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Ba Win and Pete Baumann

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Simon's Rock Oral History Project

Interviewee: **Ba Win (Dean of Students 1979 -) and Pete Baumann (Physical Plant 1966-)**

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Ba Win and Pete Baumann

January 28, 2016

Lecture Center, Bard College at Simon's Rock

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Ba Win: Mrs. Hall told me that she thought that a variant on even a good American high schools might be possible based on her conversations with her alumnae, her Concord graduates who had come back to visit her, and she asked them how are things going, and these young women at the best schools in America, they would say "Fine, it's OK." without much enthusiasm but she knew they were doing well, and when she dug further she found that what had happened was that she had a bunch of bright students at Concord, and she had great teachers working for her, and in a private school you don't have to conform to state standards, you can do whatever you want within reason, and what had happened was that... the teachers would raise the bar and the students would respond to the teachers raising the bar and on and on it went. So much so that it wasn't until their sophomore or even their junior years that her Concord Academy students really encountered real work, that without meaning to, they had anticipated the first two years of college, and they had gone into it, and so it really brought to Mrs. Hall the question about the convention that 18 year olds are only supposed to be doing this much, in fact her 18 year old students were doing a whole lot more than that.

Ba Win: For years and years and years, after the original campus was built, and it was a very nice new campus, we did not have sophisticated facilities. Science was taught with a piece of chalk, photo labs were as basic as they could be, but basic as they were, 3 weeks ago in the New York Times, they had a series of winter scenes in the city, 10 pictures, utterly beautiful, all [by] Simon's Rock [alumni Jan Staller '70] At a time when we had very primitive performance facilities we nevertheless produced the Coen Brothers, Ethan and Joel Coen, so we've had extraordinary people come out of this place. We have more than a piece of chalk now to do the sciences, and that's how it should be, when you recruit the most talented people that you can find you owe them the appropriate facilities but the tradition of really teaching, not just using bells and whistles, has persisted.

Pete Baumann: I thought of an idea, wouldn't it be nice to put a little water in [the Library Atrium] or something or something like that so I dug a ditch and got some stones and river rocks, and put in some black plastic and some water. [...] Ace who was there by himself, and one of the guys decided, you know, throw in a couple extra frogs and he ate them, except for one, and that one survived and we called him Deuce. Deuce had a little bit of a problem, he couldn't swim well, he couldn't swallow well and I had to kind of hand feed him, and everyone would come in and take pictures of the frogs, little kids would come in with their parents, maybe brothers and sisters, maybe prospective students. I used to bring them out and show them the frogs, well some of these little kids grew up and became students at Simon's Rock, graduated, and brought their kids in, that's how long. The two bullfrogs were in there for 15 years, Ace and Deuce were, and they were very tame, the bullfrogs were, the students used to pick them up and pet them, and if the students were sitting there the frogs would come out and sit right there between them like they were part of the conversation, it was really something.

Ba Win: Betty Hall was very successful at Concord Academy at a time when the women's voice was very nascent, she was one of the people who by being a strong leader was showing that generation who were at school with her that all the usual rules and limitations should not apply, they were ridiculous, they should fall away. But she was also of an older style, she would begin a meeting by saying "Ladies" and when she started Simon's Rock she had one foot in her mother's generation and one foot in the next generation. It's important to remember that she started the school in the second half of the 60s when questioning authority was very much en vogue. She took care to hire younger teachers, she did not want to hire very experienced people because she was sure once they came they would revert to what they were familiar with, she wanted something new and as a result she went out and hired a whole lot of recently minted MA and PhDs, but they were also stepping out of the 60s having just come out of college where protests and demands were commonplace, so, basically Betty collided with the 60s and she found it really, really hard. In many ways the form of education that she proposed was transformative, it was very different, it wasn't you sit there obediently and silently and I'll tell you and you record it, and of course if you have questions I'm happy to answer. It was going from that to challenging everything.