It was 1969, my freshman year at this Ivy League university. The fragile tinder box of civil disobedience was ignited every day by some new incident that happened on campus, in the city or anywhere else. On May 4, 1970, the Ohio National Guard killed four students and wounded nine others at Kent State University in Ohio during a protest of the Vietnam War. College campuses across the nation were in an uproar. It was spring, bright colored flowers were in bloom along the campus walks, and dark green ivy grew thick and covered the walls of historic buildings on campus. Penn, one of the oldest universities in the nation, was surrounded with the beauty of spring as the earth awakened after winter. But Penn, like other colleges throughout the United States, was on the brink of a conflagration that might cause it to implode. It was a bright sunny day and news spread fast throughout campus. Students who wanted to leave campus could take their final exams at home; students who wanted to take exams in class were told to see their professors to make arrangements. Almost everyone wanted to leave campus as quickly as possible. Some students hurried to get away so that they could think about what happened. Some wanted to react to the Kent State massacre. I think all of us just wanted to try and get a grip in order to prepare for what was going to happen next. “Ohio” sung by Cosby, Stills, Nash and Young described the turmoil that raged and brought an end to my freshman year.
I had landed on campus the previous September a minority in more ways than I wanted to think about. I was a 17 year old black girl, from a family with a household income of less than $10,000 per year to support a family of seven and a graduate of a public high school which was considered academically inferior. In reality, my high school was not comparable in any way to the schools from which most of the students in the freshman class at Penn had graduated. It felt as if Mom and Dad were standing on the shore and sending me out to sea, the University of Pennsylvania. Ready or not I was here to compete with the well-prepared and the privileged.

College was my first extended voyage outside the fishbowl of my neighborhood. The road map that led me to college was plotted when as a six year old I first told Dad that I wanted to be a lawyer. It wasn’t until the steel grey footlocker was packed, with new sheets, towels, and all the things Mom thought I needed, that it hit me. I was leaving home, friends, and all things familiar. As Dad packed the car, neighbors came out on their porches and waved good bye and yelled “good luck, see you soon.” I was only going from North Philadelphia to West Philadelphia but it felt like I was going to Chicago. Never in my life had I been to the section of the city where Penn’s campus was located. I was assigned to a room in Hill Hall, the freshman girls dormitory, suite, IV, A. Mom made my bed and helped me put my stuff away. As she got ready to leave, she hugged me tight. Dad patted me on the shoulder and asked if I had everything. Then they left me in my new stark white room, with twin beds, two desks and two closets. I was alone and surrounded by all things unfamiliar.

I didn’t know anybody at Penn except my best friend and roommate Carol Fleming. It was rumored that Penn admitted 150 black students in my freshman class. Many of them had graduated from West Philadelphia High School with Carol and attended a six week pre-freshman orientation program that Penn sponsored during the summer. Carol called me when she received information from Penn about the pre-freshman program and asked if I was going. I told her no; I wasn’t invited to participate. When she called, I didn’t think much about it and I really didn’t want to go to school during my last summer before college anyway. I felt differently when I arrived on campus and found out that students in the program earned a
college credit. What I really missed was that I did not get to meet other incoming freshmen who were in the summer program. They lived on campus, learned their way around, and formed their social networks. I didn’t get to do any of that. I was an outsider.

Now, I wanted to know why I wasn’t invited to participate in the pre-freshman orientation program. Yeah, I went along with the decision that excluded me but why was that decision made in the first place? I heard from some students that an administrative staff person told them that the program was for “socially and economically deprived students.” Black students did not like this characterization.

Also, this stereotype attached to all Black students in the freshman class because most whites on campus assumed that all Black students participated in the program. That was not true for me and many other Black students. I did not consider myself “socially deprived” in comparison to anyone at Penn, white or black, even though the exact meaning of the term “socially deprived” was never explained to me by anyone.

I acknowledged that based on my family’s financial status, when compared to the students at Penn, I was “economically deprived.” So why wasn’t I invited to participate in the program? I asked someone in the dean’s office of College For Women but I never got an answer. I concluded that I was not invited to participate in the pre-freshman program because Penn had written me off from the very beginning. They didn’t expect me to make it through freshman year, so why waste money for me to participate in the program. This made me angry.

I remembered what Dad told me, “Think before you act, control your emotions, and don’t let your emotions control you. Don’t ride the red horse.” It was 1969 and as a result of Civil Rights marches, the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and race riots, predominantly white colleges and universities opened their doors and admitted Black students in record numbers. Even at age 17, I had doubts. Was affirmative action intended to have positive results or was it just an experiment? Was the purpose of affirmative action to perpetuate a self-fulfilling prophecy about racial inequality? Were Black students admitted just to quell the growing unrest and placate those who demanded equal opportunity and education? While affirmative action was necessary to open the doors to predominantly white universities in order to let
Black students in, there was no guarantee that they would graduate. I learned that there were no affirmative action curriculums, papers or exams. The door to graduation was open only to those who earned the right to go through it.

Penn had general requirements for all students -- three natural sciences courses comprised one of the general requirements to graduate. I took two psychology courses but I was determined not to take any laboratory science courses. Math courses counted toward the natural science requirement but introductory math courses required students to use the computer lab and learn various programs and logarithms.

My best rhythms were dance rhythms so I stayed away from math courses. I decided to take an astronomy course to complete the natural sciences requirement. I took the course pass/fail. It was held in a large lecture hall at eight o’clock in the morning and I don’t remember any other Black students in the class. When I told my classmates that I was taking astronomy they laughed and said, “You probably thought you signed up for astrology didn’t you?”

On the first day of class the professor announced that there would be two hourly exams and a final exam. The two hourly exams counted for half of the grade and the final counted for the other half. After the second hourly exam my average was about a “C”, so I went to see the professor to ask for extra credit work. I thought that, if I earned some extra credit, I would have a cushion just in case I didn’t do well on the final exam. Unlike at my high school, there was no expectation based on my past performance that I would do well. I missed that. The professor was a slender tall white man who wore thick dark rimmed glasses and was always very serious. He rarely smiled in class and I never saw him laugh even when talking to students after class. It was obvious that he thought astronomy was interesting and useful. I did not share his sentiments.

After I asked him for extra credit work, he asked what grades I got on the hourly exams; I told him. He asked if I attended class regularly and kept up with the assigned reading. I answered “yes,” which was partially true. I did go to every class but the reading assignments put me to sleep. In response to my request for extra credit work the professor said, “Well, you must understand something about the material as you have earned a passing grade up to this point. I don’t think you should expect to do any extra credit work if you’re having
difficulty with the regular work. Young lady, you are in the big university now. Here you will sink or swim. There will not be any extra credit.”

I quietly closed the door behind me as I left his office, walked down the hall and down the steps that led outside. I took a long deep breath; the day reflected the gloom I felt -- cool, no warmth in the air. What now? I had to pass this class. From that day on, I stopped reading lying across the bed, sat at my desk, turned the music off, and stayed awake. I read the assignments, attended all classes and passed the final exam. The professor was right. I was in the big university and, now, I knew I could swim.

College was freedom. I was free to run, speak out, learn, develop, adjust, or self-destruct. It was as if I was standing in the center of a large wheel where each spoke represented a path for me to choose and each path led into the world. My choices would determine where and how I entered the world after college. No longer under the watchful eye of Mom and Dad, I drank wine and partied until the wee hours of the morning. Once on a school night, I went with some classmates to Manhattan. The discotheques stayed open all night and we didn’t get back to campus until almost seven o’clock the next morning. My fellow party goers headed to bed; I got something to eat and went to class. I took notes and willed my eyes to stay open and my sleep-deprived brain to focus. Here I was, doing it again, just like in high school, I wanted to appear to be doing the things that the “in crowd” did but I knew my grades better not suffer because of it. Trying to run on both sides of the fence took too much energy. I knew I had to take care of business if I wanted to graduate.

I was active in the Black students organization, Students for an Afro-American Society (“SAAS”), attended meetings and participated in protest marches. The atmosphere on campus was electric and always fully charged. Student unrest and outrage with the status quo in race relations and the war in Vietnam was palpable. Groups such as Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (“SNCC”), Weatherman, Students for a Democratic Society (“SDS”), and the Black Panther Party were raising hell and challenging authority. Gil Scott Heron’s album Winter In America had a song on it entitled The Revolution Will Not Be Televised. Messages were communicated through music, media and rhetoric. Not only in speeches but in conversation we called for “power to the people” and challenged one another to take action. “If you are not a part of the
solution you are a part of the problem,” was a frequent reminder of this obligation. And in the words of assassinated leader Malcom X, the constant demand for freedom, equality and justice was, “by any means necessary.” The drumbeat of discord permeated Black and white students. Every time Dad heard or read about Black student protests at Penn he called my room. He had talked with me enough to know if there was a civil rights protest I would be present in spirit, if not in person. He usually started the conversation in a calm voice. After I responded to his questions about what was going on at Penn, that’s when he began to shout.

“You better not get involved in that stuff going on. You know what you’re at that school for -- to get an education. You can do more after you get an education. You hear me! “

Dad and I frequently disagreed about how to respond to social injustice. He should not have been surprised, that I had strong opinions and was outspoken. I learned to stand up for what I believed to be right from watching and listening to him. He was at the March on Washington in 1963 and was a member of the NAACP. When I was growing up he gave me Ebony magazines that I cut up to make scrap books showing dogs attacking and water hoses turned on civil rights marchers in the south. His opinions about racism and injustice were no secret. I knew Dad was concerned for my safety and didn’t want me to jeopardize my education. Leave this kind of fighting to men. He never said that but, just like he knew me, I knew him too. I rolled my eyes, held the phone away from my ear and replied,

“Yes, yes, all right.” There was no sense in arguing with him.

Before freshman year ended either things settled down or I settled in to all the changes. Spring semester I pledged Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated and formed life-long friendships with African American Women dedicated to the pursuit of excellence and social justice. During freshman year I learned that the status quo of 1960’s and the 1970’s for Blacks, women and particularly Black women, didn’t determine my destiny. Freshman year at Penn was an incubator for life and I emerged stronger and more determined to confront the challenges that awaited me.