Interview with Arnold F. Stancell
Conducted August 11, 2015
Edited transcript

About Arnold Stancell:

Arnold Stancell is a retired vice president at Mobil Oil, and Emeritus Professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology. After receiving his BS in chemical engineering at City College of New York, Stancell became the first African American to earn a PhD in chemical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Beginning in 1962, Stancell researched chemical and plastics products for Mobil Oil. After taking leave to teach at MIT in 1970, he returned to Mobil Oil where he became Vice President of Mobil Plastics in 1976. In 1982, he was named vice president of Mobil Europe Marketing and Refining, and in 1989 he became Mobil's Vice President of Oil and Natural Gas Exploration and Production, with projects worldwide. Stancell also initiated, negotiated and launched Mobil's liquefied natural gas production joint venture with Qatar. After retiring from Mobil in 1993, he joined the faculty at George Tech, retiring as Professor Emeritus in 2004. After the 2010 BP oil spill, Stancell advised the U.S. Dept. of the Interior. In 2011, he was appointed by President Barack Obama to the National Science Board.

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 with Arnold Stancell, who is professor emeritus at Georgia Tech, and a retired Vice President for exploration and production of oil and natural gas at Mobil Oil. He's also one of the Minority Affairs Committee's Pioneers of Diversity Award recipients this year.

I thought we could start by having you tell us a little about how you developed an interest in chemical engineering as a young person.

STANCELL — I grew up in Harlem, so I was a New York City kid. I got interested in engineering at Stuyvesant High School, and of course I liked chemistry, so the choice was rather straightforward. I didn't know anything about engineering, but I just felt it would be something I would be interested in.

After I graduated from Stuyvesant I went to City College of New York in 1953, and I enrolled in chemical engineering there. They had a great program, and I thoroughly enjoyed it.

GE — Did you find mentors there?

STANCELL — The faculty were very supportive. And, many became friends that I've maintained over all of these years. It was a very good experience.

There were few other black students, I think, in all of engineering at City College I was the only black chemical engineering student.

GE — Did that create an unusual climate?

STANCELL — No, it didn't create any particular issues. You applied yourself.

GE — Then you transitioned over to MIT —

STANCELL — First, after I finished up at City College, I went to work at ESSO's Bayway refinery in New Jersey. In fact, that's where I met Henry Brown. Henry, I think, had joined Esso a year ahead of me. I was in engineering and he was in research, and we hit up a friendship then.

GE — Henry Brown, of course, was instrumental in establishing AIChE's Minority Affairs activities in the formative years. Do you have any anecdotes about your experiences with Henry Brown, either within AIChE or as a colleague?

STANCELL — Henry was from Cincinnati. And, I grew up in Harlem — a much bigger black community than where he grew up. We hit it off pretty well. I had him come over and spend a weekend with me in Harlem.

So, I met Henry Brown in 1958 when I went to work ESSO — now it's Exxon — research and engineering. I left ESSO after only eight months to attend MIT. I won a fellowship there to study for the doctor's degree.

GE — Had you been active in any AIChE activities at a national or local level?

STANCELL — I joined AIChE in the 1950s. I had some involvement with the minority committee way back. I remember in the late 1960s that Henry Brown and Gerry Lessells called a meeting and I went to it. But I wasn't a leader in that.

GE — When you entered industry at Mobil, what was the climate like for minority engineers?

STANCELL — When I started at Mobil's research organization in New Jersey, there were one or two minority engineers in research.

GE — In the 40 or so years since then, have you noticed improvements in terms of more women and minority engineers in industry, and what do you think might have led to that change?

STANCELL — I think it was gradual. It starts, and it grows slowly. Folks see the contributions that can be made by so many different segments of the population. Blacks, women, Hispanics. And I think it does feed on itself. I think, also, at the same time, there's a receptivity for diversity. But my view on that is that it shouldn't be diversity for diversity's sake. It should be diversity because we are widening the talent pool. And to me, that's always been the emphasis.

GE — Receiving ideas from everybody.

STANCELL — Everybody. And so, I have little patience when people just home in on the race or your particular background. I think it's a question of how have you contributed. I never asked for promotion. I thought I should earn promotion. And promotions came along. There were certainly mentors along the way — bosses that I worked for that appreciated the contributions I made and were encouraging — but it wasn't steady, it was an evolution. Folks see what you can do. And of course today we have African Americans, Hispanics, and women in very key leadership positions. So, it's happening. It's happening. It takes time. I do recall where I got a big promotion, I got a big award from the company. But that was evolutionary. It wasn't a program, for me or for other minorities, where the company was going to move me along.

GE — Do you think there's still room for improvement in inclusiveness in universities and industries?

STANCELL — In all the opportunities that have become available, and that you make for yourself, I have to say it's evolving nicely. I think you cannot — or you *can*, but I really wonder about the wisdom — say, "we'll have X women, X blacks. . . ." It's got to be based on talent. But, you also want to have everybody have a chance at the jobs according to their ability. So, to the extent there were barriers to that chance, I think the work that's been done by AIChE and the minority affairs group here at AIChE, has helped — by raising awareness of the talent that we have available.

To me, I don't even like the term diversity. You think, well, what is diversity?

GE — I prefer the word inclusiveness.

STANCELL — Yes, I like inclusiveness better, because it's getting at where there are barriers. So, you're pushing against those barriers. It's about each person having a chance. And, we're more and more at that point. I mean, look at how our industries and organizations have changed in the last 50 years. It's really quite amazing. I don't know if it's specifically because of AIChE and M-A-C, though I'm sure that nudge helped. And I don't know if it's a government program, the open enrollments in universities. Henry Brown and I came along before open enrollment. So you don't need that. What you need is to know the opportunity, to seek out the opportunity, and to apply yourself.

Thinking back, Jim Wei was a big encouragement when I was at Mobil Oil. He was in oil research, I was in chemical research. But we saw each other, and he was always encouraging. And then he went on to MIT as chairman of chemical engineering. And now, we have Paula Hammond, who's now the chairwoman of the department of chemical engineering at MIT. That's all since the last 40 years.

GE —In closing, do you have any other thoughts for us?

STANCELL — Well, what interested me in chemical engineering, or technology, was being able to make things work — to know how things are made, and that you can come up with new things. New developments. That was so exciting. You could go into a laboratory and make new materials. And then develop them, and see them come to fruition. So I think that kind of excitement is what is important — for someone to become a chemical engineer or an engineer in another discipline. They have to have a passion for it. And, a lot of the early MAC people — we mentioned Jimmy Wei, Henry Brown, Gerry Lessells — they all had that. And so, to go out and say to a kid, "you may want to be a chemical engineer" — that's fine. But then, you have to tell them all the things they can do. So, the excitement of being able to know that you can develop new products, new

materials, and then to bring them to fruition — such as I was fortunate to do working for a large company — it really is exciting.

And, the last project I had at Mobil was — I was vice president for exploration and production international, and I started a project in Qatar. I had that country as part of my portfolio, and made a visit to them — and I almost fell off my chair. They were sitting on one of the world's largest reserves of natural gas. Mobil had reserves in Indonesia, but they were running low. And we were being beat over the head about, what are you going to do after Indonesia? We were earning about 30 million dollars a year out of Indonesia, after tax profits. So, then I saw that Qatar was sitting on 900 trillion cubic feet of reserves. Indonesia had just 13 trillion cubic feet!

So, at any rate, I started a program in Qatar. And, do you know, I went to a recent reunion of my colleagues at Mobil. And I got talking to some of our folks there, and I said, "well, how is Qatar doing?" I knew it had been developed fully. And it's been 10 billion dollars a year profit after tax. Even with the recent fall off in prices it's five billion dollars profit after taxes. That is huge! I mean, Indonesia pales in comparison. So, it's those kinds of excitements. And the people that I met in Qatar were good people to work with. In fact, when I told them that I was going to retire from Mobil, they were surprised. They said, well, why don't you work for us? But I told them, no, I couldn't do that.

At any rate, it's been a wonderful career and an opportunity to do some things and make some differences.

And I think the Minority Affairs Committee has done an excellent job within AIChE — and now they are seeing the fruit of their efforts in the growing number of fine engineers and scientists that we now have.

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