

## J o a n M c G r a t h

*Today is May the 20th, 2004, and this is an interview with Joan McGrath. And she is the administrative assistant to the chair of the film and video department here at Columbia College.*

**So if you could start by telling us when you came to Columbia and what the circumstances were that brought you here.**

I was looking for a job in 1996, and I saw the ad in the Chicago Tribune for an administrative assistant to the provost and executive vice president of Columbia College. And it matched my qualifications perfectly. So I sent in a resume and got an interview. When I got the interview I then started thinking of people that I knew that had some relation with Columbia, and I knew Eric May from the pub crawl that we go on. So I called him and got some information about the college and its history and its mission. So I felt better prepared to go there.

**And what were some of the impressions you had of Columbia before you talked to Eric, and what kind of things did he tell you? What image did you have again before the actual interview process?**

Well, my, I guess my impressions were mostly formed by the people I knew that had a relationship with the college. And I knew Teresa Prodos who was a part timer then. I worked at "In These Times" so I knew her husband Joel. And I took conversational Spanish from her, and I knew she was a really nice person. And I knew Eric. And they

were progressive people, people who were really involved in the world. And a friend of mine from UIC had taught here. So I mean just, that's really—oh, there was a woman I met on the train who's in the fashion design department. And I used to talk to her and she liked it here. So it was just, that was all I really knew about the place.

**And who did you interview with?**  
I interviewed with Bert Gall.

**Give your first impressions of Bert Gall.**

Oh, boy. Gosh, that's—well, he was sitting behind his desk. And he had, he didn't have long hair then. But he was smoking of course. And he was a very, very friendly, nice person to talk to. And it was, it was, I just really felt like it went well. I wasn't nervous. He told me some things about the college, and I told him things about my, why I thought I would work well there. And yeah, that's as far as I remember. It was almost eight years ago. But yeah, I had a pretty positive impression. I mean the office was a mess, and that didn't change much.

**Was the job what you expected, and can you just describe it?**

Well, I think I thought I was going to be doing more, I remember him saying that there would be summarizing of articles, reading things, summarizing things for him. And I don't remember that ever happening. It was always, it was such a busy place. It was, he was the provost and the executive vice president, so every academic issue came through him and every facilities issue, space issue came through

him. So basically you had everybody in the college who needed anything was calling that office and trying to get an appointment with him or trying to get an answer from him.

There were about four phone lines. And I was, Susan Babick had her office and she did her things that were kind of, sort of related but sort of separate. And then I was kind of the receptionist, the secretary and the administrative assistant. So actually doing assistant type work never came to happen. I was much too busy for that kind of thing. So, but what was happening? You know, calls for the toilets blocked up or someone stuck in an elevator, those sort of things. There were calls for people wanting him to buy property. There were calls from trustees. There were calls from attorneys. There were calls from the press. I mean it was just, he was in such demand.



And then there were also all the academic issues. So any policy kind of things people had to meet with him. He was on academic affairs. He was on, he had so many meetings, him and Caroline Latta. And she was the academic dean then. And Bert and Caroline were constantly, you know, running from place to place. Sometimes I would make—and this was before the days of palm pilots and, you know, even e-mail. I don't even think we had e-mail then. So there was a lot of just calling around, running around. Deborah Coney and I worked really closely trying to get Caroline and Bert to, you know, to everything, and they always had to do things together. They had to interview all full time faculty hires. I mean there was just an incredible demand on their time. And so it was, it was busy.

**Did someone have your position before, or was your position created in '96 when you came onboard?**

Oh, no, there were people that—I mean Deb McGrath had this position. Susan Babick had this position. There were others. There were others.

**Did they burn out? I mean I'm just trying to get—**

Some I think didn't last a day. So I heard that there were a lot of people that—

**I can imagine. Was it exciting, or was it, you know, what—**

It was, it was my dream job really. I got to try to help people all the time. People would call with a problem. I'd try to fix it. And because of the office I was in I had the power to pick up the phone and direct somebody to go take

care of a problem. So I don't think I ever had so much power or authority in a place. And Bert was always just get it done, just figure out how to do it and get it done. So he really encouraged initiative. I was, there were a lot of things I had to find out other things from other people before I could do it. But that was the nature of it, just okay, get to the bottom of how, what it takes to make this happen. And that was great. And I had so many interesting people coming into my office. It wasn't my office. It was just a big room, you know. But they would sit and wait for Bert, and I would talk to them. And I got to meet chairs and faculty and stuff and pretty much everybody. And it was, it was delightful. I thought I had just gone to, just found the best possible place to work.

**And did the job change or evolve or did Bert's office and roles, did they change while you worked for him at all, or did it pretty much stay the same?**

It pretty much stayed the same for a while. I did get, I did manage to let him, or convince him to let me hire a grad student. And then for a while I had R. T. Ayapa who was a student from India who was taking, she was a graduate student in dance movement therapy. And she was my godsend for about a year when she worked there. So that was a change sort of.

**And you asked for that because of the work load or just the demands on the office?**

I begged. I begged. I mean we were understaffed in that job as you could imagine. And so I was pretty much always trying to get—

**And what did you want, or what did she end up doing that would relieve you to do more of what?**

She helped me with the travel, because the other thing I did was ticket, any air travel for anybody who was going anywhere. So that was just a—and when I started they had switched from the woman who had been doing the travel for a long time, and they went to this place that had promised them more. And it was a disaster. Those people were incompetent. And at the time I was actually calling people back and forth with, well, we have this time, you know, the plane could leave at this time. And they'd say, well, can you see if there's something a little later than that. And I, I mean it was just so time consuming to do that. And it was because these people were idiots, the travel agent that we went to. And eventually after about a year I did convince them to go back to Martha Scott who was, who we used, we had used her for about 12 years and then we came back to her. Because she knew the college and she, you could actually tell someone, well, call Martha and set it up yourself. And I just did the authorizing and things like that.

But there were, there were things that really weren't working as they should. And it sometimes takes a while to change things, even though it's clear that they are not working. So R. T. would, she did the travel a lot for me. So that helped.

**And what would you say was your favorite part of the job?**

The people, meeting the people. The building service guys were like family. We were—if you called

them to do something you knew they were taking care of it. I cannot say enough about L. D. and all his crew. Just dedicated, stayed till it got done, came in on weekends. I loved those guys. And they'd all come in and say good morning to you. They'd all, you know, they were, they were just a delight to work with. And when I did leave I really, I mean there were other people too, you know, that I, that I missed, Deborah Coney for one. But just not having them every day in my life, that was a hard, a hard adjustment.

**That's interesting because not many, I think they're kind of like the unsung heroes or the behind the scenes people that most of us don't see and don't get any recognition. Are most of them still here, or (inaudible) you mentioned?**

A lot of them are still here, Richard Woods and Mark Gonzalez. Well, Brady retired. Warren, he was with ABM, and he had a stroke and had to go on disability. I can't even name them all. They're all, you know, there's so many of them. But one of the things that happened when I was working there was we doubled our buildings.

**Right, that was my next question.** Yeah. And we didn't double the people working. So, well, Irv was, he was out at the dance center. They'd have to go—the dance center was down on Sheridan. So I mean there was just a lot of, a lot of ground to cover. And then even more ground to cover.

**Can you speak a little bit more to that, about the acquisitions of the buildings and your office overseeing that? And also that**

**they were ultimately, they had to be retrofitted for a college, right?** Right.

**What challenges and kind of organization was needed with that?**

Well, I wasn't in on the construction meetings, which Bert had on his calendar every Tuesday morning. And people like Gary Brown, the general contractor, and Michael Aronson, the architect, and everybody that worked under them, and L. D., would meet every Tuesday morning. And they would plan, you know, they would, they would go over what had to be done.

When I started I remember the construction project that was happening was the second floor of 600, so the area that is now the museum and the graduate center, the graduate office and the freshmen seminar. So that was, you know, that was what was under construction. And we bought, let's see, maybe the music building. 10, 1014 South Michigan was the school, the Sherwood School of Music, so we bought that. And then they renovated that. Oh, my goodness, there were, there were all sorts of issues with that. I think they had old sheet music for—they had so much old sheet music in that place.

**That they just left.**

That they just left. And I think they even had like some storage areas on the roof. And when L. D. opened it it was just filled with more sheet music. And then dealing with people who are moving, you know, moving is a very stressful thing. So we had to deal with tenants a lot. We had tenants calling. So let's see, we had already, we owned 600, 624, 623, 72 East

11th, the dorms, 70, 731, we didn't own the Congress yet, and the dance center. I think we had six buildings. And then we bought the 1014 South Michigan, which is now the music building, 1306 South Michigan, sold the dance center, bought the dance center, 1415 South Wabash, which is the directing stages, 1104 which was the Ludding, is the Luddington Building, which I think Bert had his eye on for a real long time. He was just waiting for it to be, you know, the right time. Then Buddy Guys got donated to us. We were renting 33 East Congress, and then some things happened that caused us to have to buy it. And then the hostel that's across the street from the Congress building, we have the two floors of that. Is there anything else? I think that's—and the book and paper center was at 218 Wabash, and they moved to the Luddington. And everything shifted around. And it was, it was just like a big domino, you know. You change one thing and then somebody else would change. And it was sort of a backward domino.

But, and dealing with tenants was really, could be comical, could be difficult. Buddy Guys had the fish hut. Do you remember that?

**No.**

Did you ever eat there?

**No.**

There was a little, a little restaurant in there that people ate at. And it was probably not safe to eat in it, but I ate there and it was good. They had, the guy had gumbo. He was from Louisiana. He was a real nice old guy. And we felt real bad, you know, to kick him out. But the city wanted him out because of

building violations. And there was a florist. There was a church in that building, and Bert wanted to try to relocate the, he would try to find people other places. So it was, there was a lot going on.

**Any egregious mistakes that you could talk about? Or I don't know, just anything that wouldn't necessarily be common knowledge but just was like a huge headache that was unexpected?** Oh, boy, let me think. I'm going from building to building. Unexpected. I can't think of anything. I mean just—

**The roofs didn't collapse or the walls didn't fall down when you leaned on them or nothing that, you know, the lemons that—** I'm sure there were lemons. I mean I don't if, I don't know whether we would have bought 33 East Congress if we didn't have to. I don't know.

**Why did we have to?** We were renting it, and we had put a lot of money into that. And then they had to sell it. And so it was sort of like, you know—

**To lose that would have been (inaudible.)** Yeah, yeah. And no, I don't know. I mean there were always things that, you know, people wanted to stay longer than you wanted them to. So there were those kind of things. I'm sure there's people that know those things, but I don't.

**How long did you work for Bert?** About four years.

**And can you talk about when you left and why you left?** Well, I had been trying to make changes to the office, such as staffing levels. And certain things

kept coming up about, you know, not having enough help. And the, while I was working there the part time faculty decided to form a union. And a lot of, I mean it was so much work because it was all, a lot of it was coming through our office. And I mean at the time we had a copy machine that hardly even worked, and it only could do one page at a time. And, you know, I'm supposed to be sending out all these letters. And it was just frustrating. It was, it was kind of a frustrating place to work, because it was so important and yet some of the resources and the people weren't, you know, it wasn't, I wasn't being listened to. And sometimes I was. Sometimes I got my, I got my way.

But first that, and then the presidential search. And that also all came through our office. So in addition to all the other stuff I was doing, there were these major kind of things that I had to—

**In addition to your—** In addition to my workload with really no—Bert did let me hire a temp to help with some of the stuff, but it's just not the same. You need to have someone who is accountable and responsible. So anyway, with the search I just, there were a lot of challenging personalities on the fifth floor. And there were, I would say there's sort of an unequalness sometimes that some people have to work harder than other people. And for the presidential search everything that I had been complaining about for four years sort of happened in one event. And I realized that if I continued to stay there that I was just, you know, a hypocrite. And

that I would have to stop, you know, just stop complaining. It was like you're either going to do this forever or you're going to draw the line. And so I drew the line, and I gave my notice. And I told him exactly what, you know, what the things there. And then I left.

**And that was the search to find a replacement for John Duff.** Exactly.

**Okay. So that's around, is that 2000?** Yeah, March, March of 2000.

**I just want to follow up on one other thing, and correct me if I'm wrong. When the part time faculty was organizing and working very hard to unionize, the administration was not in favor of that.** Right.

**Were you torn, or I don't know, I mean were you working on the side of opposing the union as the administrative assistant in the provost and vice president's office, or did you feel that? Or was it just simply that this was so much work being put on your lap?**

No, I mean I have worked in law firms in the past. I've worked for lawyers a lot. And so you have to kind of have sort of a, you can't take these things real personally because it's the way things are. And you kind of have to just make the best of it. So I mean I, I was surprised that the college fought it as much because everybody knew how poorly paid the part time faculty were. But I just kind of, you know, I'd take their phone calls. I'd give their messages. I was just pleasant to them. That's all I could do was really be, I was the go-

between. I was the conduit. And so even though I'd be dealing—and this is true not only of the part time faculty situation, but also pretty much anything. There would be people who were angry at Bert, and I was the person that they yelled at. And then I would, you know, pass that along to him. And he would, you know, I mean I was just the go-between and I facilitated communication between parties. And I didn't, you know, I didn't really take sides. I might have had an opinion, but that really wasn't my role in that office.

**So what did you do when you left?**

What did I do. I took a sabbatical as I call it. I recovered from too much and a lot of emotional stress. It was really, I felt like I was on the verge of a breakdown, so I took some time to heal. My parents were having their 50th wedding anniversary party, and there's all the stuff that comes up with those kind of family events. And so I wanted to make sure I devoted the time and energy that was needed to deal with all the dysfunctional family stuff.

I was very happy that Ralph Nader was running for president, so I helped work, I worked for him. I did volunteer work passing out flyers and things. I taught, I used to teach English as a second language. I was a volunteer. And my Tibetan friend wanted to learn how to drive, so I took her to Graceland Cemetery and we drove around the cemetery. And she eventually got her license, but not with me because I didn't have the heart for the driver's ed after about a couple months. I think I did some writing and gardening and just recovered.

**And how long was this sabbatical?**

I think it was about eight months.

**Okay. Eight months. And then why did you return? What were those circumstances on your second coming to Columbia?**

Well, I never wanted to leave Columbia. And so people would say to me, well, what are you going to do? And I said I'm going to come back, you know, when the time is right. I never had any intention of looking for any other job because I love this place. So I just, there really wasn't anything for me at the time. And timing is important. And plus, I mean I knew a lot about the different areas, and I wasn't going to just go anywhere, you know. I had some, I had some things that were important to me. And I had decided by this time that I wanted to get out of the administration because it was insane to work there. And it was too much like working at a law firm, the, you know, just the demands, and things have to be done so quickly. And I wanted to get to an academic department. And so a lot of them—and I came into administration making a little more money than when you are hired into an academic department. And so not everyone could pay my salary either. So there were considerations.

So I just laid and I had some communications with different people who called me to see if I was interested. And sometimes I was interested but not ready. And sometimes I was, you know, well, it actually worked out pretty well. When something, when film came

along I was pretty much, maybe I, I could have probably stayed off another couple months, but I came back because they needed somebody.

**It's interesting because at the moment there's a lot of people at Columbia at whatever level that are fearful of having a job and—so it's kind of risky to leave the place that you want to stay at.**

It wasn't so risky then. I mean I had a good reputation. And it was, and they, they tried to place people that were good workers. And so—

**Has that changed?**

It's hard to say. I don't know how hard people work to place the people who have left. There's some things happening, coming up that we'll see what the commitment is on the college to keep good people. But I think a lot of times it's an individual case by case basis. But back then I think they really, really tried to keep people. It was like a family, you know. And if someone didn't, you know, if there were personality problems in one area they'd move people to another area. So I thought it was commonplace.

**When you talked about that you love Columbia and this is where you belong, can you be a little more specific or talk about what it is, was about the college that you weren't really leaving the college as much as a situation that got unhealthy or too burdensome.**

Well, I had worked a lot in corporate, in the corporate world, and I didn't really like that environment so much. When I came here I couldn't believe how intelligent and tolerant, diverse, great, great senses of humor. I mean so many funny

people, so many caring people in one place. And it was just, maybe it was the office I worked at. But people helped me out all the time. And I helped people out all the time, you know. So it was just this real—there's always the stereotype of people who, you know, you can't get them to do anything. I didn't find that here, you know. I just, I found people that were dedicated who wanted to make things work for the students and whatever it took to get that done they did it. And so when you find a place like that you don't really, for me that's just something you don't leave, you know, on a whim.

There's more. I'm trying to think. The benefits were great, you know, back when we had the pension plan that we used to have. The salaries, you know, the pay wasn't great, but there was a, you can be yourself here. You can just really not put on any airs. People accepted you. I felt accepted, even though I have my, you know, my faults. People sort of, I mean I always felt Bert really encouraged my strengths and tolerated my weaknesses. And I just, I just know there was a lot of quirky people, and everybody was like, oh, that's just a quirky person, you know. And that was okay for people to be who they were.

**When you left the provost's office was he surprised or was he hurt? I mean I don't know if you want to talk about that. I mean you said that you had voiced your feelings many times over.**

I had. And actually when you said the provost's office, I forgot to say that the one thing that changed in my tenure with Bert was that Dr. Duff removed his tenure duties from him, because I think it was to

do with the NCA recommendation that too much was coming through our office. And so that was really difficult for him, a difficult period. And it was about the time I was going to quit the first time. And I didn't feel I could at that point because, you know, it was a tough time. So I ended up staying for about another nine months or so. And the sad thing for me was that he had just agreed to get me help. And when the provost's duties were taken from him, or removed, or I don't know what the official term was but, you know, the deal, all deals were off. And so it was, so then I had to stay. Then I was just kind of trying to figure out, you know, when things were okay enough for me to, you know. And I stayed. And there were a lot of good times. I mean there were, it was a really, at time it was hell, but it was so much fun too, you know, all that activity. And people were, people could say what was on their mind. You'd have arguments, but you would laugh about it, you know. You could voice dissent. It was, you know, it was a great environment to just say what was on your mind.

So then, you know, for the last, for the last nine months or so that I worked for Bert he was the executive vice president. And when I gave him my notice he pretty much pretended like I hadn't. So—

**He was in denial as they say.**

He was in denial, yeah, yeah. And Joyce Fulgium who was the president's assistant, President Duff's assistant, she threw a little party for me. And I mean he, even like my last day I think he thought that I

was kidding, or that I wouldn't go through with it or something. And, you know, I mean it was sad. It was difficult all the way around.

**So when you came back who did you work for? Who hired you the second time?**

The second time when I came to the film department Michael Rabiger was the chair. And Ric Cokin was the assistant chair, and Eileen Cokin, they were married then, was the assistant to the chair. And she had too much. And so they split her job into two jobs. And so I took the assistant to the job portion, and she took a bunch of the work with the budgets and everything. And so they had some input into it, but then I was hired by Michael Rabiger, who was retiring at the end of that year.

**And you knew that.**

I knew that.

**But nevertheless you're going from the executive vice president's office to, you said you wanted to move to the academic side, but to the largest department?**

And I was worried about that because, you know, I didn't want to feel like I was drowning all the time, which was what I felt like in Bert's office. And so I had talked to Eileen and Ric about that, you know, and they said oh, you'll be fine, you know, we'll train you. There's no training here, you know. It's baptism by fire.

So, you know, I was concerned about it, but it was, it was a brand new building, a beautiful building. And it was, you know, I knew some of the faculty and the staff there. I thought that it was going to be a great place. And so, you

know, it was, I made the commitment that I would help with the transition, because I was concerned whether I could handle it. And so it's important to have somebody, you know, for that. So I made it through the year with Michael Rabiger, and then Bruce Sheridan was hired. And during—

**So through the search too.**

Through the whole search. And in fact, I mean I had to run, coordinate the chair search, and I had to coordinate eight, we were looking for eight faculty, full time faculty during that year. And so it was just, it was just a crazy time. And I just had to, you know, make it up or look in the file and see what letters were sent out before and just kind of try to, try to make it happen. It was a lot of work.

One time I came in over the weekend and scheduled because they needed—it was a time, we were being pressured to hire by a certain point too, by a certain time or we would lose the positions, which, you know, wasn't a very good way to do it. But, and I scheduled, I had to schedule like 15 phone interviews the next week with the people on the search committee and these, you know, candidates. And it was, it was just crazy.

**From all over.**

From all over the country, considering the time zones.

**And outside the continent too.**

There were some, yeah, there was somebody from Australia. So it was, there was a lot.

**Can you, I don't know if you would even want to, but was it, was it as intense or nearly as**

**intense as the search for the president of the college, you know, from your perspective? You were saying earlier that, you know, that was part of the turmoil too when you left the executive vice president's office.**

Well, the thing with the chair search is I didn't actually coordinate the chair search. That was coordinated at, you know, the presidential or the provost level. But I had to deal with all the constituencies in—so it was sort of the same thing at a smaller level. Like, you know, with the presidential search I had to set up all these town meetings with, you know, part timers and staffers and faculty. And he had to meet (*inaudible*), the two candidates had to meet, you know, with all these different people. So you had to set that up.

In the department level I just had to do that for the department. So they were taking care of them meeting, you know, the dean and the provost and all that. So, but it was intense. And, you know, I was new, you know. And so I didn't have a lot of, I didn't have much know-how. I didn't, you know. It was, it was intense I guess in another way because I wasn't as confident as I was in the other, the other thing. But it went okay.

**You must have—maybe you can tell me this. Do you have a lot more contact with students working in the film department than you did for Bert? Or did you have—**

Yeah, I would say absolutely. I did have contact with students in Bert's office, but they were usually people that didn't get their way, you know, all the way through. And so they were usually disgruntled or needed some extra, I mean sometimes you

had to diffuse, you know, situations. And sometimes they were going to be told no, you know, after taking it all the way up.

**Was Bert good at that?**

Yeah. But Bert really, he tried to do, he really tried to accommodate students. And, you know, even in the film department, the ideal is to get people who are better, you know, more equipped to handle the problem before they have to see someone higher up, you know. So you always try to solve the problem at a lower level. But, you know, if the person has been told no by, you know, ten different people and they're still there, chances are Bert is not going to tell them yes. And if he does then everybody, the other ten are going to be angry, you know. They're going to be like, you know, what do we have roles for, you know. So yeah, they were, that's the kind of student I saw.

But then we had the recycling, the students who wanted to run the recycling program. And so I had contact with those students.

**What's that?**

Oh, the blue bins that you see around. We never recycled anything before, but Joanne Harding, and I would really be remiss if I didn't mention her, she used to, she works in the executive vice president's office. She used to be the building manager of this building, 624, when Bert bought it. And so he saw, you know, saw that she was a jewel and convinced her to come work for Columbia. So she works in Bert's office, in what used to be Bert's office part time because she's raising her kids, and does everything with elevators

and, you know, licenses with the city and unions and, you know, all that sort of important paperwork kind of stuff. And so she deals with Flood Brothers and the, you know, garbage companies. And so the kids, some kids came to her and said we want to recycle. And the college didn't have a recycling program. And so she helped facilitate them setting up where they would put, for paper. And I think they tried cans, but cans didn't really work, but paper mostly. And so they go around and they empty—

*(Inaudible) huge.)*

Yeah. So that was out of that office as well.

**So what do you think are in the film department, the largest department, the issues facing students today? What do you think are the most important issues that they have to deal with or struggle with?**

It's a lot of work getting their degrees, getting, being able to pay for their schooling. I think it's just so expensive now to go to college and to try to work and be, do a full time load. A lot of them struggle with that. Of course all the students that come to film, there's about 1,800 students in that department, they want to get their hands on a camera immediately. And so there's classes that, you know, come between that, and they don't like that. They want to, you know, they want to just be filmmakers right away. And not everybody can, you know. And so that's sad. That's hard when people, you know, sometimes people come to school to discover that this isn't what I'm supposed to do, you know. And there's issues. There's all sorts of issues. And I do a lot of

kind of counseling, you know. People try to help them, listen to them with a problem with a teacher and put them in the right direction.

And so I do have a lot more exposure to students, which I like a lot. That's one of the reasons I wanted to get closer to where the education was happening, where the creativity was happening, you know, with the faculty and the students. And I'm also really involved with some of the student groups on campus that are political. On the Ground is an activist group, and I was their advisor for the first two years. John Stevenson is now their advisor this year. But for the three years—I think they formed, my memory is that they formed right after September 11th.

**And what is their organizing principle? What was the motivation behind their organization?**

I guess, you know, I don't know what the paperwork says what their purpose was, but based on what they've done they are an activist group that works for peace and social justice. And that's On the Ground. And then Not in our Name was more specifically to oppose the war in Iraq. And did they oppose the war in Afghanistan? I'm not sure. But definitely—

**I'm not familiar with it before the war in Iraq, but that's so close together in some ways that I'm not sure if it preceded the war in Iraq or not.**

Well, On the Ground definitely. We kind of all came together right after September 11th, and people wanted to have an alternative to

going to war. And it just, you know, faculty, staff and students formed groups. And at that time it was really sort of dangerous to not say let's just go bomb the hell out of them and let's nuke them. And, you know, I mean it was, it was kind of an act of courage for them to do some of the things that they did.

**Can you talk a little bit more about I mean your personal commitment to social justice and peace, and maybe where that originated from and how you fulfill that part of your interest here at Columbia.**

Of course that would be another reason why I love working at Columbia, right, being able to participate in civic engagement and those kind of things. Let's see. My father would say that my Uncle Frank who is his brother who is a priest turned me into a commie. I've never considered myself a communist. I don't really consider myself any label. But he was an activist in the '60's for, you know, getting rid of the House on American Activities Committee, getting rid of, or stopping the war, gay rights, suing the police department for the Red Squad files. I mean he was a real activist in the '60's. And he was, when I was in school at UIC, because I was a really, really patriotic American, kind of believed everything, you know, cried during Yankee Doodle, watching Yankee Doodle Dandy, whatever. And I took, I took a lot of history classes. And then eventually I was a writer in college, but I wanted more, to know more about what to write about. So I ended up taking an English and a history major. But I took classes in history that just opened my eyes to some things.

The one that really politicized me was U.S. intervention in Latin America. And I, it shattered me. I was really devastated by what I learned. And so I think that kind of is what brought me into activism. And at the time the U.S. was involved in trying to overthrow the government of Nicaragua and all sorts of human rights abuses in El Salvador. And so I was involved in that. And of course, and through, and also I was a freelance student. I wrote for the student newspaper, so I was covering amnesty events, Amnesty International. And they had something about South Africa. And I remember reading "Cry the Beloved Country" in high school and finding out, oh, my God, you know, this is still going on, they haven't, you know, black people still have no rights in South Africa. I was just appalled, you know, because it seemed like so long ago. And so then I got involved in that too, the Free South Africa movement and trying to get the UIC board of trustees to divest their holdings in, you know, businesses that did business in South Africa. And so that's sort of where I became an activist.

And then I did an internship with In These Times, which at the time described itself as a democratic socialist newspaper. And then they hired me on. And so that was a great experience for me. And a lot like Columbia because you were given a job to do, and it didn't matter how you got it done, you just got it done. And I like that kind of an environment where it's not petty kind of, you know, punch a clock kind of stuff. It's more, you

know, as long as you're doing your job that's good. And so that just opened my eyes to the world. And so that's how, and in fact I think that's probably one of the reasons why Bert hired me is because he saw the In These Times thing. And I laughed because I think it's one of the few places that that would be something, a positive—

**I was going to say, I mean do you feel that same sense of encouragement, civic action, activism engagement, and do you feel that there would be any people in the administration that would see that as a plus, would know what In These Times was?**

I think they might. I think they might. I think Steve Kapelke would know "In These Times". And Bruce Sheridan does give me, you know, he encourages it. He, you know, I think he respects what I'm trying to do. So, you know, I do feel supported in that way which is nice. And, you know, my door is his door. His office is inside of mine. So, you know, it's nice that he lets me put my stuff up on the door.

So, yeah, I fear where the college is going, you know, in terms of that, although the president is a big promoter of civic engagement. And I'm involved with Louis Silverstein and Alton Miller and several other people with the civic engagement and responsibility committee. And so we do try to, you know, keep people active, get people engaged in what's happening. But there does seem to be this fear of being political or, you know. I don't get that. You can't always present both sides, you know. You present one side, and then someone else is welcome to present the other side. But you can't always, you know, like bringing Nader here was one of the

things we did. And, you know, there were a lot of people that were upset by that. But it's just a matter of, you know, it's another point of view. And it's not saying you support that point of view, but you, when are kids going to get this if they don't get it in college. When are they going to be exposed to, how are they going to be broadened. Because that's what happened to me in college, I was broadened, you know, things that I never learned for the first 12 years of my education. And I think that's what college should be about. So I hope that that will continue to be encouraged, you know, controversial issues.

I was disappointed that the FCC stuff wasn't more, you know, we're a media school. And the consolidation of the media is happening, and it's really affecting our democracy in this country. And I think this college should be at the forefront of discussing these things, and that should come, you know. Maybe if the teachers were discussing it in their classes I hope. But in terms of a public forum on it, I didn't see anything. And I hope that we can keep that alternative voice alive that Columbia was founded on and not be afraid of controversy, not be afraid of the hot button issues.

**Well, I want to make sure too as we're moving on in our hour that we talk about your work with the organization of the staff here at Columbia and, you know, what the reasons are for that. What the staff's concerns are. And if you could talk a bit about that.**

Sure. That's another thing, I never thought I would be trying to organize a labor union, never in a million years. But the college has

been changing. And last year the pension plan as you know was frozen, which was a real, real eye, you know, woke people up that things are changing. And I think, you know, if you look around the world and around the country, things have been going down, downhill for workers everywhere. But we were sort of insulated or something from that. And last year was our wake-up call. And first the pension, and actually there were some departments that were out sourced or whatever before that, like the print shop. But then last summer a number of people were fired or resigned or whatever the, whatever the term is. Other departments were reorganized. And you could see that the college was changing.

And we started to look into unions with the faculty, full time faculty. Of course the part time faculty already have a union. And so when all this pension stuff was happening full time faculty and staff said, well, let's see what we can do to preserve our benefits. And so we pursued it like that. But there's a decision called Usheva that prevents full time faculty from organizing for the time being until it gets challenged. But they say that faculty are managers because of having control over their curriculum and decisions in college policy and things like that. So the staff decided to pursue it on our own because we have a lot of the same interests as the faculty and we have the right, clearly the right to organize.

So as we were looking into it things started getting worse, and people were getting terminated. And we, by December of last year we said, you know what, we're doing the right thing. This is, what are our

alternatives. And so I'd say January, February we, probably mid-February we went public with our—and prior to that time we interviewed different unions, and we decided to go with the same union as the part time faculty, the NEAIEA, National Education Association. And we started a card drive.

So I would say there's a couple of reasons why we feel we have to do it. One is to preserve our benefits. The pension has already been slashed. We know medical, the cost of medical is going up I think I read ten to twelve percent every year. So they're going to be looking at those benefits. And there also isn't the job security that we thought we had. They're going to be streamlining departments. They're going to merge departments. They're looking at what they can get done off site. There's a lot of things. And some of them they may choose to do and some of them they may not. But they're looking to save money.

And the other thing that's happening that I think is helping us is that while they're saying that we don't have money they're hiring a lot of really high salary people. And I mean we really were thin at the top as I can vouch, attest to. But we're also very understaffed. And to see the priority going to so many six figure jobs instead of, you know, the people that are on the front line with students, we need to, you know, we need to have some leverage I think in what the college's priorities are. And we have no, we're at the mercy of, we're at will employees. So we can be fired any time. We can have our benefits

changed at any time. And we want to preserve the good things about the college. We know that there were things that needed to be changed. But there's also a lot of things that we want to preserve. And we don't feel that we have much, you know, I mean one person doesn't have much say. But a whole bunch of people together, we could actually, you know, have the college's future be what we want it to be.

**We're coming to the end of our time. So I told you, Joan, this would go way too fast. But if there's anything that I didn't touch on that you would like to include or say I would really appreciate it. I'm looking at the things, yeah, that I had to skip over just out of interest of time.**

I think we covered quite a bit, Erin. I just want to, I can't say enough about the students, the activists on this campus. And I just want to make sure that it goes in the history that we've been to Washington, D.C. three times in three years, twice for war, anti-war, and, you know. Well, gosh, there were a lot of things going on, support of Palestinian rights, anti-IMF, World Bank. Then a whole bunch of students went for the women's rights march just last month. They have sent people down to Miami to the FTAA demonstrations and to the School of the Americas. I mean these kids, I'm just so proud of them. They are, you know, people say, oh, kids today. And I just, they are just, they give me so much hope in that they're so engaged. And they care so much about making the world a better place. And I really think they are what Columbia is supposed to be about, giving that, these people—