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Interview with Alfred "Bud" Perlman, 1998

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Alfred “Bud” Perlman

OK, today is February the 8th, 1999, and this is an interview with Alfred “Bud” Perlman, former President of the Board of Trustees at Columbia College Chicago.

OK, Mr. Perlman, if we could start—if you could tell us about your original affiliation with Columbia, and maybe start with the move from 209 S. Wabash to Lake Shore and Ohio.

Well, first, I met Mike when Columbia College occupied space in the building at 209 S. Wabash with another school called Pestalozzi-[Freibel]. Mike’s father, Norman, was alive and head of the College at the time. One of my brokers, by the name of Herb Harris, his wife was a friend of Norman, and Herb Harris advised me that Columbia College was looking for some space, and do you think we could arrange for them to occupy space at 540 Lake Shore Drive, where we had 11,000 square feet, on the top floor, available for rent. After getting plans and specifications, we were able to negotiate a lease, and in addition, loan the College \$11,000 for remodeling space into studios, not classrooms, because classrooms in a [mill] constructed building was not acceptable to the city code. But if we called them studios, we were able to get the proper permission to do the remodeling. That was the beginning of my relationship with Mike as President of the College. His father had passed away, and Mike took control, and they moved into 540 with a grand total of 125 students.

And you talked about how you combined the lease and the loan,

or how did that work? The money for renovations?

I’m not sure—I think they signed a 10-year lease, and we loaned them \$11,000 for remodeling, and [they were tithed] the \$11,000 over the term of the lease, so that they were paying an additional rent of \$1000-plus a month, which was not a problem in terms of the economics of the school. The move was good for the College, because they seemed to get more recognition and more—they were able to get more students, and their enrollment began to increase. And they did well, but the time came when they had to make a decision about becoming accredited. I was a member of the Board of Trustees, and I think I may have been President of the Board, I’m not sure. But in any event...

If you could first tell us how you became a member of the Board.

Well, I had a daily contact with Mike, and we just got along personally, and Mike asked me one day if I would become a member of the Board, and I told him I had a problem with that, because it might be considered, construed a conflict of interest, being his landlord and also being a member of the Board. But I said I would talk with my partners, and if they agreed it was OK, I would become a member. All the partners agreed that it was OK for me to become a member of the Board, and I accepted the position. And I became—time passed, I was nominated, chosen, as President of the Board of Trustees, replacing... I don’t remember who it was, I think it was a man who was an accountant, and they were the auditors, and he felt that he couldn’t be on

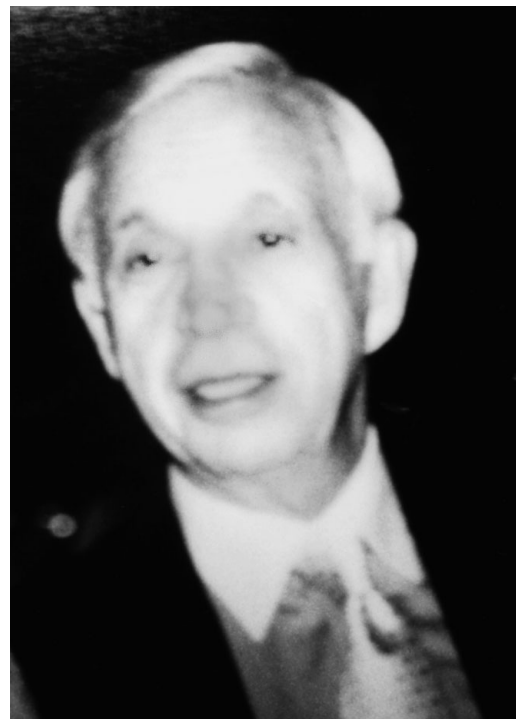
the Board and be the auditor, so he resigned. And then I became President of the Board.

In your definition, how did you view the role of the Board of Columbia College?

I felt that the Board should act only in an advisory and administrative position. It should have nothing to do with the educational process of the College; that’s up to the President and to the instructors and the professors of the school. Our main function was to help make the College economically viable.

And you had mentioned that you and Mike came—had a difference of opinion about one issue.

Oh, the time came when I felt that it was important, if the College were to grow and mature, that it become accredited. Mike... had some strong feelings that he didn’t want to become part of the establishment, and being accredited would make him like anybody else.



I explained to him that being like everybody else is gonna be important, and being accredited is the first important step to maturity. We talked about it, talked about it to the members of the Board, and we all agreed, reluctantly, as far as Mike was concerned, that we should apply for accreditation. The process was very interesting, and they had never considered accrediting a school like Columbia College, but we weathered the storm, and I think our uniqueness turned out to be a plus in terms of getting accreditation. We finally got it, and the school blossomed. Enrollment increased to the point... when I retired from the Board, I think we had over 4,000 students, full and part-time. That was unbelievable, in terms of what—125 students in the beginning. The school had rented more space in 540, and finally, they just ran out of space, and Mike said to me "I don't think we can stay in the building any longer. Do you have any ideas about where we could go?" And I told him about a building that was for sale at 600 S. Michigan. And I knew one of the owners, and I sat down with him and told him I had somebody that was interested. The only thing is, they haven't got any money.

(Laughs)

And my experience with them has been that they've never gone back on their responsibility and obligation, to pay their obligations promptly, and we could work out a deal where they had—I think we were talking about \$250,000 cash and the rest of the purchase mortgaged. We were able to work a deal out, where they got a purchase money mortgage for the seller. They had enough cash to put down

and to remodel, and they were able to pay off the mortgage inside of two or three years, free and clear of the purchase money mortgage. They still owed the bank, I never could understand why the bank loaned the money, but they were always there.

Was this Continental Bank?

It was Continental Bank, and they were very generous, it was almost like a charity. But they never lost any money on the College either. And they always paid their obligations on time, if not sooner. And that was the start.

I want to just go back to the accreditation period. You said that the North Central had not accredited a school like Columbia before.

No, that's right.

How would you describe Columbia's uniqueness? I mean, what was different about it that would make accreditation a little bit more unusual?

Oh, there was no predetermined criteria in terms of getting into school. As long as they graduated high school, as long as they wanted to learn, as long as they wanted to go to class, they would stay in. If somebody flunked a course, and they wanted to continue, they could take it over, or take another course. Nobody would get kicked out of the school. It had an open policy. As long as they were able to take care of X number of students, first come, first served, that's how they get in. They had no restrictions, no prior criteria in terms of grades or anything else. In that respect, it was quite unique in the educational process. That was one of the things that the accreditation people looked at very carefully, and had some misgivings about the concept. Notwithstanding, they

gave us accreditation, and we were pleased and surprised.

When you convinced Mike of the wisdom of accreditation, what else did you tell him? You had told [me] that you kind of made a prediction into the future of the College.

I said when that happens, Columbia College is no longer going to be Mike's personal... school. It's gonna grow, it's gonna mature, it's gonna get recognition. And if I were you, I would make sure that you had a very good contract with the College, as well as Bert Gall, and make sure that the Board of Trustees approve it, so that you know that you're established. But know the future is gonna be "This too will pass." And that's what exactly happened. I think the school became bigger, and Mike was over 65, and it was time to move on. As far as I'm concerned, I resigned because I realized that the main purpose of a trustee was to go out and... get contributions, and I just couldn't do it. And I knew that they needed the right kind of President of the Board of Trustees who was willing to accept that responsibility of being on the Board, and I resigned for that reason.

You mentioned Bert Gall. Can you tell me more about your relationship with him?

Well, Bert Gall was a student at the College, and when he graduated, Mike put him in charge of the—taking care of the real estate. And he and I had a kind of personal relationship, in that I would help him, teach him about running real estate and getting bids and hiring personnel. I was kind of like a teacher to him, in terms of learning the trade. And he turned

out to be an exceptional, exceptional young man [in terms of] his ability to run the—I mean, at one time, it was—at Lake Shore and Ohio, 25,000, 30,000 square feet, he used to take care of the remodeling, and hiring contractors. He did an excellent job. And at times, he and I would talk about the best thing to do and how to do it. I had some gray hairs, and he had none, so I helped out.

What kind of advice did you give him?

I don't know how to answer that question. Managing real estate is not an exact science, because it's not an exact product. You have to learn how to spend as little money to get the maximum result in terms of remodeling space, in terms of getting the proper bids, knowing how to analyze it. You learn by mistakes, and I learned by—when I first started in the business, my teacher, the first guy I worked for, told me that it's gonna cost somebody about \$60,000 to make you a good manager. He was wrong, it cost more. And I think I probably told the same thing to Bert Gall. You learn by doing, and you learn by making mistakes and correcting them. And I think that's probably the advice I gave Bert Gall [at the time]. It's been a long time ago, I'm not sure, but that's how I was taught, and I'm sure that Bert and I had the same kind of discussions.

How easy was it for him to make the transition from student to administrator?

He was and is very bright. He got a kick—I think he got a kick out of what he was doing, therefore, it was easy. If you enjoy what you're doing, it's easy. If you don't enjoy it, it's not easy. Bert had the unique ability to enjoy it, and for that, I

always admired him. The same can be said of Mike, of course. He loved what he was doing. He was a maverick in a lot of respects, but he liked being a maverick, and that made him very unique. Columbia College's success is due entirely to Mike Alexandroff [and] his ability to have wonderful, great ideas and to implement them. And he knew how to use the Board to help—I don't—when I say, "use" the Board, I say it in a good sense. He was able to take advantage of the talents of the individuals on the Board. It was small, it was personal, it was unique, and they were able to give him a lot of help and insight in—not running the academics, but running the College as a business. That's the only way I can explain it.

Do you remember who some of the other Board members were that served with you?

Bud Salk... Devorah Sherman... I don't remember the rest of them now.

And these were people that Mike handpicked as well?

Right, Mike handpicked, period.

All the Board members?

Yeah. I don't remember them all.

That's all right.

Mike, I'm sure, knows them. We were all very different, individualistic, and we were all opinionated, and we had no problem in voicing our opinions. And Mike was able to keep a level head with the whole group, and very rarely had problems with any members of the Board. He was great with dealing with them. It was small, it was personal... it was like a family.

Right. That description comes up a lot in descriptions of the College; now you're using it to

describe the Board of Trustees as well, and its relationship to Mike.

That's right. And, again, I resigned when I saw that the College and the Board was going in a direction which I felt I couldn't contribute, and if I can't contribute, I should get out. And I explained that to Mike, and he understood. We continued our personal friendship beyond that. I don't see him too often anymore, but I have a great deal of respect and love for Mike Alexandroff, and always will. I think he created an institution that is very unique, and contributes—contributed a lot to the social welfare of the city of Chicago. I'm very proud of him.

Before you met him, did you ever think of yourself as being so involved in—

No, I flunked seventh grade, for crying out loud. Got busted in the Army three times.

(Laughs) Well, you might have fit in, right, because there's always been mavericks over there. And it probably helped

Yeah. Well, it was one of the interesting experiences of my life, and one that I'm very glad I had.

We were talking before, too, about—I was asking if you remembered graduations? What are your memories of the graduations?

I used to hate to wear the cap and gown and walk down the aisle, sit down along the stage, and listen to all the speeches. The only thing I remember was... the address that Mike always gave. It was really just marvelous, and it really just made everybody in the audience feel good about themselves and the College and... he just was marvelous. I used

to hate it, myself. I didn't want to be on exhibition, I didn't want to wear the silly cap and gown, but I used to go anyhow, and thank God I never had to make a speech, as Chairman of the Board, because I wouldn't have done it anyhow. But I used to enjoy listening to Mike. He was a marvelous speaker, and he spoke from the heart. And that was always important to me. He was quite a guy. He is quite a guy.

I'd like to—I'm gonna turn this over, because it's almost out. All right, could you tell us a little bit about yourself, when you were born, where you were born—September 5, 1921, Chicago, Illinois. I was a twin, I have a twin sister, and I had an older brother who was an attorney, he passed away last year at the age of 80. My father was an attorney who was born in [Pultava], and at the age of two, came to the United States, with his mother and his older brother. And she married for the second time to a man by the name of Perlman, and my father married... I don't remember [whether they] were married, but he passed away in 1954, I think.

Your father.

Yes. And my mother lived to about 100 and she passed away about 10 years ago.

And what was your mother's name?

Mabel. And my father was Israel B. Perlman, and they used to call him I.B. Nobody ever called him Israel.

Was your mother born in this country?

My mother was born in this country. She was one of, I think, 14 children. My father was born in [Pultava], and had an older brother

and his mother married Perlman and had two children, so he had two half-brothers.

And when they came, they came to Chicago?

My mother was born in Chicago, my father came to Chicago. And he was self-educated, he was in the first graduating school of John Marshall Law School.

Really?

And he was a very bright, unusual man. He just came up the hard way.

And you said earlier that you didn't pass seventh grade?

I flunked seventh grade, and I got busted in the Army three times.

Did you stop going to school at that point, or did you finish high school, or—

No, I quit the University of Illinois before they kicked me out. Then I joined the Army Air Corps, started pilot training, and they kicked me out of flying school. Then I became a private... well, to make a long story short, I ended up in the South Pacific with the rank of staff sergeant, with the offer of becoming a second lieutenant if I stayed in the Army Air Corps three more years. I told them they could stick that job up their... and came home. And went to work with a man who was managing some properties, and my father and I learned the real estate business from him.

So to back up, you served in World War II, then?

Yeah.

But you weren't cut out for a career in the Army.

No, I sure wasn't. I had a good time, and I still see a lot of the friends I had overseas, we have a reunion every year. I was in an unusual outfit, we were the Air-Sea

Rescue outfit. We saved, in 18 months, over 700 people.

Really? Where were you during Pearl Harbor? Did you go to the South Pacific after Pearl Harbor?

I was—Pearl Harbor, I was in watching the Bears play football. And when I came home, my father told me "They just bombed Pearl Harbor," and I was so informed, I asked him where Pearl Harbor was. He says, "You're gonna find out soon enough."

(Laughs)

And then I volunteered for the Army Air Corps, and went through—in my second phase of flying was when they washed me out and I became a private. And then through a series of different assignments, I ended up in the South Pacific.

And, again, it was a rescue...

It was an air-sea, it was called the Second Emergency Rescue Squad. We used to fly amphibious airplanes, that landed on the water or on the ground, and pick up survivors that had been downed or they were bombing. Certain places, like the Philippines, and we were stationed all over the South Pacific. We started out in southern New Guinea, went all the way up, and we ended up—I ended up in the Philippines before I went home.

And were you still single, or had you married?

No, I was still single. I didn't get married until 1948.

Did you marry a girl from Chicago?

No, I went down to my old fraternity house, and I had a blind date, and that's who I married, the blind date.

And what was her name, and where was she from?

She was from a little town in Southern Illinois called [Vandega], and her name was Annette Levin. Her father owned a ladies' ready-to-wear shop down there, and she was at Illinois, and I had a cousin who was in the same sorority, and I asked her to get me a date, to go to my fraternity's junior prom, or something. That's who I had for—that's how I met her. And about three years later, we got married.

And so—and then, when you came back from the war, and while you were establishing this relationship, that's when you got into property management, here in Chicago?

Yeah. My father owned some real estate, and when I came back he asked me what I wanted to do, and I told him I didn't know. He says, "Well, we just gave some real estate to a man by the name of Herbert Lustig, who just opened up a firm, and he's managing the building, and he needs somebody. He'll teach you the business, and you'll learn about managing property," and I went to work for him. Thirty-six dollars a week. And he taught me the business. He was a [real] teacher, and I remember the first thing he told me was... "So and so owes some rent, and they're at North Avenue and Troy. Serve 'em with a five-day notice." I didn't know what he was talking about. I didn't know what a five-day notice was, I didn't know where North Avenue and Troy was. But he was smart, he knew what he was—he wanted to see what I would do to find out all these questions. So I got the five-day notice blank, and it was like reading a foreign language, to me. And my father's

law office was across the street, so I ran over to my father's law office and got my brother to help me fill out the five-day notice.

This is your older brother?

Yeah. And then I checked with somebody in the office and found out where North Avenue and Troy was, and I didn't have a car, so I took the streetcar. (Laughs) Took me all day, but I learned how to serve a five-day notice, and I learned what a five-day notice was. And I never forgot. And that's how he taught me.

Can you tell me something about your politics? Because everything I've asked, you've said that you were attracted to the philosophy of Columbia and Mike

Alexandroff, and the open admissions, where it didn't matter, you know, what race you were or what ethnicity you were, who your parents were, or how rich you were, and you said that you were attracted to that.

Well, my father was very liberal, and I guess I am too. The only time I voted Republican, I voted for a dumb crook.

Which one? (Laughs)
Nixon.

Yeah, OK.

I'm basically a Democrat, but I'm getting to be less and less a Democrat and less and less a Republican, I would call myself an Independent right now. I don't want to be labeled anymore. I still feel strongly about... I think I'm an atheist, but I respect anybody's right to believe in what they want to believe, and I don't condemn anybody for religious or not religious. I try to be a good person, that's all. I'm not perfect, but I don't want to be perfect. It's no fun being perfect. I do the best I can.

Did you see Columbia as serving a need that other people were not, that other institutions—

Oh, sure, that's what attracted me to it, the fact that anybody who wanted to go get an education could get one at Columbia College if they wanted one. If they flunked a course, that didn't mean you were necessarily out of the school, it meant that if they wanted to take it over again, they could. The open policy was very important to me. As long as they could have a first come, first served basis, I felt that was important. I didn't care whether they were black or white or yellow or Jewish or Protestant or Methodist or Catholic, it didn't make any difference to me. All that made a difference is that they were interested in having an education, and I felt—I knew that Mike had the same attitude, and that's what attracted me, more than anything else.

And, again, I'm returning to an earlier theme, but the accreditation: is that something that—it's obviously something you fought for. How did that come up? Is that something that you said, "It's time to look into this?"

I don't remember. I think we had a discussion, and I may have said, "You know, Mike... in order for the College to mature, I think it should be accredited" Mike didn't like the idea. I said, "I know you don't like the idea, but I think that we've reached a level where it's not gonna go any further." It was discussed in the Board, and I think we almost all agreed that we had to try for it. So we started to make the inquiries, and fill out the applications. It was a long, strenuous process, I remember, and I remember they were very, very difficult, they interviewed every member of the Board, they

asked questions that were almost like weeding, waiting for you to say the wrong thing. And I felt that almost reluctantly they gave us accreditation. They weren't used to the uniqueness of the school. They tried to get me—I was Chairman of the Board—they tried to get me to say that I was interested in the academic process of the school, and I wouldn't tell them that. I told them just the opposite. And, as it turned out, it was lucky I did that, because they believed—I think they believed that a trustee should be interested in the economic stability, not the educational process of the school. And they weren't gracious. It's almost as if "You'd better prove to me that you can get accredited" And we did. And that's when the College began, really began to take off.

I want to thank you for the interview; is there anything that we haven't covered that you think is important?

I think it's important that... I reiterate my strong feeling that Columbia College is Mike Alexandroff. What he did, what he was able to do, has just been a marvelous accomplishment. It gave me great pleasure, it was one of the highlights of my life, to be associated with Mike in the capacity that I was. That's about it.

Well, thank you.