

**MC.0356**

**Interviews of the Margaret MacVicar Memorial AMITA Oral History Project**

**Linda Sharpe**

(interviewed by Jean Choi)

April 13, 2013

Choi: I'm here with Mrs. Linda Sharpe. We will start out talking about your childhood, mainly where you were born.

Sharpe: Sure. I was born in Brooklyn, New York. So I'm from the Big Apple. I grew up in Bedford-Stuyvesant.

Choi: I know that street!

Sharpe: (Laughs) Okay, yes! You could consider it the Harlem of Brooklyn. Where I grew up it was wonderful neighborhood. In fact when I go back there now, there are still families probably the fourth generation, that are still on the block.

Choi: That you knew from childhood?

Sharpe: Yes, I knew their grandparents at this point because my contemporaries have grandchildren. Their parents were on the block so it's four generations that lived in the same house.

Choi: That's pretty awesome.

Sharpe: It's pretty awesome. New York City is a great place to grow up. In Bed-Stuy I walked to the corner to go to the dentist, I walked four doors down for piano lessons, and I walked five blocks for my ballet lessons. Nothing fancy as in the parish hall of the church. It was a very neighborly neighborhood.

Choi: A warm friendly neighborhood. Do you have siblings?

Sharpe: I have a brother.

Choi: So you grew up with your brother?

Sharpe: Yes.

Choi: Were you very close?

Sharpe: He was six and a half years younger than I, so I was the big, big sister (laughs).

Choi: I see.

Sharpe: In a lot of ways during my early childhood I was pretty much raised as an only child.

Choi: Really?

Sharpe: Well he's six and a half years younger. I was of school age by the time he came around.

Choi: Did you attend elementary school in New York?

Sharpe: Yes, public school.

Choi: Do you remember which PS number by any chance?

Sharpe: Yes, PS 138.

Choi: I always love that New Yorkers state their schools by a number not a name.

Sharpe: Of course!

Choi: So you went to school there. At an early age did you see yourself liking certain subjects more than the others, or did you like all of the subjects? Or did you dislike school?

Sharpe: I always liked school to the extent that I was being exposed to new things, but frankly, in elementary school I was kind of bored.

Choi: You were bored? Why do you think you were bored?

Sharpe: I was bored because the first third of the year they reviewed what they had done last year. We would learn some things in the middle third of the year, and then the last third of the year we would review what we had learned in the middle third (laughs). So I definitely felt like I could have done more at that time. I used to just read novels. I would go to the public library and bring back stacks of books. I would read them everywhere.

Choi: Were you really into reading as a young child?

Sharpe: Absolutely.

Choi: How did that happen? Did your parents encourage you to read a lot? Or your school? You just naturally liked it?



Sharpe: It was natural. There were a lot of books in the home. We had books, and we had sheet music.

Choi: Because you played the piano?

Sharpe: Yes, but no. The sheet music belonged to my dad.

Choi: Was he a musician?

Sharpe: No. Well, he had studied violin when he was young; one of the only pictures I have of my dad as a young man shows him in an ensemble with his violin. My dad was born in 1901.

Choi: Oh wow.

Sharpe: So sheet music were the "MP3's" of that day.

Choi: Interesting! I didn't know that.

Sharpe: So people played piano, and they used sheet music. That's how popular music was distributed to people before records became really popular that time. That's how popular music was published and distributed. Everybody had a piano.

Choi: Did everybody learn how to read the sheet music then? It was a normal thing?

Sharpe: I think it was pretty normal for a lot of people to know how to read music and to play the piano.

Choi: I feel like people were smarter back then (laughs).

Sharpe: There was a lot of sheet music of old songs. My parents did a lot of it, but I was just always very curious about a lot of things. A lot of things in my environment could satisfy that curiosity. My parents always encouraged me to do things and be open. They didn't hold me back in any way.

Choi: Was your father a New Yorker and your mother as well? Did they grow up in the States?

Sharpe: No, my parents were immigrants.

Choi: From where?



Sharpe: From Panama, of West Indian background, heritage. America, in order to make the canal, imported a lot of West Indian labored to build the canal. But some of those West Indians came and in fact did more white collar or pink collar kinds of work because Panamanians didn't speak English and the West Indians did. At the same time, the regime in the canal-zone was really a version—it was a three-way apartheid, the way it was run. The Panama Canal Company was under the Department of War, what would be today the Department of Defense and the canal was run by the military. My mom talked about growing up in "Silver City," which is alliterative, and has a nice sound to it. Some time in the early 1960s, maybe late 1950s, the name was changed to "Rainbow City." It never really occurred to me to ask why. I'm not sure my mother knew, but the famous historian, David McCullough, wrote these great books. One was about the Brooklyn Bridge, which I also read, and one about the Panama Canal. He wrote about these great feats of engineering, which were very interesting to me because of my background and which are transportation infrastructure projects (laughs). In that book I learned actually that my mom's home was called Silver City because that's where the black workers lived. In order to mask the pay differences between blacks and whites, black workers were paid in silver, and the white workers were paid in gold.

Choi: No!

Sharpe: It's called Silver City.

Choi: Because the black workers were getting silver for pay!

Sharpe: In addition, my mom used to always talk about the fact that they lived in building aught-one, building number 1. So I thought, Okay, it's a house number, and that was the number on the street or whatever the development did. But it also turns out that housing was assigned according to your rank in the system. Because my grandfather was superintendent, kind of a foreman of the printing plant in the canal-zone, he had the highest rank that could be obtained by a black worker. So they lived in building aught-one.

Choi: I see.



Sharpe: It was a very militaristic place. It exhibited the worst features of racism and all those sorts of things, but the West Indian workers moved there for the opportunity. Then many moved on to the US.

Choi: Do you know why it was changed to Rainbow City?

Sharpe: Well, again because Silver City was a vestige of those days. They were thinking...

Choi: They wanted a "nicer" name.

Sharpe: Exactly. There are still vestiges of the racism, and many black people in Panama are very poor. That part of the country is very poor, and they're not doing as well as might be expected, but the name was changed with time.

Choi: Did your parents meet in Panama then?

Sharpe: Well, my dad was quite a bit older than my mom. Yes, he met my mom, but she was a toddler when they met. He was a teenager, and she was a toddler. My mom was always very adventurous. She was a role model for me in a lot of ways although when we grew up she was a housewife. Approaching age 30 she desperately wanted to see the world, and she got her chance when my father's sister, who had married into my mother's family on her father's side, as I recall, was traveling back and forth between Panama and the U.S. So her parents allowed her to come visit the US with my soon-to-be aunt. They actually came by plane in 1946!

Choi: Wow, did you ask her what that was like?

Sharpe: Well, for her it was a big adventure. Actually my father and all his family came in the 1920s, and they came by boat. In fact, I've looked up the records in Ellis Island.

Choi: Did you find them?

Sharpe: Yes, I found them. I also looked up my dad in the 1940 census. He had come over with his family much earlier, and then my mom came with his sister who was much older than he was, and my parents met. Right like that! She really never went back home again until the early 1970s when her mom died. I'm not sure, but I don't think she went back when her dad died.



- Choi: At home, did they speak in Spanish?
- Sharpe: No, English was really the first language. All of my cousins in my generation are bilingual. My brother and I are the only ones who are not because we are the only ones who were born here.
- Choi: When you identify yourself do you identify kind of as Panamanian, Hispanic, or West Indian?
- Sharpe: You know, probably all of the above, although from my experiences I understand something of the mutability of culture and how people do identify with one culture or another. I do remember back in the 1960s my mom was talking with her friends, her comadres—there were two things I remember—number one, when they were talking about things that they didn't want us to understand, they spoke Spanish (laughs).
- Choi: They always do that! I'm from an immigrant family too.
- Sharpe: Then number two, they complained about how certain Spanish customs, like the quinceañera, were being adopted by Panamanians of West Indian descent, who were trying to be something they were not. Nowadays, of course, all of my cousins have given those parties for their daughters. It's part of their culture. A big part of culture is evidenced by music and the parties I went to with my parents had calypso and what we call now salsa music, both West Indian and Hispanic. Then with my generation it was calypso, salsa and then rock 'n roll and rhythm and blues and all of those things together. (Of course, all of these have strong roots in Africa.) I do think of myself as African-American with West Indian roots and Panamanian heritage, or maybe it's the other way around.
- Choi: Because it's very much a part of your family's history, and it's a very interesting story. So your grandfather was the one who immigrated to Panama?
- Sharpe: Yes, that's correct.
- Choi: Do you know where he came from?
- Sharpe: My four grandparents are from four different West Indian Islands. So obviously the juncture is Panama. My grandfather from my



mother's side was from Barbados. My maternal grandmother was from Jamaica. My paternal grandfather was from St. Vincent, but my dad was also raised in Barbados until he was a teenager. My paternal grandmother is from St. Lucia.

Choi: Do you ever go back to visit those countries?

Sharpe: I've been back but not often, and not recently except I have been to Panama relatively recently for a funeral. I've been to St. Vincent, Barbados, Panama and Jamaica.

Choi: When you were growing up in Brooklyn, you obviously were very curious. You went to the library a lot, and I find it awesome that you were bored at school because some kids didn't want to be at school, whereas you were bored because you felt things were repeated too much. Do you remember people noticing that you were very bright?

Sharpe: Oh yes. I was not shy (laughs). I knew that. For whatever reason I was also impatient, I think teachers liked somewhat more patient kids.

Choi: Because you wanted to learn more!

Sharpe: If I knew the answer I really didn't want to wait for someone else to figure it out. I just wanted to get it out there and move on. Teachers don't like that; I was not respecting the rights of others. After elementary school I went to Hunter College High School, which was different, more challenging. You needed to be recommended by your principal. You needed to meet a certain level of achievement on standardized tests. Then, you needed to place in the top tier on the school's entrance exam.in terms of testing.

Choi: Hunter College High School was just for high school or middle school?

Sharpe: Both, seventh through twelfth.

Choi: So you went from seventh to twelfth grade to Hunter, when it was an all girls private school.

Sharpe: No, it's not private. It's public. It's a citywide exam school.

Choi: It's connected to Hunter College?



Sharpe: It is. There is Hunter College, the high school, and also an elementary school. The elementary school is also an exam school, and they were formed as laboratory schools for Hunter College, which was originally a Teacher's College, a "normal school," as it was called at the time.

Choi: A normal school?

Sharpe: Yes, that's what they called some teacher's colleges. The high school and the elementary school were formed as laboratory schools for the college.

Choi: Did you want to apply to Hunter?

Sharpe: My parents and I knew nothing about Hunter. The principal, based on test scores and performance in the classroom, selected a number of girls to take the test.

Choi: Do you remember what the test was like?

Sharpe: I don't except that I thought it was pretty easy. One of my colleagues came out and was just really upset.

Choi: But for you it was pretty easy. Right before you went to Hunter, did you tend to like math and science more or the humanities? Or were you just kind of all-around interested?

Sharpe: I kind of was interested all-around, but I liked science fiction a lot. I liked speculative fiction. I was known to gravitate more towards science and math. In part if you're good at those subjects you gravitate towards them since a lot of people are resistant (laughs) to them. They think of themselves as not good at something because they need to take time to grasp the concepts.

Choi: That's true, I would have never thought of it that way, but it is a type of social shaping. So you got accepted into Hunter. Was it just you or a few other girls?

Sharpe: No, four of us took the test, and two of us got in.

Choi: Once you heard about it, because obviously you knew about Hunter at that point, did you want to go?

Sharpe: Yes. My parents definitely encouraged me. They learned about the school and basically the other parents were all like, "Well if she gets in, of course she's going to go." P.S. 138 was an inner city school that was pretty good, and the regular junior high school wasn't bad, but my parents felt that the opportunity to go to Hunter was worth it even though I would have to take the subway and go to Manhattan.

Choi: How far was it?

Sharpe: It wasn't that far. It was about seven miles. It took about 45 minutes by subway.

Choi: There wasn't any notion of, "Oh, she's a girl, she doesn't need to go, education wasn't everything?"

Sharpe: No, not at all. I think as the first born that was the really important thing. I found old letters from my dad where he was so excited when I was born. (laughs).

Choi: That's really sweet!

Sharpe: There was never any question that I should be educated.

Choi: What did you think about Hunter when you started to go? Was it very challenging? Did you like it?

Sharpe: Yes, absolutely. Again, I think it's true for many children if you're among folks who are as intellectually curious as you are and have passions and interests that you can talk about, it's a good thing. I think I was bolder then than I am now (laughs).

Choi: Really? What does that mean?

Sharpe: I was more able, more resilient, and more able to go into places that might be forbidding. For myself obviously race is an important element. So there were very few African-Americans in my class.

Choi: How big was your class?

Sharpe: It was a little less than 200, about 180. There were five African-Americans in my class.

Choi: Oh my gosh.



Sharpe: So when I got to MIT, there were 1000 in my class, and three African-Americans in my class!

Choi: That's so much worse.

Sharpe: Negotiating those cultural differences and just taking in new experiences and recognizing that there were other ways of being in the world than in my neighborhood or where I had been, not that I hadn't been exposed to such elements when I was a kid, because I was. It was a diverse neighborhood in a lot of ways. I was exposed to lots of different things. But, you got up to the East Side...

Choi: Was it Upper East Side?

Sharpe: Yes, it was at the time 68<sup>th</sup> and Lexington, where the College is now.

Choi: Was the school supportive of your being in the minority? Or they didn't at the time recognize that?

Sharpe: Not really. Again, we're going into strange times now. It's the 1960s. So we were rebelling.

Choi: Even in middle school times? It was a rebellious time even for the kids?

Sharpe: In middle school especially, for any kid! But, there were whole things in the society that were beginning to change. It was during that period when they were changing. JFK was assassinated when the Civil Rights Movement was occurring. More recently there had been in our email exchanges the news that a lot of our alumnae folks were red diaper babies.

Choi: Another MIT woman I just interviewed, she was a red diaper baby.

Sharpe: Even the woman that came from my elementary school, she was a red diaper baby.

Choi: Were you a red diaper baby?

Sharpe: No, but my dad had been active, and he very much had known people who were injured during the McCarthy era. If you were a black kid from a modest household, you certainly didn't have the resources as these other, richer folks, so my dad's mentality was,



“Stay out of that! Be careful!” My dad was a conductor in the New York City subways. He was very much disappointed that that’s what he ended up doing because he was a brilliant man and very well-read.

Choi: What did he want to do?

Sharpe: He had actually studied to be a pharmacist. But at the point where he was moving into his work—he worked around cleaning up and driving and things like that for a pharmacist in Brooklyn who was going to hire him on graduation, but then the Depression came. He wasn’t able to get that job.

Choi: How did he go into transportation then?

Sharpe: He just was applying for many different types of jobs and ended up being hired at that time. It was a safe job.

Choi: He stayed with it then. As someone who lived in that time, what was it like for you as a student at Hunter College High School? Were you dreaming of going to college? Were you dreaming of what you wanted to become at that time? You were kind of rebelling?

Sharpe: The rebellion was not a rebellion against school or against of any of those things. Hunter College High School was an elite high school, so everyone was going to college. It was a given, everyone went to college. The only question was were you going to stay in the city, were you going away? Were you applying to an Ivy? Everybody went to college. It was a college prep school.

Choi: Did people automatically get into Hunter College after?

Sharpe: No. Everyone still had to apply. At that time I don’t recall the mechanisms. At that time I think you could choose one city college, one four-year city college to apply to. Generally yes, if you applied, if any girl from Hunter applied to any four-year city college, you were going to get in, particularly Hunter, no matter where you stood in class. That’s one of the big changes, the differences of today. I don’t know how it is in urban public schools, but I know most kids in suburban schools and private schools with the unified application, are applying to 20 schools (laughs)! I think we could apply to four.

Choi: That’s it?



Sharpe: Yes, which I don't think is a bad thing.

Choi: It's not, but that would frighten people nowadays with, "We're not getting in!"

Sharpe: Well, you had to choose a safety school, and you chose a stretch school. Everyone in our school had to apply to a city school in case you didn't get in anywhere else (laughs).

Choi: I see.

Sharpe: We were restricted in the number of schools we could apply to.

Choi: I cut you off, but you weren't rebelling at the time against school necessarily...

Sharpe: No, it was a whole societal change. We were rebelling against the role of women. We were rebelling for Civil Rights. The war, although people I went to school with were protesting against the Vietnam War in 1964, before anybody else even heard about Vietnam. But we went on "Ban the Bomb" demonstrations, anti-nuclear weapons demonstrations. There was a lot of activity. People spent a lot of time in the Village (laughs).

Choi: Did you?

Sharpe: No (laughs). We cruised through from time to time, but I was not one of that group that spent, again, in the minority alumnae email exchanges we learned a lot of things (laughs) that we weren't all aware of then. Some folks were more actively rebelling in all sorts of ways that I won't talk about on the record, but I was not engaged in that kind of activity. Again, because my position, the feeling as a black woman in that setting that I had to address, certain standards. But I did at that point. We went down to the Village, and we bought Fred Braun shoes.

Choi: What are those?

Sharpe: And Bernardo sandals. They were just shoes that Beatniks or hippies or whatever wore. They were classy handmade kinds of leather shoes. Bernardo sandals were Italian sandals that you had to buy at Bloomingdales or whatever, but they were thong sandals that we wore, and that was scandalous! I actually got sent home

from school for coming without stockings, wearing my sandals to school.

Choi: Was there a dress code?

Sharpe: The teachers were not happy. Certainly we could not wear jeans or anything like that to school.

Choi: Did you have to wear dresses?

Sharpe: We wore dresses to school. They requested that they be of a certain length. That was part of the changes that were happening. They were upset if we wore knee high boots—fashion boots to school. We got sent home for that.

Choi: Did you really get sent home for your sandals?

Sharpe: Yes. My parents had to come to school.

Choi: Were they upset?

Sharpe: Of course (laughs)! But I can also say when I got to MIT, our house manager—we're now in the 1960s, full-flower, we ran in cut-offs and barefoot—they were building the east wing of McCormick, and the house manager said while we were walking around barefoot that we were flaunting our bodies in front of the workmen.

Choi: How interesting.

Sharpe: It was very much the cusp of changing times from white gloves, wearing gloves when you went out, to running around barefoot.

Choi: Did you used to wear gloves?

Sharpe: When I was a kid, if we went downtown and were dressing up, we wore gloves.

Choi: I see it on the television show, Mad Men.

Sharpe: Yes, well that's the era.

Choi: Do you remember the four schools that you applied to?



Sharpe: Of course! I applied to MIT, Cornell, Rochester, and probably City. Again, we had to. I discounted that because I knew I would get into one of the three private schools that I applied to.

Choi: How did you do choose the other three that you applied to?

Sharpe: I knew that I was going to get a New York State Scholarship, Regents Scholarship and that I would be eligible for that. I had been to Cornell. They had a summer program for advanced placement courses that I believe still exist. Plus, at that time there were National Science Foundation programs to promote what we would today call STEM education among high school students. This was all as a result of Sputnik. That kind of funding occurred when Kennedy announced the race to the moon. These summer programs were available. We had to apply to them. I would do that during the summers, and so I went to Cornell after junior year for the advanced placement program. In fact, I'd say fully, I don't know, 30 or 40 members of my class at MIT were in that program.

Choi: So you recognized them.

Sharpe: They recognized me (laughs). That was my introduction to Cornell. I loved the school at the time. I liked it when I went. I probably didn't study enough, but I had a good experience so that's where I wanted to go to school. However, when I interviewed there, and I did interview at the engineering school, they were very discouraging about the prospects of a woman being successful in that school. They didn't address my race although I think that was part of it as well. I actually have a letter, the document that demonstrates the attitude then that basically said, "Look we admit women, they don't finish. They transfer to liberal arts. So if you're interested in math and science, just apply to liberal arts to begin with. Engineering is not a very friendly profession for women." It was probably true at the time, but that attitude was so different from the attitude of the educational counselor that I interviewed with for MIT.

Choi: I have to hear about this! First of all, you knew you wanted to go into engineering at that point?

Sharpe: I was interested in engineering, but I was also interested in other things. One of the reasons I didn't apply to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute as opposed to MIT was that they didn't have dormitory facilities for women. You had to board at a local women's college,



Russell Sage College, and that was the primary reason, being that women weren't fully integrated into the life of the school. That was not attractive to me. I also applied to MIT because I wasn't particularly interested in going to what was known at that time as a "Seven Sister School."

Choi: A Seven Sister School? What is this term?

Sharpe: (Laughs) It's ancient history!

Choi: I'm very curious, what is this?

Sharpe: Well at that time what we think of as the Ivy League were all male schools. They had associated women's schools like Columbia and Barnard, Harvard and Radcliffe, Brown and Pembroke, with the addition of Wellesley, Smith, Vassar, maybe Mount Holyoke. Anyways, the men's colleges had the associated women's colleges. Those were the seven sisters. My teachers were all encouraging me to apply to their alma maters. I just did not want to go to a women's school after having gone to a women's high school for six years. I also wanted to go to Cornell, but I also knew that if I applied to MIT, that would shut them up (laughs). It was a pre-emptive measure (laughs).

Choi: You weren't serious about MIT. You wanted Cornell!

Sharpe: Yes, I wanted to go to Cornell, and I was going to study math and science, maybe take some engineering courses at Cornell. After I made the decision to apply to MIT I took the SAT's. The first shot I was so nervous I just didn't do well. My hands were sweating, and my pencil slipped, and I got my score for math. I was hysterical. The guidance counselors thought it wasn't a bad score (laughs), but it wasn't up to my peers'. It just wasn't where it needed to be. I was really, really upset. I retook it, wasn't nervous the second time, got the score I expected and then I was fine. I had applied to MIT, and then I retook the test, and I got in. Everybody took it twice.

Choi: Some people only took it once. I took it twice. I definitely took it twice, but I took twice before I even applied. You had already put your application in, and then you took your second test?



Sharpe: Yes. It was coincidental because the application was due in January, and we took the test in December. I took the first one in my junior year right after I decided I was applying.

Choi: No wonder, that's very early in terms of what I'm thinking. I took mine right before senior year.

Sharpe: I'm pretty sure I took them junior year because we were also taking the math AP exam junior year, so there were a number of things we took junior year.

Choi: You applied and then what happened?

Sharpe: I got in, and then everyone was just astonished because it was not a place that Hunter girls applied to at that time.

Choi: So none of your peers applied?

Sharpe: One other.

Choi: Did she get in?

Sharpe: Yes. She got in, but as far as the school goes, there may only have been one other Hunter graduate who attended MIT. Institute Professor Mildred Dresselhaus is a Hunter grad, but in my era, there weren't very many that applied. That's all changed since, but back then it was a very unusual choice.

Choi: When you got in, you were thrilled, but did you still want to go to Cornell?

Sharpe: I did. I had spent time at Rochester, and I had spent time at Cornell. I had never visited MIT. Going to school in-state I knew I would get a full-ride. For MIT, that was not the case, and so I was surprised my dad was absolutely insistent that I go. He said, "You got in, you have to go. There's no way you're not going!"

Choi: He must have been so proud of you.

Sharpe: Yes.

Choi: So you did say you had a good experience with the educational counselor at MIT?

Sharpe: I did. I felt good about that, but I was still intent on going to Cornell.

Choi: At the end, you listened to your father?

Sharpe: Yes, absolutely.

Choi: Were you sad or disappointed?

Sharpe: No, because it was the next thing to do (laughs).

Choi: Because for other people, going to MIT would have been definite because it's such a prestigious thing. Cornell as well. But that's how your father felt especially, right?

Sharpe: Yes.

Choi: Do you remember the move to Cambridge?

Sharpe: Sure, sort of. In those days there was something called, "Railway Express." We shipped things in big trunks or via Greyhound, all the stuff in the trunk. My memory is hazy, so I don't recall whether that particular move my parents actually came with me? They may not have. I arrived for freshman orientation, and the rest is history (laughs)!

Choi: What did you think when you got here? Where did you live?

Sharpe: McCormick. We were required to live in McCormick. At that time we were considered a large class of women. There were approximately 50 women in our class. That was considered a large class of women, and the school only admitted the number of women that McCormick could accommodate. Certain rooms, the corner rooms, had been designed as doubles, and they made them into triples to accommodate the larger class.

Choi: Oh my gosh. Did you live in a triple?

Sharpe: Yes, I lived in a triple on the sixth floor. It was fine!

Choi: Did you like your roommates?

Sharpe: Absolutely. The thing with triples is that they always turn out to be the two and the one.



Choi: I've heard that before.

Sharpe: There was no animosity. I was in the two, and there was absolutely no animosity. I had spent the summer before in France, and when I was there I got a big packet.

Choi: What were you doing?

Sharpe: I was at the Universite de Caen in Normandy for a French language and cultural immersion experience. I got a big packet and a huge questionnaire from MIT in order to match roommates.

Choi: That's how they matched you?

Sharpe: Yes. How do they do it now?

Choi: Well for me now, it's been almost ten years, but during our orientation week you shopped around where you wanted to live.

Sharpe: It's by dorm, then you would pick the roommate.

Choi: What I do remember though is that even before going in, I chose New House only because I noticed the international houses were there. I wanted to be in a diverse setting. But once I got to New House, that first week they had parties in each of the houses in New House and you would go to each and then choose which house.

Sharpe: You were choosing the residents and then your housing based on that. We actually were assigned roommates based on our answers to this huge questionnaire.

Choi: Do you remember what they asked you?

Sharpe: I don't. There must be something in an archives somewhere. I got paired with two girls from California. So I'm thinking, California surfer girls (laughs)! How did that happen? As it turns out I think the floors in McCormick, each floor did have somewhat of a different personality. Our floor was actually quite cohesive in a lot of ways.

Choi: Were there other students of color on your floor?

Sharpe: No, I'm trying to remember. In our class there may have been three Chinese-American women.

Choi: That's it? None of them lived on your floor?

Sharpe: I think Mimi Chen did.

Choi: Were there any Hispanic women?

Sharpe: No.

Choi: There were mostly white people then.

Sharpe: Yes, again, most of the folks, partly it's true, semi-true today, many of the folks on my floor were Jewish. It wasn't as true on some of the other floors. Of course growing up in New York City, that was a very comfortable culture for me.

Choi: Did you like your dorm? Your floor?

Sharpe: Oh yes. We still get together, and we still keep up with each other. With the other folks from other floors over time, there was intermingling, particularly with the third floor. Then when we decamped to the new tower our senior year, there was some re-shuffling. We basically remained as a group.

Choi: Did you stay as a triplet?

Sharpe: No. We all got along, but my roommate, and I believe she's a professor now, we haven't kept up, but her father had been a professor, and she studied a lot. She was less, shall we say, counter-cultural than my other roommate whom I was telling you about, who studied math and linguistics and became a transportation engineer. We are still very good friends, and we keep up with a lot of things. For instance, MIT at that time, and I hope it's still true, all of the cultural icons in Jazz and theater and what would be called today, "New-Age performance art," passed through the Institute in concerts at Kresge. The greats!

Choi: Really? Examples?

Sharpe: Ravi Shankar. He played the sitar. He just passed away. His daughter is Nora Jones.

Choi: Oh yes, the singer!



Sharpe: He just passed away. I read his obituary. It was very interesting. Just recently I went to see a saxophone player named, Charles Lloyd, who was very popular in that time, a crossover artist. When the Student Center opened—it was a new building—part of the inauguration ceremony for the Student Center for Stratton, Cannonball Adderley played. He was a famous jazz saxophonist.

Choi: You saw the Student Center go up and open?

Sharpe: We saw it open. It was built. It opened when we were freshmen.

Choi: Did you study there?

Sharpe: We did! There was a 24-hour library on the top floor. We knew people who lived there. And there was the grill room, 22 Chimneys, it was called, on the second floor. It's a function room now. Yes, absolutely we spent a lot of time there.

Choi: What was it like for you—let's say as a freshman, what was one day for you like at MIT? Were you going to all your classes? Did you sleep a lot? Did you study a lot?

Sharpe: I think all of the above. We ate in the dorm at McCormick. We had a dining service. We didn't tend to sleep in, and we made it to our nine o'clock lectures. The lectures were just wonderful. The physics, the 8.01 professor was a professor named Tony French, who was just wonderful. Just absolutely a wonderful presenter, engaging—could engage the whole lecture hall.

Choi: Was it a huge lecture?

Sharpe: Yes, in 26-100. Certainly at that time the Institute requirements were much more lockstep than they are now. Everyone pretty much took 8.01, 5.01, 18.01, 21.01.

Choi: So you saw the same students? Actually, not really, right?

Sharpe: No, because for the recitations there would be different sets of students per recitation. For example, 21.01, humanities, a kind of "Great Books," classics course, was given in different languages. So I actually took, it was the same course given in English, but I took it in French. We read the classics in French.

Choi: You were that fluent?



Sharpe: Well, I could read French at that time.

Choi: That was from your study abroad experience?

Sharpe: I had studied French in high school, and I had studied abroad. I did take French as well.

Choi: While you were at MIT?

Sharpe: Yes.

Choi: Did you have a favorite class that you went to? Or a favorite professor?

Sharpe: I had lots of them (laughs)! I can't recall specifically, but there were really a lot of them. I was interested in what we would understand today as engineering systems applied to social economic systems. I took courses in Urban Studies and Political Science and Economics and Civil Engineering and Electrical Engineering. Some of my EE-classes and Artificial Intelligence classes were just absolutely fabulous. My systems course was fabulous. It was a course that was well-known. Another notable thing about MIT is the star quality of visiting professors. I took a seminar with John Gardner, founder of Common Cause. There were a half-dozen of us around the room talking about big issues. It was very, very special.

Choi: Did you feel like the professors cared for you? Did you find that some of the professors were prejudiced against you as a woman?

Sharpe: Well, at that time, they didn't know what to make of it; there were so few of us.

Choi: What was that experience like for you?

Sharpe: I have thick skin.

Choi: Did you have any mentors who guided you through?

Sharpe: I'm not good with mentors. When I talk to younger people I tell them that having mentors is very important for successful careers; that's my observation. But, I was never particularly good at it. I went my own way and did my own thing. I did have people that I respected whose advice I sought out, but I always went my own way.



Choi: In terms of having thick skin because I definitely admire you, but I'm sure it was very difficult too. How did you learn to have thick skin?

Sharpe: I think it's just some things you ignore. I did spend a lot of time engaging in political activities. We had anti-war protests. We formed the Black Student Union.

Choi: You formed it with other students?

Sharpe: Yes.

Choi: The BSU?

Sharpe: Yes.

Choi: Oh wow!

Sharpe: Also the Black Graduate Student Association and the Black Alumni of MIT. I was on the leading edge.

Choi: Do you remember coming together? How did you create these groups?

Sharpe: Clearly, after Dr. King was assassinated there was a need for things to happen on the campus. We looked around, and there weren't very many African-Americans. Clearly there were things MIT could do to change that.

Choi: You had to take the initiative to do that right?

Sharpe: We marched in with our demands.

Choi: You went, and you set up yourselves as a group?

Sharpe: Yes, we constituted ourselves as a group. We put together a program, and pressed MIT to increase the number of black students and provide the resources to support them. In the end the MIT administration sat down with the group in a long-term process, hammered things out, and the students together with the administration made change happen!

Choi: So they were supportive?

Sharpe: They spent the time to work with us and to put together a program.

Choi: Did you study a lot? How did you have the time to do all these activities?

Sharpe: I probably have some dysfunctional habits (laughs) that I'm not particularly proud of. But I studied when I needed to.

Choi: You weren't overwhelmed by all the material?

Sharpe: Most of the time, not. Sometimes there were things that I should have studied harder in that I didn't. Those things have gone by.

Choi: Did your high school prepare you well?

Sharpe: I was probably too prepared, maybe too cocky (laughs). I probably didn't gain the experience of working really hard by the time I really needed to work hard, but that's what it is. I could do well. There were certain things I didn't necessarily finish on time, but when I needed to catch up I could apply myself to catch up and do well.

Choi: That means you're also very smart!

Sharpe: I did apply to graduate school, so I was a graduate student at MIT as well, in Political Science. I did well enough to do that.

Choi: What was your major when you were an undergraduate student?

Sharpe: Political Science. I had intended to double major, but that's one of the things that went by as I became involved in other things. Political Science allowed me to take courses in many departments and really put together ideas. Like I said, I like to do my own thing, really put together a program where I could look at systems in all sorts of contexts.

Choi: In the context that you wanted.

Sharpe: Yes, and then I could apply by analogy the concepts that I might have encountered while looking at computer systems and IT systems to social systems or economics and such.

Choi: Did you enjoy your social life while you were at MIT?



Sharpe: Yes, my roommate and I always kidded that MIT was a party school (laughs).

Choi: Did you party a lot?

Sharpe: I wouldn't say a lot, a lot, but I had a group of friends, and I don't like to cut myself off from any particular experience. So I did join a black, an African-American sorority at that time - Delta Sigma Theta. At that time there was a New England chapter, so we had women in the chapter from Amherst and from all the schools around Boston.

Choi: How often would you all meet together?

Sharpe: Probably weekly at times.

Choi: People came from Amherst?

Sharpe: Yes, if you were pledging. It's intense during the pledge period.

Choi: Did you hang out mostly with women from your sorority?

Sharpe: I never hung out mostly with any group. I've always had a variety of groups that I was very strongly attached to.

Choi: That's good!

Sharpe: During most of my time at MIT, there were only two or three other black women in the dorm. Shirley Jackson and Jennifer Rudd were in the class of 1968. Two African-American women were admitted that year. For every year thereafter, only one African-American woman was admitted for each of the next four years.

Choi: That's terrible!

Sharpe: The year after I came, the African-American woman who was admitted who was actually a Hunter grad, chose not to come. She did not come, and then the year after that the woman who was admitted was very much—she was very much the stereotype of the MIT student who gets a 5.0, carrying 60 credits (laughs), which she did. Her sister, I think, came the following year and was very similar. So she didn't engage very much.

Choi: She was studying a lot.



Sharpe: She studied all the time (laughs).

Choi: When you were going here, you were taking different courses in different departments and putting them together for Political Science; when did you start thinking of grad school? What did you dream of doing with your degree at that point?

Sharpe: At that point we wanted to change the world (laughs)! Right? Really, thinking about poverty, thinking about the way it was at that time. I think one of the major activities that I engaged in as a freshman at that time—there were big intercollegiate conferences, organized around big issues. MIT students were organizing an intercollegiate conference around the urban crisis. This is a time and it got worse after that, where the cities were crumbling. New York, Boston...

Choi: Is this when New York City was burning?

Sharpe: Yes, getting there. Every major city in the country was seen to be headed toward where Detroit is today. We were looking for policies for actions that could change that trajectory.

Choi: This was mostly people in your department or do you think in general there was this attitude amongst the students that was more aware and into change?

Sharpe: Among many students. MIT attracted the engineering tools, as we called them (laughs), who were not that engaged in anti-war protests or anything like that. But there were certainly a lot of students who were very engaged. I have to say folks that I've encountered today, there's this stereotype that the boomers have gone from being these radicals to being ultra-conservative, and that's not true for everyone. It's true for a lot of people, but not for everyone. Some people have still engaged in what would be considered today as unfashionably liberal or leftist type of life. There was a lot of change and a lot of ferment during that time. I was part of it. I engaged socially at the Institute. I received a wonderful education. I think working in systems, working in transportation, many of the things that I specifically learned back then, may not apply anymore - who uses FORTRAN?, but the principles of how to learn, how I think about systems, continue to be applicable. The education was not solely theoretical. It has continued to be relevant.



Choi: You were in this bubbling time of change, and it was exciting?

Sharpe: Yes, we would stay up all night talking about big issues, trying to figure out how do we engage the Institute. I was on the steps of the Pentagon.

Choi: As a student?

Sharpe: Yes.

Choi: What were you protesting?

Sharpe: The War, the Vietnam War.

Choi: You decided from there to pursue a graduate degree?

Sharpe: I was interested. I have an academic mode of thought, bent. It seemed that becoming an academic and pursuing studies that were related to these issues would be of interest. Plus school was something I knew how to do. I thought I would continue into graduate school. I did well, and I did not finish thesis, my PhD.

Choi: Why did you decide not to finish?

Sharpe: I didn't decide. It just faded away in a sense.

Choi: What did you choose to do instead?

Sharpe: I still pursued it. I pursued many different courses of study, and I really had the completed degree on my radar for a long time until I discovered that I wasn't building a life for myself, that I couldn't live in the past if it wasn't going to get done. I couldn't not pursue things.

Choi: The way that you were pursuing them?

Sharpe: I couldn't decline to pursue things in the interest of leaving space in my life to complete the thesis. So I decided I wasn't declining things anymore.

Choi: As someone who doesn't know much about that stuff, if you were to explain to me what you were studying at the time or what you were focused on in your studies? How would you do that?

Sharpe: I'm doing what I was trained to do. Basically the Volpe Center is a national resource, providing research and development activities for transportation related activities mostly for the US Department of Transportation but for other agencies as well. We perform research and analysis and communications activities, mostly in the area of transportation safety across the modes. I've done work mostly looking at trucking safety. How can we detect and measure trucking companies and motor carriers, as they are called, that might need improvement in their operations with respect to safety? Our motor coach carriers—there have been a lot of bus accidents in the news lately—the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) regulates that industry and so is looking at how to prevent those kinds of accidents.

Choi: This is your current position?

Sharpe: This is what I have done most of my career.

Choi: How did you transition?

Sharpe: Well, I haven't gone very far.

Choi: I mean from studying as a grad student to working.

Sharpe: I'm not sure it was a transition. It's research. It's very similar to the activities that we would do at school. Many of the policy issues were very similar. In fact we work with MIT professors and student at the Volpe Center. I haven't gotten very far in life.

Choi: Yes you have!

Sharpe: No, because the political science department is in Kendall Square, and the Volpe Center is in Kendall Square (laughs). That's probably how I ended up there. It was close and of interest to me. I've always had an interest in transportation, probably because of my dad.

Choi: Oh, you didn't go far physically!

Sharpe: When I was a kid, I always liked when we drove somewhere. I always knew the different bridges. I always wanted to know which roads we were on. I loved maps when I was a kid. I was always very interested in transportation.



Choi: In systems and transportation. Did you ever think of going back to New York? Usually when people study in one area, they end up living there.

Sharpe: I thought about going back to New York, but the work at the Volpe Center has been very interesting because it did combine my interests in transportation with computer systems and data analysis. It was a good match. I haven't been there the whole time since I left graduate school, but I was doing research, government sponsored research in some other areas that are related.

Choi: Where else did you go?

Sharpe: I was at MIT for a while.

Choi: What were you doing there?

Sharpe: I was a research associate at one point at the Economics Department. At another point it was called the Joint Center for Urban Studies. Now it's the Center for Housing Studies. I think it's totally under Harvard. But it used to be joint between Harvard and MIT. It's in Harvard Square. I was at Abt Associates, which is another company that was founded by an MIT grad. It's located in Alewife. It's very well-known for government sponsored research. I performed evaluation research of job training programs for dislocated workers, welfare to work policy, and employment programs for disadvantaged youths.

Choi: Was it interesting?

Sharpe: Yes, absolutely. I was at Abt, and then I came to the Volpe Center.

Choi: How did you decide to move from Abt to the Volpe Center?

Sharpe: I was not able to pivot to working in transportation issues at Abt, and that's what I really wanted to do so when the opportunity to go to the Volpe Center arose, I went there.

Choi: How long have you been at the Volpe Center?

Sharpe: Actually, after I left Abt, that was my second turn at the Volpe Center. I had been there right after graduate school, and I didn't like it a lot.



Choi: Why?

Sharpe: The program was not well managed, I thought. In the sense that I produced work and that went through editors and it came back worse than the original, so I was not happy with that. Some of it had to do with my maturity in the workplace as opposed to being in school.

Choi: Speaking of that transition, because I've even felt this way, but sometimes it's tough to transition especially from a place like MIT. When I was going to school they were saying that everyone needs to take a management course or something of that nature because a lot of MIT students are so good at studying but when it comes to interpersonal skills we tend to have problems stereotypically. What did you think of that transition from studying to working?

Sharpe: That was not my problem because I'm pretty collaborative by nature anyway. The issue was being able to negotiate the institutional arrangement in the workplace and understanding how to lobby for the correct resources to help deliver a project.

Choi: I see.

Sharpe: It's a little different than the collaboration that you're talking about, but the feeling that you don't have to do it all yourself, that if you can build the department or build the team in order to piece together the project, in order to break down the project so it can get done in requisite amount of time. Those kinds of negotiating skills I didn't have.

Choi: You had to learn that by working because MIT didn't necessarily give you the experience of doing that.

Sharpe: Right.

Choi: But in terms of schooling and everything did you feel like MIT prepared for the workforce?

Sharpe: Yes, well absolutely. Not just for the workforce, for life in a lot of ways. I took a very broad cut in MIT education. I describe it as a liberal technical education.

Choi: That's a good way to phrase it!



Sharpe: I took a very broad cut, maybe too broad?

Choi: I admire you. How did you know to do that because people I've interviewed, I wouldn't say took such a liberal approach to education. How did you know to do that?

Sharpe: In part that was the thing I forgot what I was talking about on RPI. The other thing that attracted me to MIT was the fact that it did have a political science department and had well-known professors in that department. It was newly formed at that time as a department, relatively newly formed. I think it had been in existence for a year at the most. The fact that there was a political science department was appealing because I was interested in social change. Going into the department, again, it gave me a view. I learned about operations research related to defense studies. I'm the anti-war person (laughs), and I was in defense studies. Really great courses in terms of methods! In terms of thinking about problems and systems. Even though we were talking about bombs and (laughs) such. Even within the department there was the ability to really take a range of courses from political theory to American politics to public policy related to urban areas, so I was able to really get a very broad education at the Institute.

Choi: Especially if you went in, coming from a high school where you knew you wanted to look at political science as well, I guess transportation was a good cross-section with engineering and...

Sharpe: Social issues. Joe Sussman just gave a talk at the Volpe Center. He's a professor in Civil Engineering in the engineering systems division. He talked about that specifically. I think he calls them socio-technical systems or massive socio-technical systems. You can't do the engineering without the social piece.

Choi: Do feel more motivated by the social political side of things or the technical?

Sharpe: I'm broad! I can't choose. On the technical side you have the ability to craft an elegant solution. Something that is aesthetic. The social side is always going to be messy, but if you can begin to optimize and begin to converge on something that's going to work for people, and bring equity and justice to the society, then that's great if you can push that forward a little bit. So, one piece that I've been



thinking a lot more about, I serve on the board of an organization called, "Walk Boston." That is not entirely descriptive. We are a statewide organization. Walk Boston is an advocacy organization to promote pedestrian values and transportation planning and implementation. I think of the organization of being Beacon Hill ladies and tennis shoes (laughs). Obviously having a safe pedestrian environment is very important for people at the other end of the economic scale because they're dependent on that mode, a lot more than the rest of us. Encouraging all of us to engage in that mode including myself, has health benefits to individuals as well as environmental benefits to this society as a whole, to the earth. So, thinking about it in that light and in transportation issues in that light is very interesting, and it can move things along a little bit. The proliferation of design sensitive to pedestrians and cyclists—cities all over, someone needed to make the decision that this is important. The Federal government, the Congress has put money into that.

Choi: Maybe this is not answerable, maybe because I don't know enough, but when you look at something you're working on at work, let's say, I don't know if this is too general, but are you motivated by addressing large underlying issues that are currently happening or tackling specific, visible problems in society? Does that make sense? Making a huge change versus trying to just adapt the system?

Sharpe: Well, change in the society can only come with resources. That's one of the reasons I chose to study politics as opposed to economics. I looked at what's the root cause and what's the first action? What's the pivot point? It's politics (laughs). Somebody's made a decision somewhere, and then the economics flows from that. I did study psychology and political psychology, which were great courses as well at MIT. There is a professor, Roy Feldman, who performed cross-cultural studies. We probably would not be allowed to do this today because of panels regarding the rights of human subjects, but we would drop money in the street. We would do it scientifically. We picked people randomly and saw whether they would accept it or not.

Choi: Interesting!

Sharpe: Even though it wasn't their money we would see if it varied by the amount of money and also by the place. He did this kind of



research all over the world. I did it in Herald Square, and I did it in downtown Boston and Harvard Square. That said, I'm digressing and kind of partially losing my train of thought. The decision of resources makes a huge difference. I do get paid for what I do. The organizations that I work for get paid, earn a profit. The Volpe Center exists as an Institution. In some sense, someone has made a decision as to where the resources are applied and will be spent on what kind of research. The university environment—the war on cancer resources were devoted to that, so the Koch Center Institute could be built based on that funding. A lot of times we will engage in work that follows the available funding. We may need to stretch to understand the bigger societal impact, the possible results of the research, but I think most of us who are engaged in the work know that from the big picture perspective, every little piece will make a difference. By example, the number, let me get this right, of automobile fatalities, highway fatalities on the road today is approximately equivalent to what it was in 1941. Again, I may have to need to edit this later (laughs), but...

Choi: But there are a lot more cars on the road now.

Sharpe: The measurement used is fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled. That rate has gone way down.

Choi: I see.

Sharpe: Why has that happened? Through research both in the private sector and the public sector. Through the application of new technologies. The new computing technology that enables airbags to work. The whole car has been made more friendly with more padded surfaces. The engines are designed so that the engine won't fall in your lap. It may go under you in the case of a head-on or forward collision for impact. We've got curtain airbags now. The emphasis, a lot of work that we've done, is on drunk driving. Again, when I was growing up, I spent a lot of time in the country up in Maine. It was nothing. People would have a six-pack in the passenger side of their pickup truck.

Choi: And they would drink and drive.

Sharpe: Yes. They weren't drunk necessarily but yes. We don't do that anymore. For the record, I don't drink beer. (laughs).



Choi: In terms of your work, for example with drunk driving, how do you work with that problem?

Sharpe: The department that particularly administers this kind of work is the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. They were looking, for example, at the fact that many of the drunk drivers today are repeat offenders. They are looking at what's called, "Ignition Interlocks." It is basically a breathalyzer that is built into your car. Either from measuring the atmosphere around your mouth or actually blowing into a device, the car will let you start it or not. That's being written into law, beginning to be, and these are for repeat offenders. Not for everyone, although 30 years from now, who knows? That's one set of issues. So the research is being done to show that it makes a difference.

Choi: Do you think it makes a difference?

Sharpe: The research is still being done, so a couple of states may institute it and then we or other organizations like us will put together studies to determine whether it has made a difference in those states and whether it should be spread among all states because most of these laws are done on a state-by-state basis. The other place it's made a difference, a big one, we are talking about restraints. Passive restraints. The general engineering of the car, the attention from driving distracted, emergency medical help. The institution of trauma centers. That was talked about during the events last year, so now for people, the emergency medical care that's available will get to you faster and will transport you to the right level, assuming it's available, of trauma center, so there are fewer fatalities. Maybe there are still serious injuries, but people don't die as much. As you know this last week during the Boston Marathon bombings, folks said that the care being available right there at the finish line, people with tourniquets applying them to the injured saved those who would have bled to death. The same thing is true in traffic accidents. The availability of emergency medical care has made a difference as well. All of those things have driven down the fatality rates even though we are driving more.

Choi: That's interesting. So you see all of the data for this?

Sharpe: Yes, well different studies, maybe commissioned or for different aspects of it. I've certainly engaged in work that touches all of those things. The other big thing that's coming, that the department is



engaged in and some of my team is engaged in, is looking at the policy and governance issues related to connected vehicles or autonomous vehicles.

Choi: I would have never thought of that! Connected vehicles.

Sharpe: So vehicles can now talk to each other. They may even be autonomous like the Google car. What are the institutional impacts of that again, political in terms of insurance, liability; there are a whole range of issues, intellectual property. There are a lot of privacy issues.

Choi: Doesn't your head spin sometimes though? It's not just like you're sitting there making one tool or engineering one tool. You're thinking in terms of the policies, the lawmaking, the studies.

Sharpe: It's complex. We work as a team, and so we work in conjunction. My team, we work for a private company. We work in conjunction with our federal customers to perform the research. We may be just doing a slice of it, and we're working with the team of federal employees and Volpe Center from Washington, engineers representing the OEMs, the automobile manufacturers as well, to think about these issues.

Choi: But you still have to be aware of all the pieces involved.

Sharpe: Absolutely.

Choi: Do you really like your job? Do you find it keeps you interested?

Sharpe: There's always something new!

Choi: That's nice. And you are an academic for sure!

Sharpe: Yes (laughs).

Choi: That makes sense.

Sharpe: I think everyone has to engage with the new these days. You're going into medicine. There will be new techniques. There are new tools, new devices that will have to be accommodated that you will have to learn. We will probably be controlling a lot of things through thought at some point probably within your lifetime.

Choi: I was actually thinking something as simple as the car. I was thinking about my grandmother. She grew up never seeing cars as a child and then suddenly we were taking her everywhere in a car. Everybody has a car. I can't imagine what's going to happen if I live to be that old!

Sharpe: Huge changes.

Choi: For your personal life, did you have time to meet people? Did you have time to date while you were at MIT?

Sharpe: I did. I had strong relationships among a wide variety of people, so certainly many of those relationships—these are still folks that I see. I see their families. We still keep in touch.

Choi: Do you have a family now?

Sharpe: I don't. I got married at an advanced age, I would say, so I have two step-sons and one grandchild.

Choi: You look like a young grandmother!

Sharpe: No, not really (laughs). My husband did pass away. It's great that I'm absolutely engaged with his family.

Choi: For your step-sons, if they wanted to go to MIT, would you say, "Yes go for it!"

Sharpe: No, they're old. They are older than you are, yes! I'm old!

Choi: How about your grandchild. If he or she wanted to go to MIT, would you encourage it?

Sharpe: If that's the direction that she wants to go, absolutely!

Choi: You're still involved with MIT now. Do you ever think about how much the Institute has changed just in terms of diversity and women?

Sharpe: Absolutely. The French saying, "the more things change, the more they stay the same."

Choi: You can say it in French too!



Sharpe: Well I probably can't remember the French (laughs).

Choi: MIT feels somewhat the same to you?

Sharpe: I think so. I'm really astonished that women of your generation and some of the committees that I served on really expressed feelings that they weren't necessarily full partners with the guys during some of their activities at MIT. I was surprised to hear that. I was absolutely surprised that that was still the case today for younger women. There are still issues that need to be addressed in order to make diversity truly work. In order to encourage everyone to understand the sameness and difference that exists in everyone. It is important not to come with stereotypes in addressing individuals, but also to recognize that their behavior may come out of a certain cultural milieu. But not to stereotype people—in trying to explain unconscious racism to people, let's say, "Hey look the big issue is that you can see me coming." Stereotypes click in and it could be unconscious but they have clicked in even before you talk to me.

Choi: I think it's interesting because I remember when we used to talk about race when I was in high school and also when I was at MIT, it's one thing to say as a non-racist gesture, "Oh I don't see any color." But the way I have always felt is that I also want you to see color because I want you to know the system has created certain experiences for people due to their skin color for example. So stereotyping is not good, but also ignoring that people continue to suffer under racism is not good. Unfortunately I don't remember it fully, but I was listening to an NPR program this summer, and there was an issue, and they brought MIT up. There was an issue at some school about affirmative action. They were saying that some Asian students, and there are a lot of Asian students—they will choose against them because there are too many Asian females and they get psychotically crazy test scores. Someone was arguing the general idea, "You choose against Asian people but then with black or Hispanic people you're choosing candidates who have lower scores. Generally, ignoring race, don't you want someone with a higher score?" I think someone from MIT, and he said it so well, this is why I feel bad I don't remember his name—he was saying that we value education as not just scores but also as a life, as life experiences. We want people to collaborate from all their different backgrounds. The way we pick students even if it is according to race, you'll see that—because a lot of students of color



come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the problem is that people don't realize that. All they see is scores scores scores but that's not how people come together and problem solve. At the end usually MIT kids no matter their backgrounds they will usually be able to catch up all together and they all come with different perspectives that will actually give you a better, well-rounded solution than if you just picked number crazy kids. I'm motivated by your story because I felt like I really cared about social justice, I still do. But I didn't live through such an openly radical time as you did. I felt very jaded for awhile because even now, I surround myself with people who are socially aware, but it's constantly there are so many people who just don't see things truthfully. For me personally, affirmative action is necessary because there are such larger problems that are not getting fixed regarding race and economics. What else are you going to do? It's not a solution, but it's at least doing something.

Sharpe: Exactly.

Choi: If you don't address the real issues of why certain groups of people tend to live in poverty and suffer from phenomenon such high rates of incarceration, all those types of institutional issues, then technically affirmative action is not even getting at the real issues. That's the least you can do. That's the way I see it, but it's very controversial obviously.

Sharpe: I know it's controversial, but that's why it's important to see the sameness and difference and difference and sameness in folks who are active more so than I am, but who choose to go into the prisons or into inner cities to see the progress, to see the potential in individuals that they meet in those places. And think, Gee, why couldn't there be a different life for this person? What can I change to help this person contribute to society more rather than to take away from society. I think that people tend to see it coming and the stereotypes click in, and it's much more difficult for black men than it is for black women in that regard. That's one of the things that is very important for everyone to be aware of.

Choi: I think there was an article recently, again I don't remember the stats off the top of my head, my memory is bad! It was something, a terrible number of percentage, just of black men who will get incarcerated in their lifetime.



Sharpe: It's huge, it's like a third.

Choi: It's something huge. Out of all, I believe, developed countries, America imprisons the most people, more than Communist China even.

Sharpe: I don't have any solutions. I think maybe you got to try a whole bunch of things in order to at least see. I think we know what would term it as, retail change. There are spots of excellence in inner cities with respect to schools, neighborhoods, etc. But we don't know how to wholesale it yet. We don't know how to spread it farther. I think we know things that work and demonstrate it, but we haven't been able to get it out to enough places and to spread it more broadly throughout the society. I'm not sure how to do it because all of the profit making, enterprise is pushing things in another direction. As I said, I don't have any solutions but I think every little bit that you can do, even if it's just a little bit, can help.

Choi: I like that you're actually doing work that you do see some change in. I think that's promising because sometimes there's so much talk but not as much that happens.

Sharpe: When you're younger you want to see change right now! As you get older you look and you say, "Wow things did change!" I've gotten older and more conservative, but things have changed that the main cities and their cores are much more vibrant. I do remember freshman year or coming back from Europe and thinking, Where are all the sidewalk cafes? There weren't any. Hard to believe right now, for example in Kendall Square. It's changed enormously. Even the years since you left, never mind when I got here, so with the luxury of time, you can see, but still not fast enough to be sure, but you can see that change does happen. A lot of it is for the better. Certainly in my lifetime I will have to go soon, but I did have the opportunity to go to the Inauguration.

Choi: You did!

Sharpe: I was in the back of the front (laughs). I was in the front of the back!

Choi: That is so amazing!

Sharpe: I wasn't anywhere up close, but I wasn't way back.



Choi: Could you see them?

Sharpe: Just little dots. They had monitors up. I had a great view of the Capitol. It was just exciting being in the crowd and seeing the managing of groups of young people and crowds like that. There were the kids with the green hats on, the kids with the yellow hats on, all these school groups. They were all wearing the same hats so the teachers could see them. We were interspersed with the red white striped hat group, and they were from California. The kids were from all over. The people next to us were from South Dakota. A woman said, "Wow there weren't a lot of people at home who were excited about my coming here. I'm glad to be here!" To me, the election of President Obama, and all that represents, both in terms of his skills and now that he's in difficult times, people like to say he should do this and do that, but I think given the times, he's moving forward. He's got to work in his own way; he's not a glad-hander. He's who he is. For the symbolism for his being the president—I grew up in Brooklyn, in the era of Jackie Robinson. all the movies are out now like "42," and it's the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his being brought up to the majors. Just the symbolism now having a black president and what that means to the country and for the possibilities coming from Jackie Robinson coming into Brooklyn, now to President Obama, it's really nice.

Choi: It's very special. Just one last thing because you need to leave. If you had advice for young women or students of color or any MIT student, if you had advice for them on how they should look at their lives, embarking into the workforce after graduation, do you have words of wisdom or any thoughts?

Sharpe: (Laughs) I don't know if I have words of wisdom. I'm going to be talking to students this week, and I was thinking of what I was going to say.

Choi: Whom will you be speaking with?

Sharpe: To the graduating class, the black students.

Choi: That's really nice!

Sharpe: I haven't totally determined what I'm going to say especially in light of the events last week at the marathon. One of the themes I've been thinking about is that I'm not sure there's any one way of



being. Everyone is different, and what's going to work for one person is not going to work for another. I think that's a lesson we all have to get more comfortable with. One of the huge changes I've seen is the Internet (laughs) and all that that represents. One impact is I don't have any original ideas anymore. I Google my idea and there it is in a million different places said better by a million different people! In any case one idea I have and I think people who come to MIT know this thought instinctively anyway: comfort is overrated. It's important to test your limits and not to limit your tests.

Choi: Did you just come up with that phrase right now? That's a great phrase!

Sharpe: It's really important and we all kind of tend to sink back into our comfort zones. It's important to stretch to reach beyond that, see what you can do that you didn't think you could do. I think for women and for people of color in particular, people try to box us in. We box ourselves in at times. It's really important to test those limits and don't limit your tests. Keep going. It's all right to be comfortable sometimes but don't settle into that comfort zone. Press, press out a little bit! Keep pressing!

Choi: Thank you so much! I'm going to try to say motto again!

Sharpe: Well I need to tell myself that too (laughs)!