



Interview with Henry T. Brown

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Edited transcript

About Henry T. Brown:

Henry Brown — in collaboration with Gerald Lessells — is one of the original advocates for minority engineers in AICHE, beginning in 1968. He co-created AICHE's first outreach initiatives for underrepresented engineers, and held the position of AICHE's Minority Affairs Coordinator from 1983 through 2001. He remains a guide and mentor to the committee's leaders and active participants.

After earning BS and MS degrees in chemical engineering from the University of Cincinnati and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, respectively, Brown worked for Esso Research & Engineering Company from 1956 to 1967. After working for E. R. Squibb & Sons as a development engineer, in 1972 he joined Polaroid Corporation, where he retired as plant manager of the Integral Coatings Division in 1996. In addition to his service to AICHE, Brown was one of the founders of the New Jersey State Urban Science Education Coalition, and is a Diamond Life Member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

The following interview was conducted by Gordon Ellis, AICHE Communications. Video extracts from this interview are available in the Minority Affairs Committee's archives.

GE — We're here today with Henry Brown, who is one of the key figures in the history of AICHE's Minority Affairs Committee. He had a long career at Polaroid, and he's also an AICHE Fellow, a director of the AICHE Foundation, and a past Board director of AICHE. And he's one of the honorees at the Minority Affairs Committee's 25th Anniversary celebration. Thank you for talking to us today.

BROWN — So, now that I've introduced myself wearing my beret, I can take it off.

GE — Excellent. Tell us a little about what motivated you to pursue chemical engineering as a career path.

BROWN — I didn't know anything about it. I found, from the school's library, some career guidance materials that said it was probably good for what I was interested in. I received no guidance, so I had to do it myself. And, the University of Cincinnati was a good place to go. I could afford it, being close to home, with the first year scholarship that I had received in high school. Since it was a cooperative school, I knew that I could pay my way through.

I graduated with my BS in chemical engineering in 1955, and like most of us in the 1950s, I was the first black graduate. I led the class. And, it was an interesting experience. I think there were guilty feelings about not ranking me first in the class, so they worked to get me a fellowship to MIT instead. And in 1956 I graduated with a chemical engineering Masters from MIT. I was

probably one of the first Masters students of color in chemical engineering there also — if not the first.

GE — What was the climate like for a minority engineering student at that time?

BROWN— Interesting. I received a long lecture about why I shouldn't come, from the dean of admission at the University of Cincinnati. They had never had a black graduate there, and he wanted to point out how tough it was, how it might be difficult to get a degree. How, because it was a cooperative school, it might not be able to find me a job — it went on and on and on like that. But fortunately, I had a friend who knew about this, and he alerted me before I went to the interview; and, the dean followed exactly the script that my friend told me about. The dean told me all the troubles students had had — how nobody of color had ever graduated; “we (the school) weren't prejudiced or anything,” and on and on. And I told him I'd see him next year.

The issue was cooperative jobs. Cincinnati and the Midwest were much more conservative than the East Coast — so, finding a job was a problem. But there was an Urban League fellow there who was going to help get a job, if needed. So, that's how I entered Cincinnati, and, I had a good start there.

GE — And your engineering career started —

BROWN — On the East coast. At Esso Research & Engineering in New Jersey. I had my first job there — for about nine years. Then I went to Squibb, and it was at Squibb when I first got started in AIChE and minority affairs.

GE — When was that?

BROWN —1968. Gerry Lessells will tell you about a New Years Eve party, an interracial one in Metuchen, New Jersey. We were both there. He was busy trying to get AIChE to work on inclusiveness — and, lo and behold, he finds a black chemical engineer, less than ten miles from him. He sort of recruited me — and we went on from there.

GE — And it was around that time that Lessells had come to AIChE's leadership and said that the organization needs to be more inclusive, what can we do? Do you remember any of those early activities?

BROWN — Oh, yes. Well, the first thing was to convince AIChE Council that they should even get involved with this. Gerry and I had a meeting with the president — Max Peters — and Hugh Guthrie, who was the vice president at the time. It was the night before our presentation to Council and their wives happened to be there. The interesting thing that happened was that they were saying, we're a technical society, we shouldn't get involved with anything of this nature, and we went back and forth with why they should get involved. So, finally, one of the wives spoke up — Betty Guthrie, in fact — and told the husbands they were out in left field. They needed to recognize that change in the world was going on. I still remember the conversation — I think she probably sold them on our presentation, that we were going to do the next day. They quieted down after she spoke up.

GE — And the presentation happened at —

BROWN— A Council meeting. We had prepared a draft about minority affairs, and we presented it to try to get their support for it. For the next year, we worked hard to put together

guidelines. What it said, basically, was — here are guidelines for local sections to get involved with minority outreach. The model was, sections would receive guidelines from the national office, and local sections were the place to get the work done.

So, we worked hard on that. We knew, for example, that we were the first engineering society to get involved with this type of effort. All the other engineering societies were not involved. We also collaborated with ACS in the New Jersey Section. We got involved with their Project SEED — we actually worked back and forth with ACS. And, Gerry pushed most of that.

GE — Were these career guidance programs?

BROWN— Career guidance, specifically toward minority engineers. Minority students. We called it Career Guidance for Disadvantaged Students — we got into the subject of race, but we didn't want to hit that point too hard. And Gerry pushed that — he very definitely was *the* moving force to get most of us involved, particularly me.

So, we got the guidelines all done, received a few submissions from companies that had career guidance slide shows — and sent it out to local sections. Very little happened. The only things that happened were the national efforts that we were doing, through AIChE's national meetings. We became really the most active part of the Career Guidance Committee for about five years. But we didn't get support from the local sections. And, looking back — it was sort of a failed model. The model would have worked, but it needed for local sections to pick it up and run with it.

GE — How long did you do these career outreach activities?

BROWN— I was involved from 1968 to about 1972. Looking back, the one thing we had not looked for was someone in each local section who was very sympathetic toward what we were doing. And, one thing that was very true is that there were very few black chem engineers around. Chemical engineering was not taught in any of the black schools. Most of the other disciplines were, but not chemical engineering. Howard University was the first one that came up with a program — that started around 1969 or so. So, in those local sections, there weren't very many people who were very sympathetic — who were white, like Gerry Lessells. So there was not much progress. And I think that Gerry felt, at times, that he'd sort of failed to move that effort forward — and that was probably true.

So, it was about 1976 or 1977 when Gerry approached Council about coming up with an AIChE minority affairs position where he would be the liaison with the Institute for various outreach activities that might come up, and he held that job until about 1983.

And he would interface with different groups that were doing things, and one of the primary groups was called ChIME — Chemical Industries for Minorities in Engineering. It consisted of about 20 companies or so. They found money for supporting programs like those we described in our guidelines — aimed at getting to students early. As AIChE representatives, we'd sort of guided them using the guidelines we produced, and recommended how to allocate the money — even though AIChE wasn't giving any money. The only thing AIChE had was a scholarship through ACS's Project SEED. \$750.

And, in January of 1983, Gerry turned this over to me. He was retiring and thought I'd be a good one to continue the work. So I did.

GE — You were on the AIChE Council (Board of Directors) around then?

BROWN— I went off Council in 1983. Those were interesting times. I got a letter saying that AIChE was looking at its budget to try raising the contribution to the project SEED students from \$750 to \$1,000, but, AIChE would like to get more “bang for the buck”.

And, the truth of the matter is, the work that we were doing — Gerry as the coordinator and then I as coordinator — was financed by our companies. We were going to different meetings, representing AIChE with these groups, and AIChE was getting exposure for each one of those, And to be honest — when I got that letter, I was infuriated, to say the least, and I suggested that I needed to address this to Council.

I put together a presentation that pointed out how AIChE had been the first engineering society doing minority outreach, but we’d lost our lead to these other groups. Civil engineers had a great program going — they had a budget for five years they could depend upon, and we actually had nothing. I said, we’re unhappy that we’ve lost that leadership to others because we weren’t investing anything as an organization.

Now, I’d surveyed all the engineering organizations and looked at the best that each did, and one of the things the civil engineers had done was a dues check-off, and so I included that idea as a thing that AIChE could do.

It was at that point that Jimmy Wei, who was AIChE vice president, came along and said, how much money do you need? I said, Jim, give me \$30,000 and I’ll tell you what I’m going to do with it. That was 1987. He became president in 1988. So, he was at my presentation in 1987 and took the idea into his presidency. He was the one who recommended forming a Minority Affairs Committee, and I got the job of forming the committee. I held onto the job of coordinator, but I also went out to form the committee.

GE — How did you go about recruiting people?

BROWN — We decided to send out a letter to all the people I knew to meet at the Annual Meeting. But — as you know, I’m recognized at these meetings as the man in the beret and bow tie. I also started to approach any person of color at a meeting. I’d go up and introduce myself, hand out a sheet about the Minority Affairs Committee, and say — here’s the committee, here’s the meeting time. If we had a session, I told them about the session. And they’d come to the meeting, and then, it became a matter of getting people involved.

And, we were fortunate enough that, during this time, Shell asked about what problems we were having. I said one of the biggest problems was recruiting people from industry who have enough backing to be on this committee. And they produced some people to help us - Irvin Osborne-Lee was one of them, and Eugene “Gene” Alsandor from Texas was the Shell representative.

And, so we had three people from industry. And we were just beginning to get black graduates coming in. So, my job was to recruit. My job also was to spend the \$30,000, which I did.

GE — On what sorts of programs?

BROWN— Well, the funds went to three organizations. One was the National Organization of Black Chemists and Chemical Engineers (NOBCChE). And Jimmy Wei actually went to one of

their meetings. He was the only president who did, in 1988, go to one of the meetings to find out what they were doing.

And so, I would say that the idea for the committee is Jimmy's. I was the implementer – getting people together and giving them assignments. Most of the committee members in the early days I recruited. I recruited by just going up to them at meetings, introducing myself, asking them what they knew about the Minority Affairs Committee — which very few did, and getting them to come to meetings, which they did.

So, I give Jim credit for the idea. Gerry was the one with the idea of getting me. And I'm the implementer for getting the committee started.

GE — So, you've covered a lot of the history of the organization, right up through the launch of the committee in 1990. Having observed the entire history of the MAC organization, before and after it was formally chartered by AIChE, what do you think MAC's most important contributions have been — to the Institute or for engineers?

BROWN— I think that getting the Institute sensitive to minorities was not an easy job. You know, my presence there — I became a needle — sometimes I think I was annoying people because of it. For example, there was an award they were going to give me, a special award for being involved. I turned it down and I turned it down because, I said, for what I've done for AIChE, I should qualify for one of the major awards. And if not, then it's not worth my getting that special award for minority affairs — if you can't work that into some of the others Institute awards that you have. So, they finally ended up giving me the Van Antwerpen Award, which I think is more appropriate for the type of thing that was done.

But getting people sensitized toward that was not an easy job.

The other day, Gerry and I were looking back on what we were doing, and he pointed out that at the time, despite all we did, we were ignoring women engineers. Women in engineering wasn't a big thing when we started, but it became one later on. But I think that what we started made it easier for women to get involved with AIChE.

Also, most of the minority engineers who have gotten involved in AIChE nationally have had at least some contact with MAC, and they sort of put that on their resumé.

I think that the scholarships are great. During the time when I was spending many hours, I was spending money pretty much on pre-college, K–12 types of problems. ChIME was also involved in this scholarship review work, and did some funding. We could direct where most of the money they contributed went, using the ideas we had set up in our original guidelines. And Gerry and I both did that. I was the one who found the money, Gerry was doing it without the money.

Looking at the future, I like some of the things I've seen. One of the things I worry about is that I don't think the group is good enough about recruiting people. When I go to meetings I see all the people I've recruited, but not many new faces, I worry about that. Because I think it's a continuing problem in making sure that people know that there's an organization and what we do.

But I think their priorities have been interesting — and this new priority of trying to document the history is a great idea.

One time I was talking to Jimmy Wei, and he said — what will people know about what we've done? This was before we knew that this MAC project was going on. I happened to run across him and he had sent an email to me talking about his first experience in the U.S. Did he talk about that?

GE — Yes, he told the story in our interview, and he wrote about it for us, too.

BROWN — But, you know — I think that the effort hasn't stopped. Black chemical engineers are still underutilized in terms of numbers. I'm happy to see the many who have been involved, who have worked within the structure of AIChE. I think, if you look at proportions of how many black engineers there are and how many have worked in Council and on other AIChE committees, we've done a great job of getting people sensitized to doing that, and they're doing it. This was not the case when I came in.

At the first meeting I went to, I saw one black face, for a whole week at a meeting in Los Angeles — when I looked in the mirror. That was the black face. I gave a paper there on minorities in engineering.

I've been happy with some of the things we've done as a committee. At one of our meetings, we had a couple fellows from Esso ask us “what can we do to help?” And I said, you know, Howard University is trying to form an engineering school, they need a building. And it turned out that, six months later, Esso actually made a big donation to Howard for a building. I'd pulled the idea out of the air — but it turned out they were people at the meeting who I'd worked with at Esso.

GE — Well, as we wrap this up, do you have any marching orders for the committee today, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary?

BROWN— I don't have any marching orders. One of the things that happens, when you're with a group, is that you'd like to see them develop, and develop their own programs. They're not going to survive on my ideas. They're going to survive on ideas that are pertinent to what's going on today.

There's a whole different set of values and problems that are going to be with us until we solve our problem here in America that deals with race, and we're not there yet. We're a long way from it. We've made progress. But we're not there where *I'm* happy, or where most people my age are happy. We're glad with some of the progress, but when we watch what's going on — with people denying that race is a problem, with people saying, “we hear you, *but*. . .” We've seen it. We've been a part of the deeper things, and it's just much more subtle now. But in chem engineering, I think there are areas that the committee will work on that will further whatever's needed.

One of the things that's interesting, for example, is — the committee has really good support from the AIChE organization. We used to fight for anything we could get from the national organization. Most of the work that we did, we did through our personal secretaries, outside, with very little help from the organization, per se. I'm happy to see that's changed — where there's really nice staff support that comes about. Your being here is a good example of that. That didn't always exist, believe me.

GE — That's good to hear. So, are you planning to attend the MAC events in Salt Lake City, and are you giving a presentation at that afternoon's ceremony?

BROWN — Well, we're trying to decide how much Gerry's going to do and how much I'm going to do. I told Gerry I'll let you do anything he wants, and I'll take on the rest. I think we'll cover much of what we've said here.

I do remember, a sad point, was when Gerry was discussing what had been written for the 75th anniversary of AIChE (in 1983), and how disappointed he was that we hadn't done more.

GE — That you hadn't accomplished more for minority members?

BROWN — Yes. In the area that he had put a lot of effort into — a lot of heart and soul, to be honest with you. But, when I look back now, we had a model that didn't work. The local sections weren't that sensitive to what we were doing, primarily because there weren't enough sympathetic people on the section level to help. The number of blacks in the local sections was almost nil or nonexistent. That has changed, and the committee really has benefitted greatly from that. My urging is for the committee to get more people involved. And you're going to have to do the same thing I did — of meeting them, encouraging them to attend, and to take on some responsibilities as well.

GE — You've given us an education. Thank you for taking part in this.

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