

## Eric May

**We're interviewing Eric May on the twentieth, if I remember correctly, of March, 1998. It's the nineteenth.**

**The nineteenth, oh, OK, thank you. So I wonder if we could start by—maybe you could tell me about how you first came to Columbia?**

Well, I first came to Columbia as a student fresh out of high school. In the Fall of 1971, I had attended South Shore High School, which is located in South Shore at Seventy-sixth and Constance Avenue. And the high school added a new building about, oh, I'd say about 1969, '68, '69. And part of that new building included a photo lab, which was unusual among Chicago high schools. It was, I mean, it wasn't a corner of the high school that they'd say, "OK, let's put a photo lab in here." It was a section of the high school that, in the original blueprints, had been designed to be a photo lab.

**Wow.**

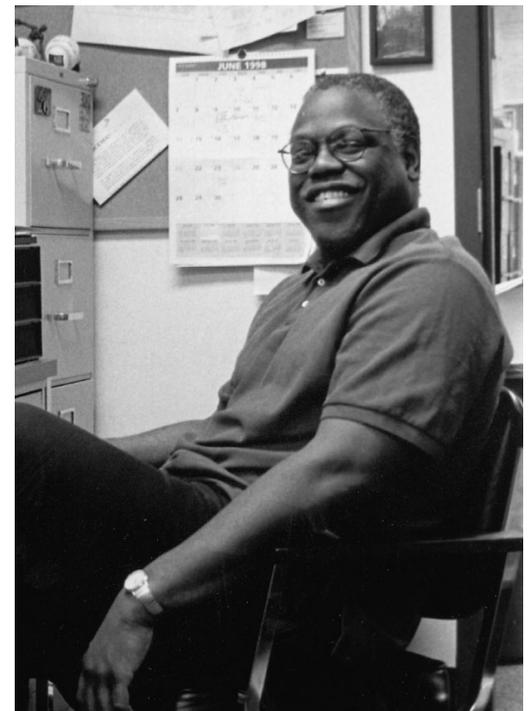
We had a full working photo lab. We had, like, five rooms in which we could load and develop film. We had a huge room for shooting negatives, for printing. It was a very modern facility for its time. We had wonderful tubs behind each print station where you had developer and stop bath and the whole deal. And for many years South Shore High School annually won photography contests in Chicago, in part because of the facilities and in part because of the teachers they had there. The Board of Education had hired a couple of fellows to come in and teach photography. One of their names

was Pershing Anderson, who I see from time to time, and he's still teaching in the Chicago public schools. Another fellow was a guy named Jerry Aronson. And, of course, this was my senior year, you know, starting in the Fall of 1970, my senior year and I'm thinking about where I'm going to college. I was thinking about going to Southern Illinois and then Jerry came in one day; they had also taught at Columbia College. So, Jerry mentioned that well, you know, you might want to check out Columbia College here in the city. I had never heard of Columbia College before Jerry mentioned it to me. And when I checked into it, in some ways it was more appealing. When I looked into going to Southern Illinois, for lack of better thing to major in, I decided I was going to major in journalism. I had been on the high school paper at South Shore High School. Like a lot of kids that age I really didn't know what I wanted to do, but I figured I had to declare something. And when I looked at Southern Illinois' kind of like the track you were on, you wouldn't get into a journalism class until your junior year. You had to take all of this, prereq this, prereq that. So you didn't get anywhere near a journalism class until your third year down there. And when I looked at Columbia College, you could take some journalism classes right in your very first semester. I was also attracted to some of the other arts and communication things that they were offering, and it was here in the city. Frankly, I was, at that age—I mean, a lot of times kids that age are very eager to get out of the house. I had some trepidation about it. I had a sense that at some

level I realized I wasn't ready to go away from home and to the kind of atmosphere where I would have almost no supervision whatsoever. I envisioned that if I didn't have somebody there saying, "Eric, get up," in the morning, I probably wouldn't. And when I look back on it I think that was a very wise decision, because at that time I don't think I was ready to go away to school. So, the fact that Columbia was here in Chicago was very attractive to me. I went on ahead and applied here. At the time Columbia College was not accredited, and so I kind of had to make the pitch to my parents about allowing me to go to a college that was not accredited

**Did they raise this issue or did you?**

Yeah, they raised it. You know, I was their oldest child, the oldest of five, I was their first born. This is now the culmination of all their hopes and dreams, that their chil-



dren are going to go away to college, and I am the first one to do this and now I'm saying I want to go to a college that's not accredited. For my father especially this is like, well, what do you want to do, and I said, "Well, maybe I want to be a reporter, a newspaper reporter or something like that." Well, he said OK and my mother liked the idea that I wasn't going to be going away, and that probably helped sell it. So, I came to Columbia in the Fall of 1971. That first Fall I took a Photo I class from Brian Katz, who was here at the time. I don't know how long Brian had been here before I came in the Fall. That year I took a Writing Story Workshop method class, that semester. And I think I took an art class with a fellow named Harry Bouras, who was quite a character. He taught art classes and he taught aesthetics. He was quite a character, quite a... You had to see Harry. He's a, Harry's since past gone, but he was quite a dynamic and engaging and fun...

**What was best about him?**

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.

**So, Journalism is taught separately from Fiction?**

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, it was a separate entity, it was a separate entity, but it was what I had come here, supposedly, to major in, but I very quickly got near these other things. The fiction writing in particular, film and radio, that really began to get a hold of me at an imaginative way and so I kind of shifted to that.

**Tell me about the teaching a little bit. Do you think the teaching is unique, innovative?**

Yeah, because it was kind of a place—at the time, Columbia College when I was here when I was a student—was kind of a place where the counter culture has kind of gotten a hold of the ranks and power. So, it was not traditional in just about every way imaginable. Of course, you know, much to Mike Alexandroff's credit, in envisioning the College like that. Though, you know, counterculture is not the first thing that would leap to mind if you ever saw Mike Alexandroff, but that's kind of what had happened here, you know. For a while, people were allowed to come in and try new things, innovative things. You know, the fiction writing classes, the writing classes that I took here, you know, suddenly instead of an instructor standing in front of the classroom and giving us some theme we had to write a paper on, we were suddenly being, not only being given the permission but actively, vigorously encouraged to draw upon our sense of story, our sense of voice, what was strongest for us out of our own positive experience and what was strongest for us imaginatively, without any reign being put on. And where suddenly my writing classes were being talked and being in a dramatic context. You know, I got into my Film Tech I class and,

you know. I remember Mike Rabiger standing in front of the class going, "This is a camera." And we spent the first day figuring out how to load the film into the camera and how to change the film in the film bag and then the next day we're out shooting film, you know, And there was sort of this whole thing across the board of, "Let's get the students immersed as quickly as we can into what it is they're trying to learn." As opposed to putting three aesthetic courses before, the aesthetic cart before the horse, you know. Where you have to take all of this and all of this and all of this and all of this and all of this before you can even hope to get your hands on a TV camera, you know, aim it at anything. You know, the radio classes, you know. The first day of my Radio I class I walk in and Al Parker's there and we have a room of Radio I students, basically, and they had a blue studio. And then he says, "OK, this is what I want you to do. Everyone's gonna go in and take a turn doing a one minute commercial. It can be on anything you want, you know. Just scribble some notes to yourself..."

Unbeknownst to Al or anyone else in the class, my brothers and I had imaginary baseball leagues when we were kids. And we used to take turns broadcasting each other's games, you know. And so I had the HFC Household Finance commercial down cold, which I had encouraged, you know, White Sox broadcaster Bob Elton do any number of times during White Sox games in which I had memorized, you know, from the times when I would, my brothers and I were playing this imaginary baseball broadcast. So I walked in and did this HFC

commercial, which I think was about four seconds short of a minute—something like that. And I walked out of the room; it was dead silence. And Al was sitting there and he said, “Well, that’s pretty much how you were supposed to do it. You’re about four seconds short and you want to hit that minute mark right on the head, but it’s better to be short than to go a little over.” And I didn’t find out until later through one of my classmates, I don’t now where she is now, her name is Susan Garvin. This was like the next semester, actually, I was taking Radio II and Susan said, “Yeah, you know, we really hated you. We thought you were, we thought Al was trying to pull a fast one and he brought some ringer in. And then when we found out you weren’t a ringer, well, then we really didn’t like you.” And I was totally oblivious to any of this, you know. But it was wonderful because, you know, it was one of the first times of my life that I had walked into any kind of a classroom and just aced something right off the bat. You know, I had gone through but that ain’t never happened. You know, I’ve walked into a high school class and get a home run my first time. And I was, you know, I was quite happy. It may be the reason that I didn’t notice the looks that could peel paint from the other people in the room.

**Who were some of the students? What was the student population like?**

Well, the student population at the time was mostly from the city. And a mix racially, though the major mix was black and white. The College didn’t have nearly the Hispanic student body that it has

now or the Asian student body that it has now. A lot of long hair, a lot of bellbottom jeans, a lot of army jackets. I mean, we didn’t even use terms like freshman or sophomore or junior or senior, I mean, that was considered to be so incredibly, you know, this was Columbia College. We didn’t talk about ourselves in that kind of a traditional, you know, I can’t remember anyone saying, “Well, I’m a freshman. Oh, this is my first year here. This is my second year here.” The tuition, of course, was, you know, as it was in all colleges, it was like, about seven hundred bucks a semester, which means that you could, you know, you could wait tables and, of course, there were a lot more grants that the government made available that they don’t make available to students anymore. It was easier and less cumbersome to get a grant, you know, it was possible at that time to come in fairly late in the summer, almost to the Fall, and apply for something like a Pell Grant or something like that, and you stood a chance of getting it. Now, you know, the grant process is much more involved and you have to have a lot more lead time, etc. So there was a kind of, you know, with the students there was this—and I think we all felt this sense of, kind of, liberation of being in this. We, you know, it was a school with a lot of artistic people in it, and a lot of them had been in situations in high schools where they didn’t fit, you know. They were the painters and the writers and the musicians and the people who saw things visually and whatnot and suddenly, it was like suddenly, we were all kind of like unchained. My memory of it as a student is of the College being an incredibly congenial place among, as far as the students getting along with each other and a pleasant place to come

to and with a very relaxed atmosphere.

**Did students hang out with each other a lot? You mentioned the student lounge and...**

Well yeah, it was just a small room. We’re talking about a small room with like a couple of, you know, sofa chairs and a couch. I know there were students who hung out with each other, you know, outside of school; particularly if they were students, you know, particularly things like theater and film, which are such collaborative disciplines. So, I mean, the first students I really, really hung out with were students I had film classes with, because it’s such a collaborative effort. You can’t make a film by yourself. You know, you’ve got to make it with a bunch of other people, and it just naturally lends itself—if you’re going to be in any way successful, even as a student in doing this to this kind of collaborative group, kind of a, kind of a thing.

**So you’re taking a whole bunch of classes here. Did you settle on...**

Well, I eventually settled on writing as the thing that, as I said, I was taking writing classes the whole time. I would shift sometimes from one thing to another, but I was taking writing classes the whole time and really beginning to see that that was an area where I had a real talent. I mean, I thought I, I mean I had talent for other things, but it was in the writing where I felt the greatest sense of fulfillment, greatest sense of, you know, having some sort of vision of things and having it come out, kind of, pretty close to what I was, what I, you know, what probably wound up on the page was pretty close to the way I had envisioned it

in my head. And I also began to realize that, just in terms of my temperament, that writing, fiction writing, I was better suited for in some ways than filmmaking. Since, because you have, you know, when you're writing fiction you are in control, you know, of everything. As I said, film is a very collaborative discipline. I didn't like that, you know, I didn't like the not having control so much. I began to find that in some ways, fiction writing was just better suited for me in terms of my temperament. And that I could make, as I said, my artistic vision—and I hate to use a word that may sound pretentious—but, you know, that I could make what I visualized in my mind's eye, I get could get to that quicker and clearer writing than I could, let's say, in making a film. So I decided to go ahead and do that.

I didn't go into radio broadcasting because, frankly, I didn't feel that there was going to be an opportunity for me to have the kind of freedom that I had as a disc jockey here at Columbia College where you could pretty much play whatever you wanted. You know, I had, basically, a freeform show. You know, I would come in and I would play Beethoven and the Supremes and Eric Clapton and one day I came in and I just did two hours of Big Band music from the '30s and '40s, you know. And, basically, there was no program format. Each disc jockey figured out whatever he or she wanted to do—and it was mostly hes, very few women at that time. And whatever you wanted to do, if you wanted to do a Top 40 show—there were folks who did want to do that—that's what they did, you know. And, you know, you're not gonna get that kind of freedom at very many radio

stations. And I knew the reality of that and I said, well, then I don't know how much fun that would be if I couldn't do that. Of course WXRT was, at that point, beginning to get going but they were only on for about two or three hours an evening at that time when I graduated in '75. So I kind of decided not to go into radio broadcasting for that reason.

**So, you graduated in what year?**  
1975, June of '75. Again, back in the time when a lot of students graduated in four years. You know, which has become much harder because of a number of factors: grants and students having to work and what have you, you know. Not every student can do that any more. For some students it's just not a possibility.

**Were there many students that you knew who took a few courses and decided that was what they wanted and...**  
Some students did, you know?

**...take courses and gave up or...**  
No. I mean, they were students who, you know, came here, took radio classes, and got a job, you know? And so they took the job, you know. Or they were, you know, in something and then got hired doing something. You know, or they got hired at a commercial film studio here in Chicago and so they took the job, you know. So, I mean, that was not unheard of, you know. I think that there's always been a component of students here who come here to get the education and when they get the education that will allow them to go, career-wise, to the next level, and that's what they do. And sometimes, that's not recognized as a valuable education as well—that if you just pinch

everything on how many students you graduated, which is, you know, not belittling or putting down that as important—but you have to realize that for any college there is also that component of students who are coming there for a specific set of knowledge that is going to help them move into a career they want to move into. And when they get that they're gonna leave, you know. Not because they're dissatisfied, not because they're unhappy, not because they're mad, not because they think they got a lousy education, but just because they learned what they wanted to learn. They wanted to come in and learn how to shoot film and, you know, and they took Film Tech I, Film Tech II, Directing class, Editing class, Lighting class, Sound class, they got it, you know. And they now have the skills to be able to move into something they want to do or to move up in a place where they're already working. So, you know, that... So I was, you know, I was here to get a degree. I was definitely here to get a degree. I did not really seriously entertain the idea of leaving. I was very happy here, I knew I was very happy here. And, so, I mean I would, you know, like most, I won't say most, but it's not unheard of for someone who's a high school senior to be very sick of school. You know, you've been in school since you were five years old and you're like, you're sitting in there, "If I have to say 'Present' one more time I'm gonna scream." And, you know, entertain ideas of joining the service, you know, just for something different; of course, there was a war going on at that time so that kind of dulled that urge. And, but once I got here I was very happy and realized and, you know, some other things happen: you get a little older, you begin to realize that, probably for

me having a college degree was going to be the best thing for me. And certainly in terms of, you know, it was something that I knew was important to my parents, you know. And, so...

**So you graduated in '75?**  
'75.

**What was your graduation like?**  
Small, we had it at the Prudential Building auditorium over on Michigan Avenue and I guess, what is that, Michigan and what, Lake, I believe. And, so it, you know, it was a Friday evening and I don't think there were a hundred people in my graduating class, I might be wrong. Of course, back then, this is the mid 1970s so I was in full disco-esque regalia with, I think I wore a knick-knick shirt and some horrible, beige bellbottom pants and these stack shoes and... I only, the only photograph for me that evening was taken by my father as I walked down the aisle for graduation and, fortunately, I had on, of course, my cap and gown. I am very happy to say that there are no photographs that survived of me in that outfit. And, so, yeah, so I graduated in June of '75. And...

**What went on at graduation then?**  
Pretty much what goes on now, just on a smaller scale. You know it was, people came and they spoke and the valedictorian said a few words, you know, and Mike Alexandroff gave his standard speech that he gave year after year after year after year. And then I went out with my mother and father; they took me out to dinner. And I then had moved out of my parent's house in that Fall and I was working at the Chicago Tribune in their mailroom, which they called the mail cage, where they delivered all the mail, and then in their stockroom. And in

January of '76 I got a call from the then chairperson of the Writing/English Department, John Schultz, and he asked me if I wanted to come back and teach a workshop, a Writing Workshop class for the Spring semester. And, so that was, so as it turned out, less than a year later I was back at Columbia College teaching a class—much to the thrill of my mother, who was a retired school teacher and my father, “OK, he's doing something,” you know. They could now say, “He's not just working in the stock room of the Chicago Tribune, he's also, he's teaching class,” you know. And of course for me, it was an exciting experience, exciting and terrifying as it always is when you're teaching for the first time in your life, you know. And I taught part-time for a number of years and then the College, later, created a status they called adjunct faculty, which it has since dispensed with.

**What was that?**

Well, adjunct faculty was, you taught a full-time load but you were not full-time, you know. But you could teach a full-time load, like three classes. And at one point, I was, like, working full-time at the Tribune in their news library and teaching, you know, two and three classes a week. And then I became adjunct faculty in 1970, oh, let's see now, [1977], and that's when I left the Tribune and came here as adjunct faculty. And had that position until the Summer, I taught the Summer semester of 1985 and that's when I left to go to the American University in Washington D.C., where I was gonna do graduate studying in the MFA in Fiction Writing. And because I had worked at the Tribune and I needed a part-time

job, I knew that there's always a turnover in copy aides at a newspaper in the Spring and in the Fall. So I called up the Washington Post and I said, “Do you need any copy aides?” And they said, “Yeah.” And I said, and I also knew that the hardest stocks to staff for copy aides are at night, so I said, “I'd really like to work nights,” you know. And they said, “Great,” the woman who interviewed me who was in charge of the copy aides said, “Wonderful.” And she was really excited when I told her I had worked at the Tribune and, you know, I was able to give her a couple of Tribune stories, you know, “What's Gene Siskel like?” And I told her that Roger Ebert had been one of my teachers here at Columbia College. I had taken a film class with Roger Ebert, which was a very—I've never looked at movies the same way since I took that class, you know. It was, in fact, he said that at the beginning of the class, he said, you know, “Movies will never be quite as magical for you when this class is done.” And he was right, you know, it's like I still look at how things are moving from right to left and what's in the corners of the screen, you know, of the frame of the picture and stuff; all the kind of things we talked about in that class. But anyway, I got hired there and worked there part-time and was going to school. And then in, then at my job in 1986 was doing the weather box, they had a weather box where I had to do a summary of the day's weather nationally and then the forecast for the next day's weather. And it was in typing a lot of temperatures, I would rip off... We had a wire machine that would, solely printed out weather stuff. And I had to go into this room and rip this stuff off the wires and go into the back and literally, temperature by temperature type this stuff

in, you know, for various sections they had around the nation and what not. I think...

...and Phoenix and...

Yeah, and I only had one big mistake, and that was one day when I had a typo where I had the temperature, the forecast for Honolulu, Hawaii was something like snow and thirty-eight degrees. And, fortunately, I think only one d.j. in D.C. caught it; I'm like, "Oh, Jesus." But I did that and then in the Spring of '87 they offered me a writing job there. And I started writing for their Thursday supplement, which was called the District Weekly. There was three days of reporting and two days of doing agate type, you know, like home sales and the police blotter and three days of, you know, reporting mostly on community issues, community news. But you could also create your own stories, you know, if you were sharp enough. And this is really where a lot of things I'd learned at Columbia College came to bear. You know, things I found, for instance, as a newspaper reporter that all of my skills in my Fiction Writing class, where I had learned how to describe a scene, where I had learned how to introduce a character, where I had learned how to tell a narrative story, where I had learned how to be engaging on the page and grab the reader's attention right off the bat, tell a scene vividly, where I had learned how to write, really go forward, the dialogue that really is engaging and powerful, became very valuable when I had to interview people. You know, when I would interview people at a scene about something that had happened, I would call upon the coachings I had been

given as a student and that I later used as an instructor. And I many times had asked people, "Well, what did you see?", you know, or I would just say, "See it!", which is a coaching we give in our fiction writing classes here all the time to students to get them in an imaginative way, focused on what is really taking their attention in an imaginative scene. There's the coaching you give in class, this what I'm talking about, talking about the dramatic context of how we teach our classes in this department. And I used that all the time, you know, and it would bingo. As soon as I would say it, the person would give me what it is they saw, you know.

Or, you know, I remember one time a plane had crashed into the Potomac and I had gotten in early that day, and so one of the editors was working the phones talking to one person and we had these witnesses to the crash; it was a private plane that had crashed into the Potomac. And I just started coaching them the way I would, you know, I had been coached and that I had coached, which was, "What sounds were taking your attention?", you know, "What did you hear?", you know, "What did you see?" You know, you would ask a person, "What is most strongly asking your attention for whatever reason right now about that?" And this would get them every time to give quotes that were just gold, you know. And they would, and it wasn't telling them what to say but it was getting them most powerfully to what it was they were perceiving, you know, in terms of how they had witnessed something. I had been writing fiction stories and I had an ear for dialogue, I had an ear for a good quote when I heard it.

I had learned from my radio broadcasting classes, one of the things I found out is that my radio broadcasting classes had taught me how to be engaging to someone who did not know me and who could not see me. When I would have to interview people on the phone, and that happened frequently, I found I was very, calling in my radio broadcasting skills, the skills I had developed as a disc jockey on the radio station here, again and again and again. Because that's what you have to be, you have to be engaging, you have to be—to someone who is often times a total stranger—and who may, in some cases, be reluctant to tell you anything. And you kind of learn a sort of, a quickly engaging, I don't want to say glibness, so much as a way of getting a person to relax so that they feel comfortable talking to you and listening. And you know, when I was taking radio broadcasting classes I was taking them because they were fun. I was, I got to run my mouth and play music. And this was, you know, "This is great. I'm running my mouth, I'm playing music, I'm getting credit for it; this is great," you know. And I really enjoyed it. I had no idea. I wasn't sitting here thinking, "Well gee, this will one day help me if I ever have to engage people on the telephone," but I found out later that it did, you know. My film classes, you know, taught me how to get a sense of a visual or get some kind of idea of what might work well visually with a story. There were a few stories where, you know, I had to work with a graphic artist about some kind of art we were gonna have to accompany a story. And just having some sense of, you know, how a picture's put together, you know, was actually,

you know, some things I got from my photo classes and stuff.

**So your whole collection of odds and ends of classes turned out to be exactly...**

Oh yeah, yeah, exactly, exactly, exactly. And I mean, I had no experience professionally as a journalist when I started writing, which was both exciting, sometimes terrifying. Because sometimes I would go out and the cover story and this would have been the first time in my life I had ever covered that kind of story, you know. And no doubt it was probably, in some degree, a little nerve-wracking for some of my editors as well. But, again, every time I was in a jam, you know, I could fall back on my training here at Columbia College and, you know, I would come in and I would have to write a story on deadline and I would—we have an exercise in my fiction classes called One Word, where the students would go around in a semi-circle and each student gives a surprise word. And I would do a One Word exercise right there by myself. Just do a list of one surprise word after another, you know, not connected, directly connected in any way, just to get my imaginative sense up and going, you know.

**While you're writing?**

Yeah, before I would write, and I would do like maybe twelve or fifteen of them. And then suddenly, my imaginative sense was getting geared up and then I would start to, you know, to write the story.

**You were doing this until when? Where?**

**Washington Post.**

Well, I started writing for the Post, I started working for them right when I got into Washington in September of '85. And I started writing for them in the Spring of

'87. My first big story that I had for them was an interview, was a story I did about Aretha Franklin about, it was the twentieth anniversary of her song "Respect," so I walked into the editor of the style section and I said, "It's been twenty years since the song came out. It was a big hit then, it's still a big song. Why don't we do a twentieth anniversary song?" And she said, "Well, sure, if you can get any of these people to talk to you," which, and I walked out of her office going, "Oh God. How am I gonna get Aretha Franklin to talk to me?"

**But you did.**

But I did. And one of the things that helped me there as a reporter was I could—and again, this is where my fiction writing, actually all of my creative training here taught me is—you know, I could look at things; what my Columbia College education taught me was to look at things and conceptualize and be imaginative with it and say, "How can this be, how can I make something here creative?" It taught me to look at patterns. It taught me to, you know, look at something and say, "Hey, wait a minute!" It taught me to make connections to this thing over here and this thing over here. And so when I looked up and it was the twentieth anniversary of the song "Respect" and it was the Spring of '87, suddenly I saw, "This might be a story," you know. And of course when you're a reporter, you're expected to do that. You're expected to not just report what happened, you're expected to create some stories yourself. You're not just expected to sit there like a slug and just cover whatever is going on and never come up with anything on your own, you know. You're expected to somehow make stories

and I was able, and I did that a number of times as a reporter there, where I was able to see a situation in something and say, "Wait a minute! I saw a pattern, there's a story here," you know. I was doing the agate type for the police blotter and noticing that at least three times a week pizza drivers were getting held up. And I said, "Well, wait a minute, there's a pattern here." And I called the D.C. Metro Police; it turns out there was a Detective Sergeant whose sole job was monitoring pizza robbers; that, in fact, it was pretty widespread and that Dominos and other companies were doing all these things to try to protect their pizza drivers and, you know, got a very good story out of it.

**Let me ask you about, you came back to Columbia in...**

February of 1970, no, I came back here in February of 1993.

**'93, OK, in Fiction Writing.**

In the Fiction Writing Department.

**Let me just ask you if you could describe the mission of the College and its relation to the whole of American society.**

Well, it's to help the students, you know, craft the, it's to help students, to give them the tools to have an influential and powerful and morally—I don't want to say morally correct because that's not what I mean—but an ethical effect on their world and their life, you know, through the arts and the communications. To give them not only the tools to do it but to give them some sort of aesthetic, historical, framework for how all of this fits together. I think, again, that one of the greatest strengths of this College is how it integrates things. And I know sometimes people here fear that we're not integrated

enough, sometimes I feel that way, but I still think we're a lot more integrated than most places. You know, when I talk to friends at other colleges, when I think of my experience when I was attending American University where, you know, different departments simply didn't mix at all in a way that they often times would do here. You now, we have a lot of Film students who will come to the Fiction Writing Department and take classes here, you know, and vice-versa. So it's—and I think that that's one of the most valuable things that this College does, which goes right to the heart of the College's mission. Which is to—because in a way, Columbia College was way ahead of its time, because more and more there is an emphasis on being multi-disciplined, regardless of what field you go into, whether it's television, whether it's journalism, whether it's fiction writing, the sense of being able to have a knowledge and a skill and an understanding of more than one kind of a thing. And certainly, you know, the computer age is bringing that very powerfully into play where, you know, you can't just be a writer, you can't just be a designer, you can't just... you can't just be one thing. You know, you have to have this kind of, this multi-disciplinary view of the world. And I think this kind of person is only going to become more valuable and have more of an effect on, you know, when we see, you know, how many Columbia College students are working at places like CNN? How many Columbia College students are working in the film industry in California? How many Columbia College students are working in, you know, broadcasting and film right here in the Chicago metropolitan area? And as these people

mature and, you know, get into their forties and fifties, you know, I'm gonna be forty-five in April. This College is gonna have more and more of an, I mean it already does, but its influence is only gonna increase, you know. And its multi-disciplinary view of the world, its multi-disciplinary view of education, and this whole thing of hooking the liberal arts to these various disciplines, you know; to teach these arts and communications disciplines within a liberal arts context, you know, which is very, very important.

**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, whatever, "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.

**Has your personal vision of education changed over the years, over twenty-seven years?**

My personal vision of it? I, no, no. I mean, I come from a family of teachers, as I say: my mother is a retired school teacher, her older sister is a retired school teacher, my mom has a younger sister who is still teaching in Chicago Public Schools, my grandmother taught in one room schools in Alabama—my mother's mother. So, you know, my view of education is to, for the students who come to my class, to give them the best creative atmosphere in the classroom and also outside of the classroom, in conferences and in things that I may say to them, that will be the most conducive to their developing their skills as far as they can. I never see my classes as a kind of an end all. And I have, at times, said that to students, you know, to an entire

class, you know, that my class is one step along the way of what will hopefully be a long life of education and discovery even beyond the College. And that, you know, what I'm gonna try to do for you here is to create an atmosphere that is, as I say, the most conducive to their sense of developing their skills as writers. Which feeds into giving them the permission, both directly and how I conduct the class, in, you know, their voice, permission... imaginative permission. And to—you know, among the graduate faculty I'm a thesis advisor, and to work very closely with students to, so that their, their thesis projects are a success, you know. So at the end of the thesis process they either have, you know, their full collection of short stories or their novel or their collection of creative non-fiction or what have you. And realizing that each student is an individual, that different students need, I mean, you have to have standards for the overall, for the class, but within that every student is different. That no two, you know, they all come to the class at various, different levels and that you have to take that into account of where they are, and taking into account how hard they're working. So I wouldn't, I wouldn't say that my vision of education has changed considerably. And I think I had an advantage of being a child and a grandchild of educators, you know...