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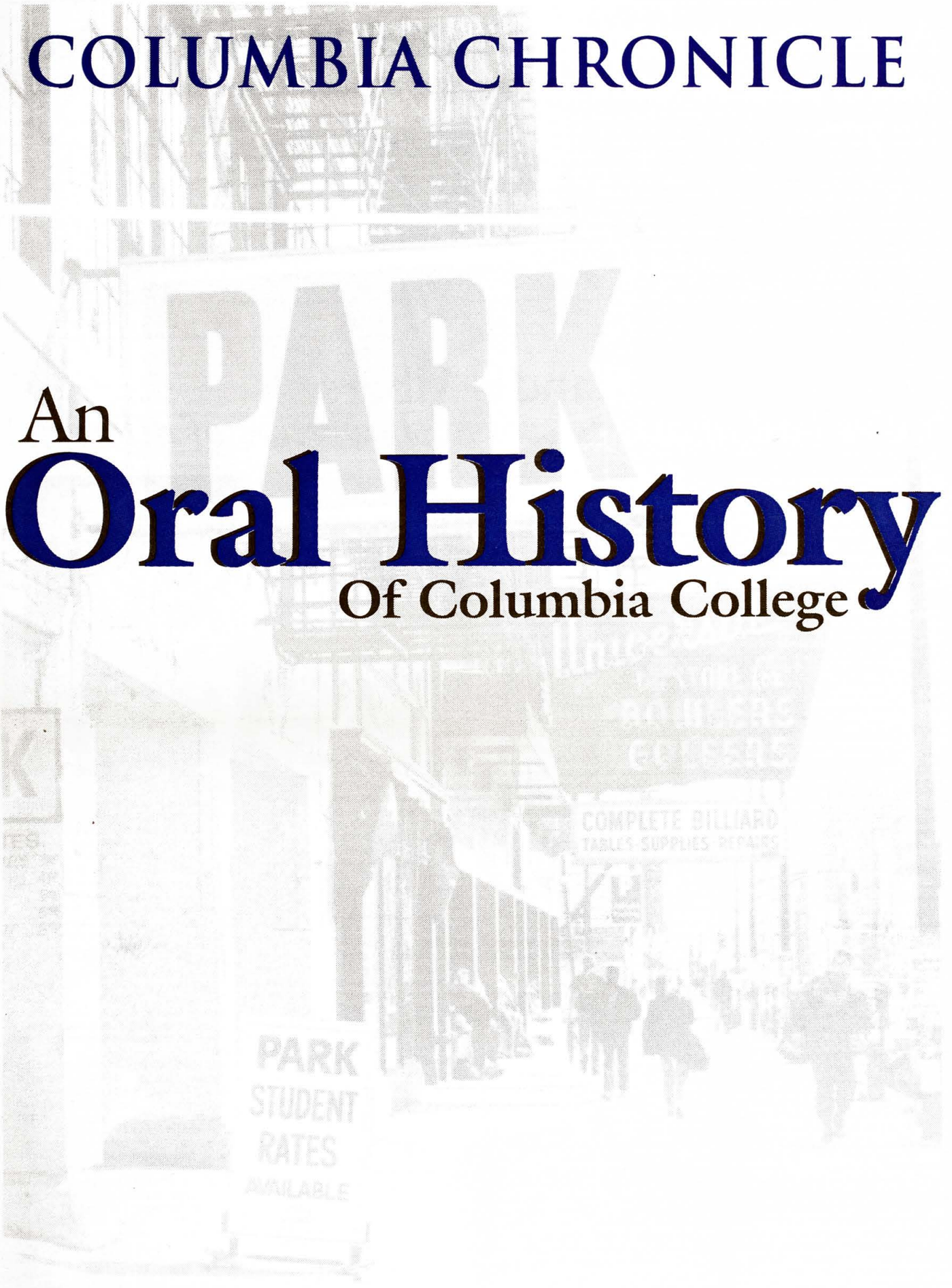
Columbia College Chicago

COLUMBIA CHRONICLE

An Oral History Of Columbia College



A short history of the Oral History Project

College collects the oral memories of those who witnessed Columbia's rise to fame

By Neda Simeonova
Assistant Editor

For nearly two and a half years, Louis Silverstein, currently a faculty member in the Liberal Education department, together with the help of several other faculty members and students, collected hundreds of hours of tape recordings.

On those tapes were the voices of more than 60 people who witnessed how Columbia evolved from the 1960s through present day.

The result was Columbia's first Oral History Project, a compilation of verbatim memories.

"These were the people who were the long launchers," said Silverstein. "They began the launch to take Columbia from what it was in the '60s to what it is in the present day. There aren't many of them left today."

Silverstein said that he decided to conduct the Oral History after the death of Jane Alexandroff who died at the age of 65 in October of 1996. "She was a contributor at Columbia and her voice would never be heard again," said Silverstein.

With the help of two professional historians, Erin McCarthy and Chris Thale, part-time faculty in the Department of Liberal Education; and photographer Dagmar Mitunicewicz, a Columbia student, Silverstein has distributed the Oral History in three forms: There were 300 CD-ROMs, 100 hard copies and a web page version.

Silverstein said the Oral History is important to the college because it will preserve an accessible record of the college's history.

Silverstein and colleagues are currently working on a second phase of the Oral History project in which up to 25 people will be interviewed about their experiences in the college in the 1980s and early 1990s. "We want to make it an ongoing project so that the history can go on and on and on."

Silverstein was glad that he was able to complete the project before former President Mirron Alexandroff's death. "He had the opportunity to have his voice included in the history of Columbia. It would've made the history of the college empty without him," Silverstein said.

What follows are excerpts from various chapters of the Oral History Project.

Randy Albers

'we've had great success with writers of all sorts'

"There have to be alternatives to that cookie-cutter approach, there need to be. And it's not just a matter of laying traditional education against non-traditional education. It's a matter of do we, how do we find ways and means to encourage students to grapple with the problems that they need to grapple with, you know, educationally, and think creatively about solutions."

Do you think it made a difference, or do you know if it made a difference, in what kind of courses people took or what kind of courses had to be offered or were offered or . . .

Well, yeah, they had to, I think there was a fairly substantial expansion of courses in some areas. And I would say that, I don't know, I mean I don't know if I can remember when this transition occurred but I think there were, sort of, more traditional at least, courses that were tending toward the more traditional disciplines. Early on, you know, liberal education was a very sort of, in some ways, a very avant-garde, it took a very avant-garde approach in the sense that there were very interesting approaches to teaching liberal education through the arts. And I think that still continues, but at that point there were a few just very interesting, quirky, wild courses, you know.

And I think—so that over the years there's been a great expansion of courses and also more of a sense, perhaps, of disciplines that, you know, the traditional disciplines with coordinators heading those areas and so on. And, you know, it sort of almost had to develop, in some sense, that way because the school grew so fast and in some way of organizing things that made sense. But I think also a certain amount of experimentation and creative collaboration, both on the parts of students and faculty, has been sacrificed because of that. And I think maybe over the years, over time, I think there was developed a kind of separation of the majors departments from the gen ed area that wasn't as visible, at least to me, when I first came into the College. It seemed to me that they were much more integrated and people really committed to taking, really committed to taking, you know, creative approaches. So it's something that is, you know, the College is wrestling with right now, And, you know, it's a good debate to be having because we have to—we have to find a way of, I think, getting back to that really, sort of, integrative approach that really values both the majors department and the gen ed.

What were the career goals of student s when you came here and what are they today? Have they changed?

I don't think that students were as career-minded, by any means, when I started. I don't know, I mean, I was coming back from, as I say, two years in California where I spent most of it out in the woods and then occasionally, you know, doing everything from teaching to bucking hay for farmers. So I wasn't as career-minded, perhaps, but I don't think students were either. They were a lot of first-generation college students and so there was a certain sense of, you know, among a certain group of them, as being upwardly mobile, rising expectations. But it wasn't until mid to late '80s that the careerist approach where they, kind of, took a foothold, I think. This is—I'm painting very broad generalities here.

And the department, you know, always emphasized that the—has always emphasized this, emphasized it, that the skills that make for good fiction, creative nonfiction writing, and the others, you know, the skills that they're developing in classes can be practiced in the Story Workshop approach and so on, you know: reading, writing, listening, speaking, conceptualizing, abstracting, greater problem solving.

That all these skills, relationship skills, all of these skills are things that they can use in jobs in a variety of areas. So we're always, we've always emphasized this dual thing, doing the writing but also developing, being aware of developing the skills that, you know, help people in jobs. And people have ended up with a great variety of jobs coming out of this program. So I think that perhaps the difference is only one of emphasis, that early on they weren't as interested, necessarily, in careers but they were still getting the skills that allowed them to get jobs when they left. Now, probably more come in, more students come in, aware of the need to think about eating while they're doing their writing.

In the last two or three years there has been more and more of a move to identify just how, you know, how much of a problem we have with under-prepared students. And there's been a much greater emphasis on pouring resources into serving those students. It's problematic, it's caused a certain strain on the College. It's very difficult to, I think, serve the ends of the arts and communications fields and departments where, you know, just what most students come to Columbia for, while at the same time pouring increasing amounts of resources into developmental education. It's put us in a real bind, you know? It's not an easy question to find a solution for. There's been a long and hard debate about it, but the problem is gonna get worse in the coming years and what we're faced with is really trying to think about creative solutions to it. Having taught in writing programs here at Columbia for—I just finished my twentieth at Columbia—having taught here for twenty years in a program where we've had great success with writers of all sorts, from all sorts of different backgrounds, skills, levels, I have, you know, real difficulties with, with an educational approach that ends by segregating students. Whether they are, you know- well, let's face it, you know, you end up with classes that are gonna have a higher percentage of some groups than another, you know? More minority students are gonna end up in those groups just because of the population we draw from and the poor preparation that students get in some of the public schools in this city. But I think that you can find ways of addressing the needs of those students in classes that are mixed and through a tutoring program. But that's not necessarily the way the College is moving and so we're fast, I think, reaching a crisis. As these resources get more and more scarce for the departments, it's actually gonna exacerbate conflict, I think, between majors departments and the rest of the school. So what we have to do is we have to really, I think, go back to the drawing board in some way and say... not retreat from the mission, not retreat from open admissions but some way really examine what we mean by it toward the end of saying, "Well, what can we do to preserve open admissions but still get, you know, the better prepared students; in some ways direct the resources toward those people who are coming here for the arts and communications fields and really are serious about it?" How can we also make sure that we do not shut out students who are talented in the areas that we are known for but who may not otherwise have the resources or whatever to get into, survive in other colleges? How are we gonna keep our diversity, you know, at the same time? These are all questions that we're gonna have to do a lot of discussion about and if we don't do it quickly, we're gonna get caught in a backwash of conflicts. I'm afraid, you know, they'll sneak up on us.

Was that true in Fiction Writing classes, in the classes that you taught?

Yep, yeah. Now, keep in mind I taught, when I first came here I just taught Writing Workshops which were the, you know... so we saw students from every major. It wasn't until a couple of years later really, I don't think, that I started teaching Fiction Workshops. But, yeah, it was true, sure it was true in Fiction Workshops as well as in the Writing Workshops. I think the Writing Workshops were probably somewhat—had a higher percent-age of minority students than the Fiction Workshops, but the Fiction Workshops themselves were very mixed. We had—and by far the largest minority group was African-American. And we probably had many more African-American males than now. We had a much smaller percentage of Hispanic students or other minority. Now the students are, you know, increasingly, would say increasingly white, increasingly suburban, increasingly national as well as international. And the Hispanic population has been growing very rapidly. So while we have a lower percentage of minority students, generally, from when I came, and a lower percentage of African-American students than when I came, we have a much higher percentage of Hispanic students and it's been the fastest growing group in college, that as a group. So, and the Fiction Writing classes, the Fiction Writing classes continue to be mixed, very mixed, and I think it's really been our ability to take an approach that validates each person's own voice, cultural background, and subject matter and so on so that the students know that they're not gonna get shut out from telling the stories that they really want to tell.

I don't know how to put it any better. Because it has to, you know—there have to be alternatives to that cookie-cutter approach, there needs to be. And it's not just a matter of laying traditional education against non-traditional education. It's a matter of do we, how do we find ways and means to encourage students to grapple with the problems that they need to grapple with, you know, educationally, and think creatively about solutions. I'll just give you a quick example: I came out of the U of C and other areas. I tutored at the U of C and so students had, sometimes, an ability to develop wonderful skills. But often, compared to Columbia students who maybe didn't have those skills, those students did not, those students at the U of C did not—generally—have much to say. Students here, in some ways, are more rougher, are rougher or ill-formed or something, perhaps, seem to have less sophistication at times, but come up with incredibly wonderful insights and creative ways of problem solving and comments, insights about reading and other - writing, for instance –that are incredibly sophisticated, you know? It's that sort of excitement that really pervades the classroom...

Mirron "Mike" Alexandroff

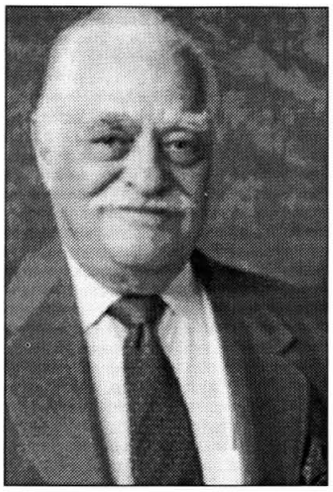
'We had a graduation in 1964, in June. And actually graduated 25 people'

So, if you could start by telling us the origins of the philosophy behind Columbia's policy of open admissions. "

It would be entertaining, I suppose, to imagine that at some moment in the early 1960s, I had a transcendent vision of Columbia that somehow sprang full blown. But... of course that isn't true. Nothing springs full-blown at any moment except to remarkable visionaries, which I certainly wasn't. But I did have some... sense of purpose, even though to have attempted to cause this to be some kind of formulaic system that I would momentarily apply would have no real basis in fact. I think the primary motive was... perhaps then, a question of just institutional survival. In 1964, when the College was seriously renewed, or an effort made to seriously renew it, we had something under 200 students, no resources, no reserves... and had I been sensible, we would have just folded it up and walked away. Literally, on January 2nd, 1964, we moved from Wabash and Adams Street, where we had shared facilities with the Pestalozzi Teachers College, who had ended what had been a 30-year association. And with the intercession of several old friends of the family, and the enlistment of a wonderful man named Alfrerlman, who gave us space at Lake Shore Drive, a floor... I'm not quite sure what prompted his—what intelligence prompted that vision, but he did. And we moved this pitiable little institution to the building at 540 Lake Shore Drive. And as I said, the cardinal issue, the overriding issue, was simply could we survive. As I said though, I did have some purpose in mind, but it was hardly defined, and the most important thing was to gather enough students and a handful of part-time teachers, somehow, to develop an institution. I don't think at that point I had anything in mind, particularly, about developing to what size or anything. That certainly came with the evolution of time. I suppose it could be fairly said that I had some early inspirations, which successfully enlisted the energies and talents of a number of others, who contributed to Columbia's ultimate prosperity, but at that time they contributed to the possibility that we might be alive the following September, and somehow be able to gather students. I suppose it could be said that Columbia's early life was informed by an evolution of what were largely unproven ideas of a college institution, but Columbia's idea was not a personal invention without tie to enlightened educational philosophy or practice. Nor was it simply a new implement that begged successful marketing.

I'm trying to think of some kind of... bridge to an institution that had some promise and some operative vitality, though I think of a little at that time. Everything was an off the top of the head invention, simply to recruit students. As that was successfully accomplished—though in minimal numbers, I think we had 300 students by 1966 or some-thing in that neighborhood. If we had a budget, we certainly didn't call it one. The total expenditure of the institution might have been $100,000 dollars by then. There were about 25 part-time faculty members, obviously we had no full-time faculty, and a focus which was largely on television and radio.

What that meant was that we were operating as a kind of professional school, though, we weren't a trade school. Some general education was always offered, of extraordinarily good quality. Even when the enrollment doubled within a several year period, the students were almost entirely career oriented in terms of the... broadcasting industries. There was at least some identifiable college effort about it, or college mission. We had a graduation in 1964, in June. And actually graduated 25 people. I remember we had the graduation at the Prudential Building auditorium, which was vastly too big for the crowd we had, and we set the chairs



about six feet apart so as to give some impression that we were full. We had music, and a variety of normal accoutrements to college graduations. For the first time, in many, many years, we had an independent—and quite attractive—facility at Lake Shore Drive, and a heck of a lot of friends, I mean in the teachers and alumni from past times and so on, who apparently contributed to our being at least successful with this focus in radio and television. I suppose it might fairly be said that we practiced open admissions out of economic necessity. I'm sure I had some larger social perception, but at the same time, I don't think it was sensibly operative. It was not until we began to enjoy considerable growth, rather dramatically so, by the middle 1960s, by 1966, that at least I began to attach a social view and a social philosophy to the idea of open admissions.

But why didn't you? Was is the students, or what made you decide to—Well, I was about 40 years old, and in a state of some uncertainty about whether I would go, and obviously, I'd actually worked there since 1947, and my father before me; my wife died in 1962, and I had two young children. I wasn't paid regularly enough to—but debt financing was not unknown then either, so somehow I survived. But I did have some pretty valuable support from several people. I remarried in 1963, and Jane had worked at the College for six or seven years at that point, and it became almost a family enterprise. What else would we do? And I had a really excellent officially titled dean. We had Jane, myself, and Wolf Dochterman. That was the administrative staff, and a part-time bookkeeper and several and sundry people. But Wolf knew radio and television, film, anything in communication; I knew the educational effort. When we moved from Wabash it was about 15 below zero, and a terrible night. And Wolf saw that everything got on the trucks, and Jane stood on the loading platform at 540 and checked things in, and I was upstairs kind of telling the movers where to put it. We'd done a little remodeling, mostly because Bud Perlman advanced us $40,000 to remodel before we took the space. While only seven or eight thousand feet, it was the top floor, and quite attractive. It certainly had everything we needed. In fact, the largest expense was to create a television studio, which was first rate. There was no question we had an exceptionally good facility, and we had always had that. At the same time, it was the '60s; many young people, particularly, were re-examining the whole fabric of American life, the civil rights movement in the South. There was something in the spirit of the times. I don't think Columbia could have happened at any other time in history. And... we damn sure weren't healthy. The wolf was always at the door, but on occasion, the wolf was diverted by... it must have run off into the woods some-where, because—we at least had a door by that time, to keep him at bay. But it was a struggle of a little, inconsequential place.

I, and several people about me, believed that higher education had been opened up by the GI Bill. But by the end of the '50s, the effect of that enormous influx of eight million veterans who took advantage of collegiate training and even with the Korean War, the momentum of that had ceased, or had diminished, and education was still essentially elitist. It certainly continued to be acutely discriminatory towards minorities, both in terms of the constitution of faculty and certainly in the choice of students. I think somewhere in the—maybe a year or two later, '64 or '65—I really began to have a sense of what kind of an institution was possible, and what kind of an institution I wanted to author. And I began increasingly to incorporate a whole number of things of the '60s. My general philosophies are not founded in the '60s. I think in a philosophical sense, I'd been a progressive my whole life. But by '66, I was beginning to have a kind of developed philosophy about the institution. And certainly a vigorous opposition to the elitist ideas that had governed higher education, more or less traditionally, with a lapse in the years of the GI bills.

Why do you think that didn' t happen? I'm curious about that too.

I've thought a lot about that recently. In educational intention, I think Columbia was two institutions, in a sense. One sought every educational excellence. And while we might not have had a constituency for an institution of the most able college students, we were not competing with the Princetons or Harvards or Juillards or Yales. Yet the level of instruction, and the quality of teaching and teachers, was, in all of the fields we focused on, as good as any, if not better than anywhere in the country. And as a comprehensive school of the arts and media, while there were outstanding people at other colleges, we had a great collection of them. We had good facilities, good equipment and everything else, and after '76, certainly the most ample space.

We were always crowded, but, at the same time, we had a social philosophy of open admissions, and dealt with what are conventionally termed—I don't like the term—at-risk students, so that if you dealt with the institution as a collection of these two worlds, an amalgam of these two, our outstanding qualities were diminished by our attempt to embrace two extremes, or the two constituencies. I think that the effect of that has been that we couldn't become Yale Drama School, or have that public excellence in any of Columbia's fields, because we sustained an emphasis on opening our ranks to all students. And I think that was the largest problem, or the largest contradiction in our whole effort.

Bert Gall, when I interviewed him, said that open admissions, the thrust of it had definitely changed, that at one time it meant open admissions open to non- traditional students, students who didn' t fit in anywhere else, who didn' t work well within an institutional structure, and now it allows for admission those students who can' t go anywhere else.

Well, that's partly true. I don't think Bert and I are in perfect agreement on this. I think that the student pool, as it were, is vastly different than it was 20 years ago. Some of the best students we ever had were minority students, but, in those days other institutions were not competing for students who went to so-called minority high schools. We used to be the only Chicago institution that went to college days at most of the inner-city high schools. And when other institutions discovered that poor students were jingling a lot of student aid money in their pockets, it became a nice thing to expand opportunity to all Americans. Before, a lot of people came to Columbia, whether or not they had interest in our subjects per se, probably because we were one of the only independent college institutions in this region they could even go to. Then, as now, there were a lot of kids who were damaged irreparably by common school education, but you were also getting some who were pretty damn good. But you got a cross-section. Today everyone's persuaded that going to college is the only route to the badge of success. But we are not getting the old proportion of very able students who are now choosing careers in medicine or God knows what. The major universities and colleges are competing for these students. So we don't get many. It isn't that they go somewhere else and study theater, but they go somewhere else and medicine is now open to them, law's open to them. So they don't have to come to Columbia. And, as a result, we're getting disproportionate numbers of the least able. And I think, probably, the numbers have just simply gotten too great of those. We always had polarity in the classroom, but it wasn't 65 percent on the least able side and 35 percent who were perfectly competent, as it is now. And just the sheer numbers that enter under the liberalities of open enrollment change the polarities in the classroom. A number of people around the College are arguing that we simply ought to have some kind of arbitrary test score cutoff.

You mean numbers- wise, or standards? Those people forget the economics of running Columbia. They want some point, 16 on the ACT or 1000 on the SAT, whatever, I don't know. I've heard some of those numbers. And you have a group that feels that open enrollment should be preserved, but that it is possible to have a massive and effective remediation program, which I, at least, suspect is unattainable. I'm certainly all in favor of putting everything the institution can afford into all kinds of remediation, though I think the whole character of the remedial effort needs to be rethought almost entirely. But in general, it has been unsuccessful, whoever's tried it. Though I think the method is wrong, I don't have an immediate replacement. I can tell them what's wrong about it, but I haven't thought long enough or hard enough to develop an alternative. I do know that the spiritual antecedents and philosophical imperatives which Columbia did address in open admissions are not well spelled out in the self-study being prepared.

"It would be entertaining, I suppose, to imagine that at some moment in the early 1960s, I had a transcendent vision of Columbia that somehow sprang full blown. But... of course that isn't true. Nothing springs full-blown at any moment except to remarkable visionaries, which I certainly wasn't. But I did have some... sense of purpose, even though to have attempted to cause this to be some kind of formulaic system that I would momentarily apply would have no real basis in fact."

Louis Silverstein

'We kept virtually no records, everything was, like, handwritten'

So when you came back, you were teaching?

At that time, the College-I came back, as I said, as a 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.

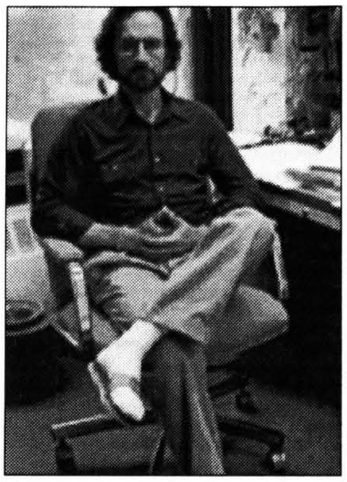
It's a long process?

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.

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-

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 percent-ages 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.

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 some-thing 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 some-thing 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.

"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."

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 techno-logical 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.

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.

John Schultz

'It seemed to be serving the needs of humanity'

Could you talk to that, speak to that? Oh yeah, it was, we were... In the beginning there were those conversations that I was having with Mike in 1966, '67, and conversations that he was having with other people at the time: Bill Russo, I think Russo was also full-time in Music/Theater, conversations with Harry Bouras, and a few others. Al Parker was chair of the Radio Broadcasting Department. But most of Mike's conversations at this time in developing this new school at Columbia were conducted with, I think with me, with Jon Wagner and Robin Lester-who came from the University of Chicago and from the Christian Action Ministry Academy on the West Side, where they were doing some very interesting work with kids who were dropouts, high school dropouts- and then a few others at this time, but it was a fairly, very small group. And a great deal of the mission was really thrashed out, I think, by, well, by us in conversation with Mike, by me and Mike in conversation, by Mike and some others he was talking with. But it still came down to this notion of being able to open your doors to anybody who really wanted a college education in arts and communication, to offer them truly professional training, but also to accept them, their voices, their backgrounds- wherever they came from-to accept them as they were, as they came through the door, and to try to work with them as they were.

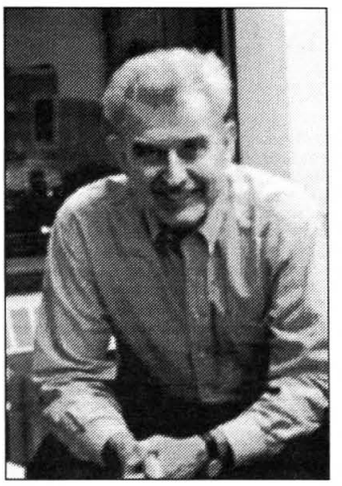
One of our working principles at the time, the way we put it was: Working with the students as you find them, as they come to you, you know. I used to ask teachers not even to look at previous records of the students, you know, not even to look at high school records or college transcript records. Just take the student as you find the student right before you. Sometimes I'd have remarkable results because it altered, completely, the teacher's expectations of what would happen, or what could happen with the student and the students who somehow had not been able to do well in other contexts flowered, you know, they really came out here very strongly. It was pretty exciting to see. And then you found out later so and so had this rough time at another college or was unable to do this and that, seemingly, and then they show they have all this talent, all this ability, and it could be developed and they were able to take the training and run with it.

"I mean, I was the only chair, I was the chair of English/Writing, and there was no really defined authority structure in the school."

This was very exciting stuff. And this was exciting throughout the school. So, it was in the summer, not summer, April of 1968, Mike held a retreat on the North Shore. People who took part in this retreat were me, Harry Bouras, Jon Wagner, I'm not sure if Robin Lester was there or not, we had a fellow Tanenbaum from New York, another guy Birnbaum, I believe that's right, from Staten Island Community College, a fellow from what was going to be the new SUNY at New Paltz, Staughton Lynd, who was a non-violent new left theorist and practitioner- all gathered for this conference, you know. And we talked for at least about three days all together at this retreat. There was a lot of fascinating talk, I don't know if it came to any conclusions, you know, in the talk. But what came out of it was a kind of general trend or a thrust for the school, which began to be increasingly refined into what we called the mission. And the mission of the school comes down-at its very core it means, at its very integrated core, it means: Accepting the students as you find them, as they come to you. Accepting their voice, their background, whatever they bring with them. Giving them as much of a chance as you can to thrive, providing them with the opportunity for professional education in arts and communications. And to do it within a liberal arts framework. And to teach the liberal arts through the arts and to teach the arts through the liberal arts.

This sort of, somewhat seemingly paradoxical but really highly integrative approach, this is at the core of the mission, you know. The mission was fashioned in this way because we thought it was the right thing to do, you know, it seemed to be serving the needs of humanity, the needs of the nation as they were being expressed at that time. And it was something that seemed to be really pushing for realization in the arts and communication. This seemed to be the right way to go.

So, when we put it into operation it became, I think we knew it was going to be appealing to students, but as soon as we put it into opera-tion, it became obvious that the students were flocking to it. You know, they were coming from all sides of it, and the school began to grow by leaps and bounds. So the mission is actually the educational thrust of the school, the educational justification of the school, but it also showed itself immediately to be the generator of the economic well-being of the school. You know, the generator of the economic potential, possibility, and support of the school. So in that sense, the mission proved itself to be extraordinarily powerful. Well, it began to develop in all sorts



of ways after this, various departments were developing, had to develop in a very entrepreneurial way. It had to.

I mean, I was the only chair, I was the chair of English/Writing, and there was no really defined authority structure in the school. I mean, there was Mike's office and then it just sort of shades off into... And when it shades off, this is an area that, it's like exploring new country, you know. A turf is declared and people begin to raise new operations and classes. I can remember inventing classes right in the middle of registration, right then and there, you know, and some of them working very well. I remember we prized this spin on a dime flexibility where, you know, where we could implement a class, kill a class, do this or that with great speed, ease, efficiency. It was highly efficient.

Alfred "Bud" Perlman

'They had never considered accrediting a school like Columbia College'

And you had mentioned that you and Mike came—had a difference of opinion about one issue. Oh, the time came when I felt that it was important, if the College were to grow and mature, that it become accredited. Mike... had some strong feelings that he didn't want to become part of the establishment, and being accredited would make him like anybody else. I explained to him that being like everybody else is gonna be important, and being accredited is the first important step to maturity. We talked about it, talked about it to the members of the Board, and we all agreed, reluctantly, as far as Mike was concerned, that we should apply for accreditation. The process was very interesting, and, but we weathered the storm, and I think our uniqueness turned out to be a plus in terms of getting accreditation. We finally got it, and the school blossomed. Enrollment increased to the point... when I retired from the Board, I think we had over 4,000 students, full and part-time. That was unbelievable, in terms of what—125 students in the beginning. The school had rented more space in 540, and finally, they just ran out of space, and Mike said to me "I don't think we can stay in the building any longer. Do you have any ideas about where we could go?" And I told him about a building that was for sale at 600 S. Michigan. And I knew one of the owners, and I sat down with him and told him I had somebody that was interested. The only thing is, they haven't got any money. *(Laughs)*

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

They had enough cash to put down and to remodel, and they were able to pay off the mortgage inside of two or three years, free and clear of the purchase money mortgage.

They still owed the bank, I never could understand why the bank loaned the money, but they were always there.

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

Well, Bert Gall was a student at the College, and when he graduated, Mike put him in charge of the—taking care of the real estate. And he and I had a kind of personal relationship, in that I would help him, teach him about running real estate and getting bids and hiring personnel. I was kind of like a teacher to him, in terms of learning the trade. And he turned out to be an exceptional, exceptional young man [in terms of] his ability to run the—I mean, at one time, it was—at Lake Shore and Ohio, 25,000, 30,000 square feet, he used to take care of the remodeling, and hiring contractors. He did an excellent job.

"Columbia College's success is due entirely to Mike Alexandroff [and] his ability to have wonderful, great ideas and to implement them. And he knew how to use the Board to help—I don't—when I say, "use" the Board, I say it in a good sense."

And at times, he and I would talk about the best thing to do and how to do it. I had some gray hairs, and he had none, so I helped out.

What kind of advice did you give him?

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

How easy was it for him to make the transition from student to administrator? He was and is very bright. He got a kick—I think he got a kick out of what he was doing, therefore, it was easy. If you enjoy what you're doing, it's easy. If you don't enjoy it, it's not easy. Bert

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

Lynn Sloan

'Some things we can't go back to'

How would you describe Columbia beyond the department, as well as kind of the atmosphere of the College at that stage?

Well, it was much more playful, maybe because it was smaller and we all knew each other. For example, just the Photography and the Film Department sharing offices led to a lot more, not interdisciplinary courses, but a lot more sharing of information, of playfulness, of things going on together. That was particularly true with Photography and Film. The Art Department sort of sprang out of the Photography Department at that time. And so actually, there were no art classes, no History of Art classes being taught, and we felt a need for them in Photo. And so the first Art History classes were taught in the Photography Department. And one of our members, Barry Burlison, a Photo teacher, started teaching Two-Dimensional Design and some Drawing classes because we felt visual artists in photography needed more of a visual background.

And so the Art Department sort of sprang out [of photography]. It's now twice, four times the size of Photography, but at that point it sprang out of Photo. And that sort of thing happened a lot. People saw a need for something on the curriculum and just advanced the idea. Mike was very enthusiastic about just anything. You know, it's this idea of-there's also a Mickey Rooney atmosphere to this school: Let's put on a show, let's put on an Art Department, let's put on a gallery. And there's so much liveliness to that. When there were social parties I remember you would invite everybody from the school who was a full-timer. So everyone knew each other. There was just a lot of-I wouldn't even call it cross-fertilization, it was just your gang, your friends. All the faculty sort of got together all the time. It was a very lively place.

And there was no need for interdisciplinary because it just happened. I remember a course that I taught at that time that had three faculty for maybe eight students. It was Jamie Bright, myself, and Barry Burlison. And the class was called Figure and Environment. I think it was 1976 that we taught this class. And we had some fabulous students in the class. Every two weeks we would take the students for a two-day film trip somewhere and photograph with them. We went to Louisville, Kentucky; we went to downstate Illinois; we went to the South Side of Chicago; sometimes, when we went far away we took sleeping bags and we arranged sort of temporary housing in various places. And when it was on the South Side of Chicago, we'd all just go home and then meet there at the factory the next day. And three faculty teaching eight students; each of us had our own different area. Jim Newberry, the chair at that time, his area was symbolist art. And so actually, he didn't usually go on the shooting. Barry and I did most of the taking the people on the field trips. This class went on field trips every two weeks, but in the off-week we would meet and just have six to eight hours of visual stimulation: movies, slides, films, things that seem to be related to the idea of figure and environment, stimulating sessions. It was a tremendously good experience. And many of the people in that class have gone on to do wonderful things. Perhaps one of our most famous graduates was Ruth Thorne-Thompson, who was an undergraduate in that class- everyone was undergraduate then- was a student at that time in that Figure and Environment class. That kind of thing that's just a great idea: we have three people, we've got different talents, different abilities, let's put us together and see what happens. And what happened is wonderful. So, that kind of thing happened a lot. There was not the kind of bureaucracy and need for curriculum and textbooks and so on that are, you know, now are very much a part of the school.

So, becoming- as you say -more of a regular college, but do you think that, could what Columbia was in the late '60s, early '70s, through the '70s, could that be recreated or was that a product of its time? You know, did that happen just at that point in history or. .

Some things we can't go back to. I mean, part of this paper business is really what all schools need for checks and balances. You know, there are teachers who are ill prepared and one of the things about all this paperwork, it makes sure that everyone's sort of on the same professional level of teaching.

But I think the institution has changed its nature and wants to be a different kind of school than it wanted to be then. In the '70s, the model that I heard about, the one that we all talked about, was like Black Mountain. Black Mountain was a school that was in existence probably in the '50s in North Carolina: Joseph Albers, Annie Albers, John Cage, people like that and so many others taught there. It was a real workshop where the faculty were working on their own work all the time. And students came-again, open admissions- students came and worked as aides in the studios with faculty. There was a real intimate relationship between doing, learning, and teaching.

That required people of high motivation and usually some life experience. That is to say, they weren't eighteen-year-olds straight out of college. They were people who had been somewhere and were coming to college with a passion for something, passion for learning. And a passion, also, usually, to change their lives. So, we would occasionally have young people but typically our students were older than they are now. And they came in with a lot of drive. Now, the institution-for a million reasons, some of which I think are bad reasons and some of which I suspect are normal reasons-has chosen to be much more of a regular four-year college, recruiting out of high school. And an open admissions school that recruits out of high school is very frequently going to get not the strongest students. In the early '70s, and probably through the '80s or part of the '80s at least, we might have had students who'd test poorly-and yet we didn't have testing then, no one even asked about ACT or SAT-but people, you could tell, had alternative learning styles. And yet, because

they have a passion and a deep motivation, this never held them back; or it would hold them back in some areas, but usually not the ones they were choosing to study in depth. Now, the institution has chosen to not make that significant. Part of our student body, in fact, as I understand it, there's been an initiative away from transfer students. One of the pleasures in teaching is often the transfer students: People come in and they're here because they now know what they want to do. And you're excited to have transfer students in a class. And, as I understand it, the institution is doing very little to encourage transfer students, very little to-in fact, purposefully-is designing a school that's made for zero freshmen, which is a horrible term and I wish they would come up with something else. But in any case, entry level, not been to college before students. Well, they're not going to be able to produce that intense, highly motivated learning that was characteristic of the school in the '70s.

Suzanne Cohan Lange

'The other thing about this place is there were always parties'

Going back to when you first came, who are some of the people that perhaps you remember the most, whether it be students or peers?

You mean like Louis Silverstein? Is he gonna read this? Eventually, I would imagine.

I remember that, such a different place. Columbia was started by '30s radicals and '60s radicals. And if you weren't one or the other what the hell were you doing here? Luckily, I had marched in Selma. Because one of the first questions they asked was, "Were you in Selma?" And the answer was yes, thank God.

Really?

Oh sure. If you weren't, why weren't you? I mean, Bert's hair was still real long and Lou had just moved from being Dean to being Chairman of Liberal Education, if it was even called that at the time.

And I remember having an inter-view with Lou where I was so astounded that he still had his conscientious objector, I want to say, it was like a plaque, if you will, mounted on the wall, you know.

And this was '80. We're not talking '65 here, this is 1980, fifteen years later and he still had that hanging on the wall and so I thought, "Well, this is a very hip place." What was it like? It was that one building and the Dance Center, which we did not own but we rented. So one of the, there was Shirley of course, Sheldon was brand new, he was hired the same year I was. And I don't know where he had classes, I don't know where he was. But I know that they had the Dance Center. And Zafra ran Science, Lya was the Dean, Mike was at the end of the hall, Pearl Cristol wrote everybody's paychecks and Peggy O'Grady took care of, you know, money from the kids, she was the Bursar. And I was always calling her and saying, "Peggy, can we just pay like a dollar down and a dollar a week for the rest of our lives?" And she'd say, "Oh

Suzanne, send them down." You know, it had the quality of a very small town. Kind of a mom and pop grocery store where everybody knew everybody. And let's see, Bill Russo was of course here, he was one of the originals, and Tony Loeb, who else? John Mulvany had been there a year so he really disliked me instantly, upon sight, yeah. We won't get into that. I remember sitting in the hall and talking to one of his faculty who said that, she said, "Oh, your program sounds so interesting, I think I'll take it." And he happened to be walking by and he just said, "I forbid it, it's a bunch of sandbox arts and crafts." And it was like, "Excuse me, who are you?" You know who he was, but anyway, what else? The janitor, Jake, Jake the janitor and Mike were inseparable, they were dear, dear friends, had been for years.

Always sort of running up and down the halls together. Bert, Bert Gall was always in charge of bricks and mortar, always. Before he became the Provost he was just, you know, sort of Vice-President in charge of everything. And his brother, Gerry Gall, was in charge of Printing Services. So if you wanted to have a poster done or something like that you went to Gerry Gall. And I remember the first word Gerry Gall would say, to any question, which is pretty much the first word that Bert Gall says as well, he answers, "No." And so we assumed that that was probably the first thing they learned from their parents which was, "No." But then they would do it, you know. I think it took Bert and Mike, it probably took a couple of years before they decided I was OK, you know, one of the guys. But I suspect that's the same in all places. I remember once Mike calling and saying, "What is it you people do? I don't know enough about this program. Send me stuff!" So it was like, OK, so I started sending things left and right. And then he had this wonderful open door policy so that if you went by his office and his door was open and you could stick your head in and there was nobody sitting there, you just sort of walked in, plopped down, and said, "I have this idea. What do you think?" Well I have to tell you, it's not like that anymore. But I didn't know that when Dr. Duff came on board. I was very naive. I had been so used to the plopping down approach with Mike that one day, right after Dr. Duff came on board, I walked by, there was nobody in so I came in, I plopped myself down and said, "Hi. My name..." And I had this good idea for the Book and Paper Center. And, you know, I ran the whole idea by him. He just sat there and he went, "Cohan-Lange who are you, what are you doing here? Don't you people have committees, structures for these stupid things? This is just not the way things should be done." So I realized that it was going to be a different place.

But I had been at the State of Illinois and then I had been at the University of Illinois. So this place was a piece of cake; are you kidding? Compared to both of those institutions this was so small and warm and friendly that when- ever you need it you picked up the phone, you called one of two people. The answer was either yes or no or how to get it. So it was none of the sort of layers of bureaucracy that I had to file through at the University of Illinois, Circle or the State Office of Education, Springfield where, you know that place. So, for me, I had died and gone to heaven. It was just the greatest thing in the whole wide world, you know? And to a greater or lesser degree it still is. You know, I mean, there's more levels, there's more layers, there's more paper, dear God, we've got paper out the kazoo. The students are still wonderful, the faculty, I have fabulous faculty; a lot of them are the same ones that I had before. The staff at Columbia's great. Morale is probably different than it was. I think that, I don't know, because you see the whole P Fac thing, I mean, times have changed so much and there's so many more layers.

But because I had access to those two people, the dean and the President, I always thought it was the greatest thing since sliced bread. The other thing about this place is there were always parties.

Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday there was a party. There was a party for this one and for that one. You couldn't have three people in a room without a party and I loved that. When I was at Illinois, I had been there for eight years and there was one party and I gave it, OK? I mean, that was the difference between a state school where nobody knew their name or cared and a place like

Columbia, where somebody was going into the hospital or getting out of the hospital or getting married or getting divorced..

Jacob Caref

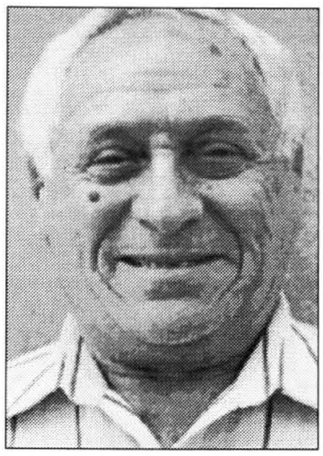
'For fifteen dollars, I made a sink'

Oh! What were you doing there, what kind of work were you doing? I was doing the carpentry, cabinets, the basement, to finish the basement in 1959. And then in 1964, a woman recommended me-the wife of Bud Salk. I was working there by them, in their house. And she recommended me to-she recommended me to Mike Alexandroff, and Mike Alexandroff, they recommended me... [He has a] college, it was at 504 West Ohio Street, he had a job to do, something. And so I went there, and that was 1964, I think. And I did a job... and a couple weeks later - and a week later I did another job, she called me, and another job, they called me there. And in '66 or '67 I started, he called me in and told me, he offered me a job, I should work steady for him. He says, "You are getting exploited anyway, let me, I exploit you," he said. And I liked the way he said it, you know? I liked very much the way he said it. "You're getting exploited anyway." Men can be very nice to men and just-it magnified me, [it was work], you know. And we became very friendly when I start to work steady.

So tell me about these jobs you did before, what kind of jobs?

I did a job, a good job was for the television studio. I did backdrops for the television studio. There was-at that time was the Chairman from Television was Thaine Lyman. Thaine Lyman, wonderful person. He used to work for WGN, engineer, the main engineer. When he used to teach it was all day here from seven o'clock in the morning 'til the evening. Thaine Lyman, very dedicated man.

At that time it was very-I don't know... all the people was working at that time, in the beginning, from '64, all dedicated: [There] was Bob Edmonds, Film Chairman, really dedicated. Same thing, he was there all that year. [God bless Sonati Joseardi.] At that time



there was a-at that time, DeKovic was Photo, then Newberry took over in '67 and I build the first-the Photo started, I build two little rooms. Not two, one room, three feet by three feet. And I went on Maxwell Street and got a sink where the women washing clothes, I call this a sink like that, I got it for something, for ten dollars, but the College didn't got no money, you know. And I did the plumbing, I did-from three foot by three foot, that start the photo. And in '68 I did already Photo, I did for...when I started, it was 170 students that day. That's all, that used to be it. And then a couple years later it was already two thousand, over two thousand. And I built, the Photo was very big, the photo, Newberry was, and I built darkrooms, and still the [traps] for the darkrooms, still now, what all the contractors are doing, they are doing my copy, they copied everything from me what I did. And by the way, all these things what I made for Photo was from plywood. Plywood sinks, and I get marine, marine-how you call this? Varnish, marine varnish, and fiberglass, in the corner I put in fiberglass. Not one thing was leaking, from plywood. Instead of a sink what used to cost, that time, five, six hundred dollars, I made a sink for two hundred dollars.

Wow. For fifteen dollars, I made a sink. With two by fours, that was good at that time. What else I have to say is that all the people that worked from the beginning was very dedicated. I built the first, I mentioned the photo, the same thing I built for the film, I built rooms, the same thing for holding the film, all the boxes for the film; cabinets and everything. I was very busy. There was a Dance Center; we are quite-oh yeah, I forgot, we had a building on School Street and Sheffield, the Theater, Theater/Music. I remember-and that must have been in I don't know, maybe '71, I don't remember exactly the year what it was. But I remember in the theater, I used to do the props for the theater. And I remember I built a stage, we showed the stage...

That's nothing yet. I remember another job in Dance Center, they brought in material on Wednesday, noontime. We supposed to build risers for the Dance Center, we got bigger, for Shirley Mordine. And they brought in the plywood, there was a lot of plywood maybe fifty sheets, or who knows, I don't remember, anyway, the risers for the chairs for a couple other chairs, risers. They brought the material Wednesday noontime, I unload it and I start to work Wednesday. I worked Wednesday all that day, Wednesday all night, Thursday all day, Thursday all night; by Friday, one o'clock, was done the job. But the concert was Friday night, and I told them we'll do it.

So you could get things done. You had to work pretty long hours sometimes but you could get it done.

That's right. I worked very long hours. I must mention one thing what the, I think, that was in '67. We added three classrooms; Mr. Alexandroff didn't have money to do it, he called me up, "What will we do?" I said, "Mike, I'll tell you what," it was after the divorce, my divorce at the time. The job, material and labor I got it, [we put the plated walls], not the canvas we put on the walls, that cost a lot of money. And the plasterboard, and the material, the wood, the doors, the windows to cover up, to darken out, I figured out it was about twelve thousand dollars. He says, "I don't have nothing, what can you do?" I say, "You know what?" I had five thousand dollars, six thousand, and I took my insurance policy, borrowed money from the kids, I gave it the insurance policies and I borrowed six thousand dollars.

When I got-and Mr. Alexandroff gave me an IOU, that was the name. I did the job in March, and [he told me] to come in in October, come in "I'll pay you off," you know. And I came in October and he paid me. He gave me the check, the first check he gave me, he paid me off right away. So I remember, but the other job, it was eleven or twelve thousand dollars he gave me. I don't know why he gave me an IOU eleven thousand dollars, that sounded strange that, you know, lots of money the College. What is now eleven, I don't believe it but I can see now that people can't understand-I can understand it, you know, the success to what we can contribute. The time, I think, the time played the biggest role, I think.

John Mulvaney

'We've become very old fashioned, stultified'

"I don't think... I think that open admissions needs-open admissions for 30-year-olds, 35-year-olds, that's one thing, because they're coming in with life experience and work experience. It's a lot different than a 17-year-old or an 18-year-old student who's just blown off high school."

Can you describe the atmosphere, perhaps, that you found here, what the College was like in the-

Well, the atmosphere was very different at that time. The majority of the students were much older then than the students today. Now they tend to be right out of high school. So these were older students, and they might not have done well, you know, or been motivated, but they'd been out of high school for a years, and went in kind of dead-end jobs, or boring jobs, and really wanted to put a life together, and so this was a tremendous opportunity for them. And that was basically what Columbia College was. Over the years, they had then started to focus and market itself to younger, four-year, full-time students, and so the character of the College has, since then, 1974, changed dramatically. We've become-we now have a traditional college age group. And they're a different group. And in an open admissions environment, many of those younger, right out of high school people tend to be high risk. They're not very well motivated, and so the revolving students has gotten large, and we've just about lost the continuing education people, the older people.

That was my next question: How do you explain that shift or movement away from the older, non-traditional student?

It was our intention, to go after recent high school graduates who are traditional age.

So that was part of the long-term goal. I think it became a goal maybe around the 1980s. You know, the College in success far surpassed any expectations. There was no idea back in 1974, when we were on Ohio Street in rented quarters, that this would become, you know, a place with a 60 million dollar budget at some time, and over 9,000 students. That was never planned for if you would have-I mean, he could never have projected that without sounding like a nut. Because this was also a time of declining college enrollments. The baby boom was over, and colleges over built, and then when the baby boom came to an end, enrollments declined nation-wide, so Columbia is definitely against the prevailing trends of education, in terms of a growing student body. So nobody could have projected the amount of success that the College has had, which shows that that success is based on the fact that we filled a void. And that's been the great strength of Columbia College, filling the void. And I think that the Art Department is an excellent example of that. This is a major, world city.

It has a huge print and design industry. There are no colleges with strong professional programs in design. Columbia College had the flexibility that, overnight, we could just say, "We're gonna do that." And Mike Alexandroff 's genius was that he looked for entrepreneurial people, action-oriented people, who would, you know, act quickly. And he gave tremendous support for doing that. He allowed me to define what the nature of the Art Department would be, and he gave the support necessary to create that. And so what might take years, what you might never be able to accomplish in a college with a long history, we could accomplish in a couple of years here.

Describe that a little bit, maybe your kind of philosophy of education, how that may have changed, or what you did in the classroom, what was available when you first came to...?

Well, my philosophy-one of the reasons that I liked Columbia so much is that I believe education in America was not founded for a leisure class. It was always tied to pragmatic ends. And I really strongly believe that one's economic aspirations are equal to one's spiritual aspirations. You can't have a spiritual life without an economic life. You're too hungry. And most colleges concentrated on the more spiritual aspects of an education, you know, the education for the self, knowing for itself. And so my philosophy was to honor those economic aspirations, to use education to prepare people to gain upward mobility, to go out into the world and through their labor have a satisfactory life. I really believed it, and I still do. And Columbia was very, very open to that use of education, and I hope it will continue to be so.

Has it got more difficult, are there greater challenges, or... What have been some of the various changes made that you've seen?

Well, I think moving to a more traditional age for our student population, you start to mirror more traditional colleges, you know? When I came to Columbia College, the requirements for graduation were 124 credit hours. 48 of them were in Liberal Studies, with no requirements, that you could take anything you want. And 76 hours in anything you wanted also. Well, if you go and read the catalog now, people are required to take certain things. We were really, in the early '70s, we were avant garde, or an alternative to other colleges.

The irony is, is that we very quickly, in the 1980s, then turned around and started running backwards towards the 1950s and the 1940s. And all the other colleges, then, adopted what we were doing then, and have passed us up. I think that, you know, most other colleges in the United States have far, far more advanced curriculums than Columbia now. The required part of the curriculum.

Mm-hmm. And we've become very old fashioned, stultified. We lock students into courses without really honoring what their desires are. And that's what we used to do. The philosophy of the curriculum was that students were the best experts in tailoring an education to their needs. And so there was very little in loco parentis. And that's all turned around now. Every year, we keep on adding more of what they must take, and students have very little control over their education at Columbia now, where at most other colleges, the control students have had over their education has increased dramatically.

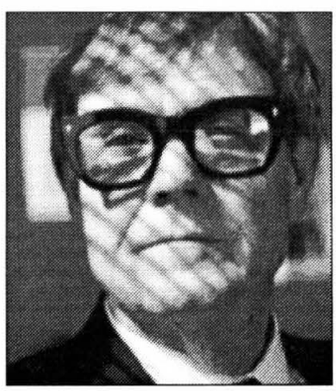
So do you think-and I'm getting ahead of myself-but for the future of the College, are you hopeful that it-and do you want it to become, have a renaissance of being an alternative institution of higher education?

Well, I would like it to have a renaissance. (Laughs) I would like-I think the College needs to question itself. I think it's going on too many unquestioned assumptions. And a lot of them are from the past, but the world has changed. And one of the things that I find disappointing in Columbia, that there is no theoretical thinking in the College about the College, and about the College as it relates to society, as it relates to industry, as it relates to this city.

In the mission statement, and I think as many as I have seen and read, that you know, they talk about the commitment to open admissions. How has the definition of that changed in your tenure?

How has it changed? Dramatically.

Open admissions... [What] I think of Columbia College. In 1974, there were more people that wanted to go to college than there were seats in colleges. And to get into the arts, you had to have a portfolio. Or you had to have experience in dance or theater in high school. You also had to have a good grade point average. If you overcame many barriers, you could be there. And to things like film and television, nobody had majors in those



then. So Columbia's open admissions, one of the components of it that we've totally forgotten, is that you didn't need a portfolio, you didn't need prior experience in the arts. That component has been forgotten, because we don't get older people anymore, we get all young people. So open admissions has just come to mean "If you failed everyplace else, you can get in." And we're taking in too many people. So I believe that open admissions has become unlimited admissions. That higher education has simply become longer education. And that then through grade inflation, we use grades as a way of retaining students. We give them good grades. If you look at the Compass test scores of our students this fall, you'll see large numbers of them are below eighth grade in reading, math, and writing, a large number below sixth grade. And yet, the most frequently given grade in Columbia, I think, is an A. So go figure that one. How are people at sixth grade, seventh grade level getting As for supposed college level work? What has happened, I think, is that the chief beneficiary to the College became faculty and they stay. People who work here and pay their mortgage.

I don't think... I think that open admissions needs-open admissions for 30 year olds, 35 year olds, that's one thing, because they're coming in with life experience and work experience. It's a lot different than a 17 year old or an 18 year old student who's just blown off high school. And that's what we're getting, and that's [where we're an open admissions school.] And I think that that should be closed. I think we really need a more responsible admissions policy.

Eric May

'I felt that I had walked into a college that had been invented just for me'

What was best about Mirron Alexandroff? Just very lively and he would come in and say things like, oh, he would come in and start talking about art in the high-end but also how that would relate or how that would shake down to art and things like advertising art. The thing that hit me when I came here was, you know, suddenly I was coming from a traditional high school, I was suddenly in an arts and communications environment, which was perfectly suited to my sensibilities. You know, I felt, as I've said a couple of times in the past publicly, that I felt that I had walked into a college that had been invented just for me. I was amazed after being in high school for four years and not fitting in, to suddenly be in a place where I felt so incredibly comfortable.

Where they were teaching things that I was interested in. The College, of course, was over on Lake Shore Drive at the time, at 540 North Lake Shore Drive, which is now condos. It didn't even have every floor in the building. And they had a white haired guy, I forget his name, who used to run the front elevator. It was one of those old fashioned elevators you'd get on and the guy would ask you what floor you wanted to take you up. Most of the classes I believe, at that time, were on the fourth floor. And you had to walk... The great thing about the College at the time when I was here, one of the great things, is that to get to one part of the College you had to walk through another part. So if you came in through the side door by the parking lot, that was on Grand Avenue, you had to walk through the Photo Department, Theater classes, the Film Department. And then hang a right down a hallway if you were going to go up to another floor, which took you past where some of the art and drawing classes were held. And past a little room there was a student lounge. And as a result, you got to walk through almost the whole school, the kind of thing you can't do now simply because the College is so large. And the result of that is you got a real sense of kind of a more community; again, the College was much smaller then than it is now. But a lot of times you would see things going on in another department and that would kind of spark your interest.

I took a number of film tech classes when I was a student, Film Tech I, Film Tech II, took Screenwriting I, Screenwriting II, directing classes, etcetera. Although I liked movies, I had no idea of doing anything in film when I came to Columbia. Every time I would walk by the film cage all of the students were standing around laughing and enjoying themselves, and they looked as if they were having a really good time. So I said well yeah, OK, and sometimes I'd see them out and around... you know, outside the school and they'd be shooting film and this looked very enjoyable. And so I decided to take some film classes, you know, well, OK, I'll try this and see what happens. As it wound up I ended up taking a lot of film classes, and of course I was taking fiction writing classes the whole time I was here. Then one day I was in the hallway and I walked by the radio, the College's radio station, in one room at that time, and the radio thing was all in the house, is was closed circuit. And these guys looked like they were having fun too, and so I signed up for a radio class. I was a disc jockey on the radio station for about three years. And so I got a real mixed-and I say mixed in the best possible sense of the word-education when I was here.

Did you have to do a wide variety of classes like this?

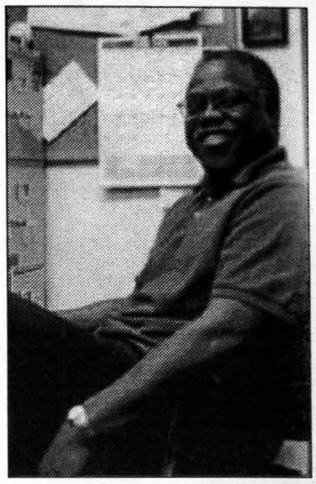
No, that was just my choice. You know, the College was smaller, the offerings were not nearly as extensive as they are now. I don't want to give the impression that somehow that less was more. The fact is the students at Columbia College today are getting a much wider, deeper, more in-depth education than I got. Sometimes when I walk through the College, when I go into the library, you know, when I walk by a computer lab, when I go into the Animation Department and the digital imaging and other parts, when I see the wide variety of technological things available to people in Radio/Sound and the TV and Film Departments, I'm very envious. Because I'm like boy, I wish we'd had some of this stuff when I was a student here. But one good thing, because there were fewer prereqs, you could move around a little bit easier from department to department. It was not unheard of for students really to come to Columbia to try and figure out what it is they wanted to do. And it wasn't unusual for a student doing one thing and then discover that they were really good at doing something else that they had no idea they were good at. That was an advantage at the time.

You were able to move about a little easier between departments. Sometimes it's possible now, though I sometimes I think students don't take advantage of that kind of a thing, that kind of a trying something over here, something over there, something over here. To see if there is something else out there that they might be good at. Because I enjoyed my film classes, I enjoyed my radio classes very much.

Neither one of those things were things that I had come here planning to do, and all of them were things that helped me later, along with my fiction writing classes, particularly when I became a newspaper reporter later. So, I was able to draw upon a lot of the arts and communication classes that I had taken. I also took some TV classes, television production classes, and of course I was taking some journalism writing classes as well. The Journalism Department then wasn't nearly as deep and wide as it is now. You look at the Journalism Department now and then and night and day doesn't even begin to cover it, how much more comprehensive and in depth the Journalism Department has become and also this department as well, the Fiction Department.

This is an open admissions college and always has been. Has the meaning of that, what's the meaning of that? Has it changed? The meaning is that it guarantees you're gonna have a good mix of people. It also means you're going to have an educational outlet for those students who, for any number of reasons, may not have excelled in high school. And there are often times many reasons why those kind of things come about. Sometimes students don't excel in high school because they're bored stiff, you know, they're just bored stiff and they haven't been challenged in years. And they're just kind of, you know, they're punching their ticket and "Get me out of here" kind of a deal. I think it's, again, it goes right to the heart of what the College is about, that we-and it's this deal where we're gonna take, we're interested in getting people who are interested in the arts and communications regardless of where they come from and their socioeconomic structure. And it, like I say, it guarantees a mix which is good for all students, regardless of what socioeconomic level they're coming from. You know, in a way, keeps the College vital and vibrant in a way that not being an open admissions college would not allow them, not allow it to do. And, of course, being an open admissions college presents a number of challenges.

You know, you saw, certain situations you don't have to deal with if you just say, "The only people we're gonna let in are folks who have a grade point average this high, who have SAT scores this high, or GRE," you know, what-ever, "And the SAT scores are, whatever, this high and we're not gonna take anybody who falls below that level." But there's an incredible leveling that goes on, you know, and we get students who come here precisely because they went to-I'm not gonna name names-but they went to very tradition-bound colleges and felt that sense of that leveling. We have teachers who have... because they were teaching at other places where they felt there was this leveling, you know, of one type of student coming through the door again and again and again; and who were all good at one thing, but weren't much good at other things, you know, in terms of how much they would allow themselves to



be imaginatively, you know.

So, you know, while open admissions will always present certain things, situations that the College is gonna have to deal with, I think the upside of it is so great that there should be no question that open admissions should be retained and that whatever open admissions presents for us, in terms of how the faculty and the administration has to deal with that situation; one of the things that Columbia College is real good at is adapting to whatever challenge it has to face. I mean, I've been associated in one way or another with this College for twenty-seven years. And when you look at where it was in 1971 when I came here and where it is now, I mean, this is one of the greatest success stories in higher education in the history of this country. And it is precisely because we are so focused on what is good for our students, and we are so imaginative about how we go about addressing what we need to address here at this College. And so I don't have, there's no doubt in my mind that whatever gets thrown our way, Columbia College is gonna be able to deal with it. Because that's why we're a college with, you know, eight thousand plus students now, you know. I mean, that growth hasn't happened by mirrors, it isn't being done with smoke and mirrors, it's because we give an education to people that addresses what they need. And that's why people come here and, you know, and continue to come here over the years.

Zafra Lehrman

'We need somebody to teach science there'

When you came to Columbia College and what were the circumstances or individual or individuals that brought you here?

I came to Columbia College in the Fall of 1977, and it was a result of Columbia being committed to a liberal arts college in the '70s. They barely had a course in science or about science. I taught with a part-time teacher-excellent-by the name of Dr. Jukowski, the students called him "Ski".

But Mike Alexandroff was the President, he was a visionary as you know, who envisioned the situation that we need to have more science for Columbia students. So he sent letters around to different people that he's looking for this magic scientist, magic teacher to come to Columbia and deal with science at Columbia College. And in his letter he looked not for a person that knew the science but to look for a person that was involved in different issues, social issues and cared about society. And my name came up in different places. Then he gave my name to Louis Silverstein that was, by that stage, the Dean of the College. I remember the time I came, everybody was in the 600 Building and I said, "This was the real base." So, I remember very well getting a call to come for an inter-view and I came. I lived in Evanston and I was at Northwestern. But Northwestern people rarely go to Chicago; it was easier to go to London because they did it more often. And I got dressed up with a suit and I came down for the interview and I walked in to the second floor and I said, "I'm here to see the dean." So they told me, "Sit down." While I was sitting down, I wasn't sure where I came, because before that I was at the Wrightford Institute of Science, I was at Cornell University, and by that stage I was at Northwestern. In all my career I'd never seen something like that. So I thought I got somebody playing a trick on me and it's really not a college but something else. And I was holding my resume and I was just looking at the people that were walking and I wasn't... that we were suppose... So immediately I brought all the things back and started looking around me to make up my mind where I am. So, not being a religious person, I thought, "I am in a religious place," because I saw Moses walking through the corridor. He had long white hair, he had a huge white beard and big black eyebrows. And I looked through the window to Michigan Lake because I was sure, where is the lake being divided and so people could cross it? But I saw him walking without doing this act. But I didn't have any doubt that it's Moses. But two seconds before him came Jesus. And he was very, very skinny with hair to his bottom, with a

goatee; exactly Jesus. And I want you to know that Moses was born in Egypt but it's not too far from Israel so I know this culture. But Jesus was born in Israel, he was born in Israel so I recognized him. And he was walking and he had the long chain with three hundred keys hanging and therefore he couldn't walk straight, he was so skinny. You know, Jesus there wasn't fed a lot. So he was bending over and he followed Moses. So I said, "At least they get along here." So it was very nice.

After forty-five minutes of waiting I decided to find out where is the dean. So I was told, "He will show up." So I already made up my mind about this place but I thought, "What will come after that? Mohammed?" So I was waiting for Mohammed but he didn't show up. And the door opened and a man with long hair, pink glasses, purple embroidered shirt, and a ring on each finger opened the door. And I said, "This could not be Mohammed. Mohammed wouldn't be dressed like that," because I know how the Muslims dress. So I looked at him and I said, "Oh," he said, "Please come in." And I said, "Oh, no. I'm waiting to see the dean." And he said, "I'm the dean." And I said, "Uh? OK." So I came in and I said, "Yeah." But I stayed there. And he said to me, "We just came from"-till that minute, I knew that only the church was...The mosques and the synagogues didn't have retreat, only churches. So I said, "This is a college, a hundred percent. They just came from a retreat." So he tells me about this retreat and I listen and he said, "Where's your resume?" And I give him the resume and he said, "I'm the Dean, but I'm stepping down as the Dean and I'm going to be the Chairman of the Department of Life Arts and Liberal Education. And we need somebody to teach science there.