

## D o m i n i c P a c y g a

*Okay. Today is May the 10th, 2001. This is an interview with Dominic Pacyga, History Coordinator in the Department of Liberal Education at Columbia College.*

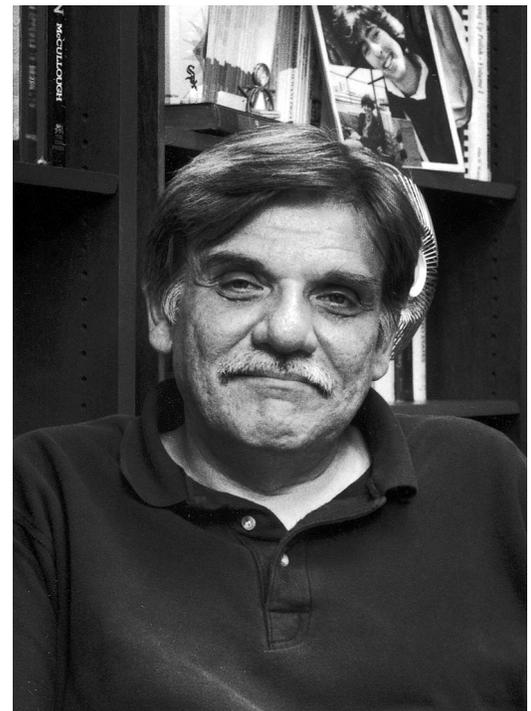
**And if we could start by you telling us when did you come to Columbia and what were the circumstances?**

Yeah. I first came to Columbia as a consultant for the Southeast Chicago Historical Project and that would have been in 1980. Then in 1981, I was brought on as the Associate Director of the Southeast Chicago Historical Project. And I believe it was 1984, when the project closed down. I was brought in as a full-time faculty member of Liberal Education. And maybe I should say what the Southeast Chicago Historical Project was. It was a rather interesting project in public history in that back in the late seventies, Mike Alexandroff, the late president, and Eddie Sadlowski who was President of the United Steel Workers in South Chicago and Paul Johnson, who was then a labor historian with the college and teaching, came together and talked about the possibility of doing an ongoing oral history project and documentation somehow of the steelworker experience in Chicago. Paul then left the college, but Mike and the College and Eddie pursued this project and got some pretty decent sized grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Illinois Humanities Council and perhaps some other funders and began to set up a project that would help the

people of the Southeast Side, that is South Dearing, South Chicago, Hegewich and the East Side, come together to explore their own history; so that it would be a community involved project. It wouldn't be a bunch of academics coming down and studying the steelworkers. It would be the steelworkers studying themselves and presenting their story to the wider world. And Columbia would help facilitate that, you know, with its film programs, television programs sort of whatever. Okay? But they needed a historian, and I was in the process at that point, of finishing my PhD dissertation, which became a book called Polish Immigrants and Industrial Chicago. And that book studied Polish immigrants in both Back of the Yards, in meat packing and in steel making in South Chicago. So they brought me on as a consultant. And then as the project grew, and it grew very rapidly, they asked me to come on full-time as the Associate Project Director. So I left, what was then a position I had at the Newbury Library, and came on board. And we ended up collecting over 5,000 historical photographs, which we copied and put in the archives. We did lots of oral histories and on camera interviews. We did a film which won some local awards called, *Wrapped in Steel*. And we did a 2,000 square-foot exhibit at the Museum of Science and Industry. Plus we had a weekly column in the neighborhood daily newspaper, the *Daily Calumet*. We did a column each week on the history. Sometimes it was written by myself or by Jim Martin, who was the Director, or it was written

by a neighborhood person. And then we helped to establish the Southeast Side Museum and (*inaudible*) Museum in Calumet Park. And then finally, almost 18 years later, 17 years later, my book, Chicago's Southeast Side, came out with the 235 photographs that we collected. And I co-authored that with Ron Sellers, who is a local neighborhood person, a local high school teacher. So even the book was done in the spirit of the local people doing their own history. So it was a very successful project, and it brought me on as a faculty member when the project closed down. Mike Alexandroff invited me to join, and Les VanMarter, Chair of the Department, invited me to come aboard as a faculty member. So I've been here since 1984, as a full-time faculty member.

**What was Mike Alexandroff's connection with the Steel Workers Union? I mean and then how did—and then when you get**



**on board maybe talk a little bit more about the personality than the teamwork.**

Yeah. Mike Alexandroff, who as you know, is really the founder of the modern college, was very involved in left wing and radical politics. Yeah, labor union people, especially steelworker people, were very involved with left wing and radical politics. And Eddie, and Mike and Eddie began to know each other in that way. And so there was a natural affinity, a natural connection. The other natural connection between Ed Sadlowski and myself and Mike Alexandroff, was that we were all White Sox fans and that was a real important connection. If you knew Mike Alexandroff, or you know me or Eddie Sadlowski, that's almost like religion. And for those two guys, I think it was their religion. So that was another connector.

**Oh, did you have all your meetings at the baseball games?**

No, we talked a lot of baseball though. We talked a lot of baseball, and they were real good fans. And we all had, you know, liberal left political ideologies. And so it worked really well. I mean we also had some very interesting connections with people who were sort of politically opposed to probably our point of view or even, especially on a local level, Eddie Sadlowski's point of view. I mean Eddie Vrdolyak, the Alderman, was involved in and loaned us James Pete Fitzgibbons, who was this local historian, this Irish bachelor, who was really into preserving the history of the community and had been preserving photographs and talking to people and sort of creating this Southeast Side Historical Society for a long time. And so he worked as an office person, I

believe, for Vrdolyak, and Vrdolyak loaned him to us. And it was great because Jim, who was a real precinct captain kind of guy, very intelligent and not schooled as a historian but, you know, one of these amateur local people that make our lives so much easier, Jimmy was able to go out and reach people. And between him and Ed Sadlowski, everybody on the right, the left, the center and in the church and out of the church and in the pool hall and out of the pool hall, everybody was covered. I mean cause they both knew everybody in the neighborhood, either through the union movement or through the local Democratic political party. So we were able to really—and it was fascinating. I mean, you know, if you want to reach out and collect photographs, I mean or memoirs, and we collected all kinds of things. You know, there was even a little diary of a Polish soldier which was given to us, letters, things like that. You'd go to a bingo, and the priest—

**Really?**

—at the bingo, you know, St. Michael's Church, or I remember at St. Mary Magdalene's Church, the senior clubs and all these Catholic parishes have senior clubs or they have regular bingos, you know, you'd have 15 minutes. Yeah.

**In between B12 and G1?**

Well, at the very beginning. You don't want to fool with—

**That's true.**

Oh, man, you don't want to fool with that. That's serious business. But at the beginning, I would come up. I'd bring my little slides. I'd pop them on the tray, and I'd say, this is what we've got. This is what we need. What can you do for me? And I'd have, you know, 100

cards with me or something like that. And you got 15 minutes. Boy, if you went over 15 minutes, people started coughing and getting mad and getting up and, you know, cause they wanted the balls to start rolling.

**Bingo.**

I mean, you know.

**Literally.**

Yeah. So what it taught you really, was how to have a very precise presentation. You know, academics, we could talk forever. I mean this interview is going to take at least seven hours because I'm just going to talk. But stand in front of a bunch of people who want to play bingo, you better get the hell out of there in 15 minutes, or you're fried. You know, so that's what we were doing. And we would go to club meetings and we would go to fraternal organization meetings and union meetings. And we would make these presentations, Jim Martin and I, and we would collect stuff. People would show up at the office and say, "you want this junk?"—and they would drop it off. And sometimes they'd give it to you and sometimes you would copy it and send it back. We did a lot of Xeroxing, a lot of copying cause people wanted their stuff back. It was like a huge, unorganized dissertation research project. I mean not going to archives, but going to bingo games and taverns and pool halls and just talking with people. And our door was always open. So we were on the second floor above a Three Sisters clothing store on Commercial Avenue, and people would come up. And next door to us was Mr. Buccio. He was a local lawyer, and I think he was politically involved. And people would come up to see Buccio and

we'd have our gallery right there and our gallery would have pictures and paintings and things, and they'd walk in and they'd say, what's this about? And we'd tell them and they'd go home and get photographs and bring it over. I remember one of the strangest things, was a guy came over with a coffee can, with a Maxwell House coffee can, and in there were his father's house records back into the 1920s. And so we took all this stuff, and really it was kind of nice—if you're doing material culture—to look back at what did this cost in 1928 or 1932? And there were the bills. He had all the bills from his father in a coffee can, and he said, you know, if you want it, you can have it. Of course, we wanted it. So it was good. We got involved in the Mexican community, the Polish community, and the African-American community, and Croatian community. We spoke at Serbian churches. We spoke at, you know, a wide variety of places. So for me as a young historian at that time, and this was 22 years ago, 21 years ago, as a young historian, it was a really interesting project for me to be involved in. It was my first real full-time, benefits job, and I finished my dissertation, on May 1st of 1981. That's when I dated the final, and it was my birthday. That's why I remember. So and from that point on, I've been here. So and from that point on, I've been here.

**Now, obviously, with this project you were on location so to speak or in that office.**

Oh, I was also teaching here. They had me teaching four courses here, while I was Associate Director down there.

**Oh, you're kidding?**

Oh, yeah. I had two three-hour courses. You know, those three-hour blocks.

**Yeah.**

One in the morning and one in the afternoon, on I think Tuesday and Wednesday. So I taught four classes in two days and then I skedaddled back down to South Chicago. And sometimes we had, on the weekend, things we had to attend like a bingo, you know.

**Wow.**

So, yeah, I would come hoarse. After teaching for six hours, I would come home hoarse. Yeah.

**Sure. So then you are overlapping as a faculty member and with this project?**

Right, I was adjunct faculty and associate. Yeah.

**Okay. What did you know about Columbia before you came on board and what were your first impressions as a teacher here?**

Well, my first impressions of Columbia predate all this. I was actually interviewed for a position in what was then called the Life Arts Department previous to my arrival. And I thought the place was really whack. You know, I had no great desire to be here. And I didn't know Mike Alexandroff at that time or Les VanMarter or any of the other people that really changed the Life Arts Department into the Liberal Education Department. But I had a very bad impression of Columbia. It was just too loose. It was too wacky.

**Okay. Too loose. So what had changed when you decided to accept the full-time position from Life Arts interview and it was too "out there" for you?**

Right. Right.

**And then meeting Mike, meeting Les.**

Right.

**What had they put in place that made it more attractive to you?**

Well, I think that the arrival of Les VanMarter here, and he arrived here I think in '83, about two years after I was already, you know, working. And also, Lya Rosenblum was very important in my own personal relationship with the college. Les and Lya and Mike were really intent on creating a modern version of the Liberal Arts Department and creating it into a more sort of academically positioned Liberal Education Department. Really getting rid of some of the courses which I think were fashionable in the sixties, but were quickly fading out of fashion in the Regan years, and with good reason. I don't think they had a lot of real academic basis. Some of the old-timers would probably disagree with me, but I have been disagreeing with them for 20 years so it doesn't matter. But I was very pleased then. Jim Martin and I had created a whole curriculum called the Urban Culture Curriculum, that we had hoped to sell as a program to the college. And Lya Rosenblum, took us under her wing and offered the courses, not in the Liberal Education Department, but as part of the dean's programs. This college was very loose at that time.

**What are the Dean's programs?**

Well, it was sort of courses that were offered through the Dean's Office rather than through a department. We were not connected to the Liberal Education Department, until 1984. We were kind of special courses. They were hidden—and what was interesting

was credit was given in history, credit was given in humanities, credit was given in social sciences, cause we designed a whole curriculum. Many of those courses are now part of the Liberal Education curriculum, and sometimes they were given as general elective, you know, kind of courses. They became immediately very popular cause they spoke to the urban nature of this campus and of actually our care-ism as a college, you know. But they weren't part of the Liberal Arts Department. And Lya had brought us in under these sort of dean's programs, and there might have been another name for it. I just don't quite recall. And so I was teaching under her auspices rather than under the Liberal Arts Department. And Mike decided that he was going to create this Liberal Education Department, you know, that he was going to bring Columbia, you know, which was getting accredited and was growing by leaps and bounds. I mean just amazing growth and all those kinds of things. And it was obvious that we should, if we were going to come on board, we should go to the Liberal Education Department. Jim Martin was already a faculty member in Film, but he had really broken with that department. He was looking for another place to settle in. And so I'll never forget it. I think it was the faculty retreat of 1983, we were up in Alpine Valley in Wisconsin. And Les VanMarter and I spent the night talking, and I told him what I want to do and what I would want to do if I came on board, and he agreed and they brought me aboard. You know, and at that point, I was an active candidate as any young PhD was, you know, looking for a faculty position. And this gave me an opportunity to stay in Chicago and with

my family, and my wife was at that point teaching, was an adjunct professor at Loyola. She wasn't my wife yet. We were engaged. So I decided this would be a good place to be, and so here we are. So Les and Lya really did so much, I think, for putting this not only this department, you know, but Columbia College as a whole, onto a sort of more firmer academic basis. And I think really that, you know, some of the old timers really didn't appreciate that, didn't like it, and gave them all kinds of hell. But Mike appreciated it, and he may not have, you know, might have flipped back and forth kind of nostalgically thinking about the old days when there were ten faculty members and they all went for pizza and beer every Friday night. You know, I'm sure you've heard all those kinds of stories. But you can't run a college of 10,000 students with a faculty, part-time and full-time, having pizza on a Friday night on some north side gin mill. So, you know, that had changed.

**You don't get accredited with that either.**

And you don't get accredited with that either. And so that had changed and Mike understood change. One thing about Mike Alexandroff and really, you know, besides the fact that he's a generous, warm, really loving man, and I miss him dearly, was that he was open to change. He was really open to change, and he understood. He understood the change of the sixties, but he also understood the change of the seventies and eighties and the nineties, what the future of the college really had to pursue so.

**Right. Cause accreditation was very important to him, correct?**

It was. It was very. Well, it was very important to all of us. Many of

us wouldn't have come here, you know, or have stayed if the accreditation hadn't taken place. And I was here for—accreditation had already taken place I think when I arrived.

**That was in '84.**  
'84 so—

**I believe.**

Well, that was the second time I (*inaudible*). That was actually, that was temporary accreditation I think, a renewal after five years or something, and then we've been accredited ever since. So I was here for a lot of that, and, you know, it's a strenuous thing to jump through, kind of hoops to jump through, but Mike certainly wanted that. Mike knew that no parent was going to spend this kind of money to send their kids to a school that wasn't accredited even if it was, you know, a school that the kids wanted to go to. And I think it was real important. I mean as a parent I'd feel the same way.

**In your discussions with Les, so you, if I'm correct, you had this urban culture curriculum that fell under the Dean's programs.**  
Right.

**Were you bring that part and parcel into Liberal Ed?**  
Yes.

**Is that what you asked? Or were there some changes?**

No, we brought it part and parcel. We even brought the part-time faculty we had with us. I remember that Glen Graham said, at a meeting which I wasn't at but which Glen actually told me about later, was he asked if the Liberal Education Department was, indeed, pregnant with the Urban Culture Program. And the answer was, yes, we are pregnant with the Urban Culture Program and—

**Delivery due.**

—delivery was due in 1984, in the fall, and we arrived and we brought a series of courses, Urban Politics, Urban Images which is a humanities course. We did an Urban Religions Course, History of Chicago, History of the American Working Class, History of the American City. Hm, there was even an attempt to teach a course on urban culture, History of Urban Culture. And there was even a course for a while, that I taught on the Search for Community in American History. And those disappeared. And we had another course on how to design a museum exhibit from a humanistic point of view.

**Really?**

Yeah, and that died. That just— cause that really had to have more connection with Les's Art Department than this department. But it really was an attempt to create an interdisciplinary program revolving around the study of the city. And so, you know, we came here and Les was very excited about it. He was, of course, in his very early years as chair, and he was looking to really make a mark, and our courses I have to say have been very successful generally speaking. Like I say a couple have been cut off. I don't think we do the Urban Religions course anymore. We don't do In Search of Community anymore although maybe we should. And I found the students to be very receptive because what we did was we used the city as a laboratory. We sort of in a way try to revive that idea that the University of Chicago had in 1920s, you know, big Chicago school. And in my

History of Chicago course, you know, I had for a long kids going out interviewing the people, doing oral histories every semester. We'd do a walking tour of the Loop, you know. That has changed over time, but the walking tour has been maintained. You know, there's all kinds of different things that people did to sort of adjust to this new curriculum in sort of the Liberal Education Department which was new, you understand. It had become from Life Arts, it had become Liberal Education. Maybe I said Liberal Arts before, but Life Arts was the original name.

**Yeah, you said Life Arts.**

Okay. And so, Life Arts became Liberal Education. So that was new, and Glen Graham and others were establishing a very secure history program. And, you know, then Bill Hyashi was working with the humanities program at that point and others. So, you know, it was kind of exciting. It was a very tempestuous and boisterous and argumentative place by its very nature, so there's always been kind of a rolling argument going on and especially between I think, you know, I know that I've been here for 21 years but there's an older guard. You know, and that older guard which really, you know, and they should have a lot of credit given to them. They built this in the sixties, you know, the innovative programs and the whole idea of an arts and media college. But that older guard, some of them, not all of them, but some of them sort of refused to change and so there's always been these kinds of arguments. What is the nature of this place? And maybe that's what a university should always be doing is arguing what is the nature of this place?

**Well, in relation to that, you talked about or made a reference to the urban nature of this college, and that was part of its purpose.**

Right.

**And could you expand on that and how you interpret it and the significance?**

Sure.

**And maybe if you think we're getting away from that today or has that shifted?**

Oh, I don't think it's shifted. I think it's growing actually. I really do. We are an urban institution. We're smack dab in the Loop, in the South Loop which when we first moved out here, it used to be rough, you know. I remember taking a group of students in a night course and on my walking tour which we walked for about an hour or longer if it's a night course. And just going under the El here, you know, and a guy who was obviously high, you know, on something or another jumping out, announcing that he was the Angel of Death and that I was Satan, and that the Lord Jesus had sent him to kill me. Now, I immediately turn to my students who were, at that point 20 feet behind me cause they just backed off, and I was standing alone with this guy with a bottle in his hand. And he announced that he was going to hit me with a bottle and kill me. So I just sort of stood there, and I says, "well, okay, you know, what do I do now?" And his buddy came out of the shadow and grabbed him and says, "no, no, no, that's not the devil. The devil's coming a little bit later." And this guy says, "well, he looks like the devil." And then I said, "well, you know." And he says, "ah, let's go

back to the mission.” And he was from the Pacific Garden Mission. Oh, let’s ask the pastor there, and they walked off. And suddenly the kids were right behind me again. And it was just like thank you, guys, you know. So, you know, it was a rough neighborhood, you know, when we first came here and, of course, it has changed. One of the smartest maneuvers that the people who make these decisions here ever made, was moving to the South Loop. I mean it’s before all this was changed. You know, there were burlesques, you know, those kinds of places or at least the remnants of them. There were certainly still prostitutes, etc. But it was an urban mission to come into this neighborhood and celebrate it. And there’s no getting away from that. You know, I mean, you know, and the kids, part of the attraction I think to a place like Columbia is that it’s a gritty place down in the middle of things that are happening, that there’s a lot of artists and a lot of writers and there’s a lot of moviemakers and film, and TV makers and whatever around. And there are also academics around who know the city who can talk about it. There used to be two wonderful men who were here. They’re gone. I wish you—I don’t think you knew them. One was Harry Bouras.

**Uh-huh, his name comes up.**

Yeah, Harry was just a wonderful guy. He was an artist. He had known Jackson Pollack. He’d gotten drunk with Jackson Pollack. He was a wild man, but he was extremely funny, artistic, witty. He had a weekly program on WTTW, called, I think, Art and the Artist, or something like that. And he had it on for years. And my book came out in 1986, the Chicago City

Neighborhoods, and he says, “geez, I’m looking forward to it,” he said, “but, you know, how can I get you on the radio program. You’re not an artist.” And he says “that company gets kind of, you know.” And I says, “well, the art of living in the city, Harry.” And he says, “that’s it.” And we did two weeks. We did two consecutive shows, and we just sat on WTTW—or not WTTW. Excuse me. Oh, my God, WFMT, you know, the fine arts music station.

**The radio. Okay.**

Yeah, the fine arts music station, WFMT which, of course, is connected to WTTW. And FMT and we sat there for two weeks on this hour show and we talked about the fine art of living in the city. And Harry was so articulate. I mean he just went on and on about bungalows, and brick work and I talked about living in these things and we had a great time. Now, those were the kinds of people. You know, Bob Edmonds was the other fellow. And Bob Edmonds passed. Bob was an early, he was originally the Chair for the Film Department here. Became professor at large in the college, and Bob was connected to everybody in the film world. He traveled to Poland all the time. He was originally born in Canada, and he and his wife, Shirley, were just some of the warmest, kindest and most articulate people you’d ever want to meet. They’d have these little salons at their house and you’d show up, and Shirley knew that I loved her chopped liver. And so every time I showed up, only for Shirley’s chopped liver. Shirley in heaven, knows that. But Shirley, both her and her husband, Bob, are gone, Shirley would always make chopped liver when I came over. So we’d have bottles of wine all over the place and then these huge

things of chopped liver and we’d eat and we’d talk. And there’d be a critic or a Polish filmmaker, or a poet or somebody from Bosnia or Dalmatia. I mean Bob Edmonds had all these connections to Eastern Europe, and he was just a fantastic guy, one of the most loving people. Both he and Harry died while I was in Paris, and that still bothers me. They died in the summer of 1990, within a very short time of each other. I saw Harry before I left for Paris, and he was already dying of cancer. I didn’t know that Bob was dying and, you know, Bob had been in Europe. He came back. He got sick in Europe, he came back and died. And then Shirley died shortly thereafter, about six months, you know. Cause I don’t think anybody, including Shirley, could imagine them apart. And they both, you know, passed very quickly together. But they were two of the great ones. And they gave, especially Harry Bouras, gave Les VanMarter constant heart attacks. Because, you know, Harry would do these wild writing assignments like, you know, what is the sex life of a green egg in a telephone booth on a 90 degree day, something like that, you know. And just bizarre stuff. I mean Harry had, you know, I have one of his paintings hanging in my living room. He was a wild man, and he would teach these courses. But, you know, Les would attend his courses, and Les would say, “Harry, you can’t do this. You have to do this, this, this, and you have to have a syllabus, Harry. You have to have, you know, exams. You have to—”and, you know, Harry who was the rebel, right, he was the beat—he was almost like a beat, you know, artist, he sat there and he says, “you know what, nobody’s ever taken the time to sit and talk to me about this, Les. I really

appreciate it.” And he started coming to the faculty meetings which he’d never done before cause he thought everybody was kind of goofy. And so he never came, and Les got him to come to faculty meetings. Les got him to calm down, you know. And Harry and I grew very close. I love Harry Bouras. And I’m sure he loved me. We were good friends.

**His name comes up a lot.**  
I’m sure it does, yeah.

**And that’s a person I would—**  
In various legal cases.

**And the other one that comes up that I would have liked to have interviewed, Bob Edmonds has come up, too.**  
Yeah.

**Okay. What special challenges do you come up against teaching history at an institution of higher education that does not have a history department or, you know, a distinct history major?**  
Yeah, well, there are various issues. One is, you know, oh, gosh. There’s two levels. That is one is a personal level and one is an institutional level. I want to do institutional first. On the institutional level, the problem is that you have a lot of unprepared students who don’t know much about history. You remember that song don’t know much about history, don’t know much about geometry, well, they don’t. And so to teach a course, all our history courses, no matter what the topic, have to be to an extent introductory courses. So I end up teaching a course like the History of American Working Class, or the History of Chicago as U.S. History surveys. I mean I go over, in fact,

when the Civil War happened, cause I cannot take it for granted that they know. And this is a comment no on the preparedness of our students alone but on the preparedness of American students who don’t learn much history in the high schools anymore. I think there’s been a real change in the teaching procedures in the high schools or history is thought of so dryly that kids just blank it out, you know. And I think what they find when they come to a college level, with 90 percent of our instructors. I mean there are some instructors who teach history here who are dry because, you know, that’s—

**They don’t know any different.**  
They don’t know any different and ten percent of all people are dry. Yeah, so there it is, you know. But I think most of the people who teach here, have now been teaching for such a long time that they really have (*inaudible*) things that are interesting and they talk about things that are relevant. I mean, you know, I’ll tell a new part-time instructor, “have a discussion. Don’t just ask what happened on December 7, 1941 cause that’s Pearl Harbor and then that’s not a discussion, you know. Ask maybe, well, why did Japanese and American interests conflict in 1941 and don’t conflict today?” I mean let’s, you know, something to get the kids thinking. But it’s hard if the kids don’t know any history so you really kind of have to walk a line. And you have kids here because it’s an open admissions college, and I would never change that. I think it’s wonderful. But because it’s an open admissions college, there are some kids that are unprepared totally and some kids that are very prepared and some older students who, you know, read

a lot and thought a lot about this and decided to come back, you know, to college. So you have a wide group of people. And the trap is to fall into the trap is to only address the five students who know what they’re talking about and to ignore the 20 who just—you know, and then they fall asleep and you lose them. So I guess the challenge in being at a place like Columbia is this kind of juggling. Now, on a personal level, I’m 52 years old. I know I’m never going to have graduate students. I know I’m never going to have majors. And on a personal level sometimes it’s a sadness for me that I won’t be able to affect the field the way I would have liked to affect the field. So that occurs occasionally, you know, although I’ve come to live with that and move on.

**Well, let’s tie that into though that mission that you see and the purpose of the urban institution. At the same time, you know, on the one side you talk about the sadness, but do you also feel that you’re reaching students?**  
Yeah.

**—that would never be reached and taking that urban perspective in (*inaudible*) their art?**  
Look, the architectural critic for the Sun-Times is a former student of mine, Lee Bay.

**Oh, really?**  
Yeah. I can’t, I do a lot of local media. I do a lot of local TV and radio, and almost every time I walk into a TV studio or a radio studio I see a former student or something from Columbia. I get phone calls from filmmakers across the country who want to do something on Chicago because they are either from Columbia and have had a class

with me, or one of their assistants, or one of their friends, or something like that. So in a popular kind of way. Now, and I guess my sadness revolves around this academic thing. I mean, you know, we're raised to be professors, you know, and I think that that's a wonderful thing. And I love the academic argument and, you know. On the other hand what Columbia has given me, this happy part of that, and I should accentuate the happy part of that is that it's given me a much wider theater in which to pronounce or profess if you'd prefer, you know. And Columbia loves the fact that I'm on Chicago Tonight, that I'm on WTTW at least five times a year, that I'm coordinator—

**MPR.**

MPR, yeah, I do one NPR, BEZ. I do a lot of local newspapers. I'm probably quoted in the newspapers at least once every two months. You know, so Columbia loves that. I like it. Columbia's been good in promoting me to do that. It's fun. I'm now curating an exhibit at the Chicago Architecture Foundation and I'm quoted in a book on the bungalow, the Chicago bungalow, a vernacular art form, a residential art form. That exhibit is going to travel to Pasadena, to Seattle, to Portland.

**Really?**

Yeah, and we have a book coming out that'll have over 125 illustrations, and I'm co-editing including six articles and two photographic essays. So Columbia gives me the flexibility to do that, and I appreciate that. And so I guess, I shouldn't cry so much about not having as much of an impact by leading graduate students as my sort of surrogate children. I have all these other impacts across the more popular history, popular culture

kind of, you know, impact. But I still do real academic work. I mean I publish in journals and all that other stuff.

**Sure.**

So, you know, I mean but Columbia's given me a lot of opportunity. I mean they've been very supportive. They pay me what I think is a very good wage. I get a new computer every few years and, you know, they let me travel. And they've been very good. And, you know, I've been I hope good for them. You know, I've represented them in Europe, in Canada, across the country, you know. So I'm part of the academic wing rather than the sort of wing that is the professional wing. But I think a place like Columbia needs both.

**Uh-huh. That was going to be my next question. You know, and it sounds like you believe there is a place for academics in the arts that you really—**

Oh, yeah. I don't see how anybody can make a film in this country without having some sort of historical or humanities and social science background. I mean what do you write about? What do you talk about? I mean people in fiction writing, paper, people in the creative non-fiction programs, you know, (*inaudible*) a poetry book. I mean all these things are rooted in our past, our lives. I mean I think that the liberal arts are absolutely crucial, the fine arts and the media arts, to the art of being a citizen. See, that's what Mike Alexandroff believed. Mike Alexandroff believed, that one of the things this college could do is to make artists who are aware and who are good citizens. Mike wanted people to understand, you know, the world around them so that their art could

have a real impact. I mean I could sit and draw circles all day, and it's going to have no impact.

**Uh-huh, have impact after you're dead?**

Or have impact after I'm dead, but have a Jackson Pollack, who understood the stress of post World War II America, draw a circle and whammo, you know, there you are. I mean a guy like Jack Kerouac who wrote with no, you know, commas, periods, the rambling, almost drunken rambling—still he had read Whitman. He had read Dostoyevsky. He understood Proust. He spoke about Marx. He had a solid grounding in his culture. And that's what we, as a department and we as the General Education Departments, in general give. I'm teaching a course this semester on the Vietnam War, which has been actually very interesting because I'm team teaching it with one person from management, one person from English, Tom Nawrocki and Kimo Williams and myself. And it's an interdisciplinary course. We do history, literature and music, culture and art. We're going to have the final class before the exam at the Vietnam Veterans Art Museum, you know. And it's just going fantastically, and the kids are actually learning a lot of history because they're learning not only the history I give them, and I have a short history of the Vietnam War, but they're also looking at literature, the writings of Larry Heinemann, the fiction writing teacher, of, you know, Tim O'Brien, of poets, of filmmakers. We brought in a Vietnamese poet last year, a refugee poet, not last year but the last class. Excuse me. We had a composer from Hanoi come in and talk about his music. I mean that's the kind of stuff Columbia can do because Columbia has

connections across the arts and across the humanities and across the social sciences, and it's very involved in the politics of the city, you know. And so we can bring people in. We had David Orr here teaching a course on urban politics the day Harold Washington died.

**Oh, really?**

And he became the acting mayor. He had to pull out of the course and we had to get somebody else to finish it up for him. He became acting mayor of the City of Chicago. Just a handful of days, but if you remember that chaos, Columbia was right in the middle of it. David Orr was teaching a course here, you know. David Orr and I went to graduate school together, and I was, you know, able to get him to come. So, you know, there's all kinds of st—and Mike Alexandroff knew him and so forth and so on. So there's a lot of that kind of stuff that Columbia does very well, and I think what it does, as long as it remains, and what I do worry about is this BFA business cause if those people aren't grounded, you know, in the social sciences, in the humanities, in history, then their art is going to suffer. How can you, how can you act in a Shakespearean play if you don't understand the time Shakespeare wrote? I mean it's absolutely I think impossible. How can you discuss a Saul Bellow without understanding post World War II America and where Saul Bellow was coming out of, you know. You can't just read it now. You have to understand what he's talking about. How can you read the Atlantic Monthly Magazine without knowing your culture? You can't. I mean I'm shocked at how unprepared kids come to college. They don't

know what Sodom and Gomorrah is. There are—and I asked my class what's Sodom and Gomorrah, cause Chicago's been called the Sodom and Gomorrah of the 19th Century. And they looked at me with blank faces. I says, "you never learned about Sodom and Gomorrah? I mean not even from a religious point of view but from a literary, as a metaphor, as a symbol, Sodom and Gomorrah, you know? So how could you read this book I just gave you where Sodom and Gomorrah's all over the place? Look the damn thing up," you know. And I mean, and that's one of the things they've got to learn, and that's one of the things we all had to learn. I think, you know.

**So do you see that as a tension within the college?**

Yes, I do.

**And on the horizon, the BFA—**  
Right.

**—would eliminate what some of the requirements or—**

I'm not sure what the impact of the BFA would be. It worries me.

**You're concerned that that might be the direction it's heading?**

It worries me. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Allowing students to just—**

Yeah. I mean the big tension here has always been is this a, how can I put it, is this a college, a liberal arts college which is what Mike wanted, what I think every president of the college has wanted so far, or is this an academy? You know, is this a place to learn music? Is this a conservatory? That's a whole different approach, you see. I not only because I truly believe it, but I also think that that has been actually the key success of this college is that it is not a

conservatory. It is a college. And I think that's important to parents. My daughter may be very gifted in playing the cello, but I want her to have BA degree. Now, and I want her to know about poetry, I want her to know about history, I want her to know about mathematics, I want her to know about physics. And that's what a college gives you. And I think that's extremely important, extremely crucial, and that's one of the things that I hope we will keep our focus on and I worry about, and we all worry about. I mean there are plenty of people here who just, and they know who they are that are listening, they would like to turn this place into a trade school, you know. The people that say don't take your gen ed courses here. Take them at a junior college. History's history. Who the hell cares? History's not history. It's taught here by professionals that understand the college, who are tied to the college's goals, who, you know, change their curriculum in order to make it a more real experience. We use film. I use film. I use poetry. I use literature. You may not get that at Daley Junior College, not that Daley—or it's no longer called a junior college, Daley Community College is not a fine place or Wilson or whatever.

**Right.**

But this is a home for those things, and for those people, those Neanderthals who tell people to go off someplace else are committing a disservice to the students. I know it's cheaper, and there are times you just do things more cheaply, you know. Maybe you don't buy the BMW, you know, you buy the little cheap car and then the truck hits

you. You know, that's life. So maybe that's the same thing with classes. You can't afford to take your gen ed courses here. I understand. I empathize with students who come from a working class background. I'm the first one in my immediate family to go to high school much less to college and graduate school. So I understand, you know, I worked my way through as a stockyard worker. So I understand that need, and I empathize with it. But I feel that for some of these people would turn this into a trade school and say, all right, go on, go someplace else because you just got to take it.

**Yeah, right, right.**

You know, and you do hear people say that.

**And here's the important stuff. Don't worry about that.**

Yeah, here's the important stuff, Sound I and Sound II and the rest of this. Or Camera, you know, Photoshop I or something and, you know, they're losing. I mean Mike was very, very, very focused on this. He understood the necessity of a good liberal arts education, and that's our care-ism that we have to be loyal to.

**Care-ism. I think you've used that a couple of times.**

Our, you know, foundation, our goal, our mission.

**Right. You talked about to reference what parents want. Now, I know your daughter is at college. If she had come to you—**  
No, she's in high school. She's at St. Ignatius.

**Oh, she's not in college yet?**  
No.

**If she comes to you and says I want to go to Columbia?**  
Yeah, that's a good question.

**Does it depend on the child?**  
Yeah.

**Your qualms, your concerns, your green light.**

I have no qualms or concerns. I think it would be, you know, a fine place for her to go. It's not a place to come if you want to be a history major, or an English major, or a biology major. But if you want to do the fine and media arts or the communication arts, it's a fine place. It's the finest place as you can get in the city. You know, and the film school is good. I would have no qualms there. I think if you really don't know what you want to do, it's also a good place to figure things out. But I think if you want to be a biochemist, you face that reality and you go someplace else, you know. Or you want to go into pre-med or whatever it might be. My daughter's taking courses here in the summer in the High School Institute, and she's very excited about that. She heard about Columbia in high school summer institute. She gets college credit for it, and she's very excited about that. And, you know, she wants to look into the arts, too. So we're not sure where Jonna's going to go. But we'll see.

**When you talked about those that might advise the students saying, "well, get your U.S. Survey, go to a community college." An you're saying that, you know, that's a disservice to the school, to the department.**

And to the student.

**And to the student.**  
Right.

**What do you hope the student would get at a U.S. Survey here that is more tailored to Columbia than they would at a community college or—**  
Well, what I would hope—

**You know, what are you hoping your teachers, as history coordinator, what are you hoping your teachers who are almost all part-timers, what do you hope they're giving the students at Columbia or emphasizing that they might not be emphasizing or giving the students at another institution?**  
Well, you know, that's actually a difficult question because I see the kind of way that we teach here is the way to teach everyone.

**Okay.**

You know, I don't see history as a dry archival subject, and I don't see history as nostalgia. Nostalgia really irritates the hell out of me. Okay? I see history, and what I try to get across to the part-timers that I've hired or interviewed is that I see history and I think Columbia sees history as an ongoing, living process that involves the arts. It involves film. It involves popular culture. And that involves, you know, it's not just simply dates. Dates are important, you know. Characters are important. I mean I would not teach U.S. History without mentioning George Washington, any more than I would teach psychology without mentioning Freud or Jung, right? On the other hand, what made George Washington possible? What, you know, what was ha—I'll ask my students, "what happened in 1776?" And they'll invariably look on the ground, you know, the first day of class. And then they'll look up and somebody'll say, "well,

the American Revolution.” And I’ll say, “exactly, but what was impor—that’s nice,” I say, “but what’s important that happened in 1776.” And they look at me and I say, “a book was published.” And occasionally, occasionally, a student will say “Adam Smith?” All right. And, of course, I’ll say, yeah, “Adam Smith.” Now, here’s the idea. Ideas are important. Concord, you know, the Battle of Vicksburg, those are important, but the idea of equality, the ongoing American Revolution. In fact, the revolution hasn’t ended. I mean if it had ended, then only old white men with slaves would be in power. The revolution is constant. Now, sometimes the revolution boils up. In the 1960s it boiled up, you know, and suddenly strange groups wanted power like African-Americans and women, God forbid. But, you know, then we had that revolution and now newer groups like gays, all right. “All right, so what does it mean to be an American?” And I think those are the important questions, and I would hope that all historians who teach ask those kinds of important questions. And certainly that then you can easily tie into, in maybe the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks or of Robert Frost or the movie, you know, what is it, you know, like *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington*. You know, you can tie. Or what is the movie from—the racist movie, *Birth of a Nation*. You know, they see these things in the film courses and then, you know—

**They have nothing to connect it to.**

Yeah, and, you know, vroom, let’s bring it down to reality.

**Right, right.**

Now, I would hope everybody teaches that way, but maybe that’s me professing again and, you know, I’ve been accused of professing too much. But the idea here is that really, you know, I mean the whole culture’s connected. You can’t understand Jack Kerouac, without understanding World War II and the great depression and the fact that he comes from an immigrant family. And then where did those immigrants come from and, you know, so forth and so on? What does working-class mean? Cause in America, even the Kennedys think they’re middle class, you know. The Roosevelts think they’re middle class. They’re not, you know. In France, there would be no question what they are, you know? But in the United States, we’re all middle class, you know. I just, one of the things that I hope we’re also teaching students is how to critique and how to criticize. My writing assignments are often revolved around the idea of, what is ideology and what ideology does the author have or the filmmaker or whatever or the museum curator, you know? Every museum exhibit has an ideology, you know. Maybe it’s celebrate rather than define, you know. And we just saw a film which I’m in, I do like I say a lot of local film, and it’s called *Chicago’s Neighborhoods, Design and Diversity* or something like that, and it’s going to be playing this week on WTTW. And I introduced that film at the world premiere. They asked me to introduce it, and there were like 300 people there at the Chicago Historical Society, and I just criticized the hell out of the film. That was how I introduced it. I said, “you know, this film, you know,” I says, “filmmakers. They think they can put a picture up

there of a bunch of Croatians and call them Bohemians and nobody’s going to know. You know,” I said, “whoa.” And I says this film is supposed to be about neighborhoods, yet there’s nothing in here about anger or fear or change. It’s like, let’s celebrate.” So I showed this to the students the other day, and I said, I told them I had been very critical. And they felt, you know, students don’t want to be critical. They want to read the book and say, yeah, that’s the truth and move on. Well, you know, not every book is filled with truth. Lots of books are filled with errors. Lots of books are stupid. Lots of books are smart. And even the smart ones have errors, or may be wrong. You know, so you argue. And one of the things that I hope our instructors teach them, is to argue with the material and even to argue with the teacher because I have an ideology and maybe it’s not their ideology. So they can’t just simply swig it down, like a shot of Old Fitz. They have to understand that maybe I’m wrong, and we have to talk. And that’s what college is about. And so I would hope everybody all over the country is teaching that kind of way. I would especially hope that we’re teaching that kind of way. And sometimes I come in to a young instructor. I just sat in on a young instructor’s, this is the first time he’s teaching. Great presentation. I mean he had all the stuff. He had, you know, speeches from Dr. King, etc., etc. It was very interesting. But he didn’t discuss. He lectured. You snooze, you loose, you know, and those kids were starting to snooze because they have to be interacted with. And I find it very difficult. I mean students just don’t want to talk or,

you know, the smart ones don't want to be smart. The dumb ones don't want to be dumb. The in-between ones don't want to be in-between. They just really want to write this down, get through this damn class and get back to their Sound I class, you know. Oh, well, not me, not with me. You got to.

**So that's the challenge?**

That's the challenge. I think—

**For you. I mean you want, you're like I'm, you know, I'm going to shape the students.**

They're going to talk.

**That maybe in a class of 25, one person took it because they really wanted to take it.**

Right.

**But I'm going to try and convert the rest of them?**

Right. And it, sometimes it happens. Sometimes you'll have people who take three classes with you. You know, you've had that happen. You know, and I'm really bad at names. I mean once forgot my wife's name so I'm really bad at names so I don't often know students by their name, but I know their face. And they pop up in my classes. I have for years been teaching this, History of the 1960s class. All right, I think for about 12 years now I've been offering it. And we opened it up, first we opened to 150 students, and it closed the first or second day. And then we kept it to 80 students, and now, I'm doing this Vietnam course which I'm team teaching to 80 students. And I find that to be a really interesting experience because they, generally speaking, talk more than in the smaller classes.

**Really? I was going to say how does the discussion go? Do they raise, you know, shout something out or raise?**

Yeah, yeah. But, you know, they can say what they want. I don't know who they are. And they know it because they may have had me for a class before, and I don't remember their name. So, you know, they can say what they want to say, and it leads to really rolling discussions. When we started this Vietnam, Tom Nawrocki and I started this Vietnam class by talking about the image of the Vietnam vet. There's a film image, you know, and the film image is usually like right out of Drugs 'R' Us, you know, the drugged up, psychotic, dysfunctional Vietnam vet which I think is incredibly dishonest. I mean most of my friends are Vietnam vets. Most of them have children. They teach. They're policemen, they're businessmen, you know. Wow. A good friend of mine was a vice president of a bank who's a Vietnam vet. He was not blowing up houses and looking for Viet Cong in Oklahoma someplace, you know. And so it's a terribly disjointed image. But we're having this discussion. We showed a few film clips and having this function, and the conversation wasn't—so I just turned around and says, "you know, these Vietnam vets, what a bunch of whiners, what a bunch of babies. My father was in World War II. He didn't cry about the war for 40 years. These guys complain and they complain and they weep and they cry." I says, "my whole goddam generation are a bunch of crybaby, spoiled baby boomers, and I'm sick of it." Man, the discussion took off. Most of it was anger aimed at me. But that's okay. I'm the devil's advocate, you know. Prove to me this guy is a saint, you know. So it really turned into a fine

discussion, and from that point on, the discussions have actually been very good. And once again, I don't know these kids so I can't grade them on, you know, 80 kids, there's no way I can grade them on what do you call it, participation.

**Participation. Yeah, right.**

But it try to do stuff like that in my classes, too, in the smaller classes.

**You've touched on that class which I'm glad cause I did want to specifically ask you about that. I mean is that evidence that this kind of entrepreneurial, you know, I've got an idea, let's put it together and see if it goes.**  
Yeah.

**That would happen here that might not happen—**

It might not happen someplace else. I think it'd be really hard, at some institutions, to get together somebody from the Management Department and English lit and history to come together and teach a course. Now, maybe English Lit and History'd be easy, you know. But bringing in somebody from management, and this guy is, Kimo Williams is a wonderful musician who is a Vietnam vet who does his music. He's going to be doing an opera, in fact, on the Vietnam experience, much of it, not all of it, but much of it on the Vietnam experience. He spoke a couple of times to my sixties classes, and I says, "Kimo, let's do a class on the war." And I mean what it is, is that I mean here, we came in with the History of Chicago in 1984 or whatever, the History of the Working Class, History of American City, all stuff that Mike Alexandroff approved of because ideologically it fit his view. You

know, Mike wanted this to be the new school to an extent, sort of like the Now School of Social Science in New York, a place where people could come and talk and argue. You know, in a way I think maybe it was born in his idea as some sort of grand salon, you know. And then it got out of hand. It got successful, and it couldn't be a salon anymore. But that's okay. He understood that. Cause, you know, maybe the Louvre started or not the Louvre, but the Sorbonne started as a salon or who knows? I don't know. You know, a bunch of monks talking together. Yeah, but eventually, you get grades and you get grade books and you get deans and associate deans and secretaries and office managers and provosts whatever.

**Forms and things.**

Forms. Because you know what? That's what modern society's about. You know, I tell kids bureaucracy, the complain about bureaucracy. I says think about a computer without the software, without DOS. Oh, DOS is gone now at this point, but without Operating System II or whatever it's called, without Windows. Well, bureaucracy is the Windows of society. You got to have it. I mean it's just the way it is. So you shouldn't hate it so much. Just work with it. I don't know where I'm going with this at this point but, yeah, I do think that there is a—

**Well, the future of Columbia, yes.**

Yeah, there is a flexibility here. I mean there's always been a flexibility here that, you know, I mean so it was with Les VanMarter when he allowed me to bring in all those urban courses, and then go in a direction which was totally different from my urban perspective. I took the sixties. That was not

necessarily part of my urban perspective, right? And then Cheryl who's allowed us to create—that's Cheryl Johnson, our new Chair, who's allowed us, Kimo, myself and Tom Nawrocki, to create this Vietnam course. And we're offering it in the English Department and in the Liberal Education Department. You could sign up for either English credit or for history credit and Garnett Kilberg-Cohen over in English has been very supportive of that, etc. So, yeah, there is that flexibility which I think might be harder to do at some places. But maybe not. I mean maybe all places are flexible, but I do think some places are more, you know, set up in a way that doesn't allow it. And so, you know, we've been able to—and even here it gets a little more difficult now as the place gets larger and you have a curriculum committee now that has to approve things and Departmental Curriculum Committee, a College Wide Curriculum Committee. When I came here, I didn't have to make any (*inaudible*) about the History of Chicago. We just did it. Now, that's a big difference.

