

Oral history interview with Mary Anne Chambers conducted by Ruth Belay

18 February 2020

00:00:00 **Ruth Belay**

Thank you so much for agreeing to sit down with us. If you could please state your name and the year that you graduated from U of T.

00:00:07 **Mary Anne Chambers**

Oh no, I was hoping that you wouldn't ask me about the years [laughs] because it's hard for me to remember. So, my name is Mary Anne Chambers and I first graduated in 1988. I was a mature student, holding a full-time, very demanding job and raising two young sons, but with the full support of my husband. I tell my grandchildren now that it's absolutely the hardest way to do university studies. But, it was a very, very positive experience for me. More in terms of what I made from it, what I created from it in terms of my life and how I think about certain things. Because as a mature student and a part-time student, I really didn't have the ability to participate in on-campus activities. It was work and school and staying awake in class at night and getting my assignments done and looking after my family. So, a lot of balancing.

My career was in the world of financial services and I was doing quite well. In fact, I think it was the year after I graduated, that I was first appointed to the position of Vice President at Scotiabank and the interesting thing is that while I would be going to classes at the University of Toronto Scarborough, doing my undergraduate work, some of my colleagues at the office would ask me why I was putting myself through all of this work because I didn't seem to need any other kinds of qualifications because I was doing well. And my response, I remember, was that I didn't ever want to find myself in a position where I was being considered for an executive level position and it came down to whether or not I had a university degree. And if I didn't have a university degree, I would not be able to snap my fingers and get one quickly enough to secure a position that I might have wanted to be able to have.

And it's interesting because, shortly before I graduated, my boss one day told me that the CEO of the bank had asked what university I had attended. Was it the University of the West Indies because I was Jamaican born, or was it the University of Toronto? And my boss didn't know the answer but he told me he said, "University of Toronto," because he was hoping that that was in fact the case. So, I was really happy. And that was just around the same time that I was graduating. So, I'd spent seven years studying part time to get to that point and that just confirmed that I had done the right thing.

00:04:40 **Ruth**

Yes.

00:04:41 **Mary Anne**

So, I majored in commerce and I saw that work as something of an investment, crudely put, a means to a potential end or a potential goal, but I did feel a bit deprived of the actual university experience because I didn't spend as much time on campus as a full-time student would have. I didn't participate in university activities. I was going to classes after a long day at work and my goal was just to get through my classes and courses. But as time went by my relationship with the University grew to the point where some years later I was appointed a Governor, a member of the Governing Council and I actually served for three years as Vice Chair of the Governing Council.

I remember my first few meetings after my appointment, and I was appointed as a Government Appointee, so not as a student, not as faculty, not as staff, but as a Government Appointee. And I remember the first few meetings I attended, I didn't have a clue what was going on, and so that in itself was like another course. But I enjoyed the work, a lot of reading, a lot of preparation, a lot of relationship building. A lot of learning, and it had the effect of, developing my relationship with the University even further. Now, having attended the University of Toronto Scarborough, and I chose that campus because it was about 10 minutes away from where I lived, so very, very convenient, it wasn't an intimidating environment, it was a very comfortable environment and I found that I really enjoyed being there and that has continued, decades later. I enjoy being on campus. So, when I was asked to join the Board of the Rouge Valley Health System, which at that point in time was comprised of the Scarborough Centenary Hospital and the Ajax Pickering Hospital, I was asked over a period of about three years and kept saying, "no". I really didn't have the time. And one of the commitments I've always made to myself is that whatever I'm involved in I should be able to participate fully and make the kinds of commitments that I should. So, I really didn't have the time when I was being asked in the first few years, and then, I think it was just around the time when I was finishing my term on another board, I thought, you know, the Rouge Valley Health System has taken care of three generations of my family, it's time for me to say "yes" to them.

So, I said yes. But then, one of the realizations for me was that I didn't know anything about health policy and so to help prepare myself to be a strong contributor, I went to the University of Toronto Scarborough's academic calendar and looked to see what might be available there that could be helpful to me. I found a third-year political science course called The Politics of Canada's Health Policy. And I thought "Yes!" And so, every Friday morning, for the duration of that course, every Friday morning I would go to class before going to my office, which of course was a privilege that I was fortunate to have, to be able to go to classes on a work day, during the work day.

And so, it was – it might have been the first time that that course was run and it was a sort of seminar format with just a small number of students, maybe no more than about 20. Our professor asked us to each say why we had chosen that particular course. Now, all the

other students were clearly young enough to be my kids [laughs] and so I was kind of different to the other students and they had very rational, very logical, very student type responses for selecting that course. And when it got to my turn to respond, I said, "well, I've just been appointed to a Hospital Board and I don't know anything about health policy" and all the other students laughed. And I said, "but I'm serious. It's true." And the professor said, "well, OK, then let's work together to make sure that you are one of the strongest board members." And I said "Yes! This is exactly what I'm after."

And a few meetings into my term as a board member for Rouge Valley Health System, one of my Board colleagues who had been appointed at the same time – now, at that time, I was a Senior Vice President at Scotiabank and she was an executive with another bank, and she said, "you know, I can tell you know what's going on. I can tell you understand what's being talked about. It's a real steep learning curve. What advice would you give me?" And I said, "oh, I know exactly what you should do. There is this course –" and it was as if I could see the blood drain from her head because that's not what she had in mind and she resigned not long after that.

And so, once again, I thought, "the University of Toronto has come to my rescue." And then I'd had so much fun with that particular course and I had done well, and I thought, "I've done a few other political science courses before, I wonder what else I would need to earn a political science major." And when I looked that up, I realized I only needed a couple more credits, and so I kept going. And ended up graduating a little later with an honours BA and a political science major. The irony of that was that I retired – I decided to retire early from the business world because I wanted to do more of my not-for-profit governance work, which I was really enjoying and as it turns out, I was finishing up the political science major just a matter of a few months after I took early retirement from the bank and then was asked to run for political office.

This was not in my plan, but in a way, it was as though it had been planned. I eventually said "yes" and there are so many other connections with the University that come in to play because I was working on a Governing Council committee at the time where one of my colleagues was a student who was President of the Undergraduate Students' Association at the University of Toronto Scarborough and I told him that I had been asked to run for political office and I wanted to know what he thought I should say, what he thought my response would be because this was not something I would ever have thought I would do. And so, I felt it would be helpful to consult people who knew me from working with me, volunteering with me, whatever, to find out what they thought.

This student, Dan, gave me the most profound response to my question and he took it very, very seriously. He didn't respond right away, he told me the next time we were together he would tell me

what he thought because he wanted to think about it carefully. And so, the next time we were together he said, "I have thought about it," and he said, "you don't fit the profile." And I thought, "OK, good. That's it, not doing it." But he wasn't done. He said, "and that's exactly why you have to do it." And he said, "and don't let anyone change you." And so, I thought that was so profound, it was so thoughtful and it helped me to decide to give it a shot. So that was the University of Toronto Scarborough intervening in my life again, through this young man.

So, my campaign was launched and I actually told the party that I was going to finish this major and that would take me until April and an election date had not been announced but it was anticipated that year. And I said, "I will only do this if I will have the time to finish my major." So, campaign is launched, and one day the manager of my campaign office tells me that three or four students come into the campaign office and they tell her that they're here to volunteer because they went to school with me and they want to help me. And she looked at them and considered their ages versus my age and said, "I don't think you are talking about the same person. You've probably confused her with somebody else." And they said, "No, no, no, we know exactly who she is, we were in classes together, political science courses together," and yes, they had gotten to know me and they definitely knew who they were talking about and wanted to support me. Again, University of Toronto Scarborough intervening in my life.

I had students working in my constituency office which was so exciting for me. During the campaign, the students hosted town hall meetings where I had the opportunity to meet other students and just introduce myself. Again, it was the University of Toronto Scarborough intervening in my life. I had always thought it was important to do what I could to help students and when I was on Governing Council, one of the initiatives I had the opportunity to work on was an initiative that the University was interested in pursuing in order to help ensure that financial capacity would not be a deterrent for students. As long as a student qualified to be offered a position to study at the University of Toronto, the financial capacity or the financial ability to be able to do so was not going to be a barrier.

And I remember at the first meeting of that committee I said, "just tell me if you're serious because I want this to happen and if we're going to have meetings and talk about it and then decide it cannot happen, I don't even want to start the conversation." And I remember it happened and how exciting it was. As it turned out, this also helped me to understand some of the financial challenges that students have, in order to pursue their education. And I felt that assistance from government as well as other sources of assistance brought together could help to make this possible for students. And so, I was really very proud of my involvement in that work and proud of the fact that I was associated with a university that was willing to pursue this

and as it turned out, ended up being a leader, in this particular arena, of universities across this country. So again, the University of Toronto in my life.

I also felt happy that I had the ability to personally contribute to scholarships. The government at the time was matching these donations, dollar for dollar, and I thought, "why not?" So that was how I started my financial contributions, the allocation of my financial contributions to the University. And then, the Academic Resource Centre at the University of Toronto Scarborough was established and I remember thinking that we had this fabulous library downtown on St. George campus and from what I could see in the advancement/development world at the University of Toronto, it didn't make it obvious that other campuses may have needs that were just not being supported to the extent that the St. George campus needs were supported.

And so, I actually looked at the donation form and realized that there was no opportunity for me to designate my donation to Scarborough and I brought that to the attention of the appropriate office at the University and it was fixed immediately. I decided that my next pledge would be to support accessibility at the Academic Resource Centre at Scarborough. And so, I made a pledge towards equipping an accessible work station, the first of its kind, in the Academic Resource Centre in Scarborough. So that coincided with the establishment of this wonderful resource centre at Scarborough, which incidentally did not exist when I was a student there.

So, when that pledge was fulfilled, I thought, "you know, I want this university to have a stronger presence in the East Scarborough area and to be seen by residents of East Scarborough as a significant part of our community." Now, it's interesting because my sons attended John Paul Catholic Secondary School, also on Military Trail, and I remember one of my sons using the library for his assignments when he was in high school and the librarian there at University of Toronto Scarborough being very, very generous in allowing him to take books out for his assignment and basically sponsoring his ability to use the library there. Again, you know, University of Toronto Scarborough being a part of my family's life and my family's success.

So, it just made sense that I would support the new Academic Resource Centre. But it also made sense to me to support the university as an integral part of that community because a lot of people in the area seemed not to know that that was a campus of the University of Toronto. And amongst those who knew, it didn't seem to matter because they weren't really familiar with the University being active in the community.

And so around that time when that pledge was being wrapped up, the pledge for the accessible work station was being wrapped up, I visited the University and I said, "I want my next pledge to really

matter to the community in Scarborough. And I would like the University to give me a proposal that would be of benefit to the community in Scarborough. That would make the whole concept of experiential learning real and would enable young people in the community to see themselves as having access to post-secondary education through the University of Toronto Scarborough.” And so, I asked the University to present me with a proposal for what they could do in that regard.

And so, one day I was told, “come on in, we have actually three proposals for you to consider.” And the presenter, the student in the Office of the Principal who was there to walk me through the three proposals was Rashelle Litchmore and she was President of the Black Students’ Association at the time. The first proposal she presented to me was for the Imani Academic Mentorship Program. I don’t know what the other two proposals were for. I didn’t give them a chance to tell me about the other two proposals because the first proposal was exactly what I thought we needed to be doing. I felt that a mentorship program, as outlined and proposed by the University and Rashelle’s team, was exactly what the area needed. We were hearing from the school boards, the Toronto District School Board, for example, that 40% of Black students were not finishing school and I thought, “That’s just incredible. That’s just not OK. What can we do to address that in practical but also ambitious terms?”

And so, the idea of a mentorship program whose primary focus would be these middle and high school Black students in East Scarborough whose guidance counsellors and teachers felt that just given additional opportunity for supports that they – that you know, went beyond what they could receive in their classrooms at school, or at home, regardless of how supportive their parents were, this would help to do just that. So, the idea that the University would be reaching out to these Black students who otherwise might not even finish high school, not to mention have the opportunity to pursue post-secondary education, even though they had the potential, but just didn’t have the support system in order to do that, or the influences in their lives that would cause them to consider that. So, a big check mark against that.

And then another big check mark against – or I should say for, in support of having mentors not much older than they are, who look like them, are from similar backgrounds, brilliant students, who would serve as their role models and mentors. And this just seemed to me to be absolutely perfect and exactly what a university should be doing in communities where this need was so obvious. I never ever really thought of myself as an activist, but I guess this is an example of activism when you realize that there is something that’s not working well enough for society, for the broader society and there are interventions that are possible that can make a difference in the lives of members of the society that will in fact benefit not just those members who are directly involved, but the broader community.

And it's like when I talk about Black history I say Black history is everyone's history, because when Black people are successful, the contributions they make to the broader society benefit everyone. So, this is not just about helping Black people to be successful, this is about helping the entire society to be better for its members. Well, it took a little bit of work to get this going and I'm very proud of the fact that this has been in effect for more than a decade. The Toronto Community Foundation one year in its annual vital signs – Toronto Vital Signs Report, named Imani Academic Mentorship Program as an innovative initiative pointing the way forward for Toronto. That's a huge deal.

I remember meeting – one day I went to drop in to see the students and this particular session was being held in a room with all of the mentees and mentors and I saw this white woman standing against a wall in that room and she kind of stood out because nobody else looked like her. I went over and I said, “hello, I'm Mary Anne Chambers.” And greeted her warmly, as a way of opening a conversation that would enable me to know who she was. And she said, “I am so-and-so's teacher from whatever school. And he invited me to come and see what he does at the university. And so, I had to come.” And I felt so wonderful about this that I said, “well, I have to thank you, as his teacher, for recognizing that sometimes our students need more than what we can provide for them in the classroom and having the commitment and dedication to the success of your students to figure out how else you can find the required supports for them. So, thank you.” And her eyes filled with tears and she dashed.

And so that for me was an example, a very profound example. Oh, the other thing she mentioned to me was that that particular student was not the first student she had referred to the program, that she had referred another student to the program before that and she couldn't believe the positive influence it had had on that first student. It was like he had become a different person, all for the better. So, she really felt very highly about the program.

I also learnt that one of the janitors at the university, seeing these Black kids coming to the University a couple days per week in groups, you know, being dropped off by bus, he asked someone in Student Services what was going on here, why are these kids here and so he was told about the program. And he said his daughter, who was in high school at the time, had been told by her teacher that she was going to be a failure. And he knew that his daughter was smart. He knew that his daughter could be successful but he felt that she was not going to be successful without being a part of a system that would be more supportive of her. They did not live in Scarborough, but he wondered if his daughter could be allowed to participate in the program anyway. Student Services said, “yes, of course”.

His daughter ended up being successful in high school, and being accepted as a student at the University of Toronto Scarborough. She moved from being a mentee before university to a mentor when she got to the university. She became an ambassador for the program. There are success stories about young people who succeeded as mentees but also, I have to tell you a story about being in one of the business complexes downtown Toronto one day and walking through the lobby area and someone calling my name and I turned around and there was this young fellow who had spotted me and introduced himself to me as a former mentor in the Imani Academic Mentorship Program and that he had graduated and gotten a job with one of the banks and the office was in this tower that we were in. And he said, "the Imani Academic Mentorship Program was the very best experience I had in my university life. Being able to be a mentor for these students." He said, "I want to be able to do more. I'm sorry that I have now graduated and no longer can be a mentor for the students."

So, from every perspective it was a huge – it has been and continues to be a huge success. No one has ever been turned away. If they're not Black and a guidance counsellor has proposed, referred, whatever, this student to the program, they have been welcomed. And now, it's my understanding that the program is being considered as an example for other communities, other cultural communities. Again, you know, a sign of the value, the success of mentorship and mentorship supported by the University.

Last year, while I was on campus for a major event, I was thrilled when the Provost told me that the University had budgeted significant funding to support the Imani Academic Mentorship Program going forward. So again, I have never really thought of myself as an activist. There are connotations fairly and unfairly associated with the word "activism" and maybe that's why I have not typically associated myself with being an activist. Preferring really to use the term "advocate" because I have always felt that there are voices that are often not heard. And if you believe that your voice will be heard, for whatever reason, your voice is chosen to be heard, your voice is welcome, then you have a responsibility to use that voice to be the voice for those that are not heard.

And, I guess that's activism. It's activism on a very positive, constructive and self-less level, which I think is really very, very important if we are to be able to see ourselves honestly as contributing members of society. There are very few of us, if any, who would have been able to achieve any level of success in life on our own, without the support of others. And I tell the mentees at their graduations each year that I've been invited to speak with them, I tell them how important it is to understand and appreciate that there are students at that University, there are mentors at the University who don't know them, didn't know them before meeting them through the program, who felt it was important to share their successes, their

talents, their gifts, whatever they could offer, to help ensure the success of these middle and high school students. And I know that without the contributions, the generosity of these mentors, this program would not exist. And so, they have my deepest gratitude.

I also am very grateful to the University for recognizing that sometimes we really do have to focus our support narrowly, surgically, in order to support a bigger whole. So, the whole concept of inclusion or diversity or equity, as far as I'm concerned, has a component of helping those who are coming from behind to be successful. Helping to understand that there are some members of our society that might need a little bit more support than others in order to contribute to the greater whole. And the University of Toronto has allowed me to pursue that in my little way.

00:46:10 **Ruth**

Well, I think just hearing the story, especially from an angle that I'm very familiar from, but hearing so much of the back end idea behind it, it really helps people like me who participate in the program, like recognize the uniqueness of this opportunity and knowing that probably nowhere else in Canada does a program like this exist, that provides Black students in the community, but also Black students on campus who often feel isolated and not necessarily connected with the institution opportunities to engage and reflect and build a community and grow and support others as well through your own growth. So... yeah.

00:46:56 **Mary Anne**

Yes. My impression is that mentors have found the program to be beneficial to them, their own personal growth and it's work for them. They could be spending their time on all sorts of other things that are very important to them and they have seen the value. So, in a way, we can also use words like "influencer" "facilitator" as an extension of supporter and it also speaks to the African saying that it takes a village to raise a child. No one person can do this entirely on their own and it takes a commitment of a community to make this happen. I'm very proud to have been able to play a small role in these successes.

00:48:18 **Ruth**

Yeah, a very large role, if I may say so myself. I guess, and a big question that I have is how has programs like this fostered a sense of community engagement at UTSC that may not have been there at an institutional level before?

00:48:38 **Mary Anne**

Well, you know, I think about my time as a student at the University and how little I involved myself in the life of the University. In a way, I was there for a purpose, I fitted it into a compartment of my life, balancing it with other commitments and other responsibilities. I felt like I was doing it for myself, for my future, to secure my future and I

certainly didn't feel, while I was a student there, I certainly didn't feel as if I was contributing to anything but my own future. And opportunities such as having the ability as a student to get involved in programs like this, I mean sure, there is the effect on their own personal development, but their objective really is to help others achieve their potential and help others with their development, help others to recognize that they can dream big. And without supports such as those, they might think that they are not entitled to dream big, they will not have the kinds of opportunities that others might have and that would be a shame.

So, with students having the opportunity to be mentors to others, as far as I'm concerned, enriches their life as well. Enriches their experience to a level beyond what – you know, just going there and studying and going home and studying some more, and feeling a sense of accomplishment at being able to graduate. And yes, you will contribute to the society hopefully as a result of what you have learnt there, but being an active participant during your life at the University, as far as I'm concerned is very much a part of that individual's personal development and maturity and appreciation of their own entitlements, their own privileges, but also of the debt that they owe society. Appreciation of the quality of the air they get to breathe and appreciation of the quality of life that they can help to provide for others.

00:52:27 **Ruth**

And I guess, just to go back to timelines, did Imani come after you left the political life or before or...

00:52:41 **Mary Anne**

So, I served in government for one term, so 2003 to 2007. I decided not to seek re-election. That year, 2007, coincided with the fulfilment of my previous pledge to the University, so it was time for me to reconsider how to move forward with continuing to support the University. And what I had learnt along the way about that community, the East Scarborough community, as its Member of Provincial Parliament and what I had learnt along the way as Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities and Minister of Children and Youth Services, helped me to understand that there were ways that I could continue to support that community that had supported my involvement in political life on an extended basis and – so what I learnt from the various experiences I think brought me back to, "here is what I would like to leave with my community, even as I leave political office and leave the community in that regard." And I have never regretted making that choice.

00:54:39 **Ruth**

And thinking of like, I guess, the future of Imani and the ways in which it's evolved, how do you think – are there ways in which Imani can continue to better engage the community?

00:54:54 **Mary Anne**

So, one of the things that I am happy about is that the University has also committed to on-going support of the Imani Academic Mentorship Program. I also told my bank, my previous employer, about the program and asked for their support when my own personal capacity to continue at the level that I had been supporting the program for almost a decade was changing. And the bank said, "yes". And so, I will always find ways to ensure that Imani continues to exist and continues to be supported and that I guess is also an example of advocacy, of support, of influence. Because, when you see something that works and is good for society, good for quality of life of people who need these kinds of supports to get them to the point where they can turn around and be contributing members of society, I say, "why not? Why wouldn't I try to do what I can?" And you know, let's face it, at the end of the day education opens doors for people who need to have doors opened for them, who don't necessarily have access to opportunities that others are pretty well born with. People who, through no fault of their own, find that success is a little harder for them to achieve than it might be for others to achieve. And so, it's, as far as I'm concerned, a privilege to be able to be a part of that.

00:57:33 **Ruth**

Well, thank you so much.

00:57:36 **Mary Anne**

My pleasure.

00:57:37 **Ruth**

Is there anything else you would like to add?

00:57:40 **Mary Anne**

No, I think I probably took more time than you allocated.

00:57:47 **Ruth**

No, this is amazing.

00:57:48 **Mary Anne**

OK, good.

00:57:49 **Ruth**

Yeah. And thank you from the bottom of my heart, really appreciative for speaking with us as well as – you know, Imani has meant so much to me and I think – when you're speaking about the students and how much you love the program and how you want to stay connected afterwards, you know, it's been almost, say, seven years for me with Imani, and –

00:58:10 **Mary Anne**

Yeah? Fantastic. Thank you.

00:58:11 **Ruth**

– it has made my university experience. The reason I love UTSC is because of Imani.

00:58:19 **Mary Anne**

Yeah. Yeah. It does feel good, doesn't it?

00:58:22 **Ruth**

It does.

00:58:23 **Mary Anne**

And I think the other thing that being able to be involved in something of this kind of value says to us is that we all have something to contribute. We have different things, we have skills, we have talents, we have time, some have finances, but how important it is for all of those contributions to come together to help ensure that life can have the kind of quality and value that it should have, right?

00:59:02 **Ruth**

Yes. Exactly.

00:59:03 **Mary Anne**

And beyond ourselves. So... that's good. Thank you.