

TRANSCRIPT (uncorrected)

An oral history effort forming part of the 1996 Rice University Women's Conference, hosted by the program then known as Rice University Women's Studies  
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Amy Chang Vollmer: Because I gotta let Carol Rogers know that she doesn't have to chase me down.

Linda Driscoll: Okay I'll do that. I'll let her know. This is February 10<sup>th</sup>, 1996. I am Linda Driscoll. I'm going to interview Amy Chang Vollmer V-O-L-L-M-E-R who graduated from Rice in 1977 and was a member of Jones College. When you were here Amy did you have a favorite place on campus, some place you liked to be?

Amy Chang Vollmer: Oh I think I liked to be, um, out on the lawn, um. If you look out from Jones South there's a big kinda grassy area kinda in front of the president's house.

Linda Driscoll: Mm hmm.

Amy Chang Vollmer: I liked to be out there. I would go out there and pretend to study but, uh, I think I just liked being out there. Um, I also liked, um, the RMC courtyard, um. We didn't have this courtyard here at Herring but the RMC courtyard was a really comfortable place for me too. Again I didn't study there but I just liked to sit there with my friends.

Linda Driscoll: What brought you to Rice?

Amy Chang Vollmer: Um, it was interesting, uh, when I was 10 years old we visited my godparents who lived here in Houston and we drove by Rice and I caught a two-second glimpse of Lovett Hall and I was intrigued so, uh, and, and my godfather told me in passing that they had a good science department, you know.

Linda Driscoll: Mm hmm.

Amy Chang Vollmer: Um, and then as a sophomore when you started getting all these brochures and things, um, the name Rice came up again and I was surprised to find out how small the school was because Lovett Hall seemed very big.

Linda Driscoll: Right.

Amy Chang Vollmer: And then I was also convinced I was not going to have to trudge through snow to get to class. I was so tired of snow in the Midwest. I said to my mother I'm going where it's warm. And so all of those –

Linda Driscoll: And where were you living?

Amy Chang Vollmer: Kansas City.

Linda Driscoll: Kansas City.

Amy Chang Vollmer: I grew up in Kansas City and the winters are fairly harsh.

Linda Driscoll: Yes.

Amy Chang Vollmer: And so, um, everything just came together and the more I read about Rice and I think the clincher was the residential colleges that didn't appear in any other catalog that I got.

Linda Driscoll: Mm hmm.

Amy Chang Vollmer: And I just, I felt like that was a good fit so I \*\*\*\* early decision and on December 3<sup>rd</sup> I heard and I had kind of terminal senioritis. So it was a good, a good match.

Linda Driscoll: Where did you live while you were in school? Did ya come live on campus at Jones then right away?

Amy Chang Vollmer: Yes, I was on campus for four years at Jones.

Linda Driscoll: And what did you like best the first year you were here?

Amy Chang Vollmer: I liked being around other people like me. Uh, not that we were all cut with the same cookie cutter but I'd always been kind of strange in high school. I was the only girl who took all of the science and math courses. In fact I think I was the only person who took all the science and math courses, so when it was time to give out the science and math award I kinda got it by default. And nobody else was interested in the things I was interested in so I was always very much a loner in high school and I came here and within a week I just had met so many people who were like me in that way. Uh, even though I knew I wasn't gonna be at the top of the class. It was already very obvious to me there were people smarter here but I, I just knew I had kind of soul mates, um, even if they were interested in architecture. They liked to study. They liked learning. They liked being challenged and they liked to work hard. And, um, it didn't take me very long to realize that, you know, I really had soul mates here and I think it was the first time in my life when I really felt that way.

Linda Driscoll: What were the professors like? Um, how did they interact with the students? Were they strict or formal, hard, easy, what were they like?

Amy Chang Vollmer: Well I think it was my perception of them that changed. Um, at first I was rather intimidated, you know, but I think it was because introductory courses were lecture format, uh, in big hallways. The professors stood down at the lectern and looked very knowledgeable and we're all very stupid and \*\*\*\*, you know, physics amphitheatre or wherever. Um, as, um, but they were always accessible. I made use of office hours. Uh, those who were associates at the colleges certainly we got to know very quickly. I was amazed we could call 'em by their first names. It just amazed me that we could do this. Um, and then of course as I

progressed through courses and the enrollments got smaller and more specialized courses. Then I really had a chance to, um, to get to know professors as people rather than just as instructors.

Linda Driscoll: Mm hmm.

Amy Chang Vollmer: Um, and then being able to do research in Fred Rudolph's lab as a senior really allowed me to understand kinda the collaborative relationship that one could develop between professor and student. Uh, there weren't very many women but the women whom I had were very, um, very, very impressive. Um, I had Dr. Anna Schnabeling.

Linda Driscoll: Mm hmm.

Amy Chang Vollmer: It was her first year here and, you know, I took music, history music as my jelly roll course and I found that I spent my entire semester in the music library. Uh, and then Kathy Matthews who was, uh, in her granny dress, um, the assistant professor. Never, never had a doubt that she would, you know, be very, very successful but she was an important role model. There weren't as many, uh, women. Also, uh, Dean Kathryn Brown was, uh, a very impressive figure and she was very encouraging to women. Um, but it wasn't like it is now, you know, many more women on the faculty than I interacted with.

Linda Driscoll: Um, what did you do for fun? I know you spent a lot of time studying.

Amy Chang Vollmer: Oh, um, we went to football games. Um, we played intramural sports, um, powder puff football and, and those kinds of things. Um, we'd go to Herman Park and go to concerts. The zoo was always kind of a nice thing to do. I didn't have a car so I had to take advantage of places that I could reach by foot but then, um, we also took advantage of, um, the alley theatre and the opera when somebody who had a car, you know, could transport us, um, I took advantage of things in downtown Houston. So there are a lot of things, uh, we did for fun. Some of the funnest things were just, you know, going out for pie at midnight with people on the floor or popping popcorn after we all got back from the library. I mean –

Linda Driscoll: Good times.

Amy Chang Vollmer: – yeah, fun doesn't need to take money or have some arena. It's just the people you're with.

Linda Driscoll: Did you know from the beginning what you wanted to major in? Obviously you're very good in science.

Amy Chang Vollmer: Well, um, I thought I knew and I thought that I was going to have to major in biology because I liked, um, a field called molecular biology.

Linda Driscoll: Mm hmm.

Amy Chang Vollmer: And I knew that for a while, um, I also knew that, uh, I needed to take chemistry and I needed to take physics but I wasn't quite sure why. I just did it because that was

kind of the formula. But when I talked to Dr. Matthews she told me that there was actually a field that was better, um, in terms of my interests than biology and it was called biochemistry and if what I was interested in was the biology of molecules I didn't need to be in bio. I didn't need to be in ecology and animal behavior, I needed to be in the molecular part of, of that and that was biochemistry. So, um, I, I knew and I think I'm rare in that I wasn't one of those students who changed their major a lot, um, but, um, but from probably about the second or third week I was pretty convinced I was going to be a biochemist.

Linda Driscoll: What was the most important thing that happened to you at, at Rice? You mentioned working with Fred Rudolph.

Amy Chang Vollmer: Mm hmm.

Linda Driscoll: Was it that or something else?

Amy Chang Vollmer: No I think it was developing friends for life. I think it was, um, honing kind of the social skills that I think are even more important than maybe some of the intellectual things, uh, that I obtained here. Um, just developing a network of friends with whom, you know, I still keep in contact. And the other thing was, um, being in classes where the professor who was teaching the class shared his or her passion for the subject, um, and I think one of the reasons I'm doing what I'm doing now which is being on the faculty at Swarthmore College is because I do enjoy teaching and I enjoy that interaction with students and I'm sure a lot of that had to do with a lot of the experience I had here at Rice, even if it was a huge classroom, you know, Dr. Martin truly, it was obvious that he enjoyed what he was doing.

Linda Driscoll: Mm hmm.

Amy Chang Vollmer: I remember asking Dennis Huston with whom I never had a formal class but with whom I, um, have lunch quite often at Jones Commons do you ever get tired, you know, just teaching Shakespeare? I mean it's, you know, same ole thing and he said no. It's different students every time. It's a completely different course every time. And it was, and now clearly in, in my work now I, I, you know, can confirm that. So I think just seeing people enjoy learning and enjoy \*\*\*\* what they knew, um, was a very important thing that I learned here.

Linda Driscoll: What did you do here that your most proud of now? What's the accomplishment?

Amy Chang Vollmer: Boy I don't know. You know at Rice you tend to feel very small after a while because you're surrounded by, by giants, um, I think I was proud of the fact that, uh, I did well in the biochemistry department, uh, that people acknowledged that I, you know, was able to master the materials, seemed to have a knack for it. Um, I, I don't think my senior thesis project was that impressive. I didn't think it at the time and I certainly don't think it now. Um, but I was able to develop a sense of direction for myself and I was very confident when I applied to graduate school and then decided to go that that was really something that I wanted, whereas when I came to college it was something that my parents wanted.

Linda Driscoll: Mm hmm.

Amy Chang Vollmer: So probably that ability to really find my own direction and, and get into grad school on my own was something I was real proud of.

Linda Driscoll: Where did you go to graduate school?

Amy Chang Vollmer: I went to graduate school at the University of Illinois in Champaign \*\*\*\*.

Linda Driscoll: Mm hmm.

Amy Chang Vollmer: Uh, I interviewed at a lot of places and it certainly wasn't the most glamorous, you know, urban megalopolis. I was in the middle of cornfields but, um, I knew the tradition in the depart, biochemistry department there was very strong and, um, it just seemed like a real friendly place and Rice was a place I didn't wanna leave because of its friendliness and I decided I needed to go somewhere where it had –

Linda Driscoll: \*\*\*\*.

Amy Chang Vollmer: – yeah I could still feel that way although there were 33,000 students so it was –

Linda Driscoll: Not very easy.

Amy Chang Vollmer: – a culture shock.

Linda Driscoll: Was there anything here that you wanted to do but couldn't do?

Amy Chang Vollmer: Yes. I have one major regret about the time I spent at Rice. I was never able to take an art history class. Every time we looked at the schedule I had to take another course at that same period and I think art history was always offered like Tuesday-Thursday morning and there was always something I had to take for the major and now that I'm advising students I almost make my advisees take art history as if to make up for my sense of regret. Um, having taken history of music from Dr. Schnabeling I, I really feel like at least I have some foundation for appreciating the context in which the music was written as well as the aesthetics and harmony and things.

Linda Driscoll: Mm hmm.

Amy Chang Vollmer: With art I know what I like but I have no idea why and I'm fairly clueless about the, the climate in which and the media, uh, by which those pieces were made and so I just feel extremely ignorant and I keep saying that I need to take one of these classes but I missed the opportunity here and I regret that.

Linda Driscoll: Um, how would your life have been different if you'd gone to another school like the University of Texas or some, some other place?

Amy Chang Vollmer: Well of course I don't know exactly how it would be different. Um, I think I would have been more lonely. I think it would have been harder for me to find people like me in a bigger school. Uh, I don't know if I would have gotten the kind of advice that I got from Kathy Matthews so early on. I mean basically I met her third or fourth week of school and realized biochemistry was what I needed to be in. Um, and I don't think I would have been able to develop the confidence that I did, uh, in the laboratory just because I'm not sure there would have been someone like Fred Rudolph who would have had the patience to kind of –

Linda Driscoll: Mm hmm.

Amy Chang Vollmer: – nurture, be nurturing and kind of shepherd me through the process. So I think I could have had a good experience elsewhere. I may or may not have been a different. I probably would have been able to make friends but, uh, the small school, the, the excellence in teaching, um, are things that I can't imagine, you know, my life being without at this point so. It would be hard.

Linda Driscoll: If you could say just one thing about your time at Rice, make a T-shirt slogan or something what would it be?

Amy Chang Vollmer: Oh gosh, word hard, play hard. You just gave whatever you were doing your all. You didn't wanna be a spectator. You know, you wanted to do it and experience it. And even if you weren't the best at it the experience was why we were here. In other words it wasn't the end, but it was the process that was so, so meaningful.

Linda Driscoll: That's great. Well I think we've covered the things that I had wanted to ask you. Um, if there's anything else you'd like to say I would be happy to, to have you say it.

Amy Chang Vollmer: Well I mean I, I've come back to campus enough recently that I really feel in touch with the university but I think it's a shame when alumni go away and don't realize that the door's always open here. And even for those who live in Houston.

Linda Driscoll: Mm hmm.

Amy Chang Vollmer: Um, who haven't been to campus in years or haven't taken advantage of the marvelous Shepherd School or some of \*\*\*\*\* alumni college and women's conference and the things that are going on, I think it's too bad. Uh, Rice is a resource that shouldn't just be part of our lives for four years and it's not as if the university's turning us away. We're very busy but every time I come back here I think gosh, you know, what a marvelous, enriching place this was and if there was some way we could really communicate that with alumni. Um, but it's, we're always welcome here and there's always so much to get out of being here, even if it's just eating lunch with the students. Um, and there's always part of us that's here.

Linda Driscoll: That would be great for them.

Amy Chang Vollmer: Yeah, and it would be, and I think –

Linda Driscoll: \*\*\*\*.

Amy Chang Vollmer: Yeah, so. Um, that it's just still here and it's not just something \*\*\*\* that it's real and live and wonderful, wonderfully vibrant.

Linda Driscoll: Well I really appreciate your taking the time. I know you must have been a little bit tired, uh.

Amy Chang Vollmer: It's late in the day but [dictation ends here]

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