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Interview with Larry Dunn, 1998

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L a r r y D u n n

...1998. Welcome, thank you. I guess the place to start is the circumstances that brought you to Columbia. Why did you come here and when?

I first came up in early '76. I was originally from Anderson, Indiana, which at that point was the unemployment capitol of the U.S. There was General Motors down and so forth. And I had been working in Anderson—just minimal jobs and so forth—and I wanted to continue education. So through—one of my high school friends was related to Jim O'Brien, he was called O.B., and his cousin was married to Mirron Alexandroff.

Ah-ha! (Laughs)

So it kind of intertwined there. But he was, in fact, working at Columbia and he would come down to see his mom and so forth. And I'd see him then, and they had just purchased the 600 building. So they were, of course, expanding at that point. And the opportunity to actually work and go to college and take classes was there, so I took it. So I came up actually to continue my college education, or start it, in fine art. So I was working and taking classes at that time.

So what kind of classes were you taking?

I took some—drawing and mostly, practically all, fine art classes. And when I wasn't taking classes I was working in 600, doing about everything (laughs). Sometimes I would be the relief for the freight operator during the construction periods over there. And we did a lot of jobs throughout the building and things like that.

So were you working forty hours a week?

Yeah.

Or less?

It fluctuated; typically about forty.

Typically forty, and were you a student full-time?

Yes.

Full-time, my. Like many other Columbia students.

I tried, yeah.

I don't know how anyone can do it at all. I'm always amazed and impressed. So you were taking courses; and so tell me a little bit about—let me start out with your student career. What was it like to be a student?

Well, being from Indiana it was a pretty drastic change from my little corner of the world. Living in Chicago was pretty overwhelming. But it was a, everybody was, it was a real interesting mix of people. And everybody was real friendly and it was really a nice setting, so far as me, my envision of Chicago being a harsh city and all that. So it was a real nice niche for me to fall into.

What were the other students like?

They seemed to be different than everybody else (laughs). That's kind of what I picked up originally.

Uh-huh, in what way?

There was a close-knit group of kids that I sort of went into, I guess. A lot of them also worked; TAs and so forth. So that was more the group of people that I was associated with. And I pretty much stayed in mostly the Art Department. But they'd take some

general classes; there'd be some science classes and things that were kind of... so I wasn't real serious about the...

So did you finish?

No.

No, you didn't.

I still haven't (laughs). I worked for a couple of years at that point. And at that point I was living with Jim O'Brien. And he and I quit the College and started doing construction work ourselves for—we worked for a company called [Regelin] Developments, and we did carpentry work and so forth. And that was in about '78. And in '79 I worked for him for a while; then after that him and I actually did each other a contract. And then in '79 I decided to go back to Indiana for some unknown reason. And I worked that summer, did construction work in Indiana. And then, of course, it was outside labor, so it ceased pretty much at the end of the summer. At that point, that



was 1980, I came up for O.B.'s, it was his fortieth birthday party, I think. And Bert was there and he coerced me into coming back and so I did. And I worked the rest of that summer, of '80, and then started in October of 1980 again working here. At that point I was doing all the painting and, of course, some carpentry work, and we'd build walls and taking things down and that sort of thing. And from there out, it just continued. I attempted to try and take more classes and I got some in here and there, you know. But unfortunately they knew I was in the building so whenever there was a problem they needed me. At that time I also got married, and so things changed. Schooling kind of ended shortly thereafter. I just continued working.

So, now you were doing construction work. When you first came to Columbia and you were working for Columbia were you, you said you were, your jobs included running the elevator and what else?

And at that point I was helping, as people were moving out some of them were—we were taking some walls down, doing demolition.

Oh, OK. So you were doing some of the things that you are still doing?

Yeah, true. That was the start of it, though.

Was that the start of it? I was wondering if you had done any of this in Indiana somewhere.

I had done some. Yeah, I worked for a contractor that installed sprinkler lines and so forth. And my dad had always been handy, so I helped him build things; did a lot of renovation on our little house in Indiana and so forth. I was accustomed to that kind of thing, and I enjoyed it.

Now, you said you ran into Bert at a birthday party, and he coerced you. Did you always know him or was that your first meeting with him?

That's who I actually worked for initially, when I first started. Of course, the school was still at 540 at that point, and they had just bought this building. [I hadn't moved out there] until like October in '75. They were in the course of people moving out of 600 and then the construction started shortly thereafter...

Now, how many people were involved? How many people were you working with that were involved with buildings, maintenance, reconstructions?

Well, that worked with Columbia, that was simply the Building Engineer, that started also at that time, Jim Brady, at 600. And then Irv Meyer, who was Plumber/Electrician and so forth, he had started in '75. And then Jake Caref had worked since the College started in 1800, I think (*laughs*). He was carpenter and everything [to the College] at that point. And then there was an EMSL and then there was a freight operator that—he was actually with a different company, so he didn't work directly for the College. That was about it as far as building services type of—and then we did have a runner, Julio... God, I can't remember his last name—but he was an art major also. He did ceramics, pottery, and so forth. So he was taking classes and doing all the running around.

You mean like buying, deliveries...

Deliveries and pick-ups and so forth. That's about it.

Now, were there outside contractors?

Oh yeah, always. I worked at, initially, the 600 building...

Yeah, who was, who in the College was sort of in charge of keeping track of that? Was there one person or a couple?
Bert.

OK, OK. So that wasn't something that Jake Caref was much involved with?

No. I think he wanted to be. But he wasn't really... about it. It was a subject, the short timeframe that it had to be done and so forth, and Jake was real... he's a beautiful person. I mean, he was, of course, concerned with what they were doing and what they were using and, you know, nickel and diming and everything, which was conscientious, as he always has been and had to have been for the College at that time. And he's still like that today.

Now, did you really kind of, when you weren't involved in building and construction and all that kind of stuff, what other kinds of work were you involved in, say in the early '80s? Were there other kind of things you've been doing?
Not at that point.

Were you involved in things like, you know, there are darkrooms, there's all kinds of facilities for all the different kinds of teaching that go on. Were you involved in any of that kind of stuff, in building it, in painting it, fixing it or anything?

Yeah.

Yeah, could you? I'm curious about some of that.

At that point, I mean, being at Columbia and so forth, we really took care of everything that was in

the building. And it was, of course, monetarily wise was the biggest reason, I think. I mean, we tried to do everything we could that wasn't too much that an outside contractor [would have to do it]. And it was, I mean, it was so confined, it seemed like it was so easy, looking back at it. You know, we were all in one building. We had the Dance Center and the theater was on School Street, I believe, at that time. So we would have to, of course, go up there and do some work to the building. [The people, you know], they broke into the theater center about every other weekend.

And did you have to put a new lock on every other weekend?
It seemed that way, but I'm sure it wasn't that bad.

So, and did you have to interact a lot with faculty in doing things like darkroom building, other kinds of things like that?
Yeah, it was, of course at that point it was a pretty small group so that you knew, I mean, at that point you knew basically everybody. We would see them on a regular basis, not as-now, I mean, there's no way you can...

Yeah, eight thousand students; a thousand faculty. Well, who else besides, now I've heard about darkrooms a little bit from people in Photography, but who else needs sort of special facilities other than tables and chairs?
Well, things were—at that point, they were always changing. Even then the rooms would need to be changed and so forth. There wasn't any one specific group. It seemed like Photography was, at that point, the larger department, and Art was fairly small, then.

Were there special demands for departments like Television and Radio?
Somewhat.

From your professional point of view.
It goes kind of in cycles as to what is the more prominent department at the time. You tend to do more things for that department because it's changing more rapidly, I guess, than the others would be. It's a lot of minor alterations. And then the major construction was always done, at that point, in the summer. And then they were using a Project Manager and outside contractors and so forth to do the bulk of all the work. And we did a lot of countertops and so forth.

So how many people are there in your department?
It's seventeen, I think.

Seventeen, wow. And doing essentially the same kinds of things?
Yeah.

And the same kind of farming some of it out if it's really big stuff.
Yeah. A lot more now, we still try and—anything we can fix, we do. And then there are more involved jobs that we use an outside contractor do, simply because there's so much of it and little of us. But again, we try and do whatever we can as far as [identifying things] and specialized-like the Film/Video, video editing, the consoles, cubicles for some of their specialized gear. We tend to do two or three of those a summer.

Now, do you do the wiring and stuff or do they do it?
Yeah, they do it.

Yeah, I was wondering because I know the Radio Department, in practically no time flat, I've heard very good things about that.
That went exceptionally well. John sent in his engineers and they did a really good job. So the radio engineers, they took care of all the wiring. Between what they did and the electrical contractor did, they got everything pretty much in place before they actually did more work at Christmas.

So actually, who's actually in charge of kind of keeping that organized now? Is somebody managing that, did you hire or... The Radio Department?

No, in a move like that.
I think it's a combination of things. I, of course, indirectly by Bert, [know what's] coming next and so forth, the timeframe and that type of thing. And then we just sort of work it out and do it.

So you're the, what's your title?
The Director of Building Services.

Director of Building Services. And how long has that been your title?
As I was walking over here, it's been a while (*laughs*)—fourteen years.

Fourteen years, OK. So you worked, you must have, that's about 1984 or so, so you became the Director in '84. And is that the title that Jake Caref had?
There wasn't actually that title, so to speak, at that time. It was when he retired that I was appointed that, I guess. So I kind of took over what he was doing, you know, and went from there.

Seventeen people is a lot. Is that in response to the physical growth of the College, and has it been kind of steady, a little bit every now and then, or has there been any moments when, you know, lots of people were added on?

No, it's been gradual. With each building, such as we purchased the building, and we inherit the engineer that was there.

Oh, that's interesting. Is that because that's the person that knows what's going on...
Mostly that (*laughs*).

...or is there some kind of, is this a normal thing that happens when a building gets taken over?
Sometimes it's, I don't know the exact legalities of it, you know, the union dictates, depending on which union and what building location it is. But the Operating Engineer stayed with, something like that... expanding on that correctly, its situations. And then when we purchased the dormitory building there was a maintenance man in there that we kept. So as we expanded and kind of, at least get one more person per building, typically, and then just the general overall needs that requires me to hire additional carpenters and hire a plumber/electrician, air conditioning, heating/air conditioning, kind of. And we all kind of know enough about everything so it's not really just a specialized, one job. I think that any of them can do, at least minimally, everything. That's pretty much how they've been like that. And I look for people that have more capabilities than just hammering nails. So we added people as we go along.

Let me ask about some of the people you remember best at the College. You mentioned a few people already, but maybe can you go on? Are there others?

Others... quite a few. Personally, I've always worked for Bert since day one. [The first day] I met the President, Mike Alexandroff. Because of, kind of the relation I had with my partner, and that was his family, so it was kind of an exceptional relation to M.A. and his family, not simply an employer relation. So that was, you know, it was interesting; a wonderful man. Just a wonderful man. And then his wife was sisters to the group that I knew in Indiana. [It was kind of steady, kind of in that way.]

What was Mike Alexandroff like as a college President?

He was never my envisionment of a President. If you would have an idea of a President, that was not how he was. He was always personable and there was no—like he was the President and you were somebody washing the floor. There was never, ever that difference. I couldn't have ultimately worked with a better, for a better person. I mean, he was always concerned and knew and... When I quit, it was, he called me into his office, which was, we'd never done that, we spoke outside the office and so forth. But it was interesting.

And what did he say?

Well, he wanted me to stay and further my education and so forth. You know, he couldn't pay me as much as I was going to get otherwise but that I really should consider staying and going to school and so forth. And to have the President of the College, you know, pull you into the office and read you the riot act (*laughs*). It was pretty neat.

Did he, I'm curious, would other people who were students have known him?

Well, at that point, yeah.

Would they interact?

He was always willing to do that. He was always reachable, I mean, I think he treated everyone as he did I, on a very personal level with great concern. It was like we were all his children, so to speak, kind of a relationship there. It made you feel good.

That's interesting. How did he interact with the faculty, do you have any sense of that?

I really wasn't around that type of interaction. The contact I would have with the faculty would be fairly minimal... anybody else. So the interaction wasn't, not there.

What about your interactions with other—I want to go back to Mike Alexandroff in a minute—your interactions with other people providing all kinds of services, like in the library or Payroll or any of those kind of departments?

It was, we're close to them. Like at the Christmas parties, they would be in the boardroom, and everyone would be there. And we'd fit in there. So being that small it was quite, it was pretty amazing.

Now, would Mike Alexandroff come to these?

Oh yeah.

And Bert Gall and the other varied work people?

Well, Pearl Cristol was at the Payroll, and John Schiebel was, it would be Finance at that time, and they would all be there. It was pretty neat. It was very different

from what it is now. You knew everybody and everybody knew you.

So is the big difference, is the big change in that just the matter of size?

Yeah. I don't think the attitudes have changed that much. I really don't. That feel-good attitude is still there, in my opinion. And that's part of the reason that I came back and stayed so long, just because of that, and the way everyone works together. It's very different from any other place that I've ever worked, certainly. And I enjoy the fact that there's a college here constantly kind of in tune with the world, at this point.

Well, is this kind of—when you first came here, was there that same kind of feeling about students?

Even more so than there is, I think, now. I think at that point there were about two thousand students at that point. And it was, being that small, it's like everybody knew everybody.

Among the students.
Yeah.

Well, can you give me, who were the students in terms of age and gender, ethnicity, and stuff like that? Can you profile the student body when you came here?

It was a little bit of everybody. It seemed to be mostly younger kids [at] my age and so forth, at that time. But there was certainly a mix with them.

Has that changed?

I'm sure it has. I don't know what change is there. It was certainly a kind of different type of student, I think, back then.

We're here with Larry Dunn part two.

I think we attracted a lot more free-spirited students at that time than your mainstream college student. But I was really overwhelmed with the variety of kids that were there.

Do you think that that's still true in a way, Columbia attracted that student?

To some degree. Not as much as it did then, just because of the growth and the reputation and so forth and so on. It's a different mix now.

How would you describe—you mentioned the open admissions policy, but how would you describe the mission of the College?

I think it's to give anyone and everyone the opportunity to get better education, to actually educate them in a sense of the real world, not such as book learning. I think I've always admired that concept, the fact that you have people that are in the real world doing what they're teaching. I think that's a real unique type of setting, especially for a college. And some of the instructors that I took, I had one instructor whose name was Andy [Pachey]. At that time he wasn't as famous as he is now. You know, to have that contact with someone of that caliber, kind of, that was exciting.

What was he like as a teacher?

He was a very good teacher, actually. Very energetic, and he seemed to really enjoy the interaction between the—he would get so excited over somebody's drawing that somebody else might look at it [and go, "What?"] So he would see something and kind of develop something with it, and individually with people. It was a good class, I really liked it.

What was the title of the class, do you know?

Oh, boy. It was a drawing class...

Do you remember other teachers?

No, he sticks in my mind because of seeing his work kind of really come everywhere after...

Do you think that Columbia's had an impact on the art community in Chicago or more generally?

Oh yeah, yeah, I think so. I don't know how you [repage] that but just from hearing and learning of people that were from Columbia and now doing this and that and the other, it's just amazing. The contacts of just the people that I deal with, more than once I've run into people that, you know, "I'm from Columbia College and I do this." "Oh yeah, I graduated from Columbia," or, "I'm going there now." It's funny to think that, just from when I first started, it was this little college in big Chicago.

Do you think that Columbia has influenced higher education?

I honestly don't know. I would think the concept of teachers that are out in the field—whereas that was, I think, before never really a mainstream. It was something that, you go to college [with your major teachers] and so forth. I think, I don't know if you attribute it to the College but it's more heard of, being aware of what other institutions are doing now. I guess I would like to think, "Sure, it started here."

Well, we've heard of others, part of a cutting edge trend. Do you think it's had an impact on American society?

I'm sure in some way it did. I couldn't begin to find in what way.

I've thought about other things, the open enrollment policy, sort of a larger impact. We're confined within our walls, so to speak.

You like to, at least I like to think, that there's some opportunity given to someone that might not have gotten it otherwise. That's the whole intent of having, if there was some reason, I can't recall, but it was about a student that didn't make good grades and so forth in his high school and got out and couldn't get in to other colleges and came here and did phenomenally. So that's the kind of thing where, to reinforce the positive side of that.

Has your vision of education changed? Your personal views since you came here?

Yeah, I'm sure it has. Of course, I have a seventeen-year-old daughter and she's getting ready to go to college (*laughs*). So in the period of my being here, my life has changed in quite a lot of different ways. And my perception of what a college should do has changed

In what way?

I guess I am more tuned into what they actually—the end product, that they live by the [actual] student and how that transpires. So I'm looking at a different side than I was originally, mine, me going to college, now it's me being the parent looking at different colleges. In my mind I think I have all of the contacts that are possible to acquire going into college [that I'm sure they do] on the outside, and that's become pretty important in my vision of what the education should do. It's not only teaching in here, your world is getting really big, and contacts out there in it. So I see that as pretty positive, a plus for Columbia.

When you came here you thought of these kind of issues?
No.

No?

I didn't really know what—I've always been good at drawing. I took a lot of art in high school. And in doing that, I wanted to do something with it, but I didn't apply. But at that point I think I was trying to find something to do with my art, and I do artistic work, I guess. (*Laughs*)

Do you still do any drawing?

Occasionally. I haven't in a while. I think the last—one of the last classes I took was Children's Book Illustration. I wish I could remember that instructor, he was very in tune. And at that time I had little kids so... they're not so little any more.

Yeah, having children makes you think about all sorts of things.
Yeah, yeah. You do change.

Yes indeed. What have been some of the most important events to occur during your time here at Columbia, the most important events for Columbia?

That's a hard one. I guess, from my point of view, is each building that we've purchased to expand. It's exciting because there's more and better facilities and new challenges.

Oh yeah. So that's especially in the last two years?

Yeah, it's become more frequent, recently. It was, initially, it was like every five years that we acquired new property, but now it's certainly more frequent than that. I've learned this because it seemed like we can't go two years without acquiring more space somewhere... started the Sherwood building. And

then of course 33 East Congress, right over there.

When was Wabash acquired?

'85? This one was '90, and then the dorm was '93, I believe.

So in a sense it's gonna become more and more challenging, exciting and interesting for you as time goes by. So are you looking forward to more?

I don't know if I look forward to it. I'm just wringing my hands (*laughs*). Oh, goodness. No, I think every addition is welcome...get better space, and everything's a positive change. It's harder to do keep up with it and adjust to it.

So are you finding, have you found that you have become more of a, that you've got to sort of like think of systems for keeping track of things, you know, that you get used to? Do you get to do some of the work yourself?
Not so much anymore. I've recommended.. more and I'm more simply chasing things and directing people and this guy here and there. It's becoming harder and harder.

Do you miss the old days?

Somewhat. But not to any degree that I sit and ponder about it. It's fun to reminisce about it. We actually had time to sit down when we weren't doing anything. That's no more.

Let me ask you a little more about other notable people. I think we got, I got you started on that and you got off the track after Mike Alexandroff. What other kind of notable people, if I make a short list of five or something who else would you put on it? And people you personally like a lot.

I mentioned John Schiebel, the Vice President of Finance.

Tell me about him a little bit.
I, well, I didn't really have much contact with him on a day-to-day basis. But at that point it was such a small group, I knew everybody. He was off in his financial world. *(Laughs)*

How long, when was he, what year was he here?

He was the predecessor to Michael DeSalle. Mike's been here longer [than I've been, I guess;] he retired Hermann Connoway was the Dean.

What do you remember about him? I know him only because there's a scholarship named after him.

I really liked Hermann a lot. He was a really good person.

What kind of interactions did you have with him?

Not much of anything, more of a casual... with, of course, they keep scoring and change lots and things like that. Always a happy guy, always positive. He was very fun to be around. There's Jake; ...since he's working with Bert and Mike. And he'd stay around here in the summer, and I'd give him jobs to do.

Oh really?

Oh yeah. Jake still comes around and tinkers. We work him like a dog and he loves it. And his wife is glad that he's out of the house, I'm sure. He's got some stories.

Yeah? Tell me, what sort of person, tell me a little more about Jake Caref. He's a pretty important person in the earlier history of the College. Do you know how he got into this business?

He went, he came from Europe, [I think in] the '50s, right after the war. He worked as a carpenter for

various employers that I know of. He had a partner for a while, actually, for a long time. And then how he came to Columbia I don't know *(laughs)*. But he would be, like build classrooms and so forth at that time. [This was in the '60s; he was always doing] things for the College.

When did you first meet him?

When I first came up here.

The first day you were here, or...

Yeah, pretty much.

And what did you find that you liked?

Not like anything I had found in Indiana, I can tell you that.

How so?

In Indiana they were, you didn't have much variety of intermixed people. Here was a man from the Old Country that was a little hard to understand and not, well, not a little hard-headed, I think, he's a lot hard-headed. He had his way of doing things and that was it.

Give an example.

Everything has the Jake way. So it was never done. He was never the degrading type of, "Do this or I'll throw you out the window." That's what he learned, and he wanted you to learn the same way.

So did you?

Yeah, you know, he taught me quite a bit.

Did he? Yeah.

I learned a lot. He would do anything for anybody. It's kind of that atmosphere and I think that's why he kind of stuck around and didn't move ever.

Now is it, he was, if he was, although he didn't have the title of Director of Building Services, if he was kind of in charge of things, he would have been a manager of other folks, kind of in charge of them, but somebody who, in a smaller college had his hands on tools more.

Oh yeah, he was always with tools. And a lot of things that were done back then, it was him and a bunch of students that built things.

Oh, uh-huh. Paid students, unpaid students?

Well, they were student workers, so he dragged them into his world to build walls or something. It was cheap labor.

Do you use students at all now?

No.

How come?

Well, the last I tried was a couple painters and I had to—let alone trying to find them, [because they're in college and they're still kind of] distracted

Yeah, that one can work both ways, I guess.

And...

Now, tell me about the process of your learning to be a manager.

Have you had to sort of sit down and think about it, read books about it, take courses on it, or did it just grow?

It just sort of grew over the years. I had taken some [of art here] and there. It's just more of an every day adapting, more than anything else.

Do you sort of step back and think about what you're doing as a manager, think of yourself in those terms?

Yeah, I think more and more I tend to do that. Whereas when there were three or four of us, it was, we were all working together.

Then you kind of grew conscious of it?

So anyway. You have the builders in here working, and some of the other guys who, that type of work, that you don't intermix with...

With the union guys?

Well, I do and I don't have to really—some other places, I'm sure you have to be careful of what you do, but I usually have to [orchestrate] working together. But there are certain things that I need them to do and I can't have somebody else do them. So we're always learning.

Interesting. Anything, we've got a minute or two left here, any other things you remember or recall you want to add to this?

Philosophical statements...

Other than, you know, I've always enjoyed being here and it seems to me to be a very different atmosphere and so forth. And I've just never run across [any other place like this], and I really enjoy it, I really do.

Good. Thank you.