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### Interview with Louis Silverstein, 1998

Columbia College Chicago

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## Louis Silverstein

**It's the ninth of June, 1998, and I'll start as I always start: What were the circumstances that brought you here?**

It was in 1968. I was pursuing my doctorate at Northwestern University, and I invited a person who was teaching at Columbia to come to Northwestern to speak to one of the classes that I was TAing for. His name was Jon Wagner, and Jon came, he spoke, we talked, and we went out and had coffee and tea and liked each other a lot. We exchanged our educational philosophies, and he asked me to come to Columbia to teach part-time. I came, I met Mike, Mike made me an offer, I accepted, and I started teaching part-time in 1968. I taught here for a year, and then left to teach in Rhode Island. Spent a year there, Mike wrote to me, asked me to come back to be Assistant Dean and help the College get accredited. The College had yet to be accredited, and he wanted me to work on the accreditation. I came back in 1970, and the dean, at that time, had had it. Bill Wilkes, he was leaving for Florida to join a jazz band and drink a lot, and Mike offered me the position of Dean of the College in 1970. So in 1970 I became Dean of Columbia College.

**That's quite a promotion, for someone just finishing their doctorate.**

Well, I had finished my doctorate at that point. I think Mike recognized my brilliance (*laughs*), and what I had to offer Columbia, and he was right. At that time—I should say, Columbia, when I started here, Columbia had about 13 students in the graduating class. The graduating class ceremony

took place in Mike's office, and one of the benefactors of the College at that time was Dwight Follett, of Follett Books and Publishing, and Mike always asked students who was the teacher that, perhaps, influenced them the most during their stay here, and just in one year, my name came up at both graduations. And so Dwight Follett recommended to Mike that he somehow connect with me.

**What were you teaching when you taught part-time in '68?**

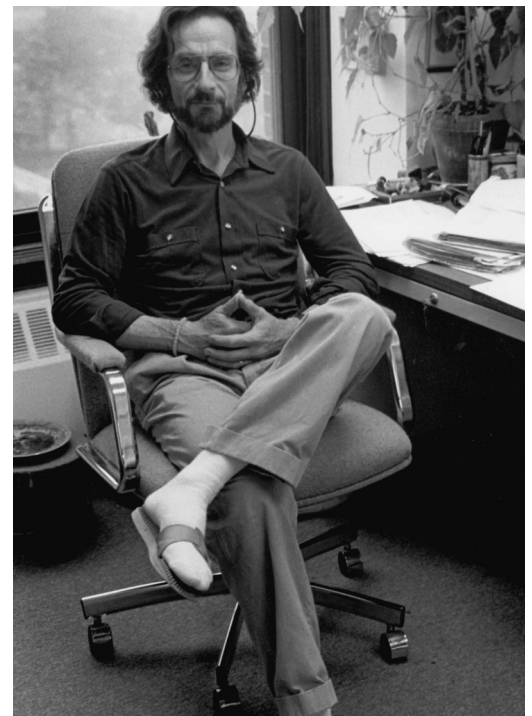
I was teaching a course, I think, in Education and Philosophy, or Educational Philosophy, something like that, I don't recall. Then in the spring, I was teaching a psychology course, an Intro to Psychology course, and I think something called Philosophical Psychology.

**Oh. You were teaching a number of different things. What were your students like?**

The students were very interesting souls. They were of the most diverse sort, as they are now, in terms of race, class, gender, at least the ones in my classes. They came to Columbia after either trying out other colleges and finding that no other college suited their being, their soul. I had students who had been in the work force for a while that were coming back to re-charge their lives and renew their lives and take a new direction with their lives. And then I had some students that were straight out of high school. They represented the greater Chicago community, as I said, with race, gender, class, academic abilities, but they were eager to learn, they were open, they wanted to grow, and they were willing to go on educational journeys with me.

**Tell me about those journeys. You have a course title, a few course titles, but how did you—**

Well, I saw students as—I saw them then, I see them now—as people who are alive at this moment, but I also see them as people who have a past, with the past affecting who they are right now, and I also see the students in my class as people who go on into the future as workers and as parents. So the journey that we went on was back into our earlier lives and reflect upon our educational experiences. See what we felt furthered our aspirations and goals as human beings, as professionals. See what we would have changed, bring that up to the present, review our education now, see what we liked about our education, see what we didn't like, see how we benefited, discuss how we could bring about change in our education right now. One of my beliefs is that if you don't work for change now, in college, you're not going to work for change later. And many



students then, as now, felt that there was really nothing they could do about changing the circumstances of how they were educated. And then we'd look to the future, as I said, among other ways, as parents, and how did we want to bring up our children, what did we need to do to bring up our children in terms of educating our children, what kind of society did we want to walk into, and what did we need to do to be the author of our society, as we tended to say in our mission statement then? What did we need to acquire? So that was the journey, and the journey was into self, but also self as it relates to community, as it relates to one's fellow humans, and the earth, and beyond. So that's the journey we went on.

**I'm curious, in your course on education, what did you have them read?**

At that time? Uh, I think I had them read *How Children Fail*, which is a classic in the field, by John Holt, who taught at a very prestigious Boston school and found that even the best schools were failing students, and he defined students as full and total human beings. I believe I had them read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and, I think, *Teacher* by Sylvia Ashton Warner, which is a book about a woman who teaches Maori children. Those were the three—I think, if my memory serves correctly—required books for the course.

**And your students liked this? How did they respond?**  
To the books?

**Yeah.**

Well, there was a double response, that's what we have now, also. One is—the books that I usually offer

my classes, my students, are very engaging, and students, once they engage the book, find that it's a mind-blowing book. I mean, it's a book that just opens them up in so many different ways. But they also have to deal with the fact that they're parents and they're workers. Then, as now, most of my students worked 20, 30, 40 hours a week. And many of them were taking five or six classes. If they took just two or three general studies or stuff like that, they were being required to write odd number of papers a week, read odd numbers of books, if they're taking a photo course or film thing, do studio work, which is very time-consuming. So they responded as people who wanted to do work, but found realities of life were impinging upon how they really were going to be successful students. So that's one of the things we talked about. So that's how they responded, you know, and I think it's true now, too. I find my students tend to really like my classes, and they really like the books, but they're engaged as full human beings, and sometimes they find they can't do the work, and they have to make choices on how they deal with that.

**So you taught these courses for a while, and then-**

I taught those courses for one year, then I went to Rhode Island College as an assistant professor, was asked to leave the institution because of my practicing my cultural and political beliefs, and the student council there decided to fund a position for me out of student funds, and I turned it down, because my wife wished to return to Chicago. She had been a student there, and she was asked to leave, as a student from the college, because of her activities. So professor was asked to leave and student was asked to leave, and Chicago

was her hometown, so... And Mike, as I said, wrote to me, and asked me to return to Columbia College, and I came back.

**So when you came back, you were teaching?**

At that time, the College—I came back, as I said, as an Assistant Dean, I was Assistant Dean for a couple of months, or something like that, and then the Dean left, Bill Wilkes. I was offered the position of Dean, it was the Dean of the entire College. In addition to that, I was chairing four or five departments, and I was teaching two courses a semester. I think I was chairing the Contemporary Studies Department, the Humanities Department, the Science Department, the Journalism Department, the Advertising Department, I was managing our Phys Ed courses, and, I think, something else. And I was young, and I could do that.

*(Laughs)*

And now, with two children, and being an older guy, and my wife, I can't do that. No, but that was Columbia at that point. Everyone was doing multi-tasks, and I was paid \$9,000 to do that. For the grand sum of \$9,000, I had to do that, all that. So that's what I was doing. But the other job I also had, was that Columbia was not an accredited institution, and we were gonna do a self-study, and some folks at the College were very concerned, because they felt that, Columbia being the different institution it was at that point, would not meet the criteria of the accreditation committee. So there were two schools of thought: one school of thought was "Sell yourself," you know, put up an image, create a picture, create something here, and

make the accreditation committee believe our words and the visuals we were putting on for the time of their visitation. There were some of us who felt that, you know, "They're too smart, they're not gonna buy that, and we should be judged by what we are doing, not necessarily how we're doing it." You know, "What is this thing called education?", and there are different routes to "What is this thing called education?" Those of us who were of the second school of thought won the day, at that point, so we took the—we felt that we were going to educate the accrediting committee, you know, so that they could be enhanced in their understanding of "What is this thing called education?" So one of my charges, also, was to assist Mike Alexandroff, the President, to write a self-study and get it together. Which did occur, and we did become accredited.

**Tell me about that process.**  
The accreditation process?

**Yeah. It's a long process.**  
It's a long process?

**Yeah, isn't it?**  
Well, now it's a much longer process than it was then. We were a smaller school, so, obviously, quantity-wise, there was a lot less to do. We kept virtually no records, everything was, like, handwritten or something like that, so there wasn't much documentation. We didn't have all this paper trail that we have now, which is wondrous and a curse. We asked people to write departmental responses to the questions posed by the accreditation committee. We put some accounting report together. Mike and I sat down and got ideas for the self-study, we put some drafts together, and, finally, Mike wrote

the self-study. What we did, though, was that when the accreditation folks came here, really, as I said, our goal was to educate them, and we engaged them in a very informal way. We went out to lunch, we went to dinner, we invited them to some parties. We had formal meetings, too, but the formal meetings tend to be, you know, hard, they tend to be adversarial, they tend to be people trying to prove a point, because you're dealing with an intellect, you're not dealing with a full human being. By socializing, outside of that, we were able to engage them, I think, in a much larger discussion. And by the time they left here, we felt we had changed the way accrediting agencies were going to view institutions. Because not only were we given, you know, approval, although I think there were some conditions, I don't remember what—that we needed more money, I think, yes, we needed more money—but that we opened, I believe, we opened the accreditation agencies, we opened them up, well, North Central, anyway, to viewing education, you know, the prism by which you look at higher education, through an enlarged perspective. And they judged us by what we were doing, and not of we fit in a particular mold. Right now, we seem to have gone to the other end with the accreditation, which is that we're doing our very best to fit into the mold, you know, that's out there. So this process is a rather different process than the one—the two I've experienced before.

**So they took, what, four years for accreditation? '74?**

I think we got accredited the first time in '75 or something. I don't remember when. My memory is—years are not important to me right

now, except my children's birthday, my wife's birthday. I don't know years too well.

**Now, were you involved in—did the College have a mission statement before this?**

It's always had, basically, the same mission statement. It might not have been worded exactly as right now, but the mission statement was created by Alexandroff, in largest part, and we tried to live out that mission, which is basically the ten or—whatever, the eight or ten principles that are there right now. How we live them out is the difference.

Not the goal, but how we go about the working towards the goal is what—I think there are some differences now. But, as probably someone else said, in many ways I think we were "Give is your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Because we really believed that our goal was not just to educate students who went to college, but to change American society and American culture, at least to some degree, do our little part in that. We took in whoever wanted to go to college, and we hoped to have them reach out beyond their cultural limitations, their prior educational limitations, their societal limitations, to see who they were. See what they wanted to do with their lives, and see how their lives would connect with other humans' lives to make this world, you know—and it's a trite phrase, but it's a true phrase—a better place. And then you get into the specifics of the statement there, but, basically, that's where we were. A lot of the people in the early years of the College, and to some degree now, although it's been diluted, were people who were

educators but they were also involved in social or societal change. When I came, it was the '60s and '70s, you know. We were gonna create a new world.

**Who else was here, and who, in particular, do you remember?**

**Among faculty or students.**

Well, I think, as, you know, virtually everyone will say, Mike Alexandroff was there.

**Tell me a little bit more about him.**

Him? He was a... decent, good, gentle, brilliant, caring human being, which he still is. With his faults, he has faults, too, he can be intolerant of certain things and so forth, he has imperfections. But he was a good and decent human, whose view of education was to open up American higher education to Americans. He took care of the students' lives, or he asked the people that were working here to take care of students' lives in their entirety, and he also took care of the people who worked for him. He took an interest in what was going on in people's private lives, and he saw how he could help them out. He was willing to bend rules, regulations, and sometimes come up with money to help people through trying times. He was a person who had a mission, and created that mission in real life, and that's called Columbia College. Along with him, there was and is Bert Gall, and—

**He was a student [here, wasn't he, the first year?]**

No, Bert, I think, might have graduated the year before I came or something like that. When I came here, Bert was already Mike's assistant, but he was Bert-in-training, because he was really learning how to do what he was doing. And he

was learning it in the true Columbia way, by doing it. And there's no question in my mind that, without Bert, there'd be no Columbia College as we know it. Mike had the ideas, and Bert was the person who turned them, in many ways, into reality. Bert, then and now—and Bert is imperfect also, as we all are—Bert worked his tail off, night and day, as most people did, but Bert has continued to make Columbia theory into Columbia reality. There was Hubert Davis—

**Let me go back to Bert Gall for a second.**

Yeah, I'm sorry.

**Can you give me some examples of what kinds of things he did that made Mike Alexandroff's ideas into [reality]?**

Well, Bert and Mike, let's say, one of the chairs, a few chairs, said, "We need a new photo lab." OK, Mike would then say, "Bert, we need a new photo lab, OK? Here's some money, create a new photo lab." "Bert, we've run out of space on the fifth floor. We don't have any space for someone who's going to work in Financial Aid or something like that. Can you reconfigure, can you work on reconfiguring the fifth floor, so we can put more human beings in there?" "Bert, we need another building." "Bert, our elevators are not functioning." "Bert, how are we gonna put a new department in a place where we don't have rooms for departments right now?" And Bert, really, was the person who carried that out. He got it together. Bert works exceptionally well on the practical plane. I mean, that's his greatest strength. With things, and creating reality out of things, and putting it all together and finding the people who are necessary to make that so. And he's very skilled at that. Very,

very skilled at that. So that's what Bert did, and, in largest part, still does, but on a much expanded scale. As I started to say, there was Hubert Davis. Hubert Davis was the then Dean of Students; he also ran the Columbia College Library. He was the kind of student fix-it man; if things were not together with students' lives, Hubert was the person you sent students to. Hubert knew how to get money out of this place and that place, and this is when Columbia was not getting very many governmental funds, and we had a lot of needy students here. Hubert was a caring, decent character; his strength, in many ways, was in human terms. Bert's strength, in many ways, is in thing terms; Hubert was very gifted at human—fixing human things. He was a minister on the side, studying to be a minister on the side. He eventually became a minister and had his own church, a street-front church. He was a blessed soul. Very tolerant, very understanding of the human dimension. Who else was here at that point? Well, there was some people working at the front desk, I'm trying to think who was standing out—Harry Bouras was here, a teacher. Robert Edmonds was here, who chaired the Film Department, John Schultz, who was chairing the English Department then... um, Jim Newberry, who chaired the Photo Department... Al Weisman, who was, I think, in Advertising or something. Al has since died, and Jim Newberry has left the institution. Bill Russo, who chaired the Music Department. There was Barry Burlison, who was chairing the Art Department, he's left the institution. Um... who else was around... Ron Kowalski, who was our—was to become our chief financial officer, the person who,

somehow, got the money thing together. Ron worked for an accounting firm that audited us, and we recruited him from that firm, and he was the money guy. And a character himself, also. There were a lot of very interesting characters.

**Did he teach?**

No, Ron did not teach, no. Well, it depends—I mean, if you define teaching as that which goes on in the classroom, no.

**Yeah.**

But I don't define teaching like that. I define teaching as whenever you are somehow instructing another human being. We're all teachers, all the time. And what we do now is say if it occurs in a classroom, it's teaching, education. If it doesn't, then it's not education, which is a shame. I was gonna mention, like, Robert Edmonds, and Harry Bouras, didn't have a doctorate. You know, most of their education came through working in their areas. Right now, Harry, for example, we wouldn't hire Harry, 'cause he doesn't have a Ph.D. We tend to say, "Unless you fit into a certain mold now, in terms of where you acquire expertise, then you're not gonna teach." We were much more open, you know, in many departments, to who our teachers were then.

**What accounts for that change?**

What accounts for that change? Asses have gotten tighter.

**Do you think it's necessary?**

What accounts for that change? No, I really do think asses—I mean, with all due respect, we have a lot of tight-assed people around now. And you reflect out, in the outer world, what you are all about there. Columbia, once Columbia got accredited, we, to some degree,

became, like, the nouveau riche, you know? Some people did. And they wanted now to be even more accepted. They wanted to become part of that, and you go to—you move in a further direction there. People who were different, there was a sort of a—at least as I view the world, here—there was a minor cleansing of Columbia College, I think in 1982, when people like Jim Newberry, who was a brilliant Photo chairman and a wonderful photographer, but his personal life, how he walked and talked, would not be—fit into a kind of a, more of a corporate image or something. He was asked to leave. Barry Burlison, who chaired the Art Department, and was a character, and lived out his art in his life, too, he was asked to leave there. Later, Ernie Whitworth, who succeeded Barry, and was much more open to what art is, he was asked to leave. Um, Louis Silverstein, who was chairing this department, was asked to leave, you know, as chair of this department. The largest number of part-time faculty in this department were made to feel unwelcome. Even my wife, a wondrous soul, felt that this was no longer a "friendly place" for innovation and being different. So what happened was, I think, different perspectives on education, how you're carrying out, in some ways, were asked to leave the College, or left the College. So we tended to have a more monolithic view of "What is this thing called education?" I mean, go back, to the early accreditation period, where we had this debate within the College. "Do we fit in, or let them view us?" And there was a real, honest debate and discussion. I think that's less likely to occur now, 'cause a lot of those voices are not here, or if they're here, they live in fear. I don't know what the

fear is, so they'll say something, and if they realize this is not going with the winds, they'll shut up. You know, they'll just say, "Oh, no"—I don't know what goes on in their head—well, "I'll lose my"—I don't think they will lose their job. I don't know what goes on in their head. There's less discourse, I think, you know, or less discourse that will make people go to discussions at a deeper level. America changed. Right? America changed.

**America's changed, accrediting—at least the North Central Association has changed, so there are those pressures, and yet—**

No. America's changed to be more tight and reactionary and oppressive.

**OK.**

That's what—I mean, we're talking about the '60s, '70s—without saying that the '60s or '70s were better, we're not making a value judgement, we're different. We're at a different time. We're in a different time. People talk about the Age of Aquarius as being the enlightened age, but there's the downside, the shadow side. The Age of Aquarius is also when individual rights or liberties are seen as less, or made to surrender, to the good of the corporate whole. That's the downside of the Age of Aquarius. I think America's changed, I think we've become more and more successful, and you're fearful of doing things that will risk that success. I mean, it's a fear. And the risk of success is how you're perceived, among other things.

**Let me go back into the accreditation. What was the reason for seeking accreditation in the first place?**

Greenback dollar bills. Money.

**Parents?**

I think, down the line. I mean, we were seeing—I mean, I talked with parents who were somewhat concerned about their students coming to Columbia College, but not really that many. Without being accredited, we were not going to make ourselves available for all kinds of funds that would assist the kinds of students that we have to complete their education. So money was a big issue. We also knew, at some point down the road, that would kill us if we weren't accredited. At some point, we would not just be attracting students who were different, and willing to [act any differently], but we'd have other kinds of students who would be concerned about that. [Licensing], you know, [licensure] and accreditation is the way of the world, I mean, everything. You're examined for everything. We wanted to—I think some people wanted to be accepted by the educational community, and accredited—accreditation says you're accepted by the educational community. But, you know, my take on it is, if money had not been an issue, I don't know if we would have gone for accreditation. We might have waited for some other point.

**Did it have any impact on the students?**

Accreditation?

**Yeah.**

We tended to continue to draw the kinds of students that we had drawn. I didn't see accreditation as making any difference, then. Now, I mean, as we—you know, as more colleges have gotten expensive in terms of tuition, and more affluent folks are considering sending their children to an institution that they otherwise would not have, because

of money. And as we've gotten more students from the suburbs... there were counselors who would not consider Columbia if it were not accredited, because to them, accreditation is synonymous with what is good. So I think it certainly has made a difference in more recent times, in terms of the kinds of students we would get. Certainly suburban students, and maybe students from foreign countries who need to go to an accredited institution.

**Let me go back to your career a little bit.**

Yes.

**You were a dean—**

I was a dean, for five years.

**For five years, until the year...?**

'75, I think. I helped—I was one of the folks who helped get Columbia accredited

**Tell me, what else did you do as a dean in those years?**

Well, I was in charge of all academic affairs. I was in charge of making certain that we were offering what we wanted, or the departments were, I was in charge of making certain schedules were all put together and done and so on and so forth. I was in charge of seeing that teachers were teaching to the level that we wanted them to, but mostly working through department chairs, except for departments that I was chairing. I was in charge of curriculum innovation, curriculum changes. I was in charge of cooperative arrangements with other institutions. At that point we had a cooperative arrangement with Malcolm X, where students who were—we would take students in the, I believe, second year of Malcolm X, who were interested in journalism, they would start taking some courses here at Columbia, and we were hoping

then they could make a smooth shift into a four-year institution, 'cause Malcolm X had a high dropout rate. What else was I doing? I was also taking care of a lot of students, you know, and dealing with faculty concerns, including personal concerns. There was a lot of that going on, we were sort of unofficial counselors there. I was—

**Talk about that a little bit. Do deans do that today?**

Well, I would imagine so. I think deans do that today. [The thing I'm struck by] is that, however, there's much less personal talk today. I find very few conversations with someone who is asking you of a—it occurs to some degree—a sincere interest in what's going on in your family life. You know, it's "Let's get that over with so we can get down to business." And part of it, everyone's compelled to get down to business. I think there was a much more sharing and openness of what was going on in people's individual and family lives, and really realizing at that point, even professors, or vice presidents, could have a hard time raising a teenage child, and that was impinging upon our lives in so many different ways there, and we used to sit down and talk about raising children and raising ourselves and pains that we were having with our wives and husbands, and things like that. And joy and the sorrows of looking at this world and seeing what was going on in the world. Our discussions tended to be—were not just business. Most things now tend to be business. So part of my responsibility was to, I think, to minister to the whole person, in terms of students and faculty, as I was ministered to, you know. That was part of what we did.

**You said you were involved in a curricular innovation. Can you tell me a little bit about that? I thought the chairs took over those things.**

Well, I said I was, for example, chair of four or five departments. We were thinking about what did we want a Liberal Education Department to be at Columbia College? So Mike charged me and, I think, a couple other people to think about what should a Liberal Education Department be at Columbia College, and build it from the bottom up. So we came up with the department called the Department of Life Arts and Liberal Education, and the idea—

**Who was we?**

Who was we? At that point, who was around... I think Mike and I came up with this idea of Life Arts and Liberal Education, although there was a gentleman, who I had mentioned earlier on, who I first met, Jon Wagner, who was one of the theoreticians of Columbia education philosophy back in the '60s. I think his legacy played a part, too, 'cause he was interested in teaching the whole person. So we came up with a department called Life Arts and Liberal Education, and you taught traditional academic subjects, but you also taught to a person's entire life. And that lasted 'til '82, when I said this change occurred, I think, in Columbia, and this department became Liberal Education, no Life Arts. And those folks who espoused that philosophy, in largest part, were no longer here. In terms of the co-operative arrangement with Malcolm X, in terms of curriculum: What kind of curriculum do you have for students who are making a transition, many of whom were even more seriously academically deprived than the students we

had here? So working that out was an example of, I think, curricular innovation.

**So you were doing this work as a dean until '75?**

No, 'til '75, and then I resigned in '75 to chair a new department called Life Arts and Liberal Education, right.

**You were chair of that until '82.**

'82, when Les Van Marter—when I was asked to leave and Les Van Marter was selected as chair. And since that time, I've been teaching full-time in this department, save for a few years when I was also teaching a graduate course in the Education Studies Department. And that's what I continue to do at Columbia College. But I've always taught at Columbia, even when I was dean, I was teaching—as chair, I was teaching two classes.

**And have you been teaching the same things all the way along?**

**What courses have you been teaching?**

"All the way along?" No, I've taught courses in humanities, history, philosophy, social sciences, alternative healing practices and—what else have I taught? My wife and I used to teach a course together called Holistic Philosophies and Traditions. For the last few years, I've been teaching Peace Studies and Education, Culture, and Society. But that changes, as years go by—as I change, as my students change, to some degree, as the world changes.

**How have your students changed?**

**Have they changed since 1968?**

Yeah. They're scared shitless. They're scared that they're—we're all scared, you know, but you go beyond your fear. I think it's nothing to be scared. You know, like fear, everyone's fearful. Well, you accept your fear, and then you move

on. I think the students are scared shitless, in largest part, at least the ones I've seen, are scared of not being able to get a job. They're scared of not fitting in, they're scared if they're different, they'll be hurt in some way. They're scared of doing anything about their society, because they think if they do anything, there'll be repercussions. They're scared to believe you can do anything, because if you believe you can do anything, then you have an internal compulsion to try to do something. I think there was less fear then, back in the '60s, even though you walked out on the street and saw policemen ready to beat the shit out of you. There was a government in power at that time that found students to be the enemy. I think there was a more realistic reason to be fearful then. People lost their jobs, I know lots of people who lost their jobs. I know very few people at Columbia who have lost their jobs.

Students still have dreams and aspirations, and they're still wondrous. I think that—they're clearly working somewhat more, as the cost of living has gone up. Now I have students who are working not just one job, but who are working two or three jobs and going to school full-time. So I think they're very tired. We have, obviously, a larger number of students. When I started here, there were 400 students, now there are 9,000 students. We have a lot more students with academic deficiencies. I don't think percentages have changed, but I think the number students have increased. I think we have a lot more younger students than we ever did before. We've always had young students, but now we have a lot more of them. So that's how they've changed

**Some people have said that Columbia attracted free spirits, that wouldn't want to go to other colleges.**

I think Columbia—yeah, I think Columbia still has a reputation of being a different place. We're working very hard to change that, I think, internally, but I think Columbia does attract folks who are—two kinds of folks. One, who's a free spirit, or wishes to be a free spirit, and find this is the place to go. We attract students who would have a difficult time going into any other institution, but there are other institutions than Columbia to go to, and there's something about Columbia, I think, that attracts them to. I think the greatest change I've seen, in terms of this free spirit thing, is attracting less and less faculty and administrators who are free spirits. And that, I think, has had a profound effect on the College. That's changed, I think, much more so than students. Everyone's giving their perspective, their reality, this is my take on reality. I think that's changed dramatically.

**You talked a bit about the impact of the College on the North Central Association. Has it had an impact on higher education other than that?**

Has it had an impact on higher education? Who knows. I think more and more institutions are moving to what we were at one point. But whether that was because Columbia set an example, I don't know. I really have no idea. I think we dreamt of having an effect, I think the dream is, in terms of other institutions, somewhat shattered now, as we have all these attacks and cutbacks in terms of education. I certainly think that we have human beings all over this world who have been planted with

some seeds that they picked up at Columbia, that can germinate if they choose to allow them to germinate. So I think we have lots of seeds that have been implanted. Whether those seeds will sprout or not, I don't know. We certainly helped to diversify the workplace. I think that the visual appearance, at least, of the workplace has changed. Whether the values have changed is something else, but, certainly visually, you have people in front of the camera and in back of the camera who would not be in that place, in some way, if they hadn't gone through Columbia College. So they have an opportunity to change. I don't know if they're doing very much to change things, though.

**How would you describe the mission of the College in relation to the arts and media?**

In relation to the arts and media... you have to breathe to live, OK, you have to do arts to live, you know. And I think each human being has a part of them which is artistic, without getting into a definition, and they need to do their art to live. I certainly see that with my two children. So allowing students, even students who are not going to become, you know, artists, or didn't become artists, I think for some of the time they spent here, they were allowed to breathe in ways they couldn't breathe before. The idea that the arts is for literally everyone, not just for an elite few, in terms of those who make the art and those who are audiences to the art, I think we've had an effect on that directly, at least in the Chicago area. At one point, we saw ourselves as being an alternative arts institution, and that's a whole other story. Right now, I think we're an arts institution that accepts students that's not really that different than other institutions who are doing art. We were

questioning "What is this thing called art?" Now, we tend to just go in step. We might do it well, we might open it up to students, but we go in step with the larger society. Which you have to do, at some point, but I don't think that we, you know... I think it's—someone probably mentioned, if I go back to the Art Department, I remember when we took on Ernie Whitworth to chair the Art Department, his strength was in what we call folk art, or people's art. Now you also have to make a living, but he felt there were ways to do that, and that was in relation to art and people, which was radically different from what we do now, because when the next chair came in, all that was thrown out, and we went into, basically, a different kind of art, a very different kind of art. Professional art, primarily, which should be available to students, but art is more than that.

**Has your personal vision of education changed over the years?**

Um, before I came to Columbia, I taught high school, which is unusual for many college professors, and I learned to grow, as a teacher, tremendously, and what it takes to teach. I was just skilled—I had a Ph.D.—or no, I didn't have a Ph.D. when I taught high school, but I know during my Ph.D. journey, I learned nothing about teaching, except as a TA. So my view of education was changed profoundly because I was a high school teacher, but, in addition to that, I co-directed an alternative school in Harlem, New York, called the New Lincoln Freedom School, in part of the '60s, which was for students in the Harlem Public Schools who were having a very difficult time with school, either for academic

deficiencies, financial reasons, or because they acted out in ways that were not acceptable to a school, so we created a different kind of school.

OK, a group of teachers, social workers, community activists, got together in Harlem after a party or something, I don't remember what, and we were a very interesting group of people, and we decided to create a school. We put together the philosophy of the school in terms of curriculum, what we would be doing, how we would approach students in the community, we made an application to [HaryouAct], which was one of the anti-poverty agencies at that point, they funded us. I became co-director of the school. So prior to coming to Columbia, I had had experience, because of the high school teaching and this, which shaped my education belief system to such a degree that Columbia really didn't impact upon it very differently.

As a young child, there were virtually no books in my house. My mother was a second grade—dropped out of the second grade in Poland—was forced out in Poland, she was Jewish, and my father dropped out of school because his father died. We were a non-literate family, except for the books on the Mafia and the Daily Enquirer, but for some reason, at the age of 12, Bertrand Russell came into my life. I don't know how, I don't know where, but I became enamored of Bertrand Russell, I read him, I corresponded with him, he answered, he wrote back to me, I mean, here's a little kid from Brooklyn, you know, and his view of the world impacted on me profoundly. His philosophical premises in terms of what life is

about, and what education is about, and what we should be all about... I saw that that could be effectuated by Columbia College. So I think I came to Columbia, in many ways, shaped. So I don't feel that my views have changed dramatically by virtue of my experience at Columbia, my educational views, anyway.

**Are you cynical?**  
Cynical?

**(Laughs) About education.**

I think we're in a real, kind of, bleak cycle right now. You have a society that is hurting a lot, and we don't seem that committed to doing something about that hurt. I think that we have a crisis of belief, in terms of what we humans can be. We have, I think, a kind of more narrow perspective at Columbia, we have a lot of tight-assed people at Columbia. I don't see, right now, Columbia flourishing that much as an alternative institution. You gotta be practical, but also alternative. I'm not cynical. I've been teaching for 36 years, happily, but life goes on. Right? Life goes on.

**Can you tell us about other important events? You've been through an awful lot of important events already—are there other important events?**

Yes, of course. Among the most important events were the fact that at one point, Columbia had a series of bars on Lincoln Avenue that were known as the Columbia hang-out spots. You know, along Lincoln Avenue where John Barleycorn is? There were a lot of blues bars—and we had two or three bars that were just Columbia's, where faculty, students, staff, administrators, everyone went, to engage each other as full human beings. And I think that played a profound role

in what went on in the institution. You gotta do that human stuff, you gotta interact in different ways. That was on a regular, ongoing basis. I think as we've lost—you know, and I'm not talking about bars or saloons as places—oh, we'd party and stuff like that, and people went to excess, although at times, excess is very good—but it was a place to meet and sit and chat and have... Right now I see people here once or twice a year from other departments. We don't do that now. We have these parties, and you go to a party and you listen to people talk, you have a few drinks and you sit down, and you play by rules and roles and stuff like that, and there's very little interaction. And there isn't a really diverse community at the College, I mean, at the parties, they're very small and they're very formal. We had great parties. We had great dances, you know, everyone used to dance with each other, and I think that—I see in my own family, when my family's having a rough time, we go into our den, my wife and I and our two children, and we dance. We relate as physical beings and we get all that shit out through physical activity. And right now, we're mostly heads here, and people get angry here, and they come in with stuff from home, and rather than, sort of, get it out, they work it out in meetings, so people are using their wit, their intelligence, as rapiers to really get to other people, and you never really work things out too well, because if you work things out well, you can't then get rid of your anger. So I think that all the physical thing is very healthy, so we had lots of great parties, lots of great dances, there was a lot more intermingling with the whole College. Right now it tends to be—except for an occasional—it

tends to be very stratified. So I think those are very important things, and that's gone by the wayside.

**Was that because everybody was in one building, or because the College was smaller, or because there were these places you went to?**

Um... why is it different? I think that, to some degree, the College has gotten older, and we older folk—I don't dance as much as I used to—we older folk tend to retreat more into our more private lives as opposed to our public lives, and I think that's part of it. I think those—the energy, that kind of energy, I think, in many ways, has left the College. The people I mentioned before had that kind of energy, and that kind left. I don't think there's that kind of energy, to some degree. I mean, there are parties here, but nothing like before. I think—no, I don't accept bigness. You create events within bigness. I think [people] say, "Well, we're big, therefore..." What does "big" mean? Well, big—big. Let me go into my consciousness, what do I associate "big" with? "Big" means this, this, this and that. Well, that's bullshit. Big is a reality, but how you relate to that reality is a reflection of what your inner belief system is. I think that's not a high priority right now. I think we're very business oriented, we're very formal, where you have—people are talking about committees, most committees here are bullshit, you know, it doesn't change very much. I think committee time could be used for people coming in and talking about what are they working on, in terms of their profession or art form or what they're doing. Most committee meetings are about rules and regulations, and people get tired. Who

wants to sit with other people and talk about rules and regulations all the time? Is part of that necessary? Yes, part of it's necessary, but part of it is not necessary, you know. Why has it changed? I don't know.

**Do you think physical space had anything to do with that?**

Changing physical space. We're bigger, we see people less. But that doesn't mean—even when we were smaller, someone had to take the initiative to get something together that's different than what we usually do, and less of that initiative is taken. We see people less, but at the same time, while you see people less—when I was first in this department, there was me. Then we had two people. Now we have 10 or 11. Even 10 is a lot of people. But there really isn't very much going on, relating in different ways. In this building we have four departments, five departments, a lot of people. We're getting towards the end, I think, so is there something you want us to get to of extreme importance?

**Um, are there other big changes or other big events that you [can think of]?**

Oh, the big changes are the big events at Columbia College. Yeah. Yeah. Hubert Davis died. Jane Alexandroff died. Thaine Lyman, who founded the TV Department, died. Al Weisman, who was in public relations, died. Robert Edmonds died. Harry Bouras died. Hans Adler died. Louis Vaczek died. Newberry, Burlison, Wagner, Phyllis Bramson (Art), Jack and Lynn Hagman (Art), Ernie Sukowski (Science)... These are big changes. John Schultz is professor emeritus. John has some—like we all do, we have personal stuff, but John is brilliant. I mean, he might have some trouble with human beings at times, but John is bril-

liant. Shirley Mordine is on her way out. Bill Russo's music is everywhere, but his influence within the College has diminished. John Mulvany is retiring. And, of course, Mike Alexandroff is gone. I think a generation has passed, literally passed, sort of passed away, I think that has had a profound effect on the College. Any other major things that I know of? Events?

**Institutional changes.**

Well, institutional changes... we're more bureaucratic and there are more rules and regulations.

**Who are some of the notable people from the 1980s? Nobody talks much about the 1980s. 1980s?**

**Or '90s, this is the '90s, the end of the '90s.**

Who are some notable people at Columbia College?

**Yeah.**

In the 1990s. Well, Bert is still—he's grown—like I grew up at the College, came here as a young man, Bert came here as an even younger man, he's still with the College, he's still, in many ways, makes the College go. I mean, he's out there, you know, no question about it. Certainly, Ed Morris, who's taken the Television Department, and built on what Thaine Lyman did, and moved it into different directions. I think Zafra Lerman is a brilliant soul, can be very difficult on the human level, but she's doing wonderful stuff in terms of inner city science education.

**When did she come here?**

I hired Zafra in the '70s, and then after a few years, she formed her own department. So Zafra is still here. Who else? Who else comes to my mind? Those two folks stand

out for some reason. Oh, me. Me. I come to my mind.

*(Laughs)*

I still have a profound effect on human lives, I have a profound effect on students' lives.

**One more thing. Who else have you hired?**

Of course, hundreds of part-time people. I hired Bill Hayashi, Glen Graham, Zafra Lerman, Ernie Whitworth, John Mulvany. I approved the hiring—as Dean, all faculty appointments required my approval—of Tony Loeb as Chair of the Film Department, Charles Traub as Chairman of the Photography Department, Michael Rabiger as Film faculty. I hired or approved the hiring of Jane Ganet-Sigel to teach Dance Movement Therapy, I hired Sonja Gilkej to teach Art Therapy—she's no longer here. I also hired someone—but I don't remember whom—to teach Music Therapy. Both Art and Music Therapy are no longer taught at Columbia. There are others, but I don't remember.

Allow me now to comment on people and matters that perhaps have not been touched upon in the interviews with other Columbia folk. There was Joel Lippman, a poet, and I'd say he practiced engaged poetry, which meant that poetry was there to express and liberate the human soul, and also was to free and elevate the human community. Joel wanted this world to be a better place, and words were one way to make this world, fashion this world, into a more just habitat for the human species. There was Hans Adler, a refugee from Europe. Hans was so knowledgeable. A sweet man, a very decent man. He taught German literature, Scandinavian literature,

French literature. He could teach so many genres in literature. Students loved him. They respected his intelligence, his love for the subject, and his care for them. There was Ernie Sukowski, who taught science. Ernie made science alive for our students. Science was not something that belonged in a lab; science, to Ernie, was something that was part of human life. Our students needed to understand science so that they could act intelligently in a scientific and technological society. There was Louie Vaczek, who also taught science. Louie was such a handsome man, and he brought to science a love of learning, a care for the human race, for creation, really. A fine man. A very decent man. There was Phyllis Bramson, who taught painting. She was so human, very delightful. She was able to help students reach into their well of creativity in a disciplined manner and trust what was there. There was Lynn and Jack Hagman, our husband and wife team that also taught in the Art Department. Lynn taught jewelry and other crafts, and Jack taught sculpture and ceramics. They loved their students. I mean, that's one of the things that is so fine about some of the faculty, you know. They really loved our students. They really cared about our students. They cared about the subject matter and the art form, but they also cared so deeply about our students. And our students needed to be cared deeply about. That gave them a safe place, a good place to explore who they were, to explore their creativity, to explore the depths of their intelligence.

And then there were the trips, where we took students out into the world. Jim Newberry, chair of the Photo Department, took a group of students down to Mexico for one whole semester, traveling

throughout Mexico, photographing. Interacting with people and the land. Students found it to be a wondrous experience. Barry Burlison, Art Department chair, took students to the Aspen Design Conference. Victor Banks, who was with the Field Museum, brought our students to Quatico National Forest, and he brought our students to the Everglades. They lived there, they wrote, they videotaped, they photographed. The subject matter was so alive for them. So very alive for them. They were doing multi-disciplinary work, interdisciplinary work. I mean, we talk about that now at Columbia as if that's something new. We did so much of that in the years before we had these rigid minds that require academic gobbledygook justification to do something across disciplinary lines, to make a learning community. If you could get the money, we'd do it. That's true now too, if we get the money, we do it. But now you have to go through this administrative hurdle, that administrative hurdle, it's so formal. The process sometimes kills the joy of the actual classroom experience.

Now students go on trips, you know, they go on trips to England and New York, and these trips are all well and good, but are so tight and organized and detailed, minute detail, and everything takes place within the known. Students are not exploring so much, and going into new territory. Learning by doing. Now it's learning by what is already known. That's important, but we have to go beyond that. Students were co-creators on previous trips. Now they're sheep, cattle, being led to the trough to be fed

Do I sound a little, I don't know, nostalgic or bitter? I don't mean to. That's not where I'm coming from.

I just feel that right now, Columbia is kind of a microcosm of the larger world, and there's much of the larger world right now that absolutely sucks. It just sucks. People playing it safe, people just buying things, you know. Multi-cultural education, so we can make new customers to consume products. Understand other cultures so you can sell to them. Poor people seen as the enemy. Jails, you know, low-cost housing of the '80s and '90s and the new millennium. What's going on? Like Marvin Gaye would say, what's going on? To those of us who were part of the early Columbia dream, what's going on outside and what's going on inside is a question. I mean, can Columbia fashion a way for higher education to go beyond the technological and the corporation milieu, the materialistic worldview? Let's fit them into what exists: an education that seems to be pervasive throughout America lately. I don't know. I still do my thing, you know. I'm doing the best I can. Perhaps I could do better, but right now, I'm doing the best I can. Working with my students intensely, to allow that part of themselves which is their essence to be manifested in their everyday existence. For them to... fashion their culture as well as to buy into their culture. To believe in a dream, the Martin Luther King "I have a dream" kind of stuff, and not the dream of more-more-more.

I'd like to see a return to the conception that Mike and I fashioned some years ago in the realm of a liberal education. Liberal education needs to include the life arts, the arts of living, in terms of one's relation to oneself, and one's relation to one's family, one's relation to those one works with, one's relation to one's community, one's relation to beauty, one's relation to

pain and suffering, one's relation to justice, one's relation to birth and dying and death, one's relation to sex and loving, one's relation to the cosmos.

**What's kept you teaching for all these years?**

What's kept me teaching for all these years? Well, I love what I do. I teach, students learn. Students teach, I learn. It's kept me alive, and I feel I'm continually creating understandings of the universe, how we humans need to live to realize a higher self on this earthly plane of ours. How to make and take in the beauty and justice—though there's a lot more beauty than justice on this planet. So I love what I do.

**Any last thoughts?**

Make love, not war.