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Simon's Rock Oral History Project

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Faculty in the Arts (1972 - 2011)

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Interview with Bill Jackson

June 18, 2016

Bard College at Simon's Rock, Great Barrington, Massachusetts

Selected excerpts from the Oral History Project interview. The full transcript may be restricted. To request access please contact the [Simon's Rock College Archives](#).

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“[Campus] was very different than it is now. I would say, first of all, it was characterized by a very rural feeling, not that it isn't rural now. But there, for example, there was no campus signage program. There was no campus lighting. I don't think there was any asphalt other than on Alford Road. Everything was dirt, so when you came in the main campus entrance, it was a dirt road with grass growing in the middle. Everything was pretty rustic and a little rough around the edges. But very pleasant and alive. It was, in a way, its own special sanctuary. A spirited sanctuary.”

“I think that there were a lot of times when-- I'll just speak for myself but I don't think I was alone-- I was wondering how this was ever going to continue, how it was going to survive. [...] There wasn't a lot of anything except good will, hard work, and a commitment to the place. If it hadn't been for the students, I think I definitely would have left.”

“[In the 1970s] no one was worrying about their careers. There was a lot of idealism and pursuing individual passions. If somebody wanted to paint, they painted. If somebody wanted to do ceramics, they did ceramics. Maybe parents were feeling a little different but the student body was living a dream here, in many ways.”

“It was a complicated endeavor to keep this place afloat, to bring it all together, to keep things functioning, to survive as an institution. It was a two-year institution at that point. The transition to a four-year institution was a big step, so there were a lot of structural, formal, pedagogical concerns that the administration had to look after that were, maybe, having a different spin on the whole thing than had been established when he arrived. [...] [Baird Whitlock], I think, made every effort to get to know students and be familiar with what they were doing, although I think he had a high bar compared to Betty, who was always around and seemed to know everyone by their first name. She'd cruise around on campus in her golf cart checking in on things. She knew faculty, spouses, students, all on a first name basis. So she was quite remarkable; in that sense, [Baird] sometimes had a hard time keeping up with that amount of familiarity, but he was up to the task. He worked hard at it.”

“[The ARC] provided a proximity for teaching faculty and students that, I think, has never been matched, even come close, in effectiveness, even in the new building. That became the kind of, I would say, the basis for and the reasoning for what I’m going to call the success of the visual and performing arts program. It was because of the close proximity for classes, students, consultation, cross-pollination, swapping ideas, people walking by somebody’s project and asking what they were doing and that would give rise to something else! It was a lot of spontaneous development as a result of that kind of community. It was a community within a community.”

“Every semester I taught [seminar], I considered it to be from ground zero. Every time I reread an assignment, it was like, “Oh!” A completely different perspective on this since last year. I have a new idea; I’m not seeing this the same way as I did before. So it was, to me, an education about how one, revisiting and revisiting and revisiting, was to have five separate experiences even though it was the same book five times over. I don’t know if one could convey that in the class per se, but certainly every class brought its perceptions along with whatever was going on in the world. It became a set of influences on how they looked at texts. As you know, with social change and shifting social attitudes, all of those texts take on a completely different-- it’s true!-- a different lens”

“Students have adopted this sculpture [*Standing Nude*] in a different, more contemporary light, than Brier envisioned it. Brier-- and, I think, Lexy [Stoller], her husband-- saw the sculpture as kind of a monumental tribute to human form in an honorific 19th century, maybe early 20th century way. Our students being sensitive and funny and spirited see the poor woman with no clothes on a cold winter day needing to be warmed up and they’ll put a coat on her or give her a hat or come spring, she’s dressed for the beach! It becomes a running series of fashion gags, if you will, which I think are wonderful. But when Brier found out about this, she was ballistic. She was furious that anyone would deface this monument in this way. Putting a hat on a bronze sculpture isn’t hurting the bronze sculpture and it isn’t hurting the hat. She saw it as very irreverent. So how one sees sculpture on campus, what it means, what it projects, how each generation takes a look at it-- adopts it or rejects it.”

“Given the list of provosts and leaders, the one who stands out as being most pivotal in creating direction and clarity and, I think, strong relations with students and faculty is Bernie [Rodgers, Dean of College]. There was a real sea-change when Bernie came and there was a vision there that was, to a large extent, maybe totally, based on his sense of fairness and openness. You didn’t have to like what was happening but he was always clear about it and could define what was going on and was open about that. Relations with faculty, students, and staff, during Bernie’s tenure, was quite remarkable. Very unlike other institutions that I’m familiar with.”

“[My arts division colleagues] are all amazing people, and I think it goes back to the kind of, sense of community that was almost by default, if not partially by design, created in that old ARC environment, and I think that’s what we-- because we worked together for so many years-- understood a lot about what each of us was about and respected that. There’s a lot of room for a lot of tolerance and support and good communication. Even when we had disagreements, we were always on a fundamental level of understanding and managed to work things out.”