

E d M o r r i s

How did you first become associated with Columbia?

It was a very happenstance—I'd been friends with Mike Alexandroff since 1947, when we met after the war in a veteran's organization. So Mike and I had kept in touch, and I had taught at various times at Columbia College. There are some interesting stories about my teaching at Columbia College. The most interesting one was when I quit because Mike and I had a disagreement about procedure, and I—at that time, I was being so paid so little that I couldn't even afford to buy dinner, and so Mike and I agreed to disagree. And about three weeks later, the phone rang, and I picked up the phone and a voice said, "Eddie? Have you got any notes for that course you were teaching?" And I was teaching a course in public relations, and I said, "Sure, I'd be glad to provide them to you if you want them." He said, "Well, I'm gonna teach the course," and of course, it was Al Weisman, and Al Weisman became a fixture at Columbia College long before I came here as a full-time person. So then I spent the next 30 years in television in Chicago, first at WTTW and then at WFNS-TV, with a little sojourn to Time-Life in New York and in Washington at the Public Broadcast Service as it was getting started. And so one day, after I had decided to retire as a vice president and general manager of Channel 44, and was running my own business, I got a call from Mike, and he told me that Thaine Lyman was very ill with cancer, and that he would like to

talk to me about Columbia. So Mike and I met for lunch, and after that, there was a committee that consisted of Bert Gall, who at that time was already Executive Vice-President of the College, Tony Loeb, who was the head of the Film Department, John Schultz, who was head of Fiction Writing, and Lya Rosenblum, who was the Academic Dean at the time. And so they interviewed me, and after that I got a call from Mike and he said, "OK, you've been approved, when can you come to work?" And so I came to work at Columbia in July of 1984, and I've spent 14 years as the Chair of the Television Department.

I'm interested in your earlier teaching. You were teaching public relations?

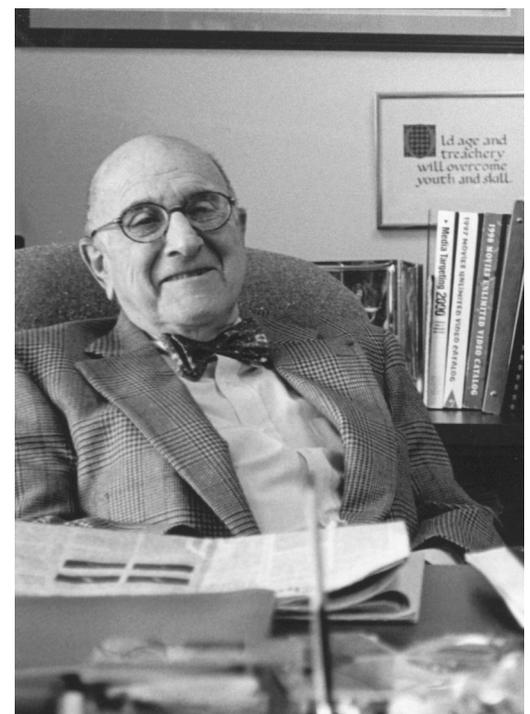
I was teaching public relations. Public relations was my field for many years. I had been a newspaperman in Lovell, Kentucky before World War II, and when I left Lovell, I joined the army, and when I went back to Lovell after the war, I found that \$18.50 a week was not a very good salary, and somebody offered me a job in Chicago. I came here to be a salesman, and I hated it. And so I was looking around for another job, and a friend of mine said, "Well, I've got a job that doesn't pay very much, but it'll be great experience, you'll learn a lot about Chicago," and it was as the executive director of the Chicago Area Council of the American Veterans Committee, which was the World War II veterans organization that supported housing and civil rights and social change, and I was very much wrapped up in it, and one of the leaders of the progressive

movement in the American Veterans Committee was Mike Alexandroff. So we became friends, and we became very close friends, and we were friends for many years. And so that's really how I happened to first teach at Columbia, and it was also the reason that I came to Columbia.

So you met Mike Alexandroff in '47. 1947.

And when did you first teach at Columbia? Do you remember?

I first taught at Columbia when the campus was located in a building on Wabash Avenue, and the interesting thing about that was that I always felt like the El train was gonna run right through my classroom. It was very noisy, and you did a very staccato presentation, because you had to wait for the trains to go by for your students to hear you, even if you shouted.



Was this before the 540 building?

Yes, this was before 540. That was before 540.

Did you teach on a regular basis?

Well, yes. I taught a course in the Principles of Public Relations, and I taught for about two years before I finally decided that I just couldn't—at the time, I was working for the Chicago Council on Alcoholism as the executive director, and I was making \$75.00 a week when I could raise the money to pay myself, and I was getting \$7.50 an hour from Columbia College to teach this course. And the difficulty with that was that I couldn't pay for my parking and my dinner with that, and with a small child, it was extremely difficult to do that, so I had to give that up.

So you did that for about two years, and then—

And then in the ensuing years, I didn't teach at Columbia, but I was asked to be a member—when I was at WTTW, I was asked to be a member of a committee to plan the future of communications at Columbia College, a committee which consisted of a very eminent group of people. I mean, the chairman of the committee was Bill Russo, who's still—and is now the Chairman of the Music Department, and was then the Chairman of the Music Department; Tony Loeb; Fred Fine, who at that time was Chairman of the Arts Entertainment and Management program; and a number of other people whose names really escape me, although Thaine Lyman himself was also a member of that committee. And we spent about... I would say about a year coming up with some philosophical material, and in my files here, I still have the deliberations of that committee. I still have some

of the material that we came up with, and it would be interesting to go back and look at it, and see what we said then and how much of that is now relevant today.

Any guesses as to what was relevant today?

Well, you know, I think we were thinking about the synergies between videotape and film, and how that was gonna impact what we were doing. I think there was a lot of conjecture about the beginnings of computer technology, which has, you know, grown to an outsized program. And what always interests me is that people say, "Well, you know, there's not gonna be any broadcast television, everybody's gonna read their books on computers, and everybody's gonna see their films on computers," and I have to tell you that sitting in front of a computer screen and trying to look at a film would be like being constipated and trying to have a bowel movement. It would be dreadful. That's a little bit of a vulgar terminology, but it expresses the way I feel.

So this would have been—what year was this?

Well, I think it would have had to have been sometime around 1968 or '69, because I left the city in 1970 to become director of programming for Time-Life Films in New York. So it was shortly before I left. It could have been as early as 1967, but that's a long, long time ago, and I think I'm gonna go into my files and look at that material and see what we thought about it. I kept it all these years. I brought it to Columbia with me, I brought my files with me to Columbia when I came over from my own company. And I still have that file. So I think I'll take a look at it, see what it says. See whether we made any sense at all.

(Laughs) Let me ask you about your students and teaching in that two years. What were your students like then?

Well, students were like all students. Some of them were great, and some of them were not so great. Some of them couldn't read and write, and some of them could write brilliantly. Some of them understood the concepts, and some of them didn't understand the concepts. Students at Columbia College have a tendency to make big swings. There are people who know a great deal and will understand a great deal, and there are some people who don't understand much at all, and I must say that—but it was a very great challenge, and it's still a great challenge to try and bring those people along. Because the one thing that I discovered about Columbia College students is, and the reason I love being here so much, is because Columbia College students try. They're here because they really want to learn, and it's unfortunate there's some people who just don't have the capacity to do that. But Columbia College students are hard learners. Hard learners. They work hard. They work hard, and I'm very proud of the students in my current department, in the Television Department, because I think that they overcome great obstacles, and many of them go out and get jobs and I hear from them all the time. And I'm very excited about that. We have many students—we have 49 students from the Television Department who are working at CNN in Atlanta right now. Two out of the four men in the CNN bureau in Chicago are Columbia College graduates. So I—I mean, I know that when we send our students out that they're prepared to do what they want to do.

Tell me about the students who were studying public relations with you when you first taught here. What did they expect to become? Where did they expect to go? Did they expect to go into PR?

Oh, I think they were gonna go into PR, absolutely. I don't think there's any question about it. I mean, this was a night class, and most of the students that I had in these classes were people who were out there in the field and were trying to better themselves. I had a considerable experience in the public relations field. I began doing public relations in 1952, and I remember—and I was very proud of this—I remember inviting Mr. Edward L. Bernays to come to speak to something that we called the Social Science and Public Relations Forum, which was a part of the United Charities of Chicago. And Mr. Bernays came, and he commented on the work that I was doing in Chicago and said that he felt it was consistent with what he wanted to do and what he had done with his own career, which was a considerable career. So I felt that I was doing a good job. I had been president of the Publicity Club of Chicago in the early '60s, and I was a member of the board of the Public Relations Society of America. So I was pretty well locked in. I got my public relations experience out of, you know, out of my experience as a newspaperman. That's where I began it, and I just sort of honed my technique in Chicago when I was working for the Chicago Council on Alcoholism. Alcoholism was not one of your well-chosen diseases. If you remember George Gobel, who was a comedian, and Gobel used to say that Eddie Cantor had the heart fund and Damon Runyon had the cancer fund, and by the time he got

famous, all the good diseases would be taken. And the same thing could be said about alcoholism.

Nobody—everybody thought alcoholism was disgusting, and they didn't realize the alcoholism was an illness that could be treated. And so my job was to do that, and that's where I began my public relations experience. I had never—I mean, I had spent four years before that with the National Society for Crippled Children and Adults in their public relations department, but that was really my training ground, and before that, of course, as a reporter I had some experience. But that's where it began.

Did your students include journalists of any sort?

Not really. I think most of the people who were in the Principles class that I taught for Columbia College were students who were... who were really interested in doing public relations work. They were not interested in being journalists, they were interested in being publicists, because they had the idea that public relations people made more money than journalists did. And that was probably true, because most of the journalists that I knew were not making very much money in those days, except for the top rated people.

Now, was this a very diverse group?

You mean in the public relations class? Well, you know, it's very hard for me to remember anymore what they were like. I mean, there were some people who were what I would classify as being callow youths, and there were others who were trying to pick up enough professional smarts to get a good hold on the business.

Let me just push ahead to your further career. In the '70s, you came back, and—

I came back to Chicago in 1972, at the invitation of Mr. Irving Harris and Don Nathanson, who was, at that time, the chairman of the board of North Advertising, and who was a Board member of Columbia College at the time. But I came back here because Mr. Harris and Mr. Nathanson had a television station in Chicago, and Mr. Harris and Mr. Nathanson and Mr. Allen Silverman, who was the third partner, invited me to come back and run their station here in Chicago. And so I did, and it was a very interesting experience. I mean, you work in public television, and the fundraising job and the programming job are much different. You work in commercial television, you've gotta be able to sell what you put on the air, and we didn't have much to put on the air. So it was a difficult, a challenging job, and I learned an enormous amount about television. I learned a great deal about the technical part of television at WTTW, and then learning the sales and management sides of it became extremely important when I went to Channel 44 in 1972.

So I'm interested—you knew a number of people who were on the Board of Columbia at the time. I'm curious about who they were.

Well, I mean, Erwin Salk was on the Board at the time, and Mr. Salk I had known from the American Veterans Committee. I mean, he and Alexandroff and I were all involved in that group. Of course I knew Don Nathanson. If you gave me a list of names of people who were on the Board of Columbia, I could probably tell you who they were and how I knew them, but

offhand, the only two people I remember were Erwin Salk and Don Nathanson. Because I can't really tell you—I don't even remember who the others were. I mean, because I didn't—I wasn't paying much attention to who was on the Board, and the truth is that I was, you know... in the days when I was teaching at Columbia the first time around, I was scratching for a living. I didn't have much time to raise my head up and see what anybody else was doing. I was very much involved in politics, I was very much involved in the civil rights movement, but I wasn't doing much fraternizing with board members at that time.

So you came back to Chicago and ran a TV station for—
Eleven years.

And then you came to Columbia. Well, for two years, I ran my own company, Morris Communications, and it was while I was running Morris Communications that Mr. Alexandroff contacted me about coming to Columbia. And so then I came to Columbia in the summer of 1984.

And did you come as—
I came as chairman of the department. I was invited to come as chairman of the department, I came as chairman of the department, and one of the most interesting things was that I didn't really feel that Columbia—that the Television program at Columbia, in spite of the enormous amount of time that Thaine had given to it, was a very well organized or very well-run program. I felt that—I mean, the students could come in and take any course in any sequence they wanted to, without reference to prerequisites. We had to establish an entire program of prerequisites in the Television

Department, and I give a lot of credit for the development of prerequisites and the development in re-organization of the course structure at Columbia to Luke Palermo, who is my assistant chair, and who has done a marvelous job of getting that straightened out. When I came to the Television Department, there was only one full-time faculty besides myself. The full-time faculty member who was present when I came was Barbara Sykes, and Barbara was the first—Barbara taught experimental television and she taught analog editing, and she was the first person on my faculty. A year later, Michael Niederman came. He had been teaching part-time, and he became a full-time faculty member. And then a lady came in to see Mike Alexandroff, and said that she wanted to teach at Columbia, and it turned out that she had been an instructor in a program that I was very much involved in at WTTW, called the Midwest Program on Airborne Television Instruction, where we were broadcasting instructional programs over an eight state area using an airplane, an old Connie, with a videotape machine in it, and we were broadcasting to the ground from this plane. And this lady's name was Barbara Yanowski, and she became my third faculty member. And Barbara and I re-instituted the internship program in—I guess it was 1986, '85 or '86, we put the internship program together and—

You re-instituted it?

Well, it had—theoretically, it had been started by people who were here before Barbara and I were here, but it was not doing anything. And we invigorated it and, with my contacts in broadcast television and her contacts in corporate television,

we were able to stimulate a lot of interest in the program, and I think it's still the largest program in the College, even though Film/Video is a much bigger department, we have a bigger internship program. Because we believe that work-study is a part of the learning process. So that's really how we began, and, you know, other people came along. I think the fourth—well, I had a guy who temporarily was my remote coordinator, a fellow by the name of Vern Brown, who was a very good man, but who decided that he'd rather retire. He'd been a full-time cameraman at WGN before he came here, and he decided that he wanted to retire and play golf every day, and so he moved to California, and I then hired Brian Read, who was the fourth full-time faculty member that I hired. And I can't remember the sequence of all the people that I hired after that. We now have 10 faculty and two artists-in-residence, and I think that we're just about right in terms of proportion. We probably could use somebody, one more person, but that's not for me to say, since I'm now retiring as chairman. And I'm sorta running around your question—I don't know where you want to go with this, you just tell me.

Well, one thing I'd like to know is, when you make changes to a curriculum and requirements and things like that, and then again, when you bring in full-time faculty, what was the process that you had to go through? Did you have to fight a lot?
What, to change the curriculum?

Yeah.

No! We didn't have to fight a lot. I mean, Mike's philosophy was, "You got this department, run it." And Dean Rosenblum felt the same way. She had a great sense of what was

desirable, and I always went to her and said, "Here's what we're planning to do, what do you think of this?" And you know, I should also say that, you know, we were talking about remote and remote supervisor, I should also say that Bert Gall was instrumental in getting the funding for the remote unit that we have. And the interesting thing about it is that we put a new structure on that remote unit, a new cab on the truck, and we've put new equipment into it, but we still have the same truck that was built for us in 1984. The same truck, 1984 to 1998. That's 14 years that that truck has been in service, and the only thing we've changed is the equipment. We put a new motor in the truck, and someday, if we wanna still do remote work, they're gonna have to buy a new automobile, but we're still doing it, and we've done a lot of really good things with that. And that's something that was a part of the vision, one of the early visions that Bert Gall had. He said to me when I came here, he said, "OK, we're building this truck. Now you decide what equipment goes into it, and you decide how to use it." But he left it to me, and that's the way Mike was too. Mike always believed that the pros that he hired to teach and run departments were the people that should run the departments. Now, I decided early on, and that's where Luke and his predecessor came in, that I really was not strong enough technically to run the department by myself, and that I needed a good technical person to do it. And I first had a fellow who'd been a technical sergeant in the Air Force before he came to me named Rob Bernard, who was the coordinator of the course instruction. But Rob had land in California and decided to

move to California, he's now in Sheridan, Wyoming, or was the last time I talked to him. And Luke Palermo I persuaded to come from Riverside-Brookfield High School, where he'd been doing the program at Riverside for 14 years, and he graduated from Columbia, and so he was well grounded on the technical side, and so I pulled Luke in and said, "You run the technical side, I'll administer the department and worry about the budget and personnel and the rest of it." And he and I have been partners, and wonderful partners. The man is a terrific academician, a wonderful teacher, and an outstanding College person. And he's done a great job for Columbia. And I hired him in—I think it's 1986, and he's done a great job ever since. I must have hired him in 1985, because in 1986 I became very ill, and he ran the department while I was in the hospital.

Now, what was involved in getting more full-time faculty?

Well, getting more full-time faculty is always difficult. Columbia is heavily dependent upon student tuition for operations, and so you have to assume that we really can't afford to have a lot of full-time faculty. In my field, at least, there are a lot of great professionals in this town who love to teach, who love to teach. And all you've gotta do is go out there and ask them and be sure that you pick the people that can do the job. And we've had a superb experience. We have people who are still—who were teaching here before I came here, who are still teaching at Columbia. And the part-time/full-time way of doing things, at least in the technical fields and the professional fields like television, is excellent. And the reason it's so excellent is because you're getting

people who are coming into you from the business who are at the state of the art, and who know what's going on. And they are imparting the knowledge that they have to the people who they have to teach, and so they're a real asset. I mean, having part-time teachers is an enormous asset. And it's extremely important, I think—I think that the way we've done this is exactly right, and I think this was Mike Alexandroff's vision, and it worked for many years on a small scale, but now on a very large scale, we have a magnificent school, and one of the reasons it's so great is because we have wonderful people who are in the business of marketing and film and television who can do the job.

Let me ask you about the vision of the College. Let me ask you about the mission. How would you describe it in relation to the arts and communication community in Chicago?

Well, the thing that always stands out for me in the mission—and you didn't tell me you were gonna ask me this—the thing that always stands out for me in the mission is: helping students to find their own voice. Giving students an education in the arts and in communications involves teaching them how to use what they've got inside themselves. And if they can learn to use what's inside themselves, that's all they need. That's all they need. I mean, there's certain specific knowledge that everybody has to have. The people who are taping what you and I are talking about right now are people who got their training at Columbia College. And they're now proficient professionals because they were given an opportunity to learn how to do things, and taught by professionals the best way to do

them. So I think that the most outstanding part of the Columbia College mission—and, by the way, to say that everybody has an opportunity to get an education. Now, I don't think that in today's world, that everybody can walk in the door and get an education. I think we have to find out more about what the students are and who they are and what they know when they walk in the door. There are some things that they can't live without, and I don't see any way to avoid that. But I certainly believe that open admissions is something that's worth trying to find a way to do. CUNY has done away with the remediation program, and has said that their students are gonna have to meet certain standards in order to get in. But they're not gonna be big standards, and I think we can do the same thing. I think we can do the same thing, and still have a very successful program. This is a philosophical thing, this isn't much about history, but I've always thought—I've always admired Columbia for its open admissions policy, and giving everybody a chance to get an education, and I still believe that.

What about—has your vision changed over the years that you've been here, or the years that you've been connected with Columbia?

Has my vision changed of what?

Of education.

No. No, I've always believed that everybody ought to have a chance to get an education. I thank God that my family encouraged me to get an education. I started reading when I was very young, and it's been—I've loved it all my life, and I think that people need to be encouraged to get an education because I think that they'll find out how wonderful it is to know more

about the world around them. I mean, I always say, when my students come—before they become students here, I always say to them “You're gonna learn something about the social fabric of our society. You're gonna learn something about history. You're gonna learn something about mathematics and science. You're gonna learn how to read and write well. And if you're gonna be successful as a professional, you have to know all those things, and a lot more. If you really—if you have a questing mind, and you want to go further, you need to know these things, and you have to take advantage of that opportunity.”

Could you have predicted—when you began in public relations, could you have predicted that you might, in the future, be involved with an institution like Columbia?

I had no idea. I had no idea what I would be involved in. I mean, I went out there and life was good to me, I found—first I found the television business, which sorta leaves me cold today, for the most part. I know I did some things that I was proud of, but I'm not too happy with a lot of what I see being done today. And then I came to Columbia, and teaching young people about better ways to live has been great for me. Been great. I mean—and I said at graduation, on Sunday, I was fortunate enough to receive the President's Distinguished Service Medal, and I said, “I love the students at Columbia, I love teaching, and I'm gonna teach as long as I'm able.”

You mentioned a number of events in the TV Department. What have been some of the most important? Are there other important events in the College's

history that you could point to? Obviously, there's been a lot of change since you first taught.

Well, I think Columbia was a wannabe institution for a long time. I think about the time that I came here, Mike Alexandroff was already establishing a group of people who were entrepreneurial, who were going out and getting something from this great community which is Chicago, and I think that was Mike's vision. I think we've fulfilled that vision, I think we've become a much better and stronger institution, and I think the evidence is there that we have a number of departments in this school, if not all the departments, a number of departments—and I don't wanna single out departments—we have a number of departments which are outstanding, which are making a real contribution to society, which are making a real contribution to the professions that they teach, and I think that, as a whole, Columbia College has become a mature institution. I think it's got some more room to grow, and I think it's got some more things that it has to do better than it does, but I'd have to say that I think that the greatest thing that we've done is that we've grown up. We've grown up. Our students are getting better, and the students are getting better because they know about us, and they come here because we can do the job for them, and they know they're gonna go away with a good education. I think—when I first perceived Columbia, Columbia was a sort of an institutional last resort. People who couldn't get in anyplace else were coming to Columbia. People are coming here now because this is a place to be in school. They're gonna get a good education. They're gonna get more, and better, than they ever got before. And we keep getting good people. Good

people come here...we lose a few, but some of us are getting older, and old teachers never die, they just keep on teaching.

Do you think that size poses any obstacles? You say there's some room for growth.

Well, I think that we're getting close to the point where we're gonna have to sit back and take another look about growth. I think we're getting close to the point where we're almost at capacity, unless we do some expanding administratively and professionally along the way.

Do you think that size has changed the atmosphere of your department and the College as a whole? Some people kind of have these war stories about times when everybody knew everybody—

Well, gee, you know... I could go either way. I could go either way, but I think the College is as big as it ought to be. I don't think we ought to become a 15,000-student institution. I think we can do a better job with smaller classes and more attention. I really do think that. Somebody will probably think that's a retrogressive attitude, but I don't think so. I think that we should think about how many students we can teach well. That's what this is about—we're really about teaching well, and if we don't teach well, we're gonna lose something.

Do you think there's been major change from the first time you were here to the present?

Oh, I think so, I think so. But you know, our society's changed in the last 14 years, too. So I, you know, I mean, I'd like to think our society was as caring as it was when I came back as a veteran after the war. But I don't think so. I don't think people care about other people the

way they used to. And that bothers me a lot, because I care about people, and I think it's sad that people are so... well, I just think it's a very narcissistic society, and a very violent society, and that bothers me.

Can the College do something about that?

Well, I think that I'm gonna try to do something about it, at least with the people I talk to. I mean, I try to make people feel that they're people, and that they have to respect others, and they have to care about others. And I understand, you know, the American drive for success. I keep thinking—I look at Gibbons' Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, you know, and I worry about that. I worry about society as a whole, not just American society, but world society. But that's a function of being old and having too much time to think. I hope you're through, because I've got to go someplace else.

Yeah, I was just about to wind up. Anything I haven't remembered that you were gonna talk about?

I don't know, Chris. If you think of something, maybe you'll have to come back. But I really don't know.

Thank you very much.
My pleasure.