

Computing Educators Oral History Project  
**Practice interview transcript**

*Andrea Lawrence*

**Interviewer: Elizabeth Adams**  
**Recorded Sunday, June 26, 2005**  
**Location: Lisbon, Portugal**

Corresponding audio available on CEOHP's website, ceohp.org, under "Short Practice Interviews".

**Copyright Statement**

This practice interview transcript is being made available for research purposes only. All literary rights in the transcript, including the right to publish, are reserved to the Computing Educators Oral History Project. No part of the transcript may be quoted for publication, except by the interviewee, without the written permission of the Director of the Computing Educators Oral History Project.

Request for permission to quote for publication should be addressed to Barbara Boucher Owens, either by email at ceohp@ceohp.org or via postal mail at Computing Educators Oral History Project, Southwestern University, P.O. Box 770, Georgetown, TX 78627-0770 USA. The request should identify the specific passages to be quoted, describe the anticipated use of the passages, and identify the requestor.

We recommend that this transcript be cited as follows:

*Andrea Lawrence, a practice interview from 2005, Computing Educators Oral History Project. Online: ceohp.org.*

Conducted as a training session during the ITiCSE 2005 Working Group meeting in Lisbon, Portugal.

1 [0:00]  
2 **Elizabeth Adams: Today is June 26<sup>th</sup> [2005] and we are interviewing Andrea Lawrence of**  
3 **Spelman College. And the interviewer is Elizabeth Adams of James Madison**  
4 **University.**

5  
6 Andrea Lawrence: My mother was a registrar at Spelman College. She eventually ... she started  
7 out as a special assistant to the president and then when he retired he made her registrar. And  
8 then she was registrar for a number of years. My father was a teacher and he ended up  
9 working with special education in the sense of helping place students in jobs at Emerson  
10 Township High [School], which I believe was one of the largest high schools in the country.

11  
12 Well, I started out at Spelman College since my mother was there. My grandpa said, "You're  
13 going to Spelman." And he { not understandable }, I think. And I really wanted to go  
14 somewhere else, but after I got there I had a great time. Met my future husband. Dropped out  
15 and got married my junior year.

16

17 So then was a question of what was I going to do next. When he went to graduate school at  
18 Purdue, I decided I would finish my education because my grandmother was nagging me  
19 every week. So I did and ... in mathematics, I majored in mathematics. And that was my first  
20 exposure to computers. Spelman didn't have any computer science courses at that time. It  
21 was the 1960s. But Purdue did. And I don't think they had graduated their first undergraduate  
22 class in computer science, but they had math electives that were computer courses. So I did  
23 assembly language and FORTRAN and numerical methods and all those things as math  
24 electives.

25  
26 Then I stayed home and raised kids for like 15 years and it was that, at that point, I decided to  
27 go back and get certified to teach in the high school. I did that and taught for a while and I  
28 decided to restart my life. I had, I guess, a midlife change. I left my husband, took the kids,  
29 went to grad school. And it was sort of ironic because I went to grad school in computer  
30 science because I didn't think I remembered how to do good proofs in math. [both laugh]  
31 And I knew I knew how to do the programming piece. And also I had done some computer  
32 science things while I was doing my certification program. So I was feeling a little more up-  
33 to-date on the computer science than I was on the theoretical mathematics. Also the chair of  
34 the department said if I wanted to do computer science he'd get me a TA-ship. Since I had no  
35 job, it sounded like a good thing. So I went to Atlanta University, got my Master's, worked  
36 as a TA at Spelman, and then when I graduated, they hired me. They told me, "You've got to  
37 go back to school and get that Ph.D. if you want to stay working here." So ...  
38

39 **E: So you did.**

40  
41 A: I did.

42  
43 **E: Where did you get it?**

44  
45 A: I went to Georgia Tech. It was kind of interesting, because there were very few women in the  
46 graduate program and there were no minorities. So I was their ... a somewhat double ... a  
47 triple minority. I was older than everyone else. I was one of very few women. And I was the  
48 ... used to have to say, "I'm having a meeting of the minority club — I'm here."  
49

50 **E: [break in recording] I hear that you have experienced some things that others might**  
51 **think of as challenges, but you seem to be breezing over them. Are there any things that**  
52 **you think of as particular challenges in your life?**

53  
54 A: Well, a number of things. One is the way I did it — the in-and-out nature of my schooling.  
55 You know, 15 years here, a gap here, and a three-year gap here, and another three- or four-  
56 year gap there. Every time I would start over, it was such a challenge to get back into the  
57 mode, to balance out the other responsibilities: the children, trying to feed the children, all  
58 those kinds of things. So I think my biggest challenges have come from trying to re-enter the  
59 so-called pipeline at various points. Almost felt like I had to bore holes in.  
60

61 And some of the challenges have come from people's attitude, especially when I first went to  
62 Tech. I ran into two different kinds of people. I ran into people who were very supportive and

63 helpful, and some people who assumed that because I had gone to a minority institution for  
64 my Master's I didn't know anything. And it was interesting because I did basically two-and-  
65 a-half years at Spelman and a year and a summer at Purdue for my undergraduate. And I  
66 discovered that if I mentioned that I was a Purdue graduate they treated me completely  
67 different, even though ... And I got a little bit of that when I went to Purdue. My advisor  
68 decided that I just needed to go back and retake all my math courses. And I said, "Oh, I don't  
69 think so." But it's a bit of a challenge because he is so ... it was funny because he pulled out  
70 the same textbook that we had used at Spelman, that I had at home. He said, "Well, if you  
71 study here you might want to look over this textbook to see what you know, basically."  
72

73 **E: Do you think your students at Spelman are experiencing that same bias today?**

74

75 A: Yes, some of them, at some places. Spelman does have a strong record for producing  
76 students who go on to achieve the Ph.D., so that has helped. So when they go to schools  
77 where they have been before, we don't have that issue. But we do sometimes have an issue  
78 with schools who look at only the GRE scores and the fact that it's a minority institution or a  
79 small institution. And perceive that the students will not be prepared.  
80

81 **E: [another break in recording] You've just pointed out that role models can make a**  
82 **difference. Is that part of the reason you went back to Spelman? As opposed to going to**  
83 **a non-minority institution?**

84

85 A: That's exactly the reason I went back, and exactly the reason I have not accepted some offers  
86 to leave. Because it's ... to be a woman in this field, and then, again, to be a black woman,  
87 makes you such a minority that if you can't see that people can do it, it makes it really hard  
88 to believe that you can.  
89

90 **E: So your students have you there encouraging them ...**

91

92 A: They have me there and I'm half model and half momma. And I'll have one of them come  
93 back and they'll say, "Well, Dr. Lawrence told me I was going to graduate school and she  
94 took me to school and introduced me to the chair and next thing I knew I was enrolled!" And  
95 I've had several stories like [that].  
96

[7:38]