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Danae Boissevain

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Interview with Danae Boissevain

"I invited a meeting with the AP writer, the educational AP writer: how am I going to get people to hear about Simon's Rock? He was wonderful. He said, "You've got to figure out how you're going to interest an older lady in Wichita in what is happening here. You have to figure it out. You just told me Simon's Rock is so many years old-- that's not news. You have to find a way to interest that lady." So I did. And it was the first story I got on a national level. We did an interview, and the headline was "Skipping High School, Goes to College."

Quotes:

The English department came to me when I first arrived, very slowly, one after the other. Because of my name! They would say, "This surname, your last name, is interesting. Are you related?" They wanted to know if I was related to Edna St. Vincent Millay, the poet who lived in Austerlitz. Her husband was Eugene Boissevain, and all the Boissevains are related. Of course, that was my husband's name. So that's how I met a lot of the English faculty. But each one came in: Bernie [Rodgers], Peter [Filkins]. They all came in, one after the other. "It is a strange name. Is it possible that you're connected?" So that was nice, because it's hard to meet them otherwise.

Bob Ackerman and I got computers more or less at the same time. You have to realize, there was a "before computer" era at Simon's Rock and "after." To begin with, there was one. And it was in the admissions office. One computer, and we had to queue up to use it. You had to put down your name when you thought you could use it, so I put one evening. And I was adamant that I didn't need a computer. I was much faster on a typewriter and I didn't want to learn. So my boss, Chris Milloff said, "You have to learn!" she said, "We'll do it on Saturdays." So she would call in and I would sit at my desk and she would put me through some exercises and then leave. I can remember printing something and I couldn't stop it. It was one of those things-- it printed until it ran out of paper. It was awful. I just could not see the point of this. But Ackerman, Bob Ackerman, came down-- I was now on the ground floor, and he came round because he had just learned how to delete something. It was so exciting, we all had to share our knowledge!

Once I was hired, I got to know the local newspapers. I invited a meeting with the AP writer, the educational AP writer: how am I going to get people to hear about Simon's Rock? He was wonderful. He said, "You've got to figure out how you're going to interest an older lady in Wichita in what is happening here. You have to figure it out. You just told me Simon's Rock is so many years old-- that's not news. You have to find a way to interest that lady." So I did. And it was the first story I got on a national level. We did an interview, and the headline was "Skipping High School, Goes to College." And that was the headline that I tried to use forever after, because that made sense. A young person choosing to skip high school. And it went national. The coverage for that story was mega. It was wonderful.

We were all told-- all of the staff-- that we were allowed to take classes, and it occurred to me that I would love to take one of Larry's classes, having worked with him for so long. So I did. I think I signed up for 20th Century Composers. [...] The interesting thing was, he knew what I would know in the class. So he asks students questions, and somehow or another he knew what I would know

and what they didn't know. And I did know! And it was very exciting because I thought I was a neophyte. Our homework was always to listen. I was late one day, hadn't listened, ran into the library, to the listening room, and there was the entire class doing the same thing! It was wonderful.

Every graduation I would say [to Leon], "Could you give me the speech?" because I'd like to give it to a reporter. It's very helpful to have the words; they can get on with their job quicker. And I'd always ask, just before graduation, before they march: "Could I have your speech?" And he'd say, "Oh, Danae, I don't have it written!" And he never did. It was always perfect, whatever he came up with. He'd somehow tie together what other people had said, or he went off on another tack. Whatever it was, it was just perfect. So we had to try to write it down. He was admirable, this man. I really enjoyed him so much.

At the time of the shooting, Diane Rhoades[-Warner], who was on the switchboard, called me at midnight, and said, "Danae, what shall I tell CNN?" She was always on the switchboard, she knew that I would always like to hear from any kind of press person. And so she said, "What shall I tell CNN?" And I said, "What was the question?" And she said, "There's been a shooting." And I said, "What's happened? Can you tell me the details?" And she burst into tears. She was not in good shape. I said, "Hold on, I'll be right over and we'll figure out what we have to do." I wrote a note on a big yellow legal pad for my daughter, who was asleep, saying, "I'm at Simon's Rock, I'll be back." And then I drove over to Simon's Rock. I thought, "Am I being sensible about this, if there's been a shooting and I'm driving around like this?" So I sort of snuck down in the car, like this [slumps down on her couch] so I wouldn't be as visible. [...] Ñacuíñán had this scarf-- he would walk around campus with this scarf around his neck, it was a great panache about him. He was just funny! And fun. And he would always send me postcards of Danaes, whenever he went to Europe, he would go to a museum and whenever he saw a portrait of a Danae, he would send it to me.

I loved doing the alumni magazines because you could develop a theory or a theme for each issue and you would call all these incredible people and they would say all these amazing things about what they were doing and how much Simon's Rock had altered their careers, their lives. It was always amazing stories. It was a really fabulous job.

I used to go to lunch at the dining hall. That was my epicenter, because I knew everyone had to go there at some point, and if I waited long enough, I could get anyone I needed. I really enjoyed going there because it was important for my work. But also, I don't know if this is still true, but we all-- lunch was free for everyone. [...] It was fantastic, it was the best part of the day. When I retired, Mary Marcy gave me a little tea [party] and I said thank you to the people I had enjoyed working with, and they did a very nice presentation, and I said what I was going to miss most-- what I'd really miss was lunch. And so Mary Marcy got up and said, "Well, we've got you a chair but I think what we really should do is, obviously, you would prefer lunch! So I'm arranging for you to have a lifetime's worth of lunch in the dining hall!"

Keywords: Betty Hall, Elizabeth Blodgett Hall, Bernie Rodgers, Larry Wallach, Leon Botstein, press, PR, communications, Leslie Sander, shooting, Wayne Lo, Ñacuíñán Saéz, Galen Gibson, South Berkshire Concert Series, Simon's Rock Magazine, Jane Rodgers, name changes, construction, Fisher Science Center, Peter Bohlen, Eileen Handelman

Position: Director of publications

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Interviewer(s): Margaret Cherin, Molly McGowan '13

