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## Bernie Rodgers

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## **Simon's Rock Oral History Project**

Interviewee: **Bernie Rodgers**

Dean of Academic Affairs (1985-87); Vice-President of Bard College and Dean of the College at Simon's Rock (1987-2004); Faculty in Literature (1985-2015)

Interviewer, videographer and transcriber: **Margaret Cherin, College Archivist**

Date: **May 17, 2016**

Location: **Daniel Arts Center, Bard College at Simon's Rock, Great Barrington, MA**

Collection: **Simon's Rock College Archives**

Contact: **[archives@simons-rock.edu](mailto:archives@simons-rock.edu)**

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## **Interview with Bernie Rodgers**

**May 17, 2016**

**Daniel Arts Center, 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](#).**

**Keywords:** Leon Botstein, Ruth Ide, Ba Win, Bard, merger, Betty Hall, Elizabeth Blodgett Hall, Livingston Hall, Livy Hall, Baird Whitlock, Dimitri Papadimitriou, buildings, construction, expansion, Ian Bickford, Peter Laipson, Mary Marcy, Bard Academy, BHSEC, Bard High School Early College, senior prank, senior thesis, shooting, Emily Fisher, Pat Sharpe

“I came out for an interview, I spent a day here, and then the next day went over to see Leon and I immediately fell in love with the place. I went into the classrooms and I saw classrooms with fifteen seats around a table and it was all I needed to know about what Simon's Rock was about.”

“In Bard's history the association and merger with Simon's Rock is extremely important, because it created a model of a satellite operation for Bard that has been repeated over and over again in various ways since that time. So everything from having the schools abroad that are combined with Smolny University in St. Petersburg and Bard, or in Budapest and Bard, or in the West Bank and Bard, these campuses that Bard established, that are joint operations, all began with the idea that Bard could be the center and it could expand its mission by having other operations. The Bard Center for Curatorial Studies on the campus came from this. The Bard Center for Decorative Arts in New York City, all of these were based on the model of having Bard Center be connected to Bard satellite, each of which has its own board and its own administration, and is responsible to Bard but is given a great deal of leeway to operate according to its mission. So over the course of the thirty-seven years that we have been a part of Bard there has never been a question about challenging our mission, our mission has always remained the same and has been totally supported by the Bard Board and by the Bard administration.”

“[Betty Hall], in particular, was a real harbinger of feminism and of the future. What she did was not something women did at that time. I always thought that she would've loved being a student at Simon's Rock. Because clearly she didn't fit into the normal educational system. Neither at Miss Hall's nor at Knox. So she got this. She understood this.”

“[Emily Fisher] had a home here in the area, because she wanted to be near the college, and so she was very active, and I would meet with her once a week, and we would plan what we were

going to do, so everything we did, we did because we had a board chair who believed in these things, who was prepared to support them, and to help us get other people to support us. We had other donors all along, but Emily was by far the largest donor in the history of the college... and she is still giving, that's endowment, that's buildings, that's establishing the first named professorship in the history of the college. She is a wonderful woman, she's a smart lady, she cares about people, she would go to the dining hall just to sit with the faculty, she got to know people, so she is a blessing to this place, a savior to this place, and one of the greatest delights to work with. I was so lucky to know these two women [Emily Fisher and Betty Hall] and to work with these two women."

"When I was about fourteen years old, I decided that I wanted to be a college English teacher. There were really two reasons. There was a selfish and not so selfish reason. The selfish reason was that I thought that if I was a college English teacher, I would get paid to sit around and read books and discuss them with bright people for the rest of my life, which sounded to me like heaven and it turned out that it was. The other thing was that I thought I could help develop people's abilities as critical thinkers and help them achieve their own dreams. And I thought that I could do that. For me, teaching was a vocation. It was designed to both serve and serve myself."

"The whole time I was administrator, I taught. I did senior theses, I did tutorials. I made time for that because it was so important to me. So I was always viewed as someone who was a teacher as well as an administrator, which I think was really critical to my ability to do the kinds of things I wanted to do, and the way I was seen by people, because they knew that I loved teaching and that I was a good teacher. So that's what I thought of the job as, I thought of the job as taking this really interesting place and taking it to the next level and trying to build it in such a way that it would last for a very long time. And that involved everything, that involved balancing the budget, it involved hiring great faculty, it involved building the facilities that would allow them to do their work, and the students to do their work, in the best possible environment. It was very rewarding, there were some very difficult times and we had to go through those but basically a very rewarding experience because I did feel that I was able to make life better for a lot of people, that I made a difference in the lives of students and faculty and others, and that was satisfying to me."

"I think [Ian Bickford] is wonderful. I think, to have the first person who is a graduate of the college become the head of the college is a historical moment. I think he is--had an extraordinarily fine career so far. I think he is a wonderful choice for this position and I think he comes with a credibility as a faculty member and a graduate that no one has had before. And he has had this experience with BHSEC [Bard High School Early College] which is valuable to us, and then the Academy."

“All the faculty were giving people extensions so nobody was handing in their thesis on time, you know, half of them, it was just assumed that people would get an extension and it was driving me crazy. So I read that at Reed College in Oregon, that students had to deliver their theses at noon on a certain day. So I established the policy that theses were going to be due at noon on a certain day. And the first year that policy was established, the students walked across campus playing kazoos, came to the window of my office. I opened the screen and they each climbed in and handed me their thesis. That became the beginning of the prank. [...] They would come up with different things, and usually when we had a new building, they would do stuff in there. They were very creative most of the time. There are only a few that seemed like they crossed the line of dignity for me, but I did them anyway.”

“My father came one time and of course my parents used to address my birthday cards to *Dr. Bernie Rodgers* because they were so proud that, so they came the first time, we were walking around campus and everybody was calling me Bernie and they said, ‘What is that all about?’ and I said, ‘See, it’s informal here’ and he said, ‘I don’t like that, why aren’t they calling you Dr.?’ [...] What I think it suggests is that respect is not earned by a title. Respect is earned by who you are. It is not disrespectful to call me Bernie; calling me Dr. Rodgers does not mean I deserve their respect. It’s a statement on where respect comes from and what respect is.”

“I will never teach undergraduates anywhere else ever again because I am spoiled rotten. Where else could I ask people to read a novel a week and they would actually do it? I don’t believe any place. I honestly believe that they don’t do that at Harvard. They certainly don’t do it at Loyola or DePaul or anyplace in Chicago! And my students mainly did it every week, and I never had a class where my students didn’t teach me something, not a single class. Seminar, which I taught every year for years, there was never a class where somebody didn’t say something that I hadn’t thought of. So, I think the students are wonderful, and I think they’ve been wonderful for a long time.”

“You know in my worst moments, I’ve thought if we went out of business tomorrow, we’ve saved thousands of kids at this school. We have affected the lives of thousands of wonderful people. If it’s not here tomorrow, it still did that. I would much rather that it be here for thousands more, not to mention the lives it’s given the faculty members, so for fifty years this place has made a difference for all kinds of people and I hope it will continue to do that.”