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Interview with Ernie Whitworth, 1998

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Ernie Whitworth

All right. It is January the 8th, 1999, and this is an interview with Ernie Whitworth, the former Chairperson of the Fine Arts Department here at Columbia College.

And, Ernie, we're going to start with the question: If you could tell us what were the circumstances that brought you to Columbia, and when that was?

Well, in '74, I was—well, '72, '73, '74, I was at the Art Institute teaching, and I had heard that—well, of course I knew lots of interesting things about Columbia College, but I had heard that there was a position open. At that time, Columbia College was on Lake Shore Drive, in a very small—well, we were in the building on the corner of Ohio and Lake Shore, very windy. And Barry Burlison was the chair at the time, and everything was pretty much photography at that time, and Barry said, "Well, there's a position open, they want to move, next year, to a building they're buying on Michigan Avenue, 600 South, and they need someone to coordinate and try to see if we can get some more arts and crafts, fine arts, etcetera, together." Well, my feeling was, not be in competition with the Art Institute, where I was teaching at the time. So I went for an interview, and met Louis Silverstein, who was Dean at that time, and that was a real interesting first meeting. And then I suggested, for the interview, that maybe I brought some of my students from the Art Institute, and if they were really interested in hiring me, that they could maybe interview my students, or I could give a lecture, or a demonstration, or something,

and that led to the first meeting for the interview. So, why don't you ask me something now.

OK. And you said that—what did you know of, or hear about Columbia before you came? You said that you had known of it, but what impressions did you have of the institution before you arrived?

Uh, interesting, because it was probably graphic arts oriented with a—starting to get well-known in photography. They had a small photo studio, which led later to the big one that Charlie Traub put together on—and a number of other people—on Michigan Avenue. But it had a... it had... it was known for photography, it was known for a lot of experimental kind of ideas. A few years before that, I had been at Goddard in Vermont, and then at St. Mary of the Woods College in Indiana, and I was really looking for a place to work that had some... what we used to call experimental, media, experimental arts that maybe had dance and theater and music concerns as well as, you know, your basic art classes.

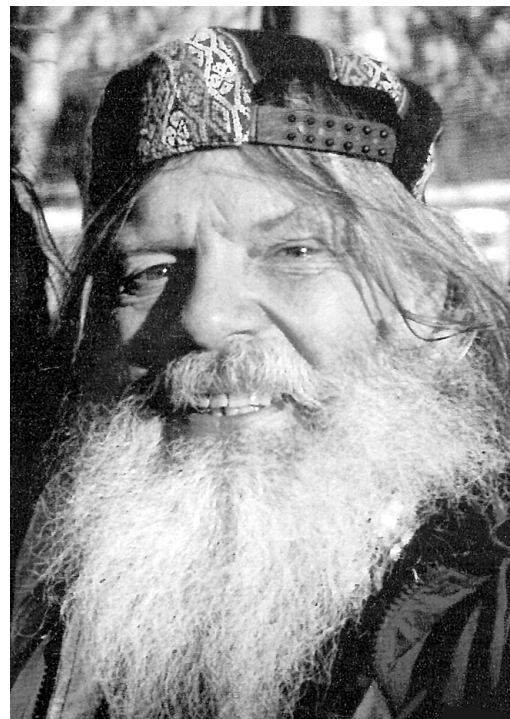
And that, you were hoping that that's what you would bring to Columbia, or have the opportunity to do?

That's—I think that's what we did, what was exciting was that it was—or, in my interpretation, it was sort of a carte blanche kind of idea that, if I got the position. So I got terribly interested for the first big meeting with Dr. Myron Alexandroff, which I thought was a great name, and we later learned to call him Mike. And Harry Bouras, who was an art history person. The

first interview was real interesting, and it sounded like, if I got the job, that we would have a possibility of really turning things around. And that was real exciting.

What do you remember of those first meetings with Louis and then with Alexandroff and Bouras? Because you're saying they were very interesting. What impression did you get of those people?

Well, I thought they were fantastic, and probably somewhere on file in New York are some letters. My sister was at the Whitney at the time, and I wrote her letters about how neat these people were, and I can remember her saying "Well, be sure to say it's Columbia Chicago, not Columbia New York," because I think she was applying for a position at Columbia New York at the time. Anyway, people, I don't think, had heard that much in the late '60s, early '70s, about Columbia. And I know that—well, Louis was just like the most fantas-



tic dean kind of person that I had met, and...

In what way?

Oh, he was just really interested in new ideas and new things, and I think Dr. Alexandroff was sort of a stoic figure who was... maybe he was smoking a pipe, I don't remember, but he was like, you know, just overseeing the interview. And I was, of course, extremely nervous, because, you know, it was like "Wow, this is a great opportunity," you know. So... I went prepared, and suggested that maybe they came and interviewed my students at the Art Institute, instead of me, as far as a teacher. They were looking for an administrator, but they were also looking—and I think that I explained that I did have some weaknesses in administration. I hadn't done much with that, but that I was terribly interested as a teacher, and that one thing would fall together after another, and so, then, why didn't they talk to some of my students. And I can remember that real clearly.

And did they do that?

Yeah. I don't think that Mike came down for the lecture demonstration, but I brought some of my students from the Art Institute over to Lake Shore Drive, gave a talk to the people which—and a demonstration of—one of my expertises is pewter casting, small objects, but it's sort of like a show and tell about education and things. So after that, then, I left the room and Louis talked to my students and... I guess I got a good recommendation from the students.

So what were those first days like, and what was your first position, if you could describe it? I wonder what you've heard about Lake Shore Drive, 'cause it was

completely different. It... the building was—all kinds of things were going on in the building, besides Columbia College. I think Ray Vogue Studio of Design and those folks, and there were people—oh, you know, models and photographing and things going on, and so the traffic going through the building was more than just Columbia College. And you could feel that they really wanted their own building. And even then, I don't know that the purchase of the building was solidified when I was first hired. I think it was in the air, but then when we got the—when it was finalized, that 600 South Michigan was actually purchased and that it would go through, that was like, you know, terribly exciting, right.

Mm-hmm.

That, wow, now we have to figure out how to expand and get—but it looked really like graphics could—the graphics department could really explode into fine arts and other things. It looked like photo was gonna pretty much be photo, and there would be a separation between the two. This is just, you know, my feeling at the time.

Right.

You know, which I wasn't sure, as chairperson of the arts, if they were supposed to separate, be together, you know, I was pretty sure that photography is an incredible art form, but you still always, even back then, photographers were questioning "What's art?", right?

Right.

Same thing with crafts, you know, and should we have crafts, should we—I think my major impetus when I first had the interviews was "Let's not compete with other insti-

tutions." In fact, that was one of my major thrusts, and I later, when I talked to Roosevelt and had meetings with the Art Institute in Chicago, and from what I've heard lately, these kind of things aren't going on, that things aren't connected. But I was—since I had friends in administrative positions in various schools, I was trying to figure out what we should do that wasn't duplicating what they were doing, right?

Mm-hmm.

I mean, there's no sense—if we're going to deal with commuter students and part-time and we're gonna try to—knowing that our faculty is coming from a part-time position, which is always a real difficult thing as administrator, that, you know, hiring someone and justifying—you know, I was trying to get Ed Paschke to teach, which I did, but- and some other well-known artists, and you say, "Look, we can't pay you much, but I got this great idea, if you would just do one class, right?" So, most of these people ended up gravitating to different institutions later. But I think what I was really interested in was not duplicating things, right?

So what, if you could describe further, what direction—in order not to duplicate, but what direction you wanted to take Columbia or your department? What types of innovations or things?

That's a good question. I had lots of ideas, until I met the students. And then—let's take this for an example. No one in the United States—of course, I didn't know it—was doing science fiction illustration. I was tending more towards fine arts, and I met a couple of students that said, "Wow, you know, you've got this airbrush course. Why don't

you do a science fiction, or a cartoon”—they hadn’t done a cartooning class either, before then. And so I started—you know, I tended to hang out with the students and talk to the students, and I started to see... let’s not just call it student’s needs, but what students were interested in, if we had a course in such and such, right? So then, I started writing these things down, and calling different people, you know? And when we finally did get the course in science fiction illustration, I got a wonderful letter from the Science Fiction Institute of America, or somewhere, and they said, “Absolutely no college, anywhere, has ever put a course in like this, and we really thank you for doing it.” About the same time, John in English was—they had a person come in and do just a plain science fiction course. And so a number of things were starting to happen, right, that were... hmm. See, usually Louis can jog my mind on this. You have to do it, too. What’s another good example of some of the things—

That Columbia was doing differently?

So we did a thing called Comics, and we even printed some comics, I don’t know if they’re still doing that. And... that’s the kind of thing that... now I’m—boy, I’m jogging my mind.

That’s all right. And we can come back to it, if something comes up. But I’m curious: You didn’t want to duplicate what others were doing. But did you find, with—

That you have to, to a certain extent.

Or did you find, with your innovations, that others were copying you?

Oh, that happened too, but I knew enough people, I was able to get on the phone and call a couple of people, like “What are you guys doing?” and this and that, and—at that time, when I first was hired, though, we had—Ray Vogue, there were a number of schools that were dealing with fashion and design, and it didn’t look to me like that should be the direction of Columbia. Columbia had a couple of opportunities, depending on funding, right, which direction they could go, you know. We also were always aware of someone giving funding for X endeavors, right? Which we did at the Art Institute all the time. Someone would, you know, donate \$15,000, but it was earmarked for jewelry and nothing else. So... uh... hmm. OK, ask me another question, because I’m trying in that direction.

OK. How would you describe the mission of Columbia College in relation to society or higher education—
Mm-hmm.

And then maybe if it was different, or if you could add to it, you know, for your own department.
Mm-hmm.

Or personally, you know. But what was the mission of the institution while you were here?

Well, remember Northwestern Accreditation, that was a big thing, and so when—

North Central.

I’m flashing over to the move to 600 South, we knew we—well, the accreditation thing had started. In order to get that, it was—pretty much we were aware that it would

change things, right? I don’t know how much you know about the history of that, but—

Well, it was in ‘74, correct?

Right. And it was a big, big thing. The entire school was—that’s all anybody was talking about.

OK. Could you maybe spend some time with that?

What courses do we have, how do we lay out—I think what Mike was—I don’t know how you call your core things now, but I remember writing a core program, and this and that, was a big thing. Uh, I don’t know what Louis would say, but it would have to be the big changing thing. The accreditation would have to, obviously, be the big changing thing in the history of Columbia College then, right?

OK.

Because in order to be accredited is one thing, but when you imagine what accreditation is, and you’re trying to write programs for it, uh... I don’t know, I see something there as a big changing period, right?

In what way? I mean...

Well, all of a sudden, you’ve gotta please—this is not just Columbia unique. Goddard in Vermont was going through it, experimental colleges like Franconia in New Hampshire were having problems... When all of a sudden, for funding, and for accreditation, which your students need in order to go on to grad school or whatever, this drastically changes the kinds of courses that you can offer. Right?

Right.

I think that—the one I’m doing—I’m working now through—nothing is called experimental anymore, but like continuing education in

various schools these days is able to put in different programs. Continuing Studies at the Art Institute, where I'm doing some things now, they're able to do things again like take a bunch of students to Ireland, you know, or find out what's going on in Belize, or... Of course, they have more money, funding, whatever, but I still think that everything changed for Columbia back with that accreditation thing, not because of the accreditation, but because of the mindset of the folks that had to deal with accreditation, right?

Do you mean that people were more concerned with what people outside the institution thought of it, or...?

I think things were happening within the institution. Also, that maybe the way you dress, the way you act, the way—I mean, a number of things were changing, you know. But I'm not knocking that as far as Columbia, I'm saying this was going on all over the place. Most of the experimental programs that were going on, or the underground colleges, if we want to call them that, from the late '60s, were sort of being forced to change because of funding and because of, you know, money.

Well, did that force you to change your direction, or did that squelch your desire to move into the experimental arts?

I wasn't aware of it until later, when I politely left. So, no. I think the people that—you know, you have no choice except to do whatever, the best you can do, right?

Mm-hmm.

I feel like I politely got out of there when I was up against a wall, in that there really wasn't anything more I could do. Except, you

know... I don't know what Charlie Traub said, but I mean, he was—both of us were sort of at this—he needed to go on to his things, which were, you know, getting a great job in New York City. Mine was to, like, go hide out in the woods and make art, 'cause I hadn't been able to do that. But... and this is nothing against the administration or anything at Columbia, just—it seemed like we did all that we could do in the three years of transition from Lake Shore to 600 South Michigan, and then—or that's the way I felt. And then...

What year—now, you said Art Institute '72 through '74— I would have left Columbia in '78, I guess.

And so were you here—when did you come? '74.

Oh, so the year of the accreditation.
That's what—yeah, that's—well, I was hired in for the accreditation, right.

OK.
Or the year before... was I... late '73, whatever.

OK.
It should be on record.

And let's return to this idea of the mission... Do you think that the mission changed with accreditation?
Not really, but I think that there was just this internal change.

OK.
But not only that, don't forget that we're suddenly moving to this large building. So it's not fair to just put things on the accreditation thing, although that was part of it. But all of a sudden, a new building, lots of classrooms, we can hire lots of

people, right? And everybody would love to teach college, so we suddenly had all these applicants, tremendous amount of part-time applicants, and it looked like that was a really good way to go. But I always had problems with that, because, you know, we were really functioning with no full-time people when I was there. Right?

Mm-hmm.

And I do feel like I had to apologize to a couple of people for paying them what I—you know, we paid extremely low salaries to part-time people, right? That was an issue. Or it was an issue with my leaving. I mean, I couldn't justify... right?

Yeah.

So... we couldn't create full-time positions at that time, and I did get a couple of three-quarter time positions, which helped, and of course benefits were, you know, nonexistent. So we had people that really wanted to teach, but also had families, or had careers, or were artists, you know, so we were able to get, though, quite a good many professionals that would like to teach, right? Now we're getting serious.

Yeah. And I don't want to ignore those points and look at the circumstances under which you left, but I'm trying, I guess, to get you to come back to the mission. Like, who, if you think about the students, who was Columbia serving at that time? You know, what... do you understand what I'm...?

Of course. Which is why I was there. In fact, the... yeah, Louis, I said, "In order to"—you probably didn't see it, but when I marched with Martin Luther King in Selma, Alabama, I sent Louis a tape about

a month ago, I was on public television talking about the '60s. Louis sent it back, I guess you haven't seen it.

No.

But the other thing, I had come out of, like, Newark, New Jersey, working with Leroi Jones, I had marched with Martin Luther King, I had been involved with all this stuff, and Columbia looked like this also fantastic place to work, because we had minority people. And I was terribly interested in working with minority groups, 'cause that's what I had been doing, right?

OK.

So... that's a real good question. And we were really trying to bring in those kind of people, which was the absolute opposite of the Art Institute students, you know.

Right.

Although the Art Institute students were great, because they really were supposed to be—this is a good question—because they were supposed to be excited about art. Which I feel they are now, but when I was there, when I came to Columbia, I found these students that were really excited about art. And they were coming from minority situations, right, and I was—which I'm still doing, is trying to do things for the general, everyday person, you know?

Right.

Finally, the Art Institute is letting me do this video and this book on, you know, art for the people, or how you do it in your kitchen, you know, make art in your kitchen. But then, they weren't... it was more of a high art form, and Columbia was a lower art form, and

that was terribly exciting to me, you know. Right?

Right.

But that was also before we even discovered that... oh, you know, there's so much that's happened in folk art and other things since the '60s and early '70s that, you know, the awareness has changed, right?

Right.

But that was a good question. But that's what—really, that was the other exciting—I was really excited. I came out of this—you know, I was doing—well, in New Jersey, Leroi Jones was doing the poetry, another activist guy was doing pottery, I was doing sculpture, and we had all these people that were trying to get the kids in the ghetto in Newark to, you know, make art or do a hands-on thing, and it... it wasn't therapeutic, it turned out that way, but it kept them off the streets. So... anyway. Wow, that was a good question.

And did your—if that's how you saw the mission, as kind of reaching out to groups that— Definitely.

—higher education had kind of just—

They had nowhere else to go.

Yeah. Did you come with a philosophy of education, or did Columbia help change or formulate that, or solidify that?

Columbia definitely did, but it was really the students. You know, I go back to that—all my learning experience and everything that happened at Columbia was really through the students, and a few key people like Louis and other people that really were genuinely interested in education, or that was, you know, my feeling. At that time, these people really were... interested

So give some examples about what you learned about education from your students.

Hmm.

Or from your peers, if you can think—'cause if you can think of one, you'll probably think of, you know, a number of them.

I don't know, just strange things that happened, like through interaction. You know, one of the students that wanted comics. You know, she wanted to draw like "Brenda Starr." So what I did was, I got on the phone and I found out that her name is Dale [Meesics], she's been doing "Brenda Starr," she's like an 80 year old redhead, dyed red hair, who draws the comic strip. So I got her and brought her to Columbia.

Really?

The students went totally bananas, I mean, you know, my small world of comics students, as did the teacher who was teaching comics. And I just called, you know, the publisher, and I said, "This is Ernie at Columbia," I could never have done that from a private phone, and I said, "I'm trying to get a hold of the woman that draws 'Brenda Starr', my students want to meet her, you know." I didn't even know her name was Dale [Meesics], right. Fantastic experience. I picked her up in a taxicab, we brought her to Columbia, she did her talk, and she was probably 75 or 74 then. With flaming dyed red hair. And then, you know, just... that kind of thing happened all the time. When I was trying to check out something that the students gave me a hint about doing, but since I had access to get on the phone, call somebody, and figure out "Can we get this person to come talk?" You know, it was... I don't know. Ed Paschke came and

taught for two semesters, and he didn't even think he wanted to teach at Columbia, or even go there. Now he's at the Art Institute and he's famous and he's at Northwestern, but I just said, "Hey, is it possible to come? Some of these guys really like your work. And they'd like to—you know, can you do"—he seemed reluctant, but he did it. I got him, like, I don't know, 10 bucks an hour more than anybody else, or something. But it was like—for the students, it was really important. And then the feedback that came from the students helped develop the direction that I thought the program should go. Does that make sense?

Mm-hmm. As opposed to being pre-determined and telling them what—

Well, because you don't know, you can't predict. It's the same way with students now, it probably always—if you listen to the students' needs, or if you had a person out there, you had a position for a person that was free enough to go around and meet and talk with people and see what—because you can tell the people that are just goofin' from the people that, you know...

Yeah.
So...

So this idea of your personal vision of education, what do you think it should achieve? I mean, what is its purpose related to, you know, your experience—not just at Columbia, but as an educator and a teacher.

Hmm. OK. How do we write down my personal vision, which has been crammed over the years? All of things that every educator says, but what happens is that you

can't pull off all the things that you envision, right?

Uh-huh.

Because there's still politics that happen, in all of these places, right? Sometimes the politics get so big that you can't really implement what you propose, and then that gets terribly frustrating.

And you mentioned the accreditation. You also mentioned—
But I don't see that as so negative. That was also a challenge.

Right.

I'm just saying in the history of Columbia, that was important, as pulling it out of what we called the underground colleges, which also all disappeared all over the place about the same time Columbia did. So it wasn't—Columbia was not unique in selling out.

I like that image of no longer an underground college.

Yeah. But it wasn't unique, to clarify that, in selling out, because it was the politics of the time. Use that as a quote. Because—or that was my, you know, feeling, right? And then it alienated us again, because the folks, especially, say, the poor black guys from the South Side that I was trying to deal with, that happened all over the place. Another unrest occurs is "Wow, you're not dealing with my needs, either," and then suddenly I was in a position of... you know, we were starting to... whatever we said about bringing in a lot of people that really—we weren't a junior college anymore, after accreditation, right, listen to this, because there is a problem there, where—what I didn't like about junior colleges I had taught at was the feeling of the student, was that we are going on from here to the next one if we're good enough. And

what Columbia didn't have, it was like a four year thing, where we get in, you know, we're from the South Side, and we wanna dance, you know, we get in, we can do it. Without going through this other clutter, right. So there's an element there that—wow, you're good at this, because I told Louis, I don't know how anybody's gonna get me turned on to... But—so you see those four or five things, the "I'm a student, I don't want to go to a junior college." Accreditation is occurring, which raises our requirements for the student, right. Later on, funding raises the requirements of the students. Right?

Right.

And then we get—not students playing games to get admission, but we get something going on—this is when admissions, and who's running admissions, becomes this important thing, and that's about—oh, I don't know, historically, it's probably about '78. I don't mean at Columbia, I mean, just anywhere, right. Who's running our admissions programs, and what gets—you know, we have all these things coming through the com- oh, now we're computerized, that's another big thing that changes, right. We don't have the—just after I left, everything became computer. We don't have the one-on-one for admissions that's so terribly important to get the good student, right?

Right.

So admissions becomes another thing. This is not unique to Columbia, though.

Right.

Like, just, I'm talking to you historically, you know. If you're trying to put a fine institution together... it's difficult, right.

So the students are taken—I mean, somewhat anonymously. Absolutely.

OK.

And I don't mean that negative again, because it's occurring all over, but we're missing the cream of the crop, can I say, or something? Because sometimes, you know, in the poetic experience of the creative other, or the outsider person, you run into this human being that we're looking for.

Mm-hmm.

If we are the admissions officer. They even started to call them officers then. *(Laughs)*

And who, as a teacher—and you already talked about minorities, but if you could expand on that—who, as a teacher at Columbia, and as a chairperson, who were you looking for, that maybe was getting missed?

Nowadays, if you don't have enrollment, you try to recruit students.

Right.

But, OK, a good example is Julio. I found Julio—I wasn't trying to recruit students, I was looking for somebody who oughta be, you know, involved in ceramics. So I was going around town looking for glazes, and found Julio, who wasn't... he oughta be interviewed, everybody from the old days would remember him. I found him up at The Clay People mixing clay, and I said, "Well, why aren't you going to college?" He's helping me get clay, and we're lugging it to Columbia, and buying it as cheap as we can get it, you know, and sometimes, you know, I was using my own money and then getting reimbursed, which was no problem, but... So Julio came to town, and then he met other kids that, you

know, he brought in. And Julio mixed the clay, plus he got credits at college. But there were these people out there. You know, at times, I really felt like I was the admissions person for the Art Department, because I was looking for—if we're calling them officers, I was looking for a few good students. You know, so I somehow ended up in the Hispanic community, and, you know... Or shooting pool with a black guy on the South Side, and decided he'd better go to college. *(Laughs)* But then, admissions was more—I could call somebody and say, "Hey, I met this neat guy, can he come in and talk to you," you know.

Yeah.

Can we get him in, can we get him a scholarship or anything. "His high school teacher says he's great," but it was, you know... it was almost like a movie, you know. I mean I remember all these beautiful things. I don't have anything negative to say, really, about Columbia and my experience there, you know. You know, it's just... times change.

Right.

But for all of us, you know, not just Columbia.

How did your years at Columbia—well, first of all, did they influence your own work? Students?

Students, and the institution, and maybe your peers here, fellow artists or otherwise. I mean, do you look at your work now and see influences that developed or—Well, here's a good copy that the Art Institute will be—I guess it can go down, they'll be pissed off at me, but I know them all very well. I decided we were gonna do farm arts, which was take all these kids

from the city to my farm, right, so they could meet Amish men and women and go to health food stores and all this stuff. Then, one of my best friends, Jim, ran The Artist and the Landscape through the Art Institute, which was a much more sophisticated version of what I did. And then he even brought people down. But we actually did, in '75 or whatever, this, where I brought all these kids that had never been to the country. A photography—you know, I think we had about 15 kids came down. Columbia College gave them credit for three weeks, we called it Farm Arts, then we had an experience where we did, you know, all those kinds of things, which was really neat. That wouldn't have ever happened if it wasn't for the students. They wanted to see how I lived or something. Right? But you wouldn't get a chairperson or a dean to take 15 kids home with them for the week-end today.

Right.

So Debbie, my ex-wife, who you'll meet sometime, she's wonderful and a friend of Louis', she just opened her arms and all these people came in, and we just, you know, pitched tents and did stuff, you know.

The stories amaze me about—in the early days—of what teachers did with classrooms—Right.

-and taking them places for days, you know, on these field trips with these kids—Right.

—that are from the inner city, or from urban America.

Did you get to talk to Barry? Did you ever?

No.

Because Barry took people up into the, you know—

What's Barry's last name?

—North Country with canoes, and I gave him—my students made, like, moon buttons for him to put on trees so that they could find their way back to base camp and not get lost. *(Laughs)* I mean, you know, we had a camaraderie going on between all the departments and areas that was also very interesting.

What's Barry's last name?

Burlison. And I think—I either told you or Louis that he's in Battle Ground, Washington, which is the south portion of the state of Washington. And I think he's listed in the—he was the chairman before I was hired

Oh, OK.

He knows all kinds of stories. And... so... But it was called Graphics Design when Barry was there.

OK.

And he was a photo person. He's just a great guy who makes toys, and now I think he's raising horses. Or raising Cain, who knows what he's doing. But he was a very good friend of Louis. Louis should know where he is, but... Louis said he didn't, so...

In what other ways has your own work been influenced?

I think all the performance stuff I did, both at the Art Institute and all the galleries in Chicago, Randolph Street, Name Gallery, the ARC, the Woman's Gallery, I was like the first guy to get invited to the Woman's Gallery stuff. But it all had to do with my students, because my students at Columbia were really... We were sort of us,

like they weren't my students and I wasn't the teacher—that's probably the key. And they were telling me "Ernie, you've gotta get more into—how come you don't play your guitar more? How come you're always, you know, in the office?" And stuff like that. And we gotta go listen to this band, or we gotta go check out this theater group, you know. And it was true, you know, the Living Theater, or the early Saturday Night Live people were performing on Lincoln Avenue, and if they hadn't dragged me in to meet some of those people, I wouldn't have met them. Right? But it's all—the students were running the show, in my, you know, in reflection now.

(Laughs)

I don't take any of the credit. I give it all to the students. I mean, really. But I think other people in "underground" colleges would say the same thing, that they were opening up, letting go, right.

Right. Were your students—can you describe them a little further? Like, were they a little bit older? You know, we think of students today being pretty much—even at Columbia, it's getting increasingly, you know, 17 to 21. We still have older students, but...

Yeah, there was—yeah, but I still remember everybody as being pretty young. Except that there were—there was more of a impetus or whatever to attract older students. Then. I mean, we were trying to get—it was—I don't know how your night classes registration is, but it was a big time then to get people after work that needed to have a class.

Right.

So we had people that were working full-time jobs, and holding down households and things. There was a percentage of that, but I don't know how big that was. Uh, yeah, I remember everybody working, though. Everybody had a job. Right?

Yeah. And your job was (noise interference).

Uh, I guess, you know, it'll show on the books what was going on. But I'm sure that that was the feeling, right?

At that time?

Yeah.

Right.

I mean, what do you see then?

Um, I've only been here since 1990, but even I have perceived that it's—not a significant, but a general drop. I get fewer and fewer, shall I say, mature students returning.
Right.

Which, you know, is a loss. I mean, even one in a classroom adds a tremendous amount.
Right.

But I was just curious if that was, you know, in the mid-'70s, if you had more of a range of students.
Right.

I mean, would you be able to say that, or...?
Definitely. You mean then?

Yeah.

Oh, absolutely. Big range.

Like going from what to what?

Oh, you know, kids coming right in from high school to kids that were like—didn't even—older kids

that hadn't even finished high school, but we were trying to help them get a GED or something. Because, see, they could also take a class in an expertise that they were interested in without having—there were all kinds of different loopholes then. Or it seems that way. Right?

Right.

You could take, through—maybe you call it Continuing Ed, but I think it was just sort of a blanket—you could take a college course without going through all—a night course—without going through all the rigmarole, right. I mean, if you wanted to know something about airbrush painting techniques, right, you could sign up for that class if you could pay for it. And there were—especially at the night level—there were a lot of interesting people that came through that were young, but, you know, they needed to learn that technique. Right?

Mm-hmm.

So, I'm sure that was that way in Photography, but I don't have (noise interference) a lot about exactly what Charlie was doing in Photography. But my feeling was that, you know, he turned that department around, and I don't know what—

I hope that part got cut off.

Interviewee asking the interviewer. Um, why don't—what were the circumstances surrounding your departure from Columbia?

Ah, I don't know. I just wanted to politely leave, and Debbie was pregnant with our son Thomas, and I had this idea of raising the kids also not in Chicago. But I think, mainly, I felt like I did all that I could do there. I think that was—

you know, if I went down on paper, if I could talk in front of Louis and Mike, I'm pretty sure that I left very politely, and that, you know, I told Lya, I don't know—I had all this problem leaving. I had to go tell Lya, "How do I do this?", you know? And Lya hadn't told me that Charlie had already decided to go take his position at the Light Gallery in New York City, so I didn't know Charlie was leaving. Which opened up two spots for John's position. But then I felt terrible, 'cause I was leaving. But I just said, "How do you do it?" And she said, "What? What do you want, you know?" It's like...

Permission.

I just said, "I think I better, you know..." Whether it was a good choice or not, I have no clue. I just, you know... But I really think I felt like I couldn't do any more for where I was at, you know?

You talked about this farm art, and taking the students down. Do you remember some of the other courses that you taught that—I mean, were there other individual courses that you designed that you kind of experimented with that either were successful or not successful?

Well, back then, there was no such thing as—I did the ceramics, I did the first sculpture courses, Jan Sullivan and I did a course called Sculpture Inside and Out, where she taught the outside part of the class and I taught the inside classroom part. At that time, we were, you know, chairpeople were teaching four classes as well as administering. So I was trying to come up with different things that would be exciting for me to do, you know. But those—I think—well, there wasn't any ceramics, and—you know, are you familiar with L.D., Larry Dunn?

No.

Works in your building? Louis and I ran into him in the street. He was one of my students. He's now your carpenter.

Oh, really?

If your College is held together, it's because of a guy named L.D., who's worked there since he was a student of mine 20 years ago or something. And Louis and I ran into him on Michigan Avenue, and I hadn't seen him in a long time. But you can interview him.

Uh-huh.

I mean, it might be important. Larry Dunn, they call him L.D. around Columbia, and he's taken—do you know who Jake is?

Yes. I have not met him, but I do know of him.

OK, Jake's the older guy?

Right.

Jake took Larry under his wing about 20 years ago. Every electric socket, every toilet that flushes—I mean, you should think about this in Columbia College—

Yeah.

—wouldn't exist without Jake and Larry. So Larry, you know, interview him about me. It's like the Art Institute, uh...

Go to the students. What's special about Larry Dunn?

He is a really, really good example of all of my students, of all the best students that I ever had at Columbia College. Larry came down and helped me put a roof on the house 15 years ago, and I hadn't seen him since then, and I ran into him on Michigan Avenue with Louis two weeks ago. That's what Columbia College is about. I think you could probably—if he would

be willing to talk about anything, Larry would know more than anybody.

Well, tell me about it from your perspective, and then I'll try to get Louis to let me interview him. Yeah, good idea.

I mean, why is he the student that sticks out in your mind? Louis will have to let you, because we were on the street together, and Larry said, "Wow," and Louis was being Louis, and—

Well, you'll have to tell me about Larry. He's just a wonderful guy.

I have to rein you in. He's a perfect example of somebody who could take charge in a situation. He will have to tell you—I mean, I'm not talking for him, but these skills, he learned at Columbia College, through interaction with students, teachers, whatever. Larry came there as a kid, he just is a perfect example of... you know, just...

Did he arrive with those kind of skills, or did you watch those develop as a student? Oh, I watched them develop. Yeah. But I don't know what he would say, but he—he would probably say the same thing I say. He probably came there as a little cherub, and you know, he didn't know what was going on either, and he figured it out. And he's, like, the most dependable, neat guy. But really, I haven't seen him in 15 years, and nothing changed. We hugged each other on Michigan Avenue just like we would have 15 or 20 years ago. So, and Louis is standing there, you know, trying to understand my friend Pam, who is an astronomy

professor. I think Louis expected me to be alone, and I brought my friend who's an astronomy professor, so... to impress him. *(Laughs)*

What other—any other individuals that stand out? Whether students, or faculty, or staff, at Columbia while you were here? You mentioned Louis, so you can elaborate on that.

Oh, sure, but I can't grasp the names. We have to talk to Debbie, my ex-wife Debbie, about that. Uh, the guy she made the rainbow coat of colors for who was in admissions, there was a wonderful guy—there's a whole number of people that—unsung heroes, as we might call them?

Mm-hmm. That who knows, could have been fired, died, or whatever, that... I'll think about it.

And you can include that on this sheet, or attach— If I can find it, yeah.

No, the sheet that I'm mailing to you, you know, if you want to jot down—you know, if we get off the phone and you say, "Oh, I should have talked about this." You can certainly include that on this background page that I'm sending you in the mail. So what do you think about the future of the institution?

That's the question I'm supposed to ask you last. Guess what? I'm not a dummy. *(Laughs)* But listen, that's what education is all about, and how can the true educator be of help in the future, you know? It's like, all my major mentor guys, you know, are still alive out East, and they are—you know, they don't know what to do. They've been put out to pasture.

Hmm. And so how does a person—you must understand, the reason I'm doing all this talk is to be of help, right?

Right. Does that come through in the talk?

Um... Or does it sound like another male ego—

No, no, not at all. I mean, it seems that it's coming through that your experience was really important and changed, you know, your life, the students' lives, and that you think it's important that people know about it.

Also, the reason you want to teach again is because of people like Julio.

Mm-hmm. But more specifically, since he's within your grasp, L.D., Larry Dunn. Whether you can actually touch base with him, or whether he's changed over the years because of the politics... When you become, essentially, a custodian, or whatever he calls himself—I think he runs the place. Because you couldn't function without people like Jake and him, you know.

Right. And, you know, of course... So what do you know about Bert's brother?

Whose? OK, hold on one second, I'm gonna stop the interview, because my opinions aren't what Louis is paying for. *(Laughs)* Oh, good.