

**Oral History Interview with Priscilla Gibson**  
**Interviewed by Julia Stringfellow**  
**October 4, 2008**

**[Start: 00:00:00]**

**JS: This is Oral History Interview number 3 for the Milwaukee Downer Reunion taking place in Briggs Hall 424. Can you please state your name?**

PG: My name is Priscilla Ann Gibson. And my nickname is "Anita," because my mother never wanted me to use Priscilla as a name. It was her name and she just thought it was unfair to name a child Priscilla. But we were both named from my Great-Grandmother. She was a really well-known...really a remarkable woman. She was widowed. Her husband died as a result of the Civil War wounds and she was able to survive and remarry. Had two very talented children that she made sure were educated. My Grandfather was born in 1869, October 14. He was born after his father died. And his sister was born two years prior to that time. I have a number of very well-known relatives. In my lifetime, my parents made me famous because of their activities and their accomplishments.

**JS: What year did you graduate from Milwaukee-Downer?**

PG: I graduated in 1958.

**JS: And what was your degree in?**

PG: My degree was in liberal arts and basically English and Communications.

**JS: Why did you choose to attend Milwaukee-Downer?**

PG: I fell in love with the school. I graduated from a Junior College with a Communications degree. I started Milwaukee-Downer as a Home Ec major, because I thought that would be a good segway for Journalism. It turns out I was not meant to be a scientist, and it took a little while to persuade the Dean that I should stick to English and Drama and Communications. I have wonderful friends, I should say, "was" because some of the deceased members were very good friends.

**JS: Was the transition going from high school to college a difficult one?**

PG: No, it wasn't. I'll tell you my story about that. I had gone to the same school from the second grade into the twelfth grade, and I was seventeen and a half when I came to the United States. I was raised in South America. I was in the middle of my senior year when I went to Glendale High School. It was not acceptable, because I came from Latin America and their concept was that only peons come from there. It took them almost from the end of the year for many of them to accept me. I did have some very good friends that I made that saw me as I am. And I am very grateful for that. And the transition from high school to college was wonderful, because we all were new. Even when I transferred there, it was acceptable, because there was always new people coming. And much more tolerance was shown to me.

**JS: What were your first impressions of Milwaukee-Downer upon starting as a freshman?**

PG: I started actually as a sophomore/junior. Actually when I came to visit, I just fell in love. It was just like schools they would describe in New England. I just felt so comfortable and so accepted. From the very first time I hit campus with my mother to visit, I said, "This is my choice." She says, "Aren't you going anywhere else?" I said, "No, this is it."

**JS: What were some of the traditions you participated in, such as the Hat Hunt?**

PG: Even though I was a part of the red class, I did participate in the Hat Hunt. I found out what it was, went through the mud, got up early. We did initiation of the freshmen and there were a lot of things. We had a class every year. The seniors came up with a theme and the other three classes had to put on a class skit. And my class always won [laughs]. And then the purple class, you heard this morning, when Barbara said "we should have won." But we don't know how we did it, but that was one.

The other thing I did. You saw Lantern Night. We sang on the steps of Merrill Hall and right after lunch on Tuesdays each of us in our class blazer all sang. We had chapel, it was a choice. I had gone to a school where chapel was required. I participated in the drama groups. They showed a picture that took place in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Well, I was in that. That was one of the first projects. That was probably the only part I had in a drama, but I worked in other ways in dramatic productions. I took drama classes, participated in the Fred Miller Theater as usher, was always willing to take somebody's place when they had a date and they scheduled themselves, and I was always willing to step in, so I could see the play. We were always allowed to, when I was in the drama classes, David MacArthur would take his class for dress rehearsals, so we saw dress rehearsals. We didn't see opening nights unless we ushered. We were able to meet many famous people. Of course, Colleen Dewhurst came on campus. She chose to come to do a play, because it would allow her to come and spend some time at Downer. She said, "I always wished I had come back to school," but she had a great opportunity and she took advantage of it.

[00:06:39]

**JS: What dorm did you live in?**

PG: I was in Holton. That is where the Commons were. The one thing that I would also like to mention, the fact that all of us had to serve either lunch or dinner. We were assigned either lunch or dinner, but at breakfast time, the first person to arrive at the table, because we were assigned tables for lunch and dinner, but at breakfast you just filled in tables. So we learned how to serve, how to carry heavy trays of food. Learned a lot of things that were valuable in being hostess and entertaining people. I never had a roommate. We always had lots of friends that were in rooms. Very congenial. Though we had specific dormitory assignments, we mingled a lot with each other. You know, it didn't make any difference, we just had to know where the other person lived. Sometimes we would have rivalry. We had to in order to have some things [laughs]. But we had fun and we were very supportive of each other.

**JS: What were some of the athletics you participated in?**

PG: I played golf. I was in crew, lacrosse, and I was a great walker. I had already met all of my physical education requirements in Junior College, so it was a choice, whatever activities were available.

**JS: Did you participate in the annual brigade for crew?**

PG: No, because you had to qualify for that.

**JS: What were some of the professors that influenced your life while you were a student?**

PG: One of them was Frances Jones. I had to take math in order to take chemistry. She taught me more than that math you need for chemistry. I really got a good grounding in mathematics. I was able to use it when I taught school. I was a special education teacher. I was able to help people who were having a difficult time who had a different way to learn. She was a fantastic teacher and of course, I learned she had taught in Beirut. She fascinated me. My mother in her younger years, before she was married, had lived in the Middle East. Dr. Dale, Tom Dale. And David MacArthur. Enid Bever, who was a chemistry professor. Miss Hawley was my art teacher. Dane Purdo. That was his first year to teach. He actually had to learn how to teach. He had incredible skills in other classes I took later on. We were required to take design in the program I was in and it was just not a thing he was comfortable doing yet, but he did improve a great deal. He taught other classes. He taught ceramics, lumber, and other arts. Somehow he was able to teach those very well. One of my English teachers was Miss Hadley and the other one was Dr. Dale. My history professor was Walter Peterson, who was eventually the librarian here at Lawrence. I keep on trying to think of anyone else who was significant... the interesting thing is that we were kind of cross-trained. We had a lot of exposure with the occupational therapy students, because they had to practice on us for their kinesiology and anatomy and so forth. Help them study and they helped us study. And the crafts and the activities they learned, they were practicing on us. Oh, I forgot Miss Dart. She was my French teacher. My Spanish teacher was Miss Calbick. She told Miss Dart, "I can't figure out her accent." She said, "I think it's Portuguese or Spanish." Well, it's an Iberian accent. I spoke Spanish first and then I spoke French first and then I learned English. Eventually by the time I was five and a half I had to learn Portuguese because we had moved. I did learn a lot of other languages when I was in grade school, because there were a lot of people who came to my school who spoke several languages.

**[00:12:21]**

**JS: Living in Milwaukee, did Downer students have a lot of opportunity to go into the city and do activities like theater or activities like that?**

PG: The closest one for us for opportunities was going to the Fred Miller Theater and participating. We had opportunities to go to any theater production. Because I became involved with the ushering, I was actually able to see many more plays and meet many more people. We went downtown to the Pabst with Miss Irvin and Miss Cherry who was her roommate and go into theater productions downtown and involved ourselves in a lot of cultural activities. One of the most interesting things to me was they had an international fair in the fall and some of my classmates participated, because they came from different foreign countries. Going to the restaurants. My family lived probably about an hour away from here and they would sometimes come up to dinner. We would go to different restaurants, our favorite was Maders. We went to Carl Ratches, the Cudahy Towers. I can't remember all of the restaurants, but I've been to many. You could go downtown easily, because we had bus passes. We bought bus passes we would each pay according to how much time we used it. We could walk. We called them lesser and

greater Downer that we would go into for shopping. We could go anywhere we wanted to in the city. It seems to me too often, but I would go down to get the train home probably every other week or maybe it was less frequent.

**JS: Did you do any traveling as a Downer student? Like out of state or to other counties?**

PG: I had been to Canada the summer before I started at Downer. I don't think I traveled. I went to like Indiana or Michigan and of course parts of Wisconsin in addition to just Milwaukee and the lakes area, like Lake Geneva and the Dells country. I also went to New Mexico, because of my cousin's wedding so we traveled there for a different summer. I had already traveled a lot and then after college I traveled a lot.

[00:15:22]

**JS: We're almost out of time. I was wondering if you could talk about going to an all-women's college. How going to Milwaukee Downer benefited your life?**

PG: Well, it allowed me to develop my talents and not to be intimidated. It allowed me to become an assertive person and speak up for myself. I believe in equity. We have to be our own best friends and help each other. We are in charge of our lives. Especially our health and our legal rights, and I have been participating in this probably from the time I started working. Actually, I had a summer job my senior year. Actually I was here an extra semester supposedly, but I was here for five semesters. The things that probably benefited me the best was that it allowed us to become whole people and to have value.

**JS: Well are there any other stories that you would like to share?**

PG: Well there's one. You know those class skits that we did? Well there is this one fellow. I learned about this fellow, because when I began at Downer, I participated in the play. And so David MacArthur wanted us to be well-prepared. His name was Glen Glen Denny. One time when each class did a skit and then the faculty did one and he did an impersonation of Glen Glen Denny. He educated us about different people, so that we would be... because an all-girls college couldn't attract young men and he wanted us to be well aware of some of the pitfalls. We had some wonderful people, because of the support and the guidance of the faculty. I have gone to colleges elsewhere and I find that it has taught me to speak up for myself.

Unfortunately, somebody chose me...I should say really it probably wasn't unfortunate, because it didn't materialize. Circumstances were as such that there was not a good candidate available to fill out a congressional seat and my neighbor said that was terrible. The candidate was not a suitable kind of person, he and his gang. And he said, "We have to do something about this." My dad said, "What do you want me to do?" The person pointed right at me and he says, "She's the one." And I was not quite old enough to fill a congressional seat and actually I have not done enough other preparatory work. So that kind of made us, when I say that it was fortunate that I didn't materialize, because someone else was then kind of pressured into doing what he was initially supposed to do and filled the seat. I mean, he had run, and that was Donald Rumsfeld. And he's done a wonderful job. I know a lot of people disagree

with what he did in the previous and this administration, but he's a very talented man. He has rescued a lot of companies and lots of people's businesses and is a very caring kind of person and a very concerned person. I am glad I was able to push him.

**JS: Well, we're out of time, so I'm going to turn off the recorder.**

**[End: 00:19:28]**