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Interview with Fred Gardaphe,1998

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Fred Gardaphe

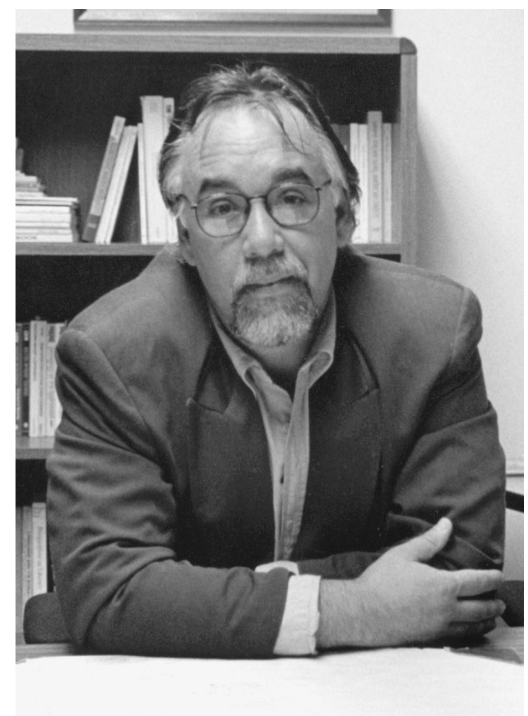
...on the twenty-fourth of March, 1998. Maybe we could start by, maybe you could start by telling the circumstances that brought you to Columbia.
I was teaching high school...

Where?
At Prologue Learning Center in Uptown. And it was my third year of teaching there, no, I'm sorry, it was my second year of teaching there; it was 1979. And, since I moved back to Chicago—I had gone to school in Madison, Wisconsin and then taught in Iowa. When I got to Chicago I spent one year in Uptown and I was looking to do some more writing. And I saw an ad in the newspaper—I can't remember which paper it was, Tribune probably—for writing instructors at Columbia College. So I said, "Well, this sounds interesting." And the ad talked about, you know, being in a community of writers and so on, and that's exactly what I was looking for, and so I applied. And I had been writing and I had a few little things published, nothing major. And got the interview, first with Andy Allegretti and then with John Schultz. And they offered me a position part-time teaching Composition on Saturdays. So I taught high school during the weekdays and Comp on Saturdays. And, that was it. I taught here one semester and I just fell in love with the place. It was an alternative school that I was teaching at so it was a natural extension of the kind of teaching, the students were the same population I had been working with for years and, so I thought, "This is great." So, that's how I came here. I was in the, back then we called it the Writing/English Department. And I taught part-time, I got involved in Story Workshop, they had us sit in and do workshops. And, so for four years I worked here part-time. From, that would have been from '79 to '80, and then in '80 I went to graduate school at University of Chicago. So in '80 I went to graduate school at University of Chicago and left my job at the high school and taught at Columbia part-time. I was teaching two classes at the time, a couple night classes. And, you know, I went to graduate school in English at the University of Chicago and continued teaching part-time. Graduated University of Chicago in '91 with my MA and taught one more year part-time. Then they offered me, in '82, an adjunct position—which was a full-time position except you didn't get credit for being here full-time and probably didn't get the same pay as a full-time teacher, kind of like grunt work. But I taught four classes, actually, I taught three classes, three four-hour classes. So, from 1982 to '85 I taught adjunct, which meant I went to all the retreats and everything. And then in '86, '86 or '87, became full-time and have been full-time ever since.

Tell me about some of the people you remember?
I remember everyone...

Well, the ones you remember best.
Well, the ones I remember best, obviously, were from the Writing/English Department. And we became very good friends because we took their classes. So that would be: Larry Heinemann, George Bailey, Tom Narwotki, Steve Bozak, John Schultz, Betty Shiflett; Shawn Shiflett was gone the year that they hired me—adjunct. And he came back, he was off doing his Masters degree somewhere...Ann Hemmenway, Gary Johnson, those are like the main, the beginning. And then, that earlier was like Bob Edmonds, has his name come up?

His name has come up, tell me a little about him.
Yeah, Bob was kind of the senior faculty member at Columbia, the old guy, and, you know, he was such a unique kind of person. He had done a style sheets kind of book about how to write a research paper. So he and I, you know, me being one of the youngest, him being one of the oldest, we actually, you know, became friends at places because I kind of was out of the loop of the normal people because I was new and he was out because he was old. So, we would bump into each other at retreats, bump into each other in the hallways and, you



know, have these great conversations. And he introduced me to Harry Bouras, who was the most wild teacher. You know, I thought I was getting away with some wild things in my classroom until I met him. And all of these guys, you know, I have to have some kind of a trigger to go back and look at them. I remember being a little, I felt like I was a little kid. I mean, I was twenty—1979, when I started part-time, I was twenty-seven. And by '87, by '85, '86 when I became full-time, I was thirty-three. So, there was about six years of kind of being one of the kids, you know. It was a lot of fun. I mean, Columbia—to this day—you know, I love, more than my department, I love the interaction of the faculty throughout the school and I've made friends in every department. You know, the early CCFO meeting where, you know, I was being a very pro-union person, I came in and said, "We need to have a union."

When was this?

This was probably—the first CCFO meeting must have been when I was full-time, so I'm guessing it's around 1982. And, you know, I kind of looked around and I said, I had just been a founding member of the Chicago Local of National Writers Union. And so I said, "What is this Faculty Organization we have? Why don't we have a union?" And people kind of looked at me, "We need a union." And people kept telling me, "Quiet, quiet." And I said, "We don't have any power here." And I was just this young kid and, you know, they kind of treated me like that. And a couple times I would get intimated by some of the administrators by saying, "Don't talk the union talk. Everything's fine around here about that." So it was amazing to see what the part-time faculty were able to do, it's about time, anyway.

What were some of the wild things you used to do in your classes?

Well, first of all, back then you could smoke in your classes and I smoked a pipe. And students smoked, which I find absolutely amazing now. I mean, I get kind of ruffled when kids eat in class. But they could smoke, we got up and we did physical exercise, you know. I mean, Columbia was kind of an anti-traditional institution and I just thrived in that environment. I had taught high school for two years in a traditional school and three years in an alternative school so I was not about to go back into any kind of traditional, boring kind of lecture, sit still education. And the Schultz methodology of Story Workshop kind of opened up people's imaginations to doing different things than sitting in a classroom. And so, I kind of took off from there. And, you know, my classroom sat across the street from—this was in the Michigan Building—so my classroom sat across the street, you know, all our windows could see the Americana Congress Hotel. Every once in a while you get something like a couple in there that would be like making love with the shades up and the students pointed and laughed. And then you get some guy exposing himself to students, you know, it was just this crazy... yeah, it was fantastic. I mean, I think that the, you know, Columbia made me realize that not all college experiences had to be the same. And I went to a pretty traditional college. I did a little bit of undergraduate work at Triton College and then I transferred to University of Wisconsin, Madison; I went to school there, finished my degree there in '76 and, you know, came to Columbia in '78.

So, you know, while Madison may have been very anti-traditional outside the classroom, it was pretty traditional inside. The whole idea of what is an artist and what is an educator really came together. I mean, I always tell myself, and I always tell people too, "I learned how to teach in the alternative high school, but I perfected that teaching at Columbia College." I've done things here that probably, you know, in terms of breaking down the curriculum, using the streets. The whole theme of my life has been connecting the streets to the academy. It's the only way I was able to make sense of college was having it make sense about where I came from, which, I grew up in Melrose Park and went to Fenwick High School but I still had a very traditional academic career in high school. But, you know, unless something made sense to me I couldn't see it academically. So this synthesis of street life and academic life really appealed to me and it was the only way I could balance the two, so I continued that.

And Columbia, you know, not only welcomed it but begged for it, I mean, they wanted it. And so, a lot of my classes took place right out in the streets. You know, we would do observation writing assignments right out in the streets. I would give my students assignments to overhear a conversation in the Harrison, you know. And every once in a while I'd get like three or four people reporting on the same conversation. You know, walking out to the lakefront and doing observation exercises and writing exercises. So it was real, I mean, there was no pretenses. Columbia did not have the kind of tradition

that required a preservation of pretenses. So, for me, it was a wonderful place, and it still is. It's certainly become a lot more traditional than when it was. And, you know, we'd have these retreats and I can't remember exactly when the first retreat was, one of the things the retreat did was it broke down barriers between departments and it invited people from different departments to know each other socially as well as intellectually. And so, in all the years I've only missed two retreats. It's in our contract that we have to make them and one is—did I miss two or one? I only missed one retreat, I think. One I had to go out for a conference and then when I was on sabbatical, so two. And, you know, that and graduation. I figure since '82 so, sixteenth graduation, I've only missed two of those: one, I had a flat tire on the way, and the other, the other was a few years ago; in Lombard the street got flooded, I couldn't get my car out of the driveway and couldn't make it to the train. So those were the two...

Tell me about graduations.

Graduations, well, graduations when I first was here was at the Auditorium Theater. Now, I hadn't been in the Auditorium Theater since Elton John was there or some concert back in the '60s, you know, late '60s, early '70s. And, so to have a graduation there was just wonderful and, you know, you could hear the music and it was about the time, I can't remember when Fame came out. I mean, I had been to my own graduation at University of Wisconsin and University of Chicago but Columbia did it by making it exciting. You know, Mike Alexandroff would get up and spout these wild words of wisdom. He was very bold and brash, at that time I don't even think Columbia had any kind of an endowment in terms of money. And what happened was, when we realized that, you know, one of the things a college, university has to do is get money from right-wing people, there's no way. You know, Mike Alexandroff would say, "You know, I'm sending you off into a world that's trying to poison your environment, that's trying to destroy your family..." And he would give these wild, "Don't let the bastards grind you down!" And he was always giving honorary degrees to these kind of left-wing intellectual artists which, you know, I would go to graduations just to meet them. Kind of deteriorated towards the end when they started giving them to Jack Brickhouse and Ernie Banks. But prior to that, we had a real heavy left-wing, real strong intellectual artist type people, and I think they still get them occasionally. So it was wonderful. It was a wonderful thing to be associated with both intellectually and, you know, psychologically. It was pretty offbeat in terms of your reputation. When I would go away to a conference and give a paper they swore that I had to be from Columbia in New York because nobody knew about Columbia in Chicago. You tell the people in Chicago, "Columbia," and they think it's like some school of broadcasting. And it wasn't until the end of Mike Alexandroff's career here as President that I really saw the College turn around in terms of, you know, people coming up and saying, "You teach at Columbia?" Yeah, early on, and I probably, in my first five years of teaching here, I probably wrote about four letters of recommendation for graduate school. I wrote four last week, you know? So, in the past ten years, you know, the students who have come here have gone on to higher education. I think that's a trend anywhere in the nation but for sure, Columbia has really shifted to be that kind of school and it wasn't.

Tell me about the students when you came here, going back to when you were teaching part-time.

Yeah, the school that I taught at in Uptown was, you know, open admissions and Uptown was a multicultural mix, it's always been. When I was teaching here, I go back and look at my list, my guess is that African-American students were the majority. I don't know what the statistics say but I could tell you my classroom, the majority of the students in my classroom are African-Americans. That has dwindled significantly to the point where they're probably about a third. So I don't know what's happened there. I mean, we've kind of talked about it in different committees all the way down the line but I remember that and I remember, you know, they were no different than the kids I had in high school, none. Some were, you know, a little bit more street smart than others but none of them, you know, not even the white kids at the time, had any kinds of pretenses for being, you know, only here until they transferred to another school. I mean, we were here to study the arts, that was it. A lot of kids come down here and then transfer, they start here and transfer, just as a lot of kids transfer into Columbia because, you now, they want to finish in the arts or something.

So, the students were wonderful. I remember a couple of students in my class got married. I didn't go to the weddings but they saw me the

following semester and they said, “We got married. We met in your class and got married” It was that close, I got to know the students, the students got to know me. There was no pretense like Dr. Gardaphe, you know, I had pretty liberal office hours if I saw a student. See, coming from high school, I would do things like call the homes and things like that, which is what these kids needed. These kids didn’t necessarily need to have people lay off because it’s open admissions. Most of them have absolutely no role models in their lives in terms of going to college, what it would be like, and so on. So it was, they were fun, they were trying, troublesome, I never had a single classroom disruption that was uncalled for or that totally disrupted the flow of the class. In all my years of teaching at Columbia I only had one student complain about a grade I gave. And, I don’t know, I could probably go back and it would be interesting. I used the whole range of letters, so it’s not like I only gave As. But I always had students do evaluations of themselves and a lot of the students had never done that before, and peer evaluation and so on. And, the, so I found that with kids who are sincere, if they didn’t have the skills then they would sincerely struggle to get the skills. If they did have the skills they just zoomed, they just, you know, took off in terms of traditional academic performance and excellence. But they were—you know, I can’t remember, it’s funny, after two weeks I’ll know every student in my class by name, by looking at them. As soon as I put the grades on their final report cards it’s like, as soon as I put that letter down it’s like the name goes. I’ll see them on the street and I’ll say, “You’re the students who did…” And I feel bad because, you know, I always feel bad when a professor never remembered my name.

You know, I don’t think I’ve ever had a class of more than thirty students. And, probably, the average was about twenty. So, the people I teach is probably around eighty to a hundred per semester, where I know some professors who teach three or four hundred students a semester. So the interaction between teacher and student is just wonderful. And, you know, I would see, in the early years, we would do thing like go across the street, there used to be a bar over where that parking lot is on Harrison and Wabash on the northeast corner called The Step High. And the English Department had a softball team, I can’t remember what it was called, Writers of Something. And, you know, after softball games we would sit in the city, we would come and, it was, you know, students and faculty would drink together here. And back then we used to drink on campus. I think at some point they instituted a no alcohol rule but I think, at art openings and things like that. We’d take a class, well, it was typical to take your class to the bar, on the last class and drink and have a good time which, I don’t know if you could do that now, you know? I really don’t think so.

You said students, a lot of the students, particularly before, knew what they wanted to do and had a career in mind. Were they careerists?

No, I mean, they were kind of attracted to being a d.j. or they were probably attracted to something in the media. I mean, they wouldn’t understand what it was they had to do until they came here. But it wasn’t like they came here to get a traditional education because a lot of the kids, for the same reason that, the kids I taught in high school shied away from, you know, the reason they didn’t go, they may have dropped out of another school or never went on to another college because, you know, they didn’t like taking tests to get in and so on. So, I think they probably, some of the earlier ones, just saw this as a place to be an artist, whatever that meant, you know, knowing that that’s what they wanted but not knowing what it meant. A place to get some skills and some very practical kinds of careers, you know, not just careers but music and television, radio. The Sound Department didn’t come for a while. I mean, that was a development after Radio started. The Film Department, Television, Theater, I can’t remember how many new departments developed over the years. And so the students, I think, did not really feel like they, you know, knew exactly what they wanted. Some students would like wander, take a class and, you know, say I’m a writing major, and wander into a film class, say, “Well, I want to be a film major.” Which, you could do that. I mean, it wasn’t like when I went to school where you had to do your two years of general ed, and then you went on and did your major. These kids could test things out right from the beginning. They can take an introductory class and they can take a, you know, a class in the arts or something.

What were there in the way of requirements for students when you started teaching?

Well, they had their major, which some majors still are very high, like seventy hours of a hundred and twenty-six. I’d have to go back and look, from what I remember, the English, Writing I, Writing II, and

then they had to choose the rest among general education courses. And I think that was... my memory isn't good. I want to say forty-eight hours but I don't think it was that high.

Did that approach work then? Were you happy with it?

Huh... I really didn't give it much consideration. I mean, the concern was: Do we have enough students to teach our courses? The concern wasn't so much: Are the students getting what they want or are they getting what they need? Because at that time we had a very insular approach to education. We thought more about our students than we did about the world our students would enter, transferring and so on. Some major things happened along the way when some schools did not accept our transfer credits. Then we really had to get in and say, "Wait a minute, what do you mean you don't accept them? What do we do that you don't do? What do you do that we don't do?" And I think we've gotten to the point now where, you know, all of our courses are pretty well accepted elsewhere. It was kind of cool to have our courses rejected. I mean, we thought that was cool. The poor students really didn't think it was funny, you know. But the faculty kind of thought it was pretty interesting that, you know, some stupid school like Circle Campus or something would, what did they think they are, pompous... Did it work? I don't know, it must have worked because we've grown to be here. I mean, it would be interesting to hear some of those students' stories. Although, we have this great Alumni Association now, I would imagine it was the successful ones who joined, you know, not the ones who are disgruntled. I would think, what worked more than anything else is the personality of the people Columbia drew as opposed to the system that it created. I really think that that's the case. I think right now, you know, Columbia still has, you know, the kind of personality that is different from most other universities. There are professors who are not afraid to engage and challenge students face-to-face as opposed to just sitting in their laboratories and, you know, "Listen to what I do, watch what I do, and then go off and try it on your own." I mean, we have, whether you're in the arts or music or whatever. You know, I think Columbia students come here for the professors, you know, come here for people who do real things. And I always tell people that, you know, Columbia's a place where the people who do teach. You know, it used to be that thing: if you can't do you teach, if you can't teach, teach teachers, you know. So when I go to open houses I say, "I do, I teach, and I teach teachers."

You know, we defy that whole stereotype of a useless education. You know, the other day I took my students in my 19th Century American Novel course to the Terra Museum to look at 19th century painting. I tried to recreate that whole century for them. And I'll have somebody from Columbia come and talk to them about 19th century photography, and I'll have somebody come and talk to them about 19th century music and we'll listen to 19th century music. There's not a single school I don't think, well, I should say not... But the whole idea of being interdisciplinary, I think, Columbia, although Columbia has never done anything academic with it, it's a natural part of Columbia that, you know... especially since we didn't have an English major, for me, I've taught courses where I've had to draw journalism students. I taught a course called Journalists as Authors where I looked at the early journalism that major American writers did: Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, W.B. DuBois, all these people. So that's been exciting. We've had weird courses, Literature of the Occult. You know, Harry Bouras had these weird courses where students would be divided up into those who had blue sperm and those who had red sperm, and you've got to get somebody who knows him real well because students will come and talk about him in my class, like, you know.

What happened was, you know, Columbia challenged people by first accepting their humanity and then accepting their adulthood. I mean, there was no, nothing censored, you know. I mean, I can't remember, was it his class they showed porn movies? I can't remember. I don't want to say it but my memory, it might have been at a bachelor party somewhere. But there was no, nothing was, Columbia was not afraid of anything. And I think now, as we become a more respectable school and so on and so forth, I think we kind of hide our idiosyncrasies. Here and there, I don't think we purposefully disguise them. I think they're there but I don't think we highlight them the way we used to. I don't think we run around sitting in bars and saying, "Can you believe what happened in that class?" It's truly defined me as a teacher and my teaching ability and my research. Although, a couple times I did teach a course in Italian-American Literature and Film but my experience at Columbia has made that research possible, not through the teaching. A couple of times I got a develop-

ment grant to do some things. I think we were on the cutting edge of the whole move towards multicultural inclusion, although we didn't know we were there; we were basically just addressing our natural population. I think had we been a little more traditional—in terms of developing ideas and presenting them at conferences—we would have been noticed as one of the cutting edge institutions in terms of providing multicultural perspectives in our classes. I always felt we were way ahead and I did a lot because in my—back when multiculturalism became a buzz word, I was doing workshops around the country on how to, kind of, multiculturalize your curriculum, what to do and so on. And people asked me where I had studied this and, you know, I didn't have a degree in multiculturalism, I had from what works in my classroom and from the kind of liberal courses we had to teaching courses like American Literature, we did Native American writers from the very beginning. So, the attitude of Columbia—all the way from the President down to the janitor—we had a janitor, I don't know... we probably had some of those janitors too...

Who was this, if I may ask?
The janitor?

Yeah.
Louis, do you know Louis?

No.
You've got to interview Louis. Louis is the janitor in the Wabash Building. He's a creative guy.

Yeah, he's the guy you see sometimes doing the graffiti?
He'll do that. But he sold, like, seaweed or something. Even our janitors are weird *(laughs)*, you know? I thought, "This is a great place." And, you know, now when you tell people you teach at Columbia College and they kind of say, "Oh," you know, like they're impressed. But back then it was like, "What? Columbia, what? Where is that place?" So, the PR department has done a great job of changing the image of Columbia, or at least presenting what's out there. My sense is that some of the earlier people, like some of the people who were there from the beginning like Bill Russo, have you interviewed him?

No, but I think he has been interviewed, yeah.
Yeah, he better be on the list. I mean, sit around with people like him, people I had heard of before I came to Columbia. Sheldon Patinkin, people who were dying to get to meet him, Sheldon's my good friend, you know? And, you know, to see these people and to be in meetings with them and to help the institution grow to committees and work, it's just, you know, it's amazing. I mean, I, this September, late October, we went to our retreat. And prior to that, there was a school in New York that was interested in me and subsequently made an offer. And I kept thinking, early on in this process at the retreat, "Can I leave this? Can I leave all these people, you know, and go somewhere else and..." You know, at first I thought, "No, I can't, this is, they may give me more money, life might be a little better, na-na-na. But this, you know, where can I turn to, in every department I have friends, every department." You know, people respect me, they know me, you know, is... with this? Is a two-two teaching load worth this, is a full professorship worth this? The only way I could, you know, negotiate that in my head or rationalize that was saying, "Columbia prepared me." And it really has. I mean, the kind of conference, I mean, you have to remember, I came here with no college teaching experience, I taught high school... In retrospect, I think we should be required that people who want to teach college have at least a couple years of high school teaching.

Why?
Because I think you got a sense of what to do in a classroom and you deal with the kind of population, you know where the students are coming from, you get used to dealing with administrations and so on, as opposed to your only experience coming from watching your other professors and possibly teaching an intro freshman class and so on. Plus, also at the high school level, I mean, in terms of designing curriculum, things are different expectations. I think it's good experience. So without any college experience, they accepted me, you know. They accepted me because of my writing, you know. And I've gone on, you know, some of my short stories have won awards, I've had books published and so on, and... The one thing I've always felt bad about Columbia is that we never really paid attention to the, you know, we're so teaching oriented that we never really paid attention to the kind of research that some professors have to do. And it's not really rewarded and so that's probably why I'll end up leaving, you know. But, I mean, all in all it's been great. I think that, there's no school like it. I mean, I've talked to people all over the place, all around the United States. Some people, you know, think that they have alternative schools and things like that. What? Emerson

College, where else, there's one out in New England I can't remember... Anyway, in terms of our retreats, in terms of, you know, we've built this institution and I use the word "we" meaning—including myself. Because, the work we did to create, you know, the programs that we have, we even went through our flaws. I mean, we fashioned it without models, we just built it from what was around us, you know; once in a while borrowing. You know, because most of the people who teach here, a lot of the part-time people do have experience in traditional institutions but a lot of others don't. And so, it's kind of like we invented this place, and you know what? It worked

Do you think it's had an impact on other institutions?

No, I don't think so. I don't think it's had a tremendous impact. I think what's happening, it's gonna affect first is Chicago, especially in the last few years. Because these friends of mine—who have been teaching at other institutions in Chicago—talk about student population dwindling; we're actually growing. We can't stop Columbia from growing. We had a projection years ago that, you know, we were gonna hit this peak and then we were gonna bottom out in terms of enrollment. That was wrong, totally wrong. You know, we've grown, grown, grown. You know, we've created an institution by word of mouth, which, you know, I used to be in the restaurant business, and that's it. You could take all the ads out in the world; word of mouth is gonna bring people back all the time and that's what Columbia is. I mean, I'm sure we have some people saying bad things somewhere about us. But, you know, the overall word on the street is, about Columbia is, if you can't fit in anyplace else, Columbia's a great place to be. I mean, what I would like to have seen was I'd like to take freshman ID photos and compare them to their sophomore, junior, and senior years. You know, the number of holes that are punched into their body by their senior year, the kind of tattoos they may have or the haircut. I mean, it would be interesting to line them all up, those photos, and look at how they've changed. I mean, in terms of, I don't know what parents would say, reaction to that, but, and compare them to other institutions. You know, there's a sense of freedom here, there's a sense of sincerity at Columbia, and there's a sense of drop the first name—the mister or the doctor—you know, let's get real and, you know, with real expectations. Now, I'm sure there are some faculty here who just like have a fun time in the classroom, the students don't learn anything except, maybe, how to talk to each other. You know, and that rigor at Columbia is probably measured differently than rigor at, you know, a traditional four-year institution with a grad program. You know, but you just kind of have to let the impact of the alumni's careers kind of tell the tale.

What's the role of the administration in all this? I don't have a strong sense, actually, of how the administration is worked

No, and I'll tell you why you don't have a strong sense: it's because the administration is basically holding this place together; the faculty have done all the work. Now that's not to, I mean, Mike Alexandroff—when he was President of the College—he used to teach classes. Bert Gall has come here and taught some classes. There's not that much difference from the administrators to the faculty, especially in terms of designing policy. The administration may come up with policy but it comes from faculty. I mean, one of the things that I love about Columbia is the involvement of the faculty. One of the things I hate about Columbia is how much committee work we have to do. But you can't be involved without doing the committee work. We really have a hand in running this institution. If you look at Columbia's administration it's, you know, we are so under-administered that that's why you don't get a sense. You know, I get a sense that the administration are the people who turn the lights on and keep the phones working. And, you know, that's, there's so much to do at Columbia and so few people in the administration doing it that, you know, we have to depend on the faculty for the change. I mean, I've always felt that the only way you can become a visionary is if you master your situation, where you're at. I mean, you can't look away, if you can't look away from your desk because you're afraid some piece of paper is gonna fly away then you're not gonna look into the future, you know. But if you have your environment under control, you can take time off and say, "OK, things are running pretty good, let me dream a little bit about where I would go from here." And Columbia's administration are not people who have come out of education. I don't know what Mike DeSalle's background is, Bert has been around Columbia so long, you know, he didn't come here from a traditional four-year institution to come here to be Provost. Caroline Latta, she has a Ph.D. in Theater, she's the Academic Dean. So she's got to turn to the experts in education that she has around at the

College, she has to turn to people who know how to teach things besides theater. So it's more of—the administration has to be good at finding the right people to do the right things. You know, when we sent in our assessment for NCA and it got rejected it was no surprise to me when I actually ended up seeing it because I said, "Well, of course not, nobody's gonna accept this as a good means of assessment to tell, you know: Ninety-nine percent of our students say they like the course; therefore, it's a good course." You know, that's not assessment. And that comes from trying to be everything, trying to be different and the same, you know. You can be different… at places like North Central. If you want their accreditation you have to do what they want you to do. And I think the administration is smart enough to understand that if they don't know what's happening to find some faculty. That might also be a weakness of the administration. I always thought that the administration should be twice what it is. I mean, you know, schools that I've interviewed at, schools that I've taught at have had like six deans and we have one. You know, we have Dean of Students maybe and they've got like the Dean of Faculty, the Dean of Undergraduate, the Dean of Graduate, the Dean of this and that, you know, Dean of Arts and Sciences, Dean of…

Well, Columbia actually has more now than it once did, though.

Oh yeah, we used to be what, one dean, two? Yeah, a few more but still, my sense is that it's, had the administrators been more traditional, you would've gotten a better sense of administration. Maybe it's good that you don't get a sense of administration, it's really a faculty kind of… Because really, it comes down to, the students walk out of the classes, they don't walk out of, I mean, they may complain about registration and so on and so forth but they go through that, why? Because they go into the classroom. If they walk out of the classroom there's no safety net for them. You know, the safety net for a poor administration is good faculty; the safety net for poor faculty, there's nothing left. So, and Columbia's always been good, I think. I think the problem that Columbia's had is how to keep their good faculty, you know. And I've talked to Bert, Caroline, all the deans about this in the years past, "We're gonna lose a lot of people." And here I am, you know, on the verge of leaving and I think this is very symptomatic of this place, you know? It's got to find a way to do it and it's not just money, you know, I'm sure Columbia could come up with the money. It's a combination of the teaching load and the respect of research or the use of research. So yeah, I think that's a very good observation, you don't get a sense of the administration. The administration has been pretty much hands-off.

What are some of the events that were most important in the life of the College while you were here?

I think that—that's a good one. It seems to me, every time we get a visit, and this is my third visit now from North Central, I mean, to me, those are really like snakeskins we shed. I mean, they are, the bosses come over and clean up, you know, it's not even that… So those visits, I think, were key. I just look back in my mind and remember the kind of work we did, the panic we did, and what happened was people actually came and visited, and how we grew from it, and how things changed. I think the, I have to go backwards from the present to the deep past to find some things. We invented majors, I mean, minors. It was a way of validating a lot of the work that's being done in other departments that don't have majors. I think that was helpful.

When was that?

It was about four or five years ago. And I don't even know how many students take advantage of the minors, but it does do something psychologically for the faculty to teach those areas. The new governance system that we have now, which I never belonged to the old one. I mean, I was a member but I didn't, I mean, I served on committees and so on but I never ran for the IPC they used to call it, the Institutional Policy Council. So that was about three years ago when that happened. I'm not big on the strategic plan stuff although I've been on some boards, strategic plans can help. The idea that we are looking towards the future together as opposed to kind of following, you know, Mike Alexandroff's vision I think is good. So, the kind of inclusion of faculty, you know. I could remember being very engaged at Columbia and being down here two or three days a week at the most. And now I'm down four days a week and I don't have to be. I'm full professor, tenure, and I don't have to do any of this if I don't want to but I want to, you know. I'm on the Academic Affairs Committee, I don't need to be on anything but I want to be. When I got my Ph.D. people told me, "You're gone, you're gonna leave," you know. And I said I wanted my Ph.D. to increase my options, but I decided that if I was going to stay at Columbia I was going to make this a better place to be. And you

can actually do that, as a faculty member. I don't know if I can make America a better place by voting but I know I can make Columbia College a better place. That's a great feeling to have.

And I have a feeling that even though I might be leaving this year, I have a feeling that I might be coming back in the years to come. I really do. Maybe it's just a wish, kind of wishful thinking, but I can't really imagine. I mean, I think in the sense that I've matured as a teacher, it's time for me to go on, it's like leaving home. But that's the whole point, it's been home, it really has been home. You know, we've gone to each other's events, funerals, weddings, you know. And it's not like any other workplace and I've worked in a lot of workplaces, not any other academic workplaces but, there's been very few days in my life where I said, "Oh God, I have to go down to Columbia today." You can probably count them on one hand which is like, you know, when I was working at a warehouse it was like every day I had to go to work. It was funny, too, because I had this dream right before I got hired from Columbia, which I think is very revealing. When I was a kid I worked for years in this restaurant supply company which was a warehouse, drove a forklift, and you took boxes off of the racks and you put them on the forklift and you loaded them on the trucks; put the boxes off trucks and put them back. About two or three days before I got the phone call from Columbia—I remember because I wrote it in my journal—I had this dream that Andy Allegretti, who I had met at an earlier interview, walked into the warehouse and started telling me what to do. And, you know, he said, "Take that box and put it over there." And I said, 'Who are you? Why are you telling me to do this? You teach college." He said, "Never mind, just do it." And I thought, "Wow, you know, that was it, I'm gonna get this job." And it was everything but that kind of rote kind of work, but I thought it was interesting that I knew a supervisor would come through a dream in an old dream setting, you know. To me it was like, this is really natural, this is really meant to be. The revolution between the English Department and the Fiction Department, I don't know if you've gotten any of that yet...

A little bit.

...it was major, major. And now I'm friends with everybody. It took years for that to heal. Now I would even entertain the departments coming back together as an English Department; I would. But at that time, I was the junior faculty, I was the baby member and I had no protection. They could have, you know, John Schultz could have fired me and nobody could have done anything about it. I was the only, was I the only one? I don't know if I was the only one but I think I was the only one not protected by the—what did we call it back then—the ERCC or something like that. I was the only one not protected by our version of probation or non-probation. The fact that we, as a faculty, split, that we complained, that we, I mean, it really empowered. If the institution could withstand internal revolution, it was just like, I was amazed. I had so much respect, not for us, not for the Writing Department, but for the institution. Because I was certain, I was so certain that the split would not work and that we would get fired and that Schultz would just hire other people that I resigned, I was so certain, absolutely. And Lya Rosenblum told me, she said, "Don't resign." And I said, "I can't live under these situations, I can't teach." And the interesting thing was I had written my letter of resignation and I had dated it the year before. And so she said, "This is, I can't use this. This letter won't work because it's got the wrong date on it." So I said, "All right, all right." Because I could not believe that she, and Mike, and the other leaders in the administration would be able to create an environment in which we could have peaceful coexistence. And at first they didn't. At first, you know, the Fiction Department, some of their people, they couldn't take all the people from the English Department into the Fiction Department. So the people they left behind in the English Department were antagonistic and they struck, you know, the first week of classes they struck, and we had to cover our classes. And then things kind of warmed up a little but, I mean, it was very hot, very warm, then it cooled. Then we had this kind of Cold War between the two departments until, where six months ago we did a joint minor together. So...

Let me go back a step. Did you choose to come here or was that...

I was on, they used to call us the Crazy Eights. Crazy Eights were Paul Hoover, Larry Heinemann, Tom Narwotki, Steve Bozak, myself, Sheila, George Bailey, I'm missing somebody—Peter Christiansen. They're were probably twenty in the department at that time. And the eight of us decided that—what happened was, Schultz was running around evaluating us, telling each of us different things

because we wouldn't buy totally into the Story Workshop method. I watched some of it, I couldn't buy a lot of it because it just didn't do anything for students, educationally. It was great exercises for teaching writing but it didn't help poor writers become better writers. It helped, kind of, blocked writers become unblocked, it helped people stimulate an imagination. But it's one thing to have your imagination stimulated and it's another thing to have your skills developed. And so I, coming from a more traditional kind of educational background, spent more time with my weaker students. And their theory was: If you spend time with your stronger students they will become models for the weaker students and the weaker students will follow. Well, that's totally false. So anyway, we, there was eleven of us and I knew immediately what side I was gonna be on. We got together and had these meetings and—actually, it happened after graduation. We were sitting in a bar talking about things and talking about our evaluations, "He said that to you? He said that to me..." And Schultz's idea, I mean, he was a pretty shrewd leader and his idea was divide and conquer, keep people from talking to each other and... Somebody did complain, they put him on a committee and it was... So we realized we had some things in common; we decided we were gonna do something about it. And we petitioned the dean to redress these wrongs and it was interesting because, you know, it turned out into this full-blown revolution. It was us against them and, you know, I was in a meeting and someone called [us] the Shiite Muslims and it was just, I was messy, it was dirty, it was horrible. And, you know, we kind of survived, we reinvented ourselves as the English Department, they became the Fiction Department. We wanted them thrown out of the school at the time, I remember. We were threatening to go to the Sun-Times, stuff that we thought was slanderous, I mean, something we thought was detrimental to the institution. So we kind of revolted and succeeded and created the English Department. That was 1987, I remember because my son was born that year. So, this is '98, eleven years later, and things are pretty calm now. I still don't agree with their methods of teaching but, you know, they haven't killed anybody, so I guess they can stay. Well, I didn't have a choice because I was part of the revolution. It was either out or with this group. You know, I thought for sure they were gonna get rid of us and it turned out we ended up a stronger department, you know, I think. The criteria is, you know, who has more fiction published, the English Department or the Fiction Department? And it's the English Department, we do.

I have a question about the mission of the College. You've talked a lot about it but one thing I wanted to ask you, this is an open admissions college, has that changed? Has the meaning of that changed?

Has the meaning of open admissions changed?

What did it mean when you started?

I don't think it's changed. I think it's about to change. I really think we're on the verge of it. I think what's happened is, what's changed, is the economy. You know, now that I think about it, the Gulf War was major, I'll go back to that, but in terms of the open admissions, pretty much anybody who's wanted to come to school can get into this school. And I think it's a matter of people finding other things to do since the economy has gotten better as opposed to just kind of coming and hiding in school. One of the major things I remember was the Gulf War. You've got to remember that we, a lot of us were war resistors in the '60s and '70s. I was then younger but I still, you know, got counseled by the Americans Friends' service and I was up for the draft and I got a very low number and so, you know, and I was very active in the SDS anti-war movement and so on. And so when the Gulf War started, when things started happening—this massing on the sides of the borders and all that—we immediately kicked in as a faculty and did teach-ins that Fall. You know, after the summer of the lion in the desert thing we started teach-ins right away. So much though that Columbia students organized all the college protests in this city. They were the organizers of it...