

Murrah, Stacie

Gender and Student Regulation Expectations at Abilene Christian University in the early-1990s

Key Terms: gender, role models, psyche at the time, women

Interview by Diane Hinesley, September 28, 2019.

Stacie Murrah attended Abilene Christian University from 1989 to 1993. She received an undergraduate degree in English, with a minor in Education, leaving ACU with a teaching certification. There is often a tension between the goals ACU has and what the university puts forth. Murrah remembers a predominantly male faculty, with women rarely, if ever, stepping into leadership roles. She does not remember women speaking in chapel. She also does not remember sexuality being a topic of conversation. While ACU has continued to become more and more inclusive and liberal in the 30 years since she was a freshman, the university still has many shortcomings. Overall, I realized that the perceptions of what gender and sexuality was like at ACU in the past is entirely a personal recollection, sometimes reaching a consensus.

This interview provides a primary source of what ACU was like in the early-1990s for a middle-class, white, female student. It focused on topics such as student life, biblical undercurrents, gender expectations, and the presence of female role models.

Diane Hinesley: This is an oral history interview conducted on September 28, 2019 in Boerne, Texas. The interviewee is Stacie Murrah, who attended ACU from 1989-1993. The interviewer is Diane Hinesley. So, what do you remember the dress code being like?

Stacie Murrah: Um, I remember that the girls had to wear shorts that were about down to the knee and, um, just very conservative dressing. We dressed up mostly, for classes. And, um, that's what I recall.

Diane Hinesley: Um, was there an obvious divide between what was appropriate for men to wear versus what was appropriate for women? So, like, when we go to the rec center or to the Lunsford, women are expected to be completely covered on the side, um, no low-hanging arm-holes or anything like that but men can be shirtless or have basically no shirt on for how large it is.

Stacie Murrah: Um, I guess in my generation it was not- this was not something that we considered or thought about. Um, we worked out and we just wore athletic clothing and, um, I don't recall the-the, um, dress code being a problem between male and female. I guess we just accepted how we had to dress during that time.

Diane Hinesley: Do you remember there being any behavior expectations for the student body as a whole?

Stacie Murrah: Well, um, during my time, I think the big controversial issue was dance, and so there were some student body people that would go dancing on the weekends and that was the big deal.

Diane Hinesley: Um, was this around the creation of Swing Cats? Do you know what that is?

Stacie Murrah: I don't even recall what- there was a little dancehall called, um, it started with an 'O', like, Oplin or something like this. And so a lot of people would go there and go country dancing and that was- yeah, I didn't participate in that. That was just something that I know that people were doing that was a little, um, off what ACU expected at the time.

Diane Hinesley: Um, I don't remember the exact year that Swing Cats started, but it's- I think it started around '80s, '90s—

Stacie Murrah: Probably after us. Because that-that group of people that started doing the dancing, maybe that was, like, after that people started going, like, on a regular basis. Yeah, I don't know.

Diane Hinesley: Um, how did you feel that you kept up with these behavior, dressing, just general expectations as a woman at ACU?

Stacie Murrah: Um, I don't think that the 'woman' issue was ever a part of our psyche. Um, we had our Christian Bible classes that, um, dealt with biblical issues. Um, we-that-it just wasn't a part of our psyche at the time. We didn't discuss it. It was- I was a woman and I was very secure in who I was and I didn't have any issue with male or female at the time.

Diane Hinesley: Um, were there any examples of behavior you saw in your peers or dress you saw of your peers who defied the expectations that stick out in your memory?

Stacie Murrah: Um, I did have one or two- there was some, um, people that were a little off-beat. Like, I remember this one guy would come to class with just overalls on, no shirt underneath it, and barefooted. So, that was offbeat. Um, there were a few people that would, you know, be different. Um, but overall, the campus accepted that and there was not- I don't recall any problems with that. We just knew some people were just offbeat a bit.

Diane Hinesley: Alright. Um, I'm going to move more into, like, the religious focus.

Stacie Murrah: Okay.

Diane Hinesley: Do you remember what your chapel requirement was, and did it feel attainable?

Stacie Murrah: Um, okay. Uh, we had to go to chapel every-every day. Um, I think we had a few, like, you could be sick, maybe. But we were expected to be- to go every Monday-through-Friday. And, um,

and it was never an issue for me, personally, because I enjoyed it. We enjoyed going- me and my friends enjoyed hearing the message, being a part of that. So for me, it was not a problem. There were people that would gripe about it and be a problem, and they would skip, and-and they would figure out ways to avoid it. Um, you know, we didn't have to sign in at the time. I forgot how they, um, I don't remember how we were- they checked if we went. They did something, but I can't remember what it was. and, um, for some it was an issue. For me, I just went and I enjoyed it and it was not a problem, so.

Diane Hinesley: Okay, these next couple questions, um, it's basically the same question but in a different context. So, how did the religious atmosphere affect expectations that were made of you in the classroom?

Stacie Murrah: Okay, well, for me, personally, um, I didn't see it as a religious expectation. I saw it as a growth opportunity for me to grow as a Christian. I've- I felt that my spiritual growth at ACU was, um, established and grew and my professors were very good at teaching the Bible. I learned more. I had Christian friends for the first time that really challenged me and led me closer to Christ. And so, um, I did not see it as an expectation, I saw it as an opportunity to grow. And I was thankful for the opportunity that ACU offered for all the opportunities. Like, we did spring break campaigns, we did summer internships, missionary trips. All, um, my-my core group of friends, we were all going to church together. That, to me, *that* was the experience that I received. So what was your question again? Say it again.

Diane Hinesley: Um, how the religious atmosphere affected—

Stacie Murrah: So, I would say that my- the religious, it changed who I was and created me as a young woman in Christ that has sustained me throughout my adulthood. Even my best friends are from ACU. We've walked through life together. We, um, we have spiritually grown together over thirty years, after college. And, um, and so I believe that that spiritual growth that I received there has been a benefit in my life.

Diane Hinesley: Um, within the same context of religious atmosphere and its effect, um, how did it affect your relationships? So your relationships, um, as in friendships, or as in dating relationships, or as in potential dating relationships?

Stacie Murrah: Okay. well, I would say that that foundational year of going to college and seeing who you are, becoming a young woman from, um, and establishing my own views changed everything about who I was. Maybe not changed everything, but solidified everything about who I was and wanted to be. And so from ACU, I met my lifelong friends. My lifelong friends knew my husband, so I was connected to my husband. Um, my lifelong friends are married to people from ACU and, um, the people I go to church with, many of them have connections there. So I feel that it-it really did impact who I am and who I've been all my life, just the foundational truths that I've learned there. I feel like I've gone beyond what ACU taught me but it was, it was important to me.

Diane Hinesley: Um, students and some faculty now joke that ACU is really "Almost Christian University". Would you say that that was how students felt when you were a student?

Stacie Murrah: I believe there was a segment of people that don't understand Christ and the power of his inner, um, abiding spirit. And for those students, if you're playing church, then, yeah, that can be a place that you play church. But for those seeking Christ and truly knowing Him, I think it's a, a fertile ground to grow and receive his indwelling spirit. Um, yes. There were people that would go to ACU and act like they were doing all the right things but in their heart and, um, their character was not aligned with Christ-likeness. Um, so, so in that degree, I do think- what was the question? Remind me of the question.

Diane Hinesley: Um, if students felt that it was "Almost Christian University".

Stacie Murrah: Okay. so, yeah there were some that would say that it wasn't-there were things going on that weren't Christian and that is true. There were things that weren't going on in Christian but I would-I

would say that those activities and those things that were happening were-were people that weren't receiving the full indwelling of the spirit and of who Christ is and understanding the depth that God-that God can change your life. So, um, I think as an institution overall, when I was there, the heart of the leaders were-were for Christ. And if you wanted to be for Christ, you could be for Christ. If you wanted to play church, that would also be a part of the campus. So does-did that answer...?

Diane Hinesley: Um, how were non-hetero students received during this time?

Stacie Murrah: I would-I would have to say that in this time period, people did not come out as being, uh, we didn't have transgenders. We didn't have homosexually or openly gay people at that time. Now, we had some that might have been and we loved on them just like we loved on everyone else. But it was silent. There was no conversation, there was no outward "oh, I'm gay" mentality. Um, so I-I just don't think that the conversation of-of my day had, um, had that topic on our mind and it was not brought up, um, in my circle of friends and people that I was friends with. I can only think of two people on campus that *might* have been gay. And we just loved them. You know, we didn't-we didn't talk like "oh, you're gay" or "you're not gay". We just loved that person for who they were and, um, I don't know. I mean and I don't even know if they were or weren't— they probably were. But we didn't-it wasn't a conversational piece, if that makes sense.

Diane Hinesley: Alright. So was there a gender divide in the majors chosen? So, like, being an English major was primarily, uh, female students or was there a nice mix?

Stacie Murrah: Um, I was an English major and actually some of my best friends in the English department were males. There was-were-there was a lot of males in the English department. I don't remember it-it was probably 50/50, as I recall. Um, the business department, probably more male. But then again my best friend was business department. Um, the Bible department was mainly male. I don't recall too many women that were in the Bible-biblical, um, at that time period. So, um. But as far as English is concerned, my-my best friends were male that we were 50%, probably.

Diane Hinesley: What did leadership look like? Was it mostly men, mostly women? Was it mixed?

Stacie Murrah: It was male. Yeah, we didn't have very many women to look up to as role models that spoke in chapel. I can't recall a woman that spoke at chapel, ever. And, um, like, leading, like, church-wise, never a woman that led anything that I can recall. Um, the mission trips that we went on, there was-it was always male leaders. So, I don't recall the women stepping into leadership roles at ACU during my stay.

Diane Hinesley: Um, with that would you say that the faculty was mixed or would you say that it was primarily men as well?

Stacie Murrah: Um, I remember a few women, but mainly male leaders and teachers. Yeah, I don't recall but two or three women, uh, professors that I had. All of my English professors were male. Um, I had a-I had education teachers that were female that I really liked and some of my physical education teachers were female. But all my English professors were male.

Diane Hinesley: Um, this moves more into student life. So what were the dorm regulations? So now, we are expected that, like, both feet are on the floor. I think it's like one person per bed or something, as if there's many places to sit. Um, we have open house on only certain nights of the week, which is dependent upon your hall. Um, and those open house nights are the only nights that other-members of the opposite sex are allowed into your dorm.

Stacie Murrah: Are they allowed into your dorm room? Oh. Uh, yes, I recall. So we had strict curfews. On week nights, it might've been, like, at 10 and weeknights, maybe 11:30 or 12. And, um, there was no, um, opposite male in your dorm room at all. We had, um, like a common area downstairs and the guys

could come in there, um, but they couldn't go upstairs, for sure. And, um, yeah, I recall that we had, you know, strict curfews. It was definitely male/female, um, dormitories. You had to live there, uh, your freshman year *and* sophomore year before you could, um, go off campus. Um, there were people that snuck out. And I remember one of my people in my hallway broke her, um, leg and back from climbing out one of the windows. Um, so yeah, there was always that of trying to break dorm curfew.

Diane Hinesley: When male students-when male students were allowed into, like, the common area, what was the behavior expectance? Like I said ours was, like, both feet on the floor, doors open, stuff like that.

Stacie Murrah: Yeah, I guess it was probably the same as far as, um- um, I didn't normally have males come over so I don't recall too much other than they were just expected to-to be open. Like, they couldn't be in private areas. It was just all in the common area. You were either watching TV or playing some kind of card game or something. I mean, there was always some, a supervisor, a RA, or somebody there when it was time for the, um, co-ed time. So, there- it was always supervised.

Diane Hinesley: Um, I remember largely the first semester of my freshman year, but especially during Wildcat Week, um, hearing a lot about "ring by spring" and feeling the pressures of that. Um, so I was wondering if this was something new or if this was something that's been going on at ACU for a while, and likely other colleges.

Stacie Murrah: Um, at ACU, it definitely was kind of an issue and undercurrent that people went there to find their mate for life, and to get married. And, um, being in a club- like I was a part of Ko Jo Kai- and, especially there, there was this big thing about being engaged and they would make a big scene about it and so all these people wanted to share their story of being engaged with the Ko Jo Kai and so you always had that pressure, I guess, kind of to feel that you had to get married while you were there. Um, and, um. Yeah, that was always kind of the undercurrent, that you needed to be engaged before your senior year, you know. So, yeah. I wasn't, but that was kind of the hope of most everybody on campus, is that you found your mate and then you got married.

Diane Hinesley: Did you feel safe walking alone on campus at night?

Stacie Murrah: I did. I-I was a runner at the time and we ran around campus. We didn't really think about crime or any problems. Uh, we just- uh, we felt very safe.

Diane Hinesley: Um, did you receive any unwanted attention to an amount that made you uncomfortable- so catcalling or someone, um, starting a conversation with you and within the first few moments, you know that this is an unsafe conversation?

Stacie Murrah: Um, nope. I don't recall any of that. I did not have any problems, um, like that. I just, I can't recall it. I would've remembered. I didn't.

Diane Hinesley: Um, so you've already said that sexuality was just kind of something that wasn't really talked about. Um, but was there any sort of 'hate the sin, love the sinner' attitude about it, or was it a genuine 'love the person' attitude?

Stacie Murrah: Um, I-I think that would depend upon your friend group, wouldn't it? Um, because, um, um, I can't recall the faculty having any hardcore discussions about it or having any type of, um, dogma or anything to say about it. Because in-in all honesty, that is an issue that has come up probably in the last 15- 10 to 15 years. I don't know how long it's been on the forefront of the- of the conversation. But 25 years ago, that just really truly wasn't in the whole society issue. And so, I think for ACU at the time I was there, we were more dealing with, um, 'biblical issues, like 'is it okay to bring instruments into the church?', or 'is it okay to dance?', or 'is it okay for women to speak?'. Those were the type of things that we were struggling with and talking about. Um, so I think today's young people have a-a very, very

different conversation and psyche- that they have to- and they need to address it, just as we felt that we had to address the women speaking in church issue. I mean, to the- to me, that was a wrong that needed to be righted. And, um, so, um, I-I can see that-that would be a very important part of what ACU needs to address. And they-and they need to have conversation of it, and they need to have open dialogue about what truly is-does it mean to be called a child of God, a child-a person who abides in Jesus, and what do you do with a society that has, um, if they're biblical and if they're not in line with the Bible and what the Bible says, and if- and the people that come to the campus, if they're not in line with what the Bible says, where-where- how do you address that and how do you address society in that- in that aspect?

Diane Hinesley: Was there any pressure about who and how to marry? So, I've heard, like, that, um, some of my professors' mothers would go to ACU or a similar university and they'd be like, "I'm gonna marry a Bible major!" Was there any pressure like that?

Stacie Murrah: I think there was an undercurrent of that. That, you know, you wanted to marry somebody that, you know, knew the Bible and was a deep believer, and, um, you know, who also made money, you know? There was this rich kind of mentality, that like you had to have it all. You had to have the money and the- the Christ spirit within. which, to me, as I reflect on ACU, that would be the one critical thing that I would say in my generation was the, um, was the wealth mentality versus what Christ says about wealth. It just seemed like people were very materialistic and, and that was not addressed. I'm like, how can you be this materialistic person within this christian university. So to me, that was a bigger issue than the gender issue, so now that i think of it. That was-the materialism was my issue during the- during my stay there.

Diane Hinesley: Um, I wonder if that came from being at the end of this long period of war, and this long period of just turmoil within, um, like, the American people. 'Cause we went from World War I to World War II to Cold War threat so I wonder if your generation's parents having that mentality of being in that, like constant stress of whether we're going to war or not contributed to that desire for marrying someone godly and marrying someone who was wealthy.

Stacie Murrah: It could've. We were, um, when were in- 1992 or 1- I think it was '92 or '93, we had just gone to war again, and so. Um, George Bush had sent, um, shock and awe, um. There was still some unsettled issues with our society. Um, yeah. I don't know how much that played in. I think there is, um, at ACU a lot of money. And a lot of people send their children there who have a lot of money and, um, so that was, you know, that-that could be a generational thing that needs to be addressed. I don't know.

Diane Hinesley: Um, this is more general ACU- kind of a category. So, consider the mentors and role models that you had while you were an ACU student. So beyond just a faculty member that you had as a teacher, like, someone who really stuck out to you. Were these role models predominantly male or female?

Stacie Murrah: Um, I would have to say, for me, as-as I said before, there was not a lot of women who mentored at the time. So the men, the preachers at the time, the Bible teachers, the people that led us on missionary trips who-who were male, all of these were the people that kind of led us spiritually. So i did not have the opportunity to have a woman, um, mentor. There was one lady that did, um, she was, she was- sorry. She was the, um, Ko Jo Kai sponsor and, Mrs. Sharpe, and so she was a mentor to a lot of girls. I wasn't as close to her as probably some people were, but that's the only female that i can think of that was a possibility to be a mentor to me personally, so.

Diane Hinesley: Um, did these male mentors affect, um, the relationship you have with men and the expectations you have of those relationships?

Stacie Murrah: Um, I would say that those male influences, um, affected my spirituality. They affected my relationship with Jesus Christ, which, in turn, does affect every aspect of my life and my relationship with my husband now. Um, I think that what they preached and what they taught was truth, that-that sunk deep into my soul and affected my life for eternity, so-so in that regard, I feel very blessed to have had those words spoken of truth in my life. Would i have liked to have had a woman's perspective? Absolutely. I wish-i would've loved that. And I hope that ACU is moving toward that. Have they moved toward that? Yeah. So, and again, I think it was a generational thing. I think that at that time period, that just wasn't even a thought in their, um, in the psyche of our society.

Diane Hinesley: ACU has always prided itself on giving students a Christian education. As you perceived it, how did the Christian aspect of your education interact with gender?

Stacie Murrah: Okay. Um, well that's a hard one for me again. And I think it's just in regards, because, at-at the time, that was not quite an issue for me. And so, the-the only way I can answer that is that maybe- this is the only thing I can say is that had ACU been more open to women in the ministry, I could have been a wonderful minister. I could have gone into the ministry very easily and would have, had that been an opportunity for me. I would've really- really seen that. So, um, I don't think my question is answering your question as far as gender is concerned in today's society, um, but at the same time, I-I can't speak to something that wasn't a part of my generation, that really just wasn't there. I could talk to you about now and the church I go to and how we're addressing gender within the church I go to now. But at ACU, that- that line of thought, everyone around me, society in all, that just was not a part of who we were at the time.

Diane Hinesley: Um, what would you want to say to current ACU students about their education and about how sexuality and gender shape their college experience? So how, the opportunities that we have, having, uh, women mentors and stuff like that.

Stacie Murrah: Um, I think- Have you ever heard of Ravi Zacharias? Okay. If you have not heard of Rocky- Ravi Zacharias, I would say that you need to YouTube him and listen to his spiel, his message on homosexuality. It is, it is everything that needs to be said in the church today and it explains it so clearly. Um, and I would- I would say that ACU needs to follow his teachings on that and be able to verbalize in a-in an academic setting. It needs to be taught and addressed. I think transgender, gender, all the things that we're addressing in society has to be addressed at ACU. And in a loving, kind way that doesn't, um, take away from the truth of Christ. So, I think that's where the conversation needs to happen and it needs to be important to the-to the community there. You know, so, as you bring up these questions- I'm curious, are they addressed at ACU? Are they discussed?

Diane Hinesley: Um, this class is the beginning of having those discussions.

Stacie Murrah: I would recommend that-that you personally listen to Ravi Zacharias on homosexuality and have your own opinion- have your, um, you know draw close to Christ and His word and His teaching, and then come up with your own ability to express that in an educated way to believers and to non-believers. You've got to be able to answer the questions of other people and if you can't learn that in a-in a secondary, post-secondary education, then they've failed you as a Christian because that has to be addressed. And what do you do, um, with young people that are feeling, that are questioning who they are and their sexuality- how do you address that? It- we can't be silent in this area any more. That-that has to be a conversation.

Diane Hinesley: Um, are there any other, um, ideas or memories or anything that got brought up that you would like to say?

Stacie Murrah: I guess, for me, like, um, my daughters are at the age of going to ACU. Um, one of them chose not to go there. Um, and one of them is a junior now and so I still believe in ACU, but if she went there, I would hope that that materialism and, um, and I hope that they are addressing society's needs and not just church issues, which don't really have to do with society. I hope-I hope that they're abiding to Chrsit, looking to Christ, and not a particular church or a particular theology, but only Christ and Christ alone, which is what I would hope for ACU.