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Interview with Phyllis Johnson, 2001

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Phyllis Johnson

All right. It is May the 3rd, 2001. This is an interview with Phyllis Johnson who is the Professor of Art, Entertainment, and Media Management.

If we could start with giving the date that you came to Columbia and describing the circumstances that brought you here.

Okay. I started as a part-timer, probably like most people here in 1981, and I replaced the legal counsel for Actors Equity Association as a Labor Relations and Arts teacher. He burned out and for some reason he thought I could do the job and so I got it.

Who was this individual?

Peter Meyer.

Peter Meyer, and how did you know him?

I was a business representative of Actors Equity, which is the union for stage actors.

And through that association he brought you into Columbia?

Right.

Did you know anything about Columbia before you got here?

The only thing I knew about them is that, as I was getting out of graduate school with an interest in arts management, they started their graduate program in arts management. So it was a day late and a dollar short because then I would have been a Columbia alum, but that's about all I knew about them.

And oh, I knew, this is so funny. My best friend took a few courses at Columbia and she had Harry Bouras as a teacher and she had told me about his classroom and so

I knew him, at least through her stories.

And maybe if you could describe a couple or one of the stories that she told you?

My favorite one is yeah, it had something to do with the class conversation that was going on—you know as class conversations do. And all of a sudden this little voice came out and says, "I'm holding onto reality by a slender thread. I don't think we can go on this way." And it was Harry. And it was like, "what is this? It sounds like way more fun than I'm having." So—

And so before you get into say the course content that you were teaching what were some of the first impressions that you had of Columbia personally—?

That it was a cool place.

Why?

One, because Ann was going there and she always seemed to have done the right thing. But it seemed like a much more laid back freer kind of place. I went to undergraduate school at UIC which was structured, very structured you know, and so it seemed like a cool place. I actually think I was also familiar with the dance center so it was artsy and that's always a leg up in my book, so I had a pretty good impression.

And describe your teaching experience, had you taught before?

No. Well, sort of if you count like high school and you teach Sunday School, but—

Okay.

—no, I hadn't taught before and I was terrified. I guess the other thing that I really liked was when I

got a call from Harmon Greenblatt, who was the assistant coordinator of my program at that time, and he offered me the teaching job. And I sat there and I said, "no, no, no, no, you don't want to offer me this job you want me to come in and interview." And I hung up the phone and I thought, are you crazy?

So I went in and interviewed, discovered that Harmon was somebody I had played softball against in the theater league. And at the time, I was reading a biography of one of the founders of the UAW and so I had the book with me and I went in to meet Fred Fine, who was the director of the program and he knew this guy, so we talked about him and the founding of the UAW.

That was your interview.

And so I talked about softball with Harmon and the UAW with Fred, and Harmon comes in after he's taken some time to read my resume



and he said, “oh I’m trying to seduce her into taking this job. I don’t need to see this,” and he flips the resume over on the other side. And I was like, this is the coolest interview you could ever ask for. So I just thought the place was the best from then.

And so when you came as a part timer, did you continue to work outside? How long did that last and maybe you can also describe the teaching experience?

I was a part-timer for five years and the first time I came in I adopted Peter’s syllabus lock stock and barrel and so my eyes rolled into the back of my head because I was familiar with actor unions, but I really wasn’t familiar with technical unions or the musicians union. And so I was like, “oh my god, I got to get people in to help me.”

And I quickly—you know Peter had a lot of experience on the law side of the unions, tremendous wealth of experience and I totally knew I had to go in another direction. I am not a lawyer. And so I immediately started adding things to the class, but it was kind of fun to talk to students. It was amazing—the first time you start telling stories and try to outline what history is in the labor movement, because I have a particular belief that says you have to kind of understand what the framework is, what the baggage is that you’re working with. And so therefore, not only do you need to know the baggage that the people are carrying with you, but you need to know the history of the labor movement to make any sense out of it and the history of the unions that you’re working with.

And so I started telling stories and people were like writing everything down. And I kept wanting to say, don’t write that down, no, write this down. Don’t write that down, that’s not really important. This is important. And I had to stop myself. I had to completely stop. The other wonderful thing was, at some point, the classes were very interactive—just people obviously weren’t shoehorned into this class and that has continued to be the case up till this day and I still actually teach that course.

Oh you do?

Um-hmm. One other person since ’81, has taught that course when I wasn’t available, so its like it is high class. But at one point somebody asked me a question about some incident and i don’t recall whether it was their union or a union that they were dealing with or the union of a, you know aunt or uncle, brother or sister. And I saw, launched into this answer about why it was this way—and I realized I didn’t know that union and I didn’t really know why. And I stopped and I thought, well you know I need to tell them I don’t know, or I can finish it up or clean it up next week.

So I finished up the story, my analysis of the situation and went home and thank goodness I hadn’t sold my books from graduate school or the books I had acquired since then, because I really loved labor relations and I looked through some of them and I said, “oh my goodness, my graduate school gave me a great way to analyze most labor situations.” So it was really wonderful because I didn’t know what I knew before I started teaching. And so that’s just you know, that’s the best experi-

ence. I had a downstairs neighbor who was a teacher and I told him that I was teaching and he said, “oh, wait until it clicks.”

And so then the first couple of nights I slugged in and I was like, “oh god, oh god.” This is before I discovered that I really knew what I was talking about. And I think it was the third week of school, when students started writing, and I wanted to tell them not to write and they started asking really cool questions and I was just—I came home and if I could sing, I could have sung on the “L”. I knocked on his door at ten o’clock and I said, “I feel like (*inaudible*) this is the coolest thing,” and from that point on I was like, “I can’t believe they pay me to do this.”

What were you doing besides teaching from ’81 to ’86?

I was working as a staff member at Actors Equity Association.

At Actors Equity, okay.

I was a business rep for the upper-Midwest for a lot of the commercial theater contracts.

And then how did you become fulltime and was that a difficult transition or an easy one?

It was pretty easy. There were three of us who had the same type of assignment with different collective bargaining agreements and we’d from time to time stand around and talk about what would we do after Equity and one of them is still there, believe it or not, but the other two of us have pursued actually doing what we said we would do after Equity—which was teach. So one is teaching munchkins and I’m teaching here at Columbia. And so we had a file that went around the office, with periodicals

and public mail called the Daily File and the Daily File was going around. And one of my colleagues got it and saw an ad for a fulltime position in a newsletter, that's no longer existing, Art's Reporting Service, and brought the Daily—instead of just flopping it on the next desk, brought it directly to me and said, "you have to read this. You have to apply for this."

And at the time I just actually realized that I was bored at Actors Equity and fortunately Actors Equity is a very flat organization, so I had applied to be the Regional Director, even though. I didn't want to be the Regional Director, but I wanted some new challenges and this job pops up right toward the end of that process, which was great timing. And so, you know, I got the confidence boost. I made the first and second cut and luckily they were smart enough not to hire me and I applied for the job here and got it and beat out some people, I was told from one of my friends, beat out some people from—and they had some pretty good credentials. So I don't know whether they didn't want to pay the relocation fees or what, but you know it's been a good deal for me ever since.

And it was a pretty easy transition. At Actors Equity I was on the phone all the time, so for the first semester I was not in demand at all and that bothered me because no one knew me. But ever since then I've learned the college pretty well and I love the students and they know it so they come by.

Can you describe some of the additional things that you're involved in at Columbia since you've been full time and I'd also

like you to speak to I think the first thing that often comes to mind when people hear labor relations is industry. How does labor relations relate to the artist and if you could speak to that?

Okay. Initially what I wanted to do, was be a theater manager. I had been doing it for no pay and I actually went back to graduate school to learn how to be a manager, so I could manage a theater. In the commercial theater everything is unionized. The person opens the door for you is a union member. The person that takes you down the aisle is a union member, clearly all the artists are union members, the designers, the painters, the actors, the singers, the dancers, the musicians they're all union members. The director is probably in the commercial setting.

In non-commercial it's a little less heavily unionized, but I see in the City of Chicago that's changing since the Goodman has just become a union house for its technicians. And so I assumed, I was going to go into theater knowing that I'd need to know labor relations. The movie industry, television industry is extraordinarily unionized, dance is unionized. The only thing that isn't unionized in the arts—are the fine arts—and even then the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York has a union for its curators and its support staff, so its all over the place.

And artists by and large I think, actors, musicians, singers need a union partly because of the history of this country where artists weren't well thought of and I still don't think they're revered as much as they should be. So a lot of people—there are so many people that sing in the church choir and they do it for fun. And I think there's a

concept in this country that work is drudgery and fun is recreation, and so why should you get paid for recreation and so people don't get paid, you know?

I used to have a class in talent management and I'd bring in an artist so she could talk about the demands for making the bulk of her career from being an artist and she talked about being a voice over artist. And at every single class people would say, "oh I want to do that," but they never heard her say_I've read the newspaper out loud and looked at the clock and they didn't understand what kind of talent and what kind of skill it takes to have somebody to say—"could you take a second off of that" and to be able to do it in one take, you know? So because you do it in high school, you do it in college for recreation, for fulfillment, a lot of people I don't think appreciate the skill that professional actors and painters and designers and technicians have, that make what they do at the Schubert or you know the All State Arena looks great and so they need a union because that's what sets up the standards.

Even when I was a theater manager, one of the really interesting things was I think and I still think I am, but I certainly thought I was a good person and I did the right thing. But when our theater switched from a non-union theater to being a union theater, so we could acquire the talent we needed to do the work we wanted to do, I discovered that we were—and when I thought about it, it was like oh yeah, I'm treating the actors shabbily—but it never crossed my mind. We were asking them to do work in conditions that just weren't

good. We were asking them to you know, actors are free so we asked them to change in the same dressing room. Well, frankly I wouldn't want to change in front of the guys you know. And it wasn't a matter of just assuming that they do it, it was a matter of not thinking.

And so I think the other things the unions do in the arts that are less formalized work situations is they set standards and they set standards of decent working conditions that are very important and they're the best people to do it because they're the people that are working in it.

What's the reaction of your students? My own experience in teaching history and I show several documentaries often with union themes and the students perhaps because so few workers are unionized in the big picture they're shocked and—

See that wasn't my experience when I took labor studies at all, it was I guess I have to do this because my family wasn't union oriented at all and my mind was blown. And students have the same reaction. I don't know what your students do, but my students are like, "oh," and then I talk about the whole idea of social history verses political history and it's the kind of geo-political history that we get a lot of—who won this war, who won this election. You don't ever get down to the level of people working it seems to me.

But when you think of—you know this is crazy for me to say this to you—historians, I don't know if its really social history, but I think of it that way. You get down to people. You know what it's like to live and work and go to school and not get a chance to study, to be

working when you're 14 years-old for a living, which is just outside the realm of reality for most individuals now. And you think the only people that that kind of thing would resonate with, would be farm kids.

Right.

So fourteen, no I was getting my skateboard about then you know. I was just getting an allowance for doing the dishes, or you know what I mean and that's what most people see. And so usually its pretty good eye opener. I show the movie, *The Inheritance* which I never tire of and—

What's the subject matter? I'm not—

It's the founding of—it was movie commissioned by the union that's now known as Unite, the former Amalgamated for (*inaudible*) Worker's Union and it just tells their story. But what it does, because a lot of unions tell their story but they tell it in the context of only the workplace, is it tells it over this 50 year period setting—it in you know—there's World War I, there's this, there's there, there's the depression, there's the stock market crash. Just setting in all of that there, are these touch stones that you know about but then it talks about their experience.

And that's especially good for me in the arts because it looks at the downside and what it means to have a craft union of specialists and an industrial union of just everybody working and the impact of the way our system works and the demands of our system and how you can denigrate or forget about the needs of the people that are actually getting the work done.

I'm making a bit of a leap but I do want your take on this. You worked as a part time teacher for five years and you were here as a full timer, but when the part time faculty unionized. Do you have a special perspective or feeling that you know you could share about that?

Most administrations organize unions. If the unions are sharp enough to see it and I think this case is totally one where I believe the part-time faculty was asking for recognition of dignity, which is what most people ask for when they unionize and a good manager can do that without having a heavy union, you know. In this case a independent manager—so that there's not a whole industry hooked up to it. And I think that the part—timers asked for that and were rebuffed and told that they had to form a union." My understanding is the comment was well, "if we talk to you that will be recognizing you as a union. I was like, "no, you talk to the full-time organization all the time. Why would you say that to the part time organization?" And they did the only reasonable thing, they went out and formed a union.

And when you look at the first contract that the part-timers got, they didn't get a lot. It wasn't an expensive contract. It wasn't a radical change because that's not what they needed, they needed recognition for the tremendous work they do in this institution and they weren't getting it. They weren't being taken seriously.

And so what's good, I think because there was a lot of anxiety amongst the administration and a tremendous amount of anger amongst the part-timers, is that they were able to settle down and come up with a kind of bargaining

relationship that they have now. So they engaged in a fairly sophisticated form of bargaining, that had—they started this 30 years ago, probably even 10 years ago, they wouldn't have done. And it's a much more collaborative style, much more productive style of bargaining. And I think it will serve the needs of the managers here and the part-time teachers here and the institution real well. I was quite impressed that they were able to pull that off.

I remember hearing from one of the negotiators and I forget the book that I think they had all been given a book on this form of negotiating and bargaining.

Good ideas?

And he was very—as you said the anger had been there and he was extremely encouraged by the process.

Yeah, because what the process does is it asks you to put away your fears and to put away your anger and to talk about your concerns and issues, to look at the issues first. In the traditional style of bargaining you say, “okay, here's the answer. You have two-thirds of it and I want part of it,” which is what the writers are doing right now. And the motion picture producers is like, “well, if we give you what you really deserve—

Then everybody is going to want—

—then we'll probably have to give the actors what they might deserve.” You know not above the title folks, but the rest of the schmucks at work you know, the normal guys and they were just not willing to do that.

I want to ask you one more question from your professional opinion. Do you feel that so few of the workers I think now it's 11 or 12% in this country are unionized because they're getting recognition and dignity or other reasons? Or why do you think unions are so weird?

It's very complicated. Part of it is because the unions were, I think the unions fell victim to the same things that we have in society, sexism, racism, this belief in America that it's the individual that rules and the fact that you can just give me time and I can pull myself up and find my boot straps and you guys are hanging me up. You know, if they only recognize me, I'll get a fair deal. We're not a very collective society and so part of that is hanging people up and part of it is just—I think there was a great opportunity that the union movement in generalness in terms of unionizing, relating to immigrants and relating to the next downtrodden group you know. So there was the Irish and the Eastern Europeans and then the Blacks, when slavery (*inaudible*), and there wasn't a lot of stomach for breaking down social barriers and that was the most radical thing about the industrial unions. They broke down class and social barriers, but they were a smaller part. And as they grew then law came in and actually law is not made by normal guys. Law is made by the landowners and the upper class and always has been in this country, so that had an impact.

And now I want to get back to your personal story.

Yeah.

Tell me how your position evolved once you became full time and how your responsibilities and interests have expanded and what you're doing with the position now?

Well, one of the things that you have to do as a full-time faculty, is advise students. And so for me it was impossible to advise students and only stay in this little baby area called their major especially when arts management students really need to say I'm really interested in music. I'm really interested in dance. I'm really interested in television because it's not sufficient for them to learn management skills because they're not just managers, they're arts managers. And an arts manager has to have some aesthetic background and aesthetic sensibility and understanding about what it means to make this art.

And so I had to find out about all those different areas, which is why this is such a great place to have an arts management program. And so I ended up having to read the catalog and get to know it and so I think the first thing was I—and I do truly love talking to students. So like, I'm not one of the people that complains about registration. I was late cause I was registering somebody and I was trying to talk him out of being a manager major. What really makes him go is his drawing.

Okay.

And his belief is that if he's an artist he won't make any money, so he wants to be a management major so he can make money. But what makes him get up in the morning is his art, so he really should be an artist. He really should be over in art and design.

And so we had this long conversation and I kept trying to make him take a studio class and finally he relented. So he's taking the studio class at a time, when he said he wasn't going to be able to get there so I'm delighted you know.

But I began sort of learning the institution and I had become a member of the CCFO at the time one of my fellow faculty members was an officer. And so I had gone to the CCFO meetings and the retreat and there were a few others and I went to him and I said, "listen, how can I get more involved because that was the way I was going to meet people outside?" You know luckily, at that point, I was in the Wabash building so there was another department, we shared a copier with another department and so I knew those people and that's how I know the journalism people and the marketing people because at different points we shared the suite with them. But I wasn't getting to know much of the faculty and I wanted to and so I volunteered to help and so that meant the next year I (*inaudible*)—treasurer, because at that point there was officer or member.

They saw you coming. She's volunteering.

Yeah, you know and Chuck didn't tell me that that's what I was doing. So I became involved in committee work from that, because at that point the CCFO officers met with Bert Gall and representatives from the chairs council on a weekly, monthly basis. And so everybody has to pay the treasurer their dues, you get (*inaudible*), you get nominated for the committee, so I served on a lot of committees, a lot of committees. Right now I'm on the Provost Search Committee. I was on the Blue Ribbon Committee

and I've been on the teaching and learning committee, just a lot of committees.

You're still not complaining. You like that too.

Well, you know it's sort of, I don't know. I tell people that I went to the wrong orientation. There were these two orientations. There was one where it said get involved and you know be a part of the community and the other was teach your class, do your work, get off campus, do your work and I went to the first one. So yeah, it's kind of a lot of work but—

You just referred to Columbia I think as your community.

Um-hmm.

And maybe this is a good time for you to talk about how you would describe the mission of the college, you know in your own words what do you see as the mission and you know how does that relate to your department, does the department have additional or a different mission or a related mission?

No, I think the mission of the college is—I think the greatest value of the college is two areas, that this is about authoring the culture of our times and this is about access. Those are the key points. And so I think it's the job of the college to end up with quality programs that will allow people to make a difference in the arts and in communications and arts management feeds right into that, because I think that the way our department works is that we have the so-called professional end of things and then we have, what I think of as, the service end so that we can help artists be savvy artists—so that they're not

bamboozled by unscrupulous dealers or other managers or lawyers—so they'll understand what to look for.

And we can train people to be ethical and forum managers. So for example, when I talk to a student and they say, "well I want to make money," I basically say, "well you need to major in finance and I recommend DePaul because it's a very good finance school." There are a lot of people in the arts that make tremendous sums of money, but I don't think most of them went into it for that reason, that you need to be driven by a desire to bring the arts to people and make the arts possible—bring the people to arts. And you know, people isn't just some people, people is all the people and so all the people have to be involved in that effort.

So you might be the person who got shortchanged in an urban school or sometimes a suburban school, though that's not the most openly held opinion, but you still have a desire to do something, make a difference in the arts. You know, I don't know whether it's because I'm a child of the 60s, which one of my colleagues claims. I just had the unfortunate need to fire a teacher and real good buddies. I want to invite him back. We made some really goofy mistakes and we went through them, but if I could get him to guest speak in my class next fall. I will, he's available because he's got information that my students need. He didn't manage his class and his life well, but—and my colleagues were like, "oh yeah, yeah, yeah why didn't you just tell him off? Weren't you angry?" I said, "yeah I am upset, but I was excited to get him in the first place, I want him to teach our students, I want him to find out how to do that."

So I think that there are all kinds of people, there are all kinds of art, they appeal to different people and people should be able to bring those different perspectives, whether it's the people that grew up at ten sitting in \$109 seats at the opera or the orchestra or people who—because I have graduate students who in their first year of graduate school saw their first play and they're perfectly capable people. So you know I don't think the arts are a separate thing, they are in this country, but they're so necessary.

The other thing is that if I'm really, really excited by the prospect of being another Sean Puffy Combs and that's what gives me the opportunity and the impetus, or not the opportunity but the impetus, to go on to college and to get my skills honed to a higher degree then why not? There's this huge, I think, over-interest in connecting majors to professional outcomes, but I don't see people, you see an angst over the philosophy majors that come out and they're not professional philosophers.

I think college training in our particular day and age is really, really important for somebody to be able to participate fully in society. And if I can get a college education, because I'm enamored with the music business and I can learn to write better and learn to speak better and I can learn about the environment that comes around the creation of different music and I can discover that the precursor of rap was maybe something in Ancient Greece, I'm so much the better and then I can go out. I know I can learn. I know I can accomplish. I know I can satisfy

goals and I can participate in society, in whatever way I want. And so a lot of people that are turned off to school are passionate about something and Columbia gives them a really absolutely fabulous opportunity to discover a passion in the arts or in communications and to follow that through because I think that helps people, if they follow passions, become a more whole person.

You've talked about access and opportunity for students once they're here. What about access to the college? Do you see challenges in that department in the future and you know who is the college serving and is that being threatened or—?

It's very tricky. I think there are a couple of things the college has gotten—I think it's shifted about ten years ago. I think before then the college was way too focused on access and not focused on proficiency and excellence enough. And I think right around the time I got here, they began to sort of wiggle about that as a group because it's possible I know that—Mike Hatziter, was a student in my freshmen seminar group and when I saw his writing for the first time, I was like, I couldn't believe he had gotten out of high school. He's working in the .com world. He discovered karate or something here. He finished a music major. He's already a black belt but he started out as a white belt, he's only been out of school two years and he's teaching classes now himself. Is Terrance going to be a great drummer? No, probably not. Does he look like he's going to be a great grown up? Yeah. Yeah.

And he was willing, when he didn't achieve the level that he should have achieved in the class, to take it

over again because a lot of the classes were I think probably for him, foreign territory and he took them over again and he's a reasonable good writer, he's a good speaker. He's at a place where he can improve all the other things. The trick now is I think, that Columbia has a good thing going and the trouble is there will be barriers to access. There will be physical barriers to access, not that the wheelchair can't get around and things like that, but there's only so many people that you can put in so much space and educate well. And I think at some point that's going to become an interesting thing for Columbia to grapple with and my hope is that it resolves that and continues to be an open admissions school.

So you would like to hang on to open admissions?

I think that's critical.

It's critical.

Yeah. I just think it's absolutely necessary. It creates a set of diversity that's real life. It creates a world here that's closer to real life than many things, many institutions of higher-ed, certainly the ones I went to. And I don't know it just seems like what you have to do. We're not as diverse as we need to be even with our numbers burgeoning out the walls. I think that Columbia can have more control than it believes it can. I know when I was on the Blue Room Committee, that considered open access, there was this whole issue and I suggested that the college could market and de-market itself in its programs and people looked at me like I had grown horns, but it can do that.

Why don't you explain that a little bit more?

Marketing is you know, when you start communicating with the publics you're interested in communicating with. So for example, since I've been here the number of African American students, especially African American men has diminished as a percentage as a whole. But they're there and they're interested, they just don't know we're here and we're interested. The Film Department is about to turnover on its ear. Well, the easy program to market because it's gotten the most renown because of the very public career that people that are successful in film have. The easiest thing to promote is Columbia's Film Department, but its Interior Design Department is equally excellent I bet you, turning out exciting people.

We can choose to take the focus, I mean anybody that—we all know that Robert Downey has a drug problem, but we don't know every incident. I'm completely confident of that because somebody has taken control of that. So we can be more in charge of what people know about us and we can be in charge of what doesn't come to their mind first. We can diminish something in importance by raising other parts of the institution of importance. It's a choice we haven't made yet.

I love that line, they're there and they're interested, they just don't know we're here and we're interested.

Yeah, cause both are important.

Yeah. You talked about growth and this diversity as challenges. Any other challenges you see**(inaudible) Columbia that we have to meet?**

I think there are some challenges that effect our outcomes and hopefully never will be obvious to the public, in terms of maturing our internal structure and finding a way to—it's a really tough thing to find a way to allow the kinds of freedom and entrepreneurship that's been the hallmark of this college, while not burning out its faculty and administrators and finding a way that will make it more collective.

One of my favorite colleagues—I have two colleagues that always seem to think they have the eye on teaching and they are superior teachers, but it's not like the rest of us don't care. And I sort of trained one of my colleagues and I said, "oh well, I just, I don't care about students," and I keep telling him that and I keep razzing him and finally I heard him in a conversation saying, "we." I said, "yeah" because one of the initiatives the Management Department took under Carol Yamamoto, was to develop this whole advising procedure and it was at a time when students could wander around and take whatever they wanted and they could still—you know because graduating with a major was brand new. So they could have two from Column A, two from Column B, and three from Column C, and they wouldn't have a cohesive body of knowledge and we were trying to find a way to step in on that decision making process.

And so we dangled a carrot out to them and we said, "it's just like a theater. We'll make a reservation for you in this class, but you have to come and talk to us and you have to come and register on the day you're supposed to register."

And you know for somebody new to be sitting in a department that has that aim, you know, it's ridiculous to think that they have the corner on student centeredness. But there are some departments, where the ability to balance professional excellence growth in the currency of their programs and I think all of the programs are probably like this—student centeredness, all of those things at once is very complicated.

There's also I think some old perspectives of people that are unwanted baggage, they could the way we make decisions and there is a façade of engaging everybody at the college that's wearing thin and I think, that as a group, we have to find a way to engage more people not in busywork but in really focusing the college, making policies that will make that come true and making people more accountable to each other at different levels in the institution. I think what's happened is our pace has quickened, just like the pace of society and its hard to do.

What do you see because the restructuring of Columbia is around the corner, correct?

Um-hmm.

And are you familiar with what is—how do I want to say this?**What you're hoping to be addressed do you think it's being addressed or are you—?**

The beginning of restructuring failed because it tried to address a real problem with a real solution, unfortunately the two weren't linked. The real problem restructuring is taking place is our very thin upper middle management slots, that's where the deans are going to have an impact. They're

not going to have an impact directly on the faculty, they're not and that package was originally sold as a way to alleviate work on the faculty. It has the opportunity to have a tremendous impact on the cohesive nature of the college.

One of our weak points as a communications college, is our ability to communicate among each other. It comes as a handicap, but it has an opportunity because of the opportunity to enhance communications to enhance trust which is not at a huge ebb here. I think that's a real problem with an institution that people aren't trusting. And I don't think there's a sense of trust and a sense of goodwill here. We have a façade, but I don't think we have the real deal so I think the restructuring has those opportunities. It's handicapped by the way it was done and probably the best things for people to get over, to look at it, to continue to agitate for voice and for say and to keep moving, not to get stuck down there or back there.

In the past what the college was or right now?

Right now, yeah not to get—I think the restructuring was poorly handled. I think the outcome is probably going to be very positive, but we had an open forum about the college council and five of us spoke. Well, the College Council is a body of some forty people, all bright, articulate, knowledgeable folks. Five people can't possibly speak for those people, they just can't. I was one of the speakers and I can't possibly have—I don't know enough about what goes on other places to understand enough to be able to suggest that 20% of the people feel exactly the same way and have exactly the same consent.

And so there's something, where the college is becoming the so-called leaders because I assume, when you elect somebody or select somebody to be part of the council, that you would expect them to have good ideas and have points of view that you're in alignment with; or you believe that your point of view will be advocated for, even if it's not that person's point of view. For all those people to be silent is just worrisome.

Does that come back to your point earlier about the investment in the community that that's lacking too or that that needs to be addressed?

That needs to be addressed and part of it, I think this an outcome of having, Mike Alexandroff, had a wonderful vision for this college and he ran it like a sole proprietorship—though its not. And somehow, the kind of culture that you get in a sole proprietorship that's trying not, a college that's trying not, to be a sole proprietorship so it has all the bells and whistles of not being a sole proprietorship, but it has all the behavior of being a sole proprietorship there's that disconnect. And somewhere along the way that disconnect, you know there needs to be some merger, some recognition that being a sole proprietorship in the 70s and the 80s, may have been incredibly beneficial. In some respects it was incredibly beneficial for this institution, but in other respects it took some hits.

Last year the U of C, Columbia and two other colleges got new presidents, installed new presidents. And I heard an interview show with three of the forum and the gentleman from the U of C, his

name I don't recall, he said, "what's really interesting is that I'm responsible for a multimillion dollar business but I don't have a soul to say, but I have all this faculty and all these directors that have some say into what I do and yet my job is to make it run and make it grow." And that's a very funny tension. It's not one that we've come to grips with, which is the process of restructuring. Now hopefully, the outcome of the restructuring can help move us closer to that idea.

You've been here now over 20 years since you started as a part timer.

Kind of scary.

What, because I don't want to end the interview with the challenges? You started talking about how you discovered your love of teaching at Columbia.

Yeah.

What keeps you here?

The students. I love the students. They are the coolest people in the whole world. I mean I've always seen myself as kind of a facilitator and so they come in with these dreams, some of them in their toenails, but they know they have them and I get to help them figure out what's helpful. So for me the best part of the job is not necessarily the classroom teaching part, it's the one on one advising conversation, batting it around part, (*inaudible*). I remember about five or six years ago, an incoming graduate student and she wanted to be a music business student and her father was this wonderful photo journalist and her whole essay was about photo. And so we talked, she was very engaged, very bright. And we apparently sent her back to Ohio distraught cause she thought

she hadn't gotten in because she was sure she hadn't persuaded us that she wasn't a visual arts management major. We accepted her, she came in, she switched to being a visual arts management major. She's on the photo journalism fellowship at the end of it, right now. That's like you know, you can't get paid for that. That's what someone (*inaudible*) being here at Columbia because story after story after story people come in with a passion or they discover it, you know they really kind of formulate it and kind of say okay, it's not this fuzzy ball anymore.

Does the dreamer in you that wants to encourage the dreams and the passions in your students ever come into conflict with—do you have a practical side?

Oh yeah.

Do you find that at Columbia that those are in conflict or at tension?

This is a great home for that, or at least especially in my department because we're sort of the pragmatic guys. So, I think, I love encouraging dreams and I love encouraging practical routes to them so this is a great place. I love being at the school that my parents didn't send me to. I mean, I have a niece and she's not going here even though I think she'd be ideal here. But she wanted an, away experience and I thought that that would be really good for her and my brother and she got to the point where she didn't want to declare music as her major and she's filling out her college applications and her first choice writes back and says, "what's your major?" She calls me up and says "what's my major going to be?" I said, well what did you like

doing in high school?" She said, "I really like my psych class." I said, "put psychology down."

She is a psych major now and she seems to be all in it. And her father comes to me and he says, "are you the one who told her about psychology? What do you do with psychology?" I said, "you enjoy it. You go to school and you find out what happens afterwards." But yeah, I don't find a conflict.

And you anticipated my next question. You definitely could see or would advise your niece to come here. Are there some students that maybe shouldn't be at Columbia or I mean is there an ideal student—?

Given her choice now, she's no longer an idea student. At one point, when she began her college application process, what she was telling me is, I want to be a website designer and singer. Unfortunately she wanted to go to this school, it didn't have interactive multi-media and so we had to go for you know —and I sort of pushed her towards computer science and she didn't want to go there. So I said, "okay well, what really makes you sing?" And she said, "this."

So I think that the ideal student for Columbia, is a student who is really fascinated by or driven by some area in the arts or communication because that's what we do. And so I think that if a student thinks that, like if Crystal had come here and she discovered she had taken an Intro to Psych class or Abnormal Psych class and just was like, wow, then I'd say, get out of here. And I think that those students, that discover what really makes them tick and it's not necessarily what Columbia has to offer because one

of the strengths of Columbia is it doesn't offer the whole world, is for them to leave. It's not a big problem.

I think our perception that that's a big problem is an issue because there are very, very few schools like us but we have to find a way to get that off the anecdotal side and to illustrate it or articulate it because I think that's a wonderful service we provide.

I talked to a senior a few years ago that had taken her last lit class or last humanities class. It was even before that it was Humanities Lit here—her last humanities class and it was a lit class and her next to last semester and I registered her. She was coming in and she was taking a last dash in management class and she was almost despondent because she wasted her time, because the other four classes that she took were lit classes. And she said, "oh how am I going to do this?" I said, "you're going to go in graduate school." But they're not going to accept me because I didn't major in English. But how are they going to understand this? I said, "they're going to understand that you had a change of heart but that you saw your way through completing a major even though we weren't making you so that you can start a goal and see it through the end and you're going to be fine."

So maybe she'll survive graduate school by working in the retail business, fashion industry, until she can get her Ph.D. and go teach or go write or both. You know she wasn't poorly served because she discovered something that was very exciting to her, in the process of doing something that had been more exciting to her before. So—

How good a job do you think Columbia—you know you're talking about students that came here with one intention and discovered something else and maybe are moving on or aren't going into arts and communications? What about the students that come here ill-prepared for college, how are we doing with them in retaining them those that would like to stay here and—?

That's where I don't think we have enough trust in ourselves you know. I believe that they can be helped and I think we're beginning to develop the kinds of course work that will—I mean because the greatest handicap, there are I think three great areas of handicap that will hang somebody up. A handicap in reading and comprehending, a handicap primarily in writing because usually your writing development seems to go hand in hand; with your critical thinking skills and then a lack of exposure to the art form that you're interested in because we're not a portfolio in school. And I think that probably the wrong place for somebody to come and discover the violin, but oddly enough that's not what we do here.

So I think that we have managed to identify areas in the arts where somebody can start and begin to make some advances. And if I were to come here as a freshman and pick up the horn for only the second year in a row, I would have to be pretty passionate and pretty dedicated to end up being a professional musician at the end of four years. But I might be there by the end of eight years and I think Columbia is well prepared to do that. I think I could become a talented designer in four or five

years as long as my communication and my thinking skills could be given the (*inaudible*). I think Columbia is in a position to do that.

But I think that it has to be somebody who's passionate. It can't be someone who's come to Columbia as a last chance school. It has to be somebody who wants to be an illustrator, wants to own the next double door, whatever it is. And then, if they're willing to sit down and do that kind of work and work towards being excellent, I think that that can happen here.

What if Columbia didn't exist?

What would I be doing?

What would you be doing and you do talk a lot about students and their experience here? Where would—I mean do you ever think about that like where would they have ended up, what would have been their story?

Yeah, sometimes we do and I think about—there are some kids, I mean the fun thing about Columbia is that I've had students who could have gotten into Harvard, or the most selective school and some kids that without commitment and a personal connection, wouldn't have gotten through COD or Loop. You know, I'm dating myself, Harold Washington? And so I guess I worry more about—actually I worry about both of them. The guys in the middle are probably going to be okay one way or the other, but both of those kids on the end come with sort of unique pressures, because the guy that I—

