

Columbia College Chicago

## Digital Commons @ Columbia College Chicago

---

An Oral History of Columbia College Chicago,  
1997 -2004

Columbia College Chicago Oral History Projects

---

2016

### Interview with Renee Hanson, 2004

Columbia College Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colum.edu/cccohx>



Part of the [Education Commons](#), and the [History Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License](#).

---

#### Recommended Citation

Columbia College Chicago, "Interview with Renee Hanson, 2004" (2016). *An Oral History of Columbia College Chicago, 1997 -2004*. 35.

<https://digitalcommons.colum.edu/cccohx/35>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Columbia College Chicago Oral History Projects at Digital Commons @ Columbia College Chicago. It has been accepted for inclusion in An Oral History of Columbia College Chicago, 1997 -2004 by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Columbia College Chicago. For more information, please contact [drossetti@colum.edu](mailto:drossetti@colum.edu).

## R e n e e   H a n s e n

*Okay, today is May the 12th, 2004, and this is an interview with Renee Hansen, Professor of English in the Department of English and President of the Columbia College Faculty Organization, 2002 to 2004.*

**Hey, if you could start by telling us how you came (inaudible) first.**

Mm-hmm, okay, I came to Columbia as a student I believe in 1979, although I'm not sure about that, and at the time I knew I wanted to be an artist and I think, you know, this is still shared by a lot of our students. You want to be an artist, but, you know, you're not quite sure what you're going to do or which art form you express yourself in. So what I did know was that the other colleges weren't working for me. I went to DePaul. I went to Northeastern. I went to some community colleges and I either flunked or dropped out of every single college, and I remember being in a lecture hall at Northeastern. It was philosophy class I think on (inaudible) and I remember just feeling so removed from that class and from that lecture, and, you know, I thought philosophy must be for dead people. You know, I just, I couldn't connect it all, but what I did was, you know, I knew I wanted to be a writer, a poet, a photographer, an artist, something. I was always expressing myself in some medium and so what I did was I just dropped out and I got my friend who had been asking me do I want to go to Central America? Do I want to go to Guatemala, and I said sure, let's go.

And we had friends down there who were sort of also drop outs in that our friend, who was 18 she was our age, 18 or 19, at the time, her whole family had dropped out of society more or less because of Nixon. They refused to live in the United States anymore and then this man, his name was Jay Writinger, he was very romantic and he put all of his three daughters in a silver stream and his wife, and they just left the country. They ended up in Guatemala. His wife ended up dying that year of cancer, but he stayed down there. And he bought jade mines and I have a feeling it was somewhat illegal. We went down there and there was all this pre-Columbian artifacts all over the place, jade all over the place. They were mining jade (inaudible) up in the jungle, and I went down there.

And my friend, Renee, was down there and she had just come back from Europe. And she had a boyfriend, Kent, and somehow Mr. Writinger, he must've got on pretty well with the jade industry. He had bought this huge hacienda in the middle of Antigua, which is I think one of the more picturesque towns in Guatemala, and I still didn't know what I wanted to do. But, you know, it was just a place to hang out really. It's not as if I'd studied Spanish or wrote my book or, you know, made any steps towards finding myself, but in a way I did because Renee, my friend down there who shares my name, was an avid reader. And I think she introduced me to James Joyce and Carson McCullers and Katherine Mansfield and so, you know, I started having those kinds of

conversations with Renee and with Julie, the other friend who had dropped out with me and gone down there.

And so we were in our sixth month down in Central America and Mr. Writinger finally came up to us and said girls, how long do you think you're staying? And it had never occurred to us I think that we would have a plan, you know, so but it was pretty clear that we needed to get one, to get a plan, and so we left. We decided to more or less take the train, the bus, or hitchhike through Mexico and work our way back to the United States, and whatever happened would happen but it was not that serendipitous. I think we liked the safety of the big hacienda in Antigua, and when I did come back to the United States a few months later I was a little bit cast adrift once again.



You know, I just, I was just kind of trying to get my footing. What am I going to do, and I decided I would just look at the newspapers and apply for jobs and it was disastrous. You know, I'd go and apply for being an editor of the meat industry magazine or something like that and it just again I felt the same way I did in my philosophy class. I'd look at people and I'd think I can't work nine to five and buy a briefcase and come down. Like the picture didn't fit the picture I had of me in my mind even though it was so nebulous at the time so that's when I applied to the art institute and to Columbia. And like I'd say 90 percent of the students at the time at Columbia, this was the last stop. It was the last place you were going to go and find yourself, you know, and I remember coming to Columbia just to check it out or maybe we didn't have such things as orientation so I must have just come here to drop something off like an application or something.

And I remember getting in the elevator and the 600 building was the building that I guess they had just purchased at the time. And all these kids with jeans were singing this song oh, to be a workingman's hero, work nine to five everyday, and it's kind of a parody on the workingman's theme. That is so cool to just—I mean I felt camaraderie even though I wasn't even here. I felt it right in the elevator, and I just put my application in and I took—at that time you didn't have to declare a major and that was perfect for me 'cause I was on like my sixth major at the time and, you know, I couldn't have declared a major and graduated. I just couldn't have so I took journal-

ism, I took photography, and then my very last class here I took a fiction writing course.

And what happened in the fiction writing course was I just I clicked with what I would call a methodology. The fiction department very much has a particular methodology. I think it's image based and dream based and meditative in its nature, and I think I wanted to get into that zone of writing from a place that would surprise you. So I clicked with the Fiction Department, but even before I clicked with the Fiction Department, I clicked with the photography department too. I think photography, what I found out with photography is I didn't like working with chemicals, but even in the Photography Department the teachers were what we called cool, you know, and it made a big difference at that time at Columbia to be able to socialize with your instructors.

And the way that happened was Illinois at that time had a drinking age of 18, and so you'd go to these events at Columbia, you'd be here all night. You know, there'd be wine on the table or beer in the cooler, and, you know, sometimes the lights were off and somebody had brought in some indirect lighting of some sort. And everything was makeshift, but very much what, you made it very much your own space so I liked that. And I hung out with most of my teachers. I had Larry Heinemann for a class, and I remember being with a group of students. And we'd just like what I'd call invaded his office, you know, and I don't know if he was there or not. We were just sitting on his desk and sitting on the floor and discussing literature while we waited for him, or he could've been

there, but the idea was that the school was yours.

And it pains me now to see how they set up faculty offices like in these corridors, these long and I think depersonalized corridors, and I know I'm even intimidated when I stare down the corridor. I can imagine how students feel trying to find their instructors and going down these long corridors of offices, but at the time the offices were right off the hallway and all the offices were also shared. There weren't a lot of offices at the time so if you went to see one person, there were usually two or three other instructors there to hang out with. So I very much became a part of that department I think just from hanging out in the office, and that's what I'd like to see at Columbia now is more personalized spaces where students can just hang out and I don't know. We might be on our way with that. I'm not sure what's planned for that, but I think that's what drew me in as a student.

**That's a fascinating story and missing from this chronicle so I'm glad we had a chance to talk. What did you know of Columbia, if anything, before you applied? I mean you said it was your last stop, but did you have image or an impression or not?**

No. I don't even know where I had heard about it. I sent for a catalog and even back then I think Columbia had a spiffy catalog. I know our materials now are state-of-the-art, and I think we send CD's out and vellum covered brochures and things like that. I liked the material I got from Columbia. I liked the fact that they sent it quickly and for a lost soul,

you know, you're looking sometimes to make a quick decision because I certainly didn't have a lot to ponder. It was almost like whoever takes me first gets me, and I think Columbia sent me their material. I came here, I liked the whole scene here, and I think I visited the art institute but decided not to go there. Personally I don't know if I looked into grants or I don't even know if I considered how I would pay for it. I don't think that was ever a consideration of mine how I would pay for school. I never thought about it, and somehow it came together either I was working or my parents were helping me or I was—of course I had student loans until the age of 40 that I was paying back so, you know, but at the time I didn't think about it. It was more like I was tripping. I really felt, you know, whatever the artists need is to express yourself it could not be contained. I was going to go somewhere. I was going to express myself.

**I have to ask you one more question before (*inaudible*).**  
What was the last question?

**Your impressions of Columbia but during this whole journey that you've been as a young adult and when you, you know, finally land at Columbia, what's your family's reaction to this whole process?**  
Well I came from a family of I don't know if you'd call it self-made people, self-made millionaires, whatever you—successful people who really pulled themselves up by their boot straps so they had this philosophy. My mom told me just recently that she was just going to let us grow, you know, and she was going to ask us—I'm like, why didn't you ask us if we'd go to college or, you know, what we were

going to do when we grew up or something? And she said she didn't believe in it, and never occurred to me her attitude came from a code of beliefs but she didn't want to influence us. She just wanted us to find our way or do whatever we wanted to do.

Now of course they always encouraged my poetry. You know, when people came over, they'd ask me to read my poems or my father would ask me to play guitar. At that time I was playing guitar and singing often in high school, and, you know, if I had a drawing, they'd put it up somewhere. You know, in that they encouraged me. They bought me books. No one else in the family read, but I think reading literature was just not in the family heritage. It's not something I grew up with, but somehow my mother figured out I liked to read. And so she went out and bought me books, you know, whatever those girl books are that you buy like Nancy Drew or Pippi Longstocking or, you know, and then I graduated to other books then. And then she'd take me to the library too to read so I, you know, I guess it was in that way they encouraged us, but not we want you to be a poet when you grow up, you know, not that. They really didn't want us to be anything in particular so we were just out there like weeds, you know, going every which way and it was fun. It still is a fun family.

You know, I feel sorry for my nephews and nieces now because they're left to choose their own path as well. No one tells them what to do. My niece recently reported she wanted to be a weatherman, and no one batted an eye. You know, weatherman it will be, you know, so that's just I guess the

kind of family, but I can tell you—I get back to that question about my first impression of Columbia.

Besides the elevator ride, at that time the 600 building just because of the view of the lake, it was glorified, you know, and I don't want to rail against Columbia now but I think we pretty much take the views of the lake away. They've become administrative offices. We take it away from the students sometimes right now, but at the time the cafeteria was on the seventh floor. It wasn't in the basement, and when you went to get a candy bar, there was this vast horizon, this view of the lake right out the window. And also the library was on the eleventh floor so when you got, went to get a book and sat by the window to read it, it matched the experience of the book. I mean it was vast and it was, you know, a beautiful horizon out there. And the city looked like, you know, it was magical as the experience that I was reading about so I liked that about Columbia.

And also the tenth floor, which I think still has the Photography Department, my photography classes, all the dark rooms were kind of like in an interior cubby, but when you came out of the dark room, the exterior rooms where you cut your photographs and looked at them, they all again the faced the lake. Say you were there looking at all these pictures and right in the natural lighting of the lake, and there was just something, 'cause I grew up by the lake too, and there was something really uplifting about that so it was I loved the space. I loved Columbia's space at that time. Yeah, I'm very nostalgic for it. I'm very, you know—

**'Cause that is very different from today that I wouldn't think this, the library (*inaudible*) of the lake, but it's pretty limited for the students.**

Right, that lake access, yeah.

**So you're here at Columbia. What makes you or what's involved in the process for you to decide to stay and then pursue, you know, your advanced degree here?**

Right, you know, I think I graduated in—I'm so bad —

**It says your BA was in '81.**

Eight-one, okay, that makes sense. Okay, it was so long ago. I graduated and, you know, Columbia, sometimes a degree at Columbia prepares you for nothing in particular and everything in general, and really I was qualified with editing. I was editing for Exxon. I was a freelance editor, what you call a technical writer. I was working here in fiction writing department as a tutor, tutoring students with developmental difficulties, and I had also gotten a job at I think Illinois Central Golf at the time was still up and running, the real road. And I had done some photography as an intern for them and I was continuing in some capacity, and so I was doing a lot of this and that. I was also working at Jewel food store in the deli, and it all worked out. I had an apartment that I rented from my parents because real estate is their business. I had food from the Jewel deli. I had these, this mish mash of jobs, and I had all these friends that I had met here at Columbia to hang out and talk poetry and literature with so it was working out pretty well. But I knew that, I guess maybe I sensed that it would come to a halt somehow, and that I had to get back in it, you know, so I came back to graduate school.

Columbia had just at the time I graduated, they had just gotten I want to say the fiction MA was their very first MA that was here, and I was probably in the very first graduating class out of that MA or one of the first. And, you know, I liked the methodology, and I liked everyone who taught in the fiction-writing department. You know, eventually things came to a head in that department. I think actually things were too intense. It was very intense department, and you either swam with it or you had some sort of static. You know, arrived with some sort of disagreement with the form or the methodology, but at that time I was really swimming with it. And I was really into it and everyone who taught here, and again we'd hang out so it was like more hanging out. It was more of what I liked about my undergrad. I came back for more of that. You know, it's like I couldn't leave it, go, and I think that's true for many Columbia students here. Many end up working here.

**And when you're talking about the methodology, is that the story telling?**

Yeah, that's the Story Workshop methodology (*inaudible*).

**John Schultz's methodology, okay.**

It is though it is kind of based on oral story telling and, you know.

**And you swam with that.**

Yeah, I really liked it, and I latched on it. It worked for me because of various ideas that I was pulling out of it. I don't know. I'm sure John can tell you more about it, but to me I'm kind of a—I operate a lot out of my instincts or intuition or my deeper sense of what needs to be expressed, and I think the story

workshop methodology brings you to that place and to me that's my natural place. I daydream a lot, you know, often as a child and I still do. I'll pass up my exit on the, you know, on the expressway or, you know, or on the way home I'll pass up my own house because I'm locked into some thought. So getting that lock in into your subconscious images, the same kind of images that occur in your dreams, you know, that kind of vivid occurring, that vivid image is part of what the methodology is about so it worked for me and I could—I don't think it works for everyone.

It, also it's a dream based methodology in that I believe you begin with an image and then the coaching in that methodology is always what's the next thing that takes your attention. What takes your attention next? What takes your attention next? What do you see happening next? And in your dream you make those jumps naturally from a vivid image to vivid image to vivid image, and good writing takes place in that mode. It's almost a dream mode that you're in when you're writing like that so I was so successful at dreaming I guess or writing with that poetic sensibility that John Schultz asked me to come and come in as an adjunct and teach as an adjunct, which then was this kind of weird position between part time and full time.

It was three classes a semester, and there was the salary. And there were health benefits involved, which were good, and, you know, I wasn't, I didn't think twice about it. He also had asked three or four of the people who were in my same masters class 'cause at that time

Columbia very much hired from within. And in a way I think he kept the very unique persona of Columbia going that way so all four of us like jumped at it so we came in. I didn't think twice about it. You know, I said what are you paying me? He told me it was terrible. I didn't say a word. I just said okay.

**And that was in the fiction-writing department. All right, so and maybe now's the time, can you—you end up, you land in that English department ultimately, and I'm very interested in the ties between the Story Workshoping and creative nonfiction, if there are ties or how. Because you're very instrumental, right, in creating or being a part of the initiative creative nonfiction.**

I guess it's my specialty, if I have one, a specialty right now.

**Okay, so maybe that's—we'll spend the next portion of the interview, if you could talk about—**  
Segue from.

**Yeah, well from fiction, the story workshoping and the fiction department that transition to English and your work with creative nonfiction and—**

Okay, well I can just sort of brush over how I got from the Fiction Department to the English Department. It wasn't by choice, you know, the department split, and it's in some way an ugly thing to chronicle. But like I said the story workshop method was so intense that I, and so demanding, that I think many of the, of my colleagues in the department at that time were burning out on it

and wanted to go elsewhere with their pedagogies. Wanted to try other things and I think, you know, it was known as the story workshop department, and it just wasn't going to happen if John Schultz had anything to say about.

**And there wasn't an English department.**

No, no, so out of that need to teach in our pedagogies was kind of a need for academic freedom. I think that's the way it was couched and probably rightfully so. Out of that need came the English Department, and so all of the academics and colleagues of mine who started the English department came out of the fiction-writing Department. Now I came out of the Fiction Writing Department not so willing to also work in the newly formed English Department because there simply wasn't room in the Fiction Department. I think at that time they had allowed for only four positions, and it was a huge department 'cause we taught all the comp., we taught all of the literature, but it was, that department was then framed as only fiction writing and they only had room for four academics in fiction writing. All the other classes that had been in that department had been called writing English I believe so all the English lit. and other lit. courses and the professional writing courses and all the comp., basic comp. courses eventually the Englishes and second language program, all that was moved from writing English into English. And so that meant they needed about 12 faculty over in English and only four in the fiction so I kind of got bumped.

I was bumped to English and, you know, retrospectively it was probably a healthy move for me because I had to find myself. I think it took years for me to do that to find myself all over again and to kind of make my own way because I had been kind of swimming in the channel that John Schultz had cut so I did that. I think I did that by focusing on other areas I was interested in. I taught many of the women's lit. classes, and I initiated many of the women's lit. I initiated the Gay and Lesbian literature class and was the first faculty member to teach that class. I started the gay and lesbian group on campus here. At that time my book was published, which was a lesbian kind of picaresque journey book called *Take Me To The Underground* and so I was focusing on that.

And then I think Phil Klukoff, who was chair of the English Department at the time, I don't know who came up with this idea of forming a committee to investigate creative nonfiction, but we formed the committee. I was part of that first committee to investigate creative nonfiction, what it was an emerging genre, whether or not we wanted to have classes. And we decided it was a great emerging genre and yes, we'd have classes in it so from that we have a minor. I think eventually we'll have a major in that or a major in professional writing with those kind of emphasis on creative nonfiction, but the connection between creative nonfiction and fiction, what I taught in fiction is it's literary thematic and poetic. It has the same literary quality that fiction has and many people do not understand what creative nonfiction is.

They think it's, I think it's more of a fiction based genre than a journalism, a journalistic genre and many people think it's journalism or it's writing nonfiction or it's like in cold blood. It's kind of a literary journalism and it's not—it has some basic tenants that are similar to fiction and that is they're the personal egos of the author. That's always involved. You have to be expressing yourself and discovering the material as you're writing it. The only difference between fiction and nonfiction is from nonfiction you're gathering from a memory source that you try to adhere to. You try to keep to the memory path and in fiction you can veer off that memory path. A memory or an image always jogs what you're going to write about in fiction, and in nonfiction it jogs it but you stay in that.

**And is creative nonfiction always rooted at the personal?**

It's going to have, it's going to be framed by the personal experience.

**The autobiographical experience or?**

Yeah, I think it will be, it will end up being autobiographical more so than journalism or narrative journalism or literary journalism. The experience of the author is going to frame up that theme. The same—

**The author's present. In the experience the author's present in that (*inaudible*) so much (*inaudible*) nonfiction you try to pull your—I mean you try to pretend the author isn't there.**

Right, the author is very much there in creative nonfiction, and the author is deciding on a metaphor. You know, for instance, if I wanted to write about growing

up in the city of Chicago, the lake might be an obvious metaphor for me and so I would choose that as a metaphor. I'm choosing metaphors, I'm choosing symbols, I'm even choosing mythic characters the same as I would in fiction. The only difference is it's nonfiction and I was a first person kind of writer anyway. I was—even my book is first person and I was always writing out of personal ethos. It wasn't a big, it wasn't a large jump for me to move to creative nonfiction.

**That's interesting. It kind of leads to the next thing. I wanted to make sure we got to that. You mentioned a lot of your courses, and you said that you were pursuing other interests that you had and that moving to the English department allowed you to do that but were you—at the same time why were these courses in women's autobiography, gay and lesbian literature? Do you feel that they were particularly well suited for Columbia? Did Columbia students need these? I mean the next thing I want to know is you, as a woman at Columbia, you know, what voice perhaps were you filling, if any, or was it simply your interest and there was a response to that? Does that make sense?**

Yeah, it's kind of an interesting question because when I started teaching women's lit. classes in the late 80's, most of the students taking those classes could still remember the 1970's wave of feminism. They may have been eight, but they had a memory of it. And I think the classes are offered in the English Department less often even though I know we have a women's studies minor, do we not? But I don't know either. Personally I

haven't checked in on the women's classes. Either we don't have the faculty interested in teaching it right now or there might be less of a demand for those women's lit. classes because at the time it definitely felt, filled a need.

The Gay and Lesbian lit. class was earth shattering I think not just for the college, but for the students taking it. They were very brave. I mean this is the 80's and I think everyone was coming out. And there was enough latitude in society in the 80's, but still you bring home a transcript. These students were bringing home transcripts and explaining the gay/lesbian lit. class to their parents, you know, who are paying their tuition. And in that sense I think our students were very, very brave and kind of cutting edge to be studying queer theory and what makes a gay/lesbian literary analysis a cultural analysis (*inaudible*) so, you know, it's difficult to say.

Is the question like how much interest is there from our students because when I teach a writing class, most students come here, they want to express themselves. They need to express themselves, and that's just so clear in the classroom. Everyone's going to get down and do it. When I teach a literature class, it's a little bit different. It's more like can they swim with the theory and with the literature being introduced in class, or do they not take up on that so much. And I've had classes where everything clicks, and I've had classes where I've had to introduce the fact that women are oppressed. You know, where I've classes where I had to talk about violence against women or the history of women's

voice in society and how women's voice traditionally is not heard and concepts of disenfranchisement. Just I had to introduce those also so it depends, and part of the problem is we don't have a literature major here at Columbia so some of the students taking the class, I'd say most of them are taking it to fulfill a requirement, or they might have sort of an interest. But they're not literature majors, and they don't have a broad base in that kind of knowledge so it's difficult.

**And I wanted to ask when you were talking about the gay and lesbian literature classes and the bravery of your students and the time period in which you initiated that, and you said your book had come out. Were you out? Were they identifying with, was it a personal experience as well with you or was that something that you had come to terms with before and—**

Okay, when my book came out, I was teaching the Gay and Lesbian lit. class when my book came out, and it was a lesbian book. Yeah, I think a lot of students in that class were identifying with—I still talk to students from that period. I do. I still have students call me. I've made friends with some of the students from—those students aren't my students anymore. Now they're some of my better friends, my best friends so it was a very fervent period for me and for them I think. I had a lot of students come to me with problems 'cause they'd take the class, but they were probably taking the class 'cause they wanted to try out an idea of maybe I'm gay or lesbian or I'm somewhere on the continuum, and maybe I'll find out more about

myself by taking this class. So they were trying themselves out just by taking the class, and I think it's probably true today. A lot of what happens in that class is a personal reflection by the student taking it upon the material being taught and, you know, am I this, am I that, you know, where am I, a little bit of everything, and it was very rewarding at the same time I think. You know, I just didn't have the answers for a lot of students who'd come to me. I also had students with AIDS, and it was like one of the few classes they could just come out and be out with me.

**And that would've been the time.** Yeah and, you know, now it's so funny. I teach classes, and I don't teach that gay/lesbian class anymore, although I want to come back to it. But it's like no one has come out and mentioned the fact that they're gay or lesbian in a class, and I always try to introduce gay/lesbian material in class. And I don't know who the gay and lesbian students are hardly in my classes so that was a very special thing to share, and it was a safe environment to share. I think maybe that's why they don't come out, you know, a class, a broader of literature. They don't feel safe, although I've had students come up to me after class or something to tell me something about themselves.

**That's interesting. I mean and I don't know if you can comment on that, but I was going to ask that, too, is that, you know, the assumption might be that Columbia is a safe place for people to feel comfortable with their sexuality, but I'm not so sure that that assumption, that you can make that quick assumption.**

You know what? It is. It's safe. You

know, I don't, here's the thing, I don't think students risk, you know, whatever their fear would be like someone's going to make fun of me or something like that. I don't—I think the students at Columbia are open-minded, and I would hope that that wouldn't happen. But I think students don't come out in class because where do you put that information and who else in class is going to say oh yeah, I know what you're talking about or, you know, it's a question of whether or not they want to take the personal energy to educate the class. What is it like to be gay? This is my experience. This is my history, or my history isn't reflected in society, and they really have to come out as almost advocates. And not every gay and lesbian student wants to be an advocate, and I think it's the same way for other students.

Our Latino, Latina population and our African American students, I always think it's fortunate if they want to speak from the African American perspective. But I would not call upon a student and say now give us the African American perspective on this piece of literature. You know, it's not really fair to them, and also it's a matter for the class and for society to educate themselves on African American perspective or gay/lesbian perspective that students shouldn't have to be the only voice in the class.

**Well and what that speaks to I think too that I have found, and I have taught here a little over ten years, that I have fewer and fewer African Americans so it ends up being the one or two people. When I had five or six or seven in a class, then you could have a diverse and they were**



**more forthcoming. I think the one or two in the class are hesitant because they, the role you're exactly talking about and I mean it's an issue here that the college faces of affordability and diversity. And, you know, it gets (inaudible) because there are fewer and fewer in each class and—**

That's right and if you're going to have that voice in class, you want to hear it coming back to you. You want someone else sitting across from you who can take the dialog further. You don't want it to go nowhere. That's tragic so.

**And then you end up talking about African Americans, you know, and they're not in the class period. I mean (inaudible) as well and then you're like—**

Yes, I've done that too, yeah, and I hoped I get it right. You know, or even gay/lesbians, you know, it's like I don't speak for every gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender person out there. You know, I can only speak for myself so, yeah, that's going to be a tragedy if Columbia can't turn that around and attract more minority students and diverse candidates, yeah.

**All right, I want—I'm sorry, for the abrupt jump, but I want to move onto the, your role as president of the Columbia College Faculty Organization. And, you know, maybe come back to it, a few of these other things we've kind of left hanging if we have time, but did you, why did you want to be president, or how did that happen that you ran for president of that organization? You know, how did you, how did that happen?**

I don't think I planned to be president. This is my, me and my life

story. I really didn't—the Columbia College Faculty Organization, it's too much of an ad hoc group right now. You know, the college council is almost sanctified by the administration and the Columbia College Faculty Organization. It's, you know, it—oh I don't know. It's neither here nor there. It's just four officers. There are actually no committees. Many people think the committees on campus are the CCFO committees, and actually what they are, they're all subcommittees of college council and CCFO almost acts as faculty advocates. We're like the caped crusaders. Whenever we need to advocate the faculty, we fly in, we knock on someone's door, like the president or the provost, we say this is the problem, and let's dialog. So we're always doing a lot of dialog, a lot of troubleshooting or whatever. That's, you know, crisis intervention, crisis management.

We're always doing that, and I, actually I ran on the platform of dismantling the CCFO. I think it's, the way it's run, it's not a very, what do I want to say? It's so ill formed and ill conceived that you're almost doomed for failure, and I think that's why actually a lot of my colleagues don't run for the CCFO president or vice president. I think this year we have one person running for president, and the year before I ran, there was one person running for president and the elections have done deals sometimes if you choose to run and that's because it's a thankless position. It's almost like no position, but on the other hand, I have to say you can really get a lot done behind the scenes. Because it's so ill defined, it's up to you to define it so I went ahead and I really tried to

be proactive with it and I considered everything in the college under my (*inaudible*). And if I saw something that I thought was a problem, that I thought was hindering faculty in some way or affecting our job or position here, I went ahead and put it on our agenda. But it's, it would be so much healthier if that agenda were actually being created from faculty, if the CCFO had CCFO reps in every department. You know, if we had an official CCFO caucus of some sort, and I've tried to introduce that.

Actually I wanted the college council to become a college senate, which would deal with the kind of issues the CCFO deals with, which are mainly workplace oriented, and then the academic issues as well and the senate idea did not fly. They did reconstitute the college council, but not as a senate. Then I wanted the CCFO to be part of the college council and not its own kind of ad hoc nebulous entity, and that didn't fly either. Then finally I decided on my own that the college council as a body would act as the CCFO caucus so I take all the department reps from council, and three times a year I ask them to meet as part of the CCFO caucus and in that way I have some sort of cross referencing from the council to CCFO. They really shouldn't be two entities that never cross dialog, never talk to each other so my experience being CCFO president has been a mixed blessing to be sure.

Do you want to know some of the things I've learned? It's been a privilege. It's been a privilege to meet with the provost and the president and as, as a president of the faculty

representing almost 270 faculty members, I always walked into those meetings with President Carter or Provost (*inaudible*). I always end up thinking I better get this across. I'm representing—this one person sitting here is representing 270 people. I better get this across, and I know I come on very strongly and I make all my points and I even become what I would say debate oriented. You know, if they have issues, I want to hear them. You know, I want to be able to respond to their issues. The good thing about being in that position and being in those meetings with the President Carter and Provost Kapelke, is that I found out the very human nature of dealing with people. They're people too, and they really do want to integrate and see what can be done and kind of try to come around.

And then sometimes I have the other problem of a faculty who assumes, and they know I'm very much an advocate and sometimes an angry advocate, and then I have a faculty who assumes that I'm going to meet the enemy. You know, and I almost have to educate the faculty that this group of people are trying to work with us, the other group of people, you know, and it's not a combat zone. And I think partly that's the history of CCFO is that we have had to go to combat. We had to go to combat just to form the CCFO and to get tenure on campus. You know, it was all faculty initiative. Any kind of oh, I don't know, work issues, pension issues.

This past year, you know, our pension was frozen, and the CCFO again we had to go to fight for that new pension plan. And so faculty assumes that there is a fight waiting, and I always, I have to say that

I assume that too but one of the lessons or one of the things that I've learned is that it's more of an arena of negotiation than you would think. And to that degree, I think it's very creative negotiation. You know, you come with the best intentions, and you're talking with people who also have the best intentions. Now what happens in the room is there's a lot of miscommunication and, you know, their best intentions don't match necessarily your best intentions.

Also I think what's happened to the school is we've become a little too dependent upon the board of trustees for decision making, and because we have a new president, I think some, we feel the board of trustees perhaps more so than we should, and so sometimes when decisions are being made, I really try to pin President Carter down in terms of who's making, you know, is this you talking or someone else talking. And I, you know, I think he's—it's hard to say. I think he's strong. I think he's speaking for himself. What's more is you kind of learn about vision. I like hearing about people's vision. I think President Carter has a vision for the school so, you know, I've been okay with it.

**Had your opinion changed about needing the CCFO? I mean do you think it should remain?**

I don't think we need the CCFO if the college council or some other body wanted to take it on, right.

**But the faculty you think needs an advocate that (*inaudible*).**

Oh yeah. Oh absolutely, just the workload issue. I took that on like three years ago. I formed an ad hoc

committee of CCFO to look into the workload issues because at Columbia we are expected to be working professions, and this was a issue that was particularly near and dear to my heart and close to me. We all—all of the faculty here try, many of the faculty are distinguished in their careers and many are trying to establish themselves and become distinguished in their careers and in their art forms and in their communicative media. And I think this, originally that spirit of having a faculty here who taught from that spirit is what drew students to Columbia and, you know, now it's interesting 'cause I see our marketing materials, and I see that they're trying to put the face on Columbia as being a cool place to come. Well I came here because it was a cool place to come, but when I came here, I could feel it in the hallway and I could feel it in the instructors who taught here. And so it's really important to me to have instructors who are practicing and who are scholars and who are, you know, accomplishing themselves in their field.

So when I see instructors teaching four classes a week and then being asked to be on two or three college wide committees or a department committee, sometimes a department committee and school committee and a college wide committee, I see the, you know, it's just the hamster in a cage syndrome. You know, I see our wheels spinning and I see my colleagues saying I'm not going to get to write till this summer, or I'm waiting for my sabbatical, you know, like every seven years you're going to write or something and it's a tragedy. You know, it's a tragedy to see that energy being siphoned

off by the bureaucracy and I don't think we need the committees, the number of committees that we have. On the other hand, I don't think faculty would be willing to let go of that committee work. They like, you know, they want it both ways. To some degree faculty wants the power and they want to be on those committees so I thought of another solution.

If you can't get rid of the committees, another solution would be to reduce the workload, which is more like a community college workload. It's 12 hours and 12 hours, and that often in my department it equated to four classes and four classes. And theoretically you could be coming down here four days a week and then grading and then preparing and then you're on your three other committees and advising and working in other capacities, orientation or registration, and you might be down to two hours a week to, you know, try to make something in your art form, which is pathetic. It's impossible so when I formed the workload committee, and I always joked that the workload committee was becoming a workload issue, it was like three or four years ago I formed the committee and I wanted to reduce the workload. Now I think we have something on the table. I think provost is talking about it.

We're going to be down to nine hours and nine hours, or if you're working three credit classes, that would be three and three. And, you know, our tenure document says that we are professionals and we must show publications. We must show our development in this area. We must demonstrate development

in our areas of expertise and, you know, it's almost like a unfounded mandate in a way to say that this is what's expected of you and then to give you no time to do it. So the workload proposal was near and dear to my heart, and that's just something as CCFO president that I just, I could get in there. It's like getting in the trenches and just get it done because it had been four years in the making, and, you know, that was something I was pretty staunch on and I'm hoping something happens.

*(Inaudible).*

Yeah and, you know, the pension thing took up a lot of time too because the pension was frozen and thank God we had two tenacious pension trustees, Joan Erdman and Peter Legrand, and they got in there and took care of a lot of the details. You know, I'd received these pension reports, and it would take me all weekend to wade through them. And I appreciate the fact that they were on it every day looking at the numbers and the figures and the columns and, you know, these are professors of photography and what's Joan a professor of?

**Anthropology.**

Anthropology, you know, going home with our school pension documents every night, all summer long so I really appreciate the work that they did on that, but I'd like to see, you know, just faculty involved less in administrative things. But, you know, as I mentioned, the whole problem sometimes is not the administration. Sometimes it's the faculty who would not want to give up that element so anyway I'm not going to be CCFO president. I decided not to run. I need to write, you know. I need *(inaudible)*—

*(Inaudible).*

It is a workload issue. You know, it's almost like I talked with Eric May our past president. They said well we put our time in. It's like the army. You know, you put your time in and you get back to the real work of creating our—okay, so is there a way we can wrap it up?

**Yeah, I will wrap it up. I just, I want to ask you though to talk about a bit about the future of the college. How you feel about it and maybe by looking at, I'm wondering if you, the camaraderie you felt with other students as a student, do you continue to recognize yourself in the students at Columbia College?**

The quick answer to that is no. Students are younger. It's a different demographic. It's not an urban culture anymore I don't think. I mean I know we use the urban landscape as our teaching ground, but we're importing students from the suburbs and then, you know, injecting them into the urban landscape and I'm sure they're learning. It's a tremendous learning experience for them, but it's not the urban voice that I had when I was at Columbia College. The culture was much more diverse. I think our—I don't know. We had a 30 something percent minority, and I think it's down to 26 or 27 right now. And I guess we should be celebrating in a way that we've only lost 6 percent, and we've become—oh I don't know. Scratch that idea. There's no celebration. There's nothing to celebrate in that. Never mind. Yeah so, no, I don't recognize myself in my students. I do in that they really want to express themselves, and they're groping for knowledge. And they're fresh, you

know, and I think they believe that they can go out there and change the world. So in that degree I recognize myself, but in other ways, no.

You know, when I came here I was an older student and I think I want to say 90 percent of the students who were here were on their last government grant. You know, when I came, yeah, and at that time there were a lot of students who were just professional students really who were taking second BA's or just drawing it out here at Columbia. They didn't want to graduate, and it was more of a—I don't want to—yeah, it was more of a utopian experience. It was incredible. I don't know if students get that now. I know that the emphasis is upon creating a school identity. I don't know if that's—students miss those very personal pockets when you only have a school identity and I know they're trying to do with that with convocations and May fest and school wide events and school wide parties or, you know, things like that, but I think students are missing out on that more intimate experience of Columbia.

I also think we might be making a mistake and I teach in the English department. I just don't know how to say this, but our, the developmental classes of course always address the intercultural students. And most of the students in the developmental classes are students of color so you don't get the voice. What happens in the other classes like in a comp one, a regular comp. one, or a comp. two is you don't have that diverse voice and all the

diversity. That urban culture is sitting in the developmental class talking to each other and, you know, the thinking is that they need these skills to succeed and they're not going to succeed in college. Unless they get these skills, they're doomed for failure.

We had a very high, or I should say a very low retention rate. You know, we weren't retaining students and part of the problem was that our students didn't have real college reading and writing skills. So here we are giving them these skills, but what we're doing is we are actually taking the breath away out of the classes, taking the urban breath out of those classes and it's so distilled sometimes. You know, I have a real problem with it, and then I know that many students drop out in their first year. And many of those students dropping out are probably the students in the developmental classes who lose interest my guess is because they can't get into the more advanced classes unless they've taken these developmental classes.

So I have Intro to Lit. I used to have Intro to Lit. and there would be five or six students of color, and now I have Intro to Lit. and I have oh, I don't know, two or three, or three or four student of color sitting in the classroom. And I think, okay, I guess we're 27 percent minority so where are they? Where are they in my classroom, and I can only guess they're sitting in the developmental classes. That's where they are so I mean this is—I have to qualify this. This is a very personal theory of mine. I don't know if the numbers would play out and verify my theory or not, but I think a lot of our diverse population is sitting in those classes.

**Maybe never to get out I mean—**

And maybe they will never get out, right, exactly. I would like it if they had how—what is the diversity ratio in the senior local class? That would be interesting to see because I'm willing to bet it's like 10 percent even though the school wide ratio is 26 or 27 percent so that's also why it's not the same experience. I was so open, my eyes were so opened by having that people from other cultures sitting in my classroom. It was remarkable. It was like as good or better than the education I was getting out of the books so I think students are missing that. Is that the end?

**That's a good place to end. We went a little over, but I told you we'd have no problem. Thank you very much for participating.**

Yeah, you're right. You get into a zone here, you know.

