

Lita Kuaea - Interview #19
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Note

This transcript has been lightly edited by TCC Archivist A. Demeter to remedy name spelling, misheard/missing words, and other minor corrections, 4/26/2024.

Summary

In this interview Lita Kuaea speaks about her knowledge of the school from her different secretarial positions over the years from 1974 through today in 2014. Kuaea discusses the similarities and differences between the college in the 1970s and '80s and today, as well as issues such as the continuity of TCC's mission, TCC in the aftermath of the 1960s civil rights controversy, and the cost and importance of education.

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Interview

INTERVIEWER SHAWN JENNISON: So Lita, let's say and spell your name first, for the record.

LITA KUAEA: Ok. Lita, L-I-T-A. Kuaea, K-U-A-E-A. And when I was originally hired my maiden name was Suafoa, S-U-A-F-O-A.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. So let's talk about that, you were originally hired. When did you start, what brought you to TCC, let's get back to the early days.

LITA: So when I originally started, I was hired in August [1974]. And that summer, I had gotten my first summer job. I had graduated from high school [1973], and gotten a summer job with the Pierce County Sheriff's office. I had a friend that worked across the street, she was like in some kind of employment agency. So I was over there, we were goofing off, and she's like fill out this application so my boss doesn't think that we're goofing off. I fill out the application and then lo and behold I get called in for an interview. So it was purely by accident [laughs]. And I got hired. I got hired to work for Carl Brown, he was the director of Minority Affairs here at TCC. And that was the start, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: That's pretty amazing!

LITA: It is, it is. Because I had intended to go back to Ft. Steilacoom Community College, finish up my second year, and continue on. I was 18, and started with Mr. Brown. Things just quickened real fast. He was the director of Minority Affairs, and then he became in addition to that the personnel director, the affirmative action officer, and then that soon changed into the dean of Administrative Services. And then we were moved into the admin building. So, here I am, 18, and surrounded by deans, professional secretaries, and yeah.

INTERVIEWER: What did you think at the time?

LITA: I was pretty overwhelmed. I mean, I had good secretarial skills that I learned in high school. And then at Pierce, well it was Ft. Steilacoom at the time, I was doing a medical secretary. So I mean my skills were up-to-date, I could do shorthand, that type of thing, but I knew I was thrust into an adult world. And it's like, you know, just keep a low profile [laughs]. So I was partying on the weekend, and then you know 8 to 5 on Monday through Friday.

INTERVIEWER: So obviously, you said yourself it was by accident, you had no plans to come here. What was-- Obviously you had a good experience because you're still here.

LITA: And so what happened was I was here from '74 to '80, working for Mr. Brown, and I left in 80 because I got married. My husband was in the Army, we went to Germany, and then lucky enough got stationed back at Fort Lewis. Was here from '84 to '88, and during that time I was raising my family, and then whenever I could, I'd come back and work part time. Just do some part time jobs. And even at one point, got a full time job, but because of family and personal issues it was too much, and so I didn't keep that.

INTERVIEWER: So when do you come back, after... It sounds like you kind of came, went, came, went.

LITA: And then the last time after '88, then I came back in 2000. By that time, I had time where I could-- everyone was in school. And so I came back and just worked 10 to 2. You know, I got everybody in school, and got off at 2 o'clock, everybody else was out of school. So I did that part time in early 2000s. And then eventually became three-quarter time, and then full-time. I've been here ever since.

INTERVIEWER: So what was it like, rewinding back to 1974, and stepping foot on campus. What was campus like then, what was the climate here?

LITA: The climate was good. I mean we did, we literally just had the Flintstone buildings. We didn't have the greenery, the campus was still young. The greenery was sparse. But literally everybody on campus, the classified staff, the faculty, we all knew each other. We all knew each other, you know, by name. It was really a personal family setting. At one point we even had a dance. It was a dance that was across the street, and, you know, I don't remember what building, but it was that, everyone was pretty close. Things happened but we worked through it. And mean there were some issues, a no-confidence vote. So there were some faculty issue, some union issues, but, it was pretty close knit. And that was one of the things that, every time I left I was literally coming home to my family here. But coming back to TCC, it was always just an easy transition. It was oh yeah there's people there that still remember me or that I know, and I'll find a job somewhere on campus. So it was always, yeah, really easy.

INTERVIEWER: So that must've been sort of a refuge for you, [laughs]. It sounds like it anyway.

LITA: And this is pretty much, when I look at my work history, it's, TCC is the majority of my work history.

INTERVIEWER: So in the seventies, the late sixties, early seventies, there were a lot of world events happening. In '74 when you came on it was kind of past a little bit of that, but it was pretty fresh in everybody's minds. What kinds of things-- did you see anything that was controversial on campus at that time?

LITA: Well coming here, I was working in the Minority Affairs office. And I knew Carl Brown, I realized quickly that he was a figurehead in the community. And coming off the sixties, the civil rights movement and everything, there weren't very many Black faculty. And the Minority Affairs office, we had money. The difference between Minority Affairs office now and the CASA MECA, we had money. We could give a tuition waiver, a book waiver, you know, loans. And with Mr. Brown on campus it wasn't so much "minority affairs director," he was the community's contact, and having him here they knew that if, you know, an issue happened or incident happened in Tacoma, he was going to be the person here to kind of keep the waters calm. So I knew that was important. There was only Black Student Union, there wasn't very much minority representation. But students knew if something happened Carl Brown was the person to come to, and he could make things happen, and he had connections throughout the community.

INTERVIEWER: How long was Carl here?

LITA: Oh gosh. When I left in '80 I think he retired probably... In the mid-eighties. But I think he was probably here twenty plus years.

INTERVIEWER: So you were really young back then--

LITA: I was.

INTERVIEWER: You were still a teenager?

LITA: Yeah, I was right out of high school.

INTERVIEWER: [Laughs] So you're kind of living through current events, you're kind of living a piece of history, as you're working a brand-new job and getting to know it, it's kind of a brand-new college, I mean it hasn't been around for that long.

LITA: Right. When I started in '74, '76 was our 10 year anniversary. And I knew that when I started here I was a part of something that was going to be great. And even right out of high school at Ft. Steilacoom, the trees had just been planted. I mean that school was still new. And you have the sense that, I'm new to this, and going to be part of the history of the school. Yeah, and you did have that sense. But every time I'd come back, I've always felt, gosh, I'm part of TCC. I know they're well-respected across the state and we're probably one of the forerunners across the state with technology, and all the programs, our IT development. So I've always been really proud of that, and probably a part of this.

INTERVIEWER: So, I know you got the job by accident [Lita laughs]. But the mission of community colleges, did you know much about it before? I mean, so you mentioned you were a student at Pierce before you became an employee at TCC. What made you go to Pierce, why not go away to college? Or do something else right out of high school?

LITA: Well financially for my family, I'm from a family of nine, that wasn't going to happen. And then I live in Lakewood, so that was just the natural thing to do, to go to Ft. Steilacoom. And that was fine. My goal was to get a secretarial degree, that was my forte, and then continue on to work.

INTERVIEWER: So in your mind you already had some exposure to community college. You knew about community colleges, even though they were so new. And it was sort of a movement back in the sixties.

LITA: And it was okay to go to a community college. Academically, I didn't think-- going to university wasn't my goal. I thought, community college, I'll learn a skill, I'll jump into the work force. So I was okay with that.

INTERVIEWER: That's good. So having worked in different decades at TCC. I mean, has the mission changed much since it opened?

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LITA: No. I mean, I think the availability, the cost is still attractive to students, and I think we get the job done. And I'm always the one to advocate to parents, send your kids to community college, that's the smart thing to do. You're going to save a ton of money, and then your kids can go on, graduate at a four year, and no one will be the wiser that they started at a community college. So it's okay. And they'll still get the life experience here and then moving on. My own daughter is proof of that. Started here, finished last year, and is now at a two-year school-- a university. I'll be the first one to tell anyone, come to a community college.

INTERVIEWER: So you have how many kids?

LITA: I have six.

INTERVIEWER: You have six kids. You know, that could be a pretty large college bill, for mom and dad [both laugh].

LITA: Luckily, my daughter, my sons, they got scholarships. So, yeah, we count ourselves lucky.

INTERVIEWER: So talking about the cost of an education, I mean, it's up there, it's definitely up there. The federal student debt has exceeded credit card debt. So student loan debt is high.

What are your thoughts about paying for college, how to pay for college, the affordability of community colleges, those kinds of things? The bang for your buck?

LITA: To put it in perspective, in '74 the tuition was \$84 a quarter [laughs]. Yeah. And books, we could give a book waiver, and I was thinking about that this morning, it was probably \$35-\$50. I can't imagine having to pay – like I said we got scholarships – having to pay for tuition. But I mean there are programs. You can jump in on the 'get' program. And there are scholarships, but you do have to look for them. And if you don't qualify for any free federal aid, I mean the loans, yeah that's pretty incredible. So, plan ahead. Start saving.

INTERVIEWER: I agree. So let's talk about facilities, you mentioned it was a young campus when you first started. What was the landscape like, what were the buildings like, was it adequate? Was it considered good back then?

LITA: It was considered good. I mean what we had, there just weren't any plants because the school was still pretty young. And then even across the street across Mildred, when I first started, there wasn't anything there. And then eventually they did put a shopping center, and then the businesses along 12th and 19th Street, they weren't there. It was just starting to pick up. So it was pretty sparse. And then gas, gas was under a dollar. When gas became a dollar, I remember nationwide, people picketed, you know, we didn't buy gas for a day. The country united. Over a dollar for gas [laugh].

INTERVIEWER: Wow. Definitely takes you back a little bit, for sure. So can you draw some kind of a comparison facilities-wise between where we were then versus where we are now?

LITA: I think to the facilities-wise, it was adequate. I'm not even sure what our enrollment was at the time, but we of course offered probably less classes. But the school's, as our enrollment's grown, the school was trying to grow with it. We've got new buildings popping up. We've got more programs. Back then it just seemed like it was a kinder, gentler time. And now, the school is trying to keep up with the increased population. Demands on the different programs that they need. Back then the big buzzword were the occupational courses. They were trying to bring in classes that students could learn a skill and jump right into the workforce. The computers were the big thing back then. In building 19, that was our Computer Center, they had rooms dedicated to these big huge Lotus computers. So that was the big program to try to bring people in. And we're still doing the same thing. We're still changing with the times, with the demands.

INTERVIEWER: The College has gone through a period of transition. I would say at least from my own perspective, at some point – I'm not exactly sure when – at some point it kind of maybe got a stigma. Mildred Street University, that kind of thing. And it seems to me like we've sort of turned that corner now, but maybe 15, 20 years ago it seemed like we were in the thick of that stigma. Does that ring any bells with you?

R: Well I think with community colleges in the seventies, sixties, it was new. And it seems like how students with you going to a voc-tech school, that it's less than a university education. But I think now, with the rising cost of everything, community college is the way to go. I mean it's very valued. We have articulation agreements with UW-T and other universities. So I mean the respect level is there, that a student coming out of community college can just jump into a four-year program with ease. And their education, what they learn here, is well-respected and received. And transfers. So I think that's the difference. I think back when we first started, they were getting maybe a sub-education. And I don't think that's the same now.

INTERVIEWER: Every three years we conduct a student satisfaction survey, it came out in November, and the results were interesting. 75% of the participants said that TCC was a number one choice. I don't think it's always been the case. Do you think that's because of our focus on healthcare, and business, and transfer? What do you think?

LITA: I think with the fields that we do offer, I think for students thinking about going into nursing, TCC is the place to go. The nurses that graduate from here, I don't have statistics, but I think they're able to move into jobs in the community. And I think because they come from TCC, that's one of the reasons. But I think it's because of the programs that we do offer, health education, that is one of the reasons. And now with, we're going to get a new health education building, I think we're going to get even more students attracted. But reputation wise, I think we're good.

INTERVIEWER: What about leadership. You've seen presidents come and go. You've seen dean-level type people come and go. Has leadership always been strong, have there been problems, have there been really good things we need to talk about that have happened?

LITA: Well when I was here in the seventies it was just under Dr. Stevens, and I'm assuming he had an okay time here. I think with Dr. Transue just coming the past ten years, with the budget problems we've had, we've been okay *because of our leadership*. I mean there's other community colleges up and down I-5 that have not fared as well. But I think we've been okay because of our leadership, because of Dr. Transue, because she's had the foresight to make decisions that have kept us afloat, and we haven't had to cut employees, or make the budget cuts that some of the other schools are have done, and then still offer the programs that we want.

INTERVIEWER: What about the future of TCC. I mean, we've come quite a long way, we're going to be 50 in 2015. What about the future, what about the next 50 years?

LITA: I think one of the things I would measure it by is that we're were one of the community colleges that was picked to host the CTC Link. And I think it's a big star on our chart for trusting us with it. This is major! But I think because we were one of the schools to be picked, that we're going to set the tone for the next 50 years. I mean look how long we've had the S&S. So I think we're going to be just fine.

INTERVIEWER: What about programmatically, and viewed as a brand as an institution, by our community. How do you think the future's going to look there?

LITA: I mean TCC traditionally, we've moved and changed as the economy changes, and I think will continue to do so. We are not one of those schools that get stuck in a rut, teaching the same thing. If it doesn't work, we're willing to change. I mean nursing might not be the go to program in the next 10, 15 years, and I think the school will just change as the demands change in the country. It would be nice if the legislature would somehow cap the tuition. With Dr. Transue's leadership, we're one of the few schools that aren't increasing some of the fees to generate revenue. I mean its things like that, she's still advocating for the student as much as she can.

INTERVIEWER: How important is it to think about the things and the work that we do here from the student's perspective?

LITA: Well I mean, the students are our business [laughs]. It's easy to get entrenched every day and forget about the student, but you have to keep reminding yourself, that we're here because of the students. And you have to look from their perspective.

INTERVIEWER: Now the work you've done over the years. Can you talk about the different positions and some of the responsibilities you had associated with those?

LITA: So when I first started, it was just a Secretary III position. And then as my boss became a dean, I became his administrative assistant. When I finally came back in 2000, it was just to work part time. You know, just be under the radar. And I worked in Admissions, I was at a window, helping students and then it just transitioned. I think I'm a Customer Service Specialist now, and it's still assisting students, I'm still in enrollment Services. You know, it's just all about the policies, procedures for students.

INTERVIEWER: And is that what you enjoy?

LITA: I enjoy it. I mean, there's not probably a month that goes by that I don't learn something different. Or a new instance comes up. So it's still challenging. But my days are getting numbered [laughs].

INTERVIEWER: So when you took the secretarial program at Pierce, why that, why not something else?

LITA: I knew coming out of high school I had good skills, I had good secretarial skills. I had learned that. And so I had decided I was going to become a medical secretary, I actually thought I was going to work in like an emergency room or something like that. So it was a medical secretary program. And have never been in the medical field [laughs].

INTERVIEWER: So you've raised six kids and you've seen them go off and do different things. As a parent, and also having worked a college, what can you say about the power of education, and the importance of college in their lives?

LITA: My husband and I, we've always advocated to get their education, or if they did want to go to a four-year, to just learn a skill. Everybody has to work, but if you have an education, maybe you don't have to work as hard. They've seen their dad, he was 20 years in the Army, and then another 20 years at the Naval shipyard. He's worked hard. If you get that education, maybe you won't have to work as hard as your father. So, that's the message that we try pass on to them. But also, that you do have to get a job [laughs]. There's no freebies in life. You do have to get a job, make your way.

INTERVIEWER: Has that been a tough one for, I know each kid is so different, has that been tough for some of your children to understand?

LITA: No, no, not really, my youngest son is at home, but he's just getting a job, he's 25 and I can see him probably within the next year transitioning. Our message to them was, you can stay here, and we'll probably eventually leave you [laughs].

INTERVIEWER: That's pretty funny [laughs]. I'm just going to look over my questions here, do you need a drink of water?

[Water break]

INTERVIEWER: I don't have a whole lot left to ask you. You've kind of covered most of the questions I had for you [pause]. Do you have anything that you, kind of came with, like was there a thought process that you had, or something that you were thinking of that you really wanted to cover and we just haven't talked about yet?

LITA: No, I think we've probably covered everything. Talking to Michael, just made me really think about all of this. I didn't really realize that the interview was going to be so formal. But, so it was kind of fun. It was even more fun to think about what my maiden name was. I've been married longer than I had my maiden name. That was just interesting to just kind of dredge up these memories, again.

INTERVIEWER: Well good, I don't have anything else. I think we're wrapped.

LITA: Okay.