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Simon's Rock Oral History Project

Interviewee: **Peter Filkins**

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Interview with Peter Filkins

February 16, 2015

Fisher Science and Academic Center, Bard College at Simon's Rock

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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“Natalie Harper, who you wouldn't know and many don't know, was a very, very dear friend of mine in the English department. She lived in the Pond House down here. We used to go to dinner at her house, my wife and I. I even went to visit her in Maryland after she retired just to go see her and take her to lunch. And a few months later, she died. She was frank and kind and a person who loved books and loved literature. She was a savvy reader and she wrote book reviews that were intelligent, thorough, and engaging. She had a subtle, wonderful sense of humor.”

“I always knew I was going to teach, I knew I was going to teach at a college, I always knew I was going to publish poems. It's not even out of ego or arrogance. I simply didn't know what else to do. I just put my head down and did what I did. I always knew I was going to be a teacher. I read widely and across literatures, and when translation came into my life, German literature opened up for me in a way that I never could have predicted. [...] I'm a poet who became a translator who became a biographer who teaches Dante. I've just followed my passions, and I think Simon's Rock has been a blessing in that way. It's allowed me to do what I want to do. Not in the sense of whatever the hell I wanted to do, but if I really wanted to do something, Simon's Rock allowed me to do that and to find a way to fold it into the curriculum and to make it interesting to my colleagues and the students. I always say that in fact I don't work, I just do the things that I do.”

“I've been here 28 years and we're coming up on our 50th anniversary, so I've been here over half of the length of the entire college's history, and then to have known people like Natalie Harper, Rene Biber, Ed Misch-- to have known them and to have known them very well, to hear all the old stories is extraordinary. Nobody gets to do that at Harvard, or even Bard or Williams. Hence that sense of, again, building something. Having a chance to really put your hands on the place and shape it and try to make it work and make it better and to see it grow. Just the growth I've seen in the college, whether it be buildings or the faculty or the evolution of the curriculum in the time I've been here is just extraordinary.”

“Bernie asked me to do [the Poetry and Fiction series] my second year. Bernie firmly believed that’s what colleges do, have public readings. He said, “I’d like you to invite writers to come here,” and he gave me a small budget to do it. [...] I’m just not shy about reaching out to them. In the old days, I would get hold of someone’s telephone number. I didn’t care who it was, I would just call them up. And I seem to have a gift for talking people into doing this. I remember John Edgar Wideman. I went after him, I think, four or five times. Finally he agreed to come. We don’t pay a lot of money, you know, and these are quite prominent writers. He told me later that he put the phone down and turned to his wife and said, “I don’t know why, but I think I’m supposed to do this.” [laughs] I think somehow I’m able to talk people into coming here. After you have a lot of prominent people, you’re able to call people up and say, “We’ve had Seamus Heaney, William Kennedy, Annie Proulx, John Edgar Wideman,” and then their ears perk up and they think, “Oh, maybe I will go do this.” It’s fun. Look, these are often the first writers that our students have ever met, and to sit in the classroom, having read the book and talked about it, and then ask questions of the writer and have that conversation and hear the writer read and ask more questions-- that’s a tremendous opportunity for them. And to know that I can bring the highest caliber writers and know that they’re going to be charmed and interested and amazed by our students, is wonderful. No students ask, “Do you write longhand? Do you write on the computer?” They ask actually profound and serious questions, and it’s never gone badly in 27 years. We’ve never had a bad showing of students or the writer.”

“We often talk about [Bernie’s tenure] as the golden era of Simon’s Rock. He had a really special touch, for he made everybody feel valued and he valued everybody. He cared passionately about education and he cared passionately about students as human beings. He had a lovely wife, Jane, who I was also very, very close to, and her passing was, quite frankly, tragic for the college. She was a person who would kind of pull everyone together. The best party on the planet was the Simon’s Rock Christmas party in those days. And I’m not talking wildness. It was just the warmest and the most joyous occasion you could go to. It went on for hours and hours because people simply wanted to be around Bernie and Jane. Jane used to decorate [the White House] beautifully. She loved Christmas, and throughout the year she always had the house immaculately decorated, very classy. They loved having people there.”

“The shooting happened on December 14, 1992, which is right at the end of the semester. I was slated to teach my Idea of the Hero course in the spring. The first text we were going to read was Homer’s *Iliad*, which is, of course, about the Trojan War. It was the only time in my life I’ve ever thought-- maybe this is the wrong work, maybe I should take this off the syllabus. But then I thought, this is what I’ve been handed, forward we shall go. We spent three weeks talking about violence, rage, and anger, and ultimately how compassion has to be the thing that ends the rage and the violence of the war. We spent three weeks talking about the *Iliad*, but we never were talking about the *Iliad*. We were talking about the shooting, but we never mentioned the shooting

once. There were fifteen kids in the class and I think all sixteen of us knew exactly what we were doing, but we never mentioned what we were doing. And that's what literature does. You're talking through books. What you're doing is traveling through those books. It's not what you're reading, but how you're reading it. And that, to me, is the essence of the Simon's Rock education. It's not the canon, and it's not *not* the canon; it's how you're reading any of those works and how you're engaging with them."

"I arranged for the entire freshman class to go to the opera! I went up to his office and asked, "Bernie, which trustee really loves opera?" And it was Murray Liebowitz. And Murray paid for the whole thing, for the buses to go down, and he bought the tickets. [...] The next day, there was a review of the opera in the NY Times. They gave it a very good review and also said, "We don't know what the New York City Opera is doing with its youth programs, but there were all these young people there and they knew the opera cold!" [laughing] I was pretty tickled by that. It was probably the first, maybe only, time that many of the students ever went to the opera, but go they did. And again, that's Simon's Rock. It lets you do something. [...] We're small enough that if I connect this person with that person with that idea, I can make something happen. And I didn't get anything out of it except the pleasure of being with students and seeing them have that experience. There's something so pure about what we do at Simon's Rock. It's not the furnishings, it's not the lovely dorms, it's not the campus golf course, right? It's the-- pureness of what happens in the classrooms. To be able to think that way, to say, "I can do this for a really pure reason," and if we get lucky, it might have a real and positive effect on someone else's life. I've seen it happen over and over and over again."

"Simon's Rock is much bigger than little ol' me, but it's been a pleasure and a privilege to have some small part in what it has become and will grow to be."