

M i c h a e l N e i d e r m a n

All right. Today is April 1, 2004 and this is an interview with Michael Neiderman who is the Chair of the Television Department here at Columbia College.

So, why don't you tell us how you came to Columbia, when and how?

You know I've had to go back and sort of try to remember exactly what year it was. It was as best as I can recollect, it was Spring of 1984. And I was brought on hired as a part-timer. I was finishing up my degree, my MFA at Northwestern. I was finishing up my MFA at Northwestern and I was working for a woman Annette Barbea who is still at Northwestern. I was her first TA back in the day and she got a call from Barbara Sykes who was the video coordinator in the Television Department looking for someone to teach a class called TV Video Analysis.

It was basically sort of a (*inaudible*) of a bunch of stuff but basically I got sent from Annette to Barbara and I was hired that Spring to teach a class. And I took the class and rewrote it and just cause it had been taught by someone previously but it was sort of a melange of things.

And I had come out of—I had always had a (*inaudible*) in sort of TV, film and came out of interest in genre study. So, I rewrote the class and I guess that made an impression with Barbara.

And so I was hired then the following Fall to teach a bunch of classes part time.

Oh, okay.

So, I taught that Spring one class I think I did two classes the following Fall. I think I did four classes in that Spring. This was back in the day when you could teach, you want to teach eight classes, go ahead teach eight classes. But I taught four classes part time and time I was hired that Fall as a full-time faculty member in '85.

What were your first do you remember your first impressions of the college when you came? Or did you know anything about Columbia before you arrived to teach?

Knew very little about Columbia before I started to teach. Remember Columbia from just growing up here from being at Lake Shore Drive, the Lake Shore Drive campus, remembered Columbia College. But knew very little about it.

I mean one of my fondest memories of that I went down and met with Barbara and that was fine and she was on eleven I think at that point. But then I went upstairs and at that point Thyme Lineman was ill and he passed away shortly thereafter. And so there was no real chair of television at that point.

So, I ended up meeting with what was kind of the acting chair of television at that point which was Al Parker. So, that was like my first you know and I always teased Al from you know, you know obvi-

ously I—all these years I always teased Al about he was my first chair.

So, that was always—that's it fun. I remember—I remember Al particularly early I remember cause they at that point television/radio shared offices up on fifteen that was before they got separated out. They were two different departments but they shared offices.

So, that's, that's what I remember. And Carol Bingham who was—and Mary Matucci who ran the office. Obviously Mary's still here. Carol has subsequently left but she had been a fixture for a long time. But that's what I remember.

And when you were hired full time, who was the chair by that (*inaudible*)?

It was Ed Morris. Ed Morris came on chair—came on to be chair from correct—I got hired—Fall of '84 and I was hired the next year.



I'm pretty sure that timing is right. I always remember what Ed had said to me years later because you know I was hired. I was—I was just fresh out of—I was 25 or something like that. And Ed always said to me, if I had known young you were, I never would have hired you in Ed's old sweet sort of grumbly sort of way.

So, I got hired basically to teach—to teach TV/Video Analysis. I could do any of the video field production editing classes and to teach writing cause that was something I had been teaching part time at U of I at that point and maybe Northwestern. I had been—you know I had—the previous year I had been sort of doing you know gypsy teaching (*inaudible*).

What's interesting—I mean the one interesting thing is before I got hired at Columbia in the Fall, that Spring I got offered a full time job some place else. To be honest, Governor's State making a lot more money and I think about that to this day, making a lot more money and I said no because I—at that point I sort of had the inkling Columbia was going to hire me full time and I already had a sense that Columbia was in some strange way a good place for me to be.

That was an instinct or could you give some examples of why you would choose less money and this place—

It was—so—it was always—it was always very clear to me that it was a whacky sort of odd sort of place. You have to remember I'd gone from teaching—I'd been teaching some at Northwestern and you know there's nothing like—oh,

nothing like teaching a room full of privileged children who feel like you know they, they poopie in the right place it deserves an A. You know those kids, and they were great kids and I had—you know I made a lot of friends there right up to this day. But a lot of kids just felt so entitled to the universe. It was sort nauseating.

U of I was better but U of I—the kids weren't clearly focused the way the Columbia kids were. So, I guess that's what attracted me the fact that it was a very diverse room, something I sort of miss in today's world. Very diverse and just odd, interesting, everybody had a life story. You know I always think—this is early on—I always remember this was in the day when you would actually go out to drinks with a student afterwards. We don't do that any more.

But these were—

They are younger now.

Yeah, I know. Well, that's the thing. These were two guys who were like you know my age or a little older and you know we went out for drinks afterwards and it was like you know one of them turned—one of them is Ron Boyd who's a full time faculty member. He was my student and it's like you know it's like, it was just hysterical.

Another was—another guy was the head of security of the Israeli Consulate. I mean it's just crazy, funny things that sadly I mean it's not old Columbia in that respect. So, you that's what I think about. I think I already had I the sense that Columbia sort of appealed to both sides of sort of myself in that regard sort of. You know it was a place that cared about what it did but it was also a little odd.

Okay. And how—how did Ed Morris—how was his chairmanship. I mean how did he run the department, if you could describe it? Because obvious (*inaudible*) Benevolent dictator. And you know I say with all love and affection but it really—he was you know he was the chair. And I you know at sometimes we look at that and how much things have changed. And there was just—you know I always describe Columbia in those days in sort of the '80's.

I always described as a mix between the wild west and futile states. There was sort of—you know you could use both metaphors and they both apply because Columbia always seem to you know the fastest gun won. You know, I mean that's kind of what—and all the little chairs in there had their little places that they resided.

So, Ed, but Ed was clearly the chair. You can't—in many respects you can't talk about Ed as chair without talking about Luke Palermo, assistant chair, who came on I want to say two years after Ed had been there. There was one guy and he left and Luke came on board cause to me that was sort of the, the A-Team. They were the functional—they represented—I mean that's why the TV Department strive for many years. They complimented each other so well by doing what I did so well and what Luke did so well.

And what were some of the major you know developments or changes in the department at that time under Ed.

Under Ed—

Under the A-Team.

Under the A-Team, it was really in the '80's we sort of became a more professional place. I mean that was when we really started to take things more seriously in terms of Ed had come from stations and that sort of thing. So, an engineering staff became more important. The fact that things functioned became more important.

He really allowed us to push the field production and editing stuff which was really coming into full bloom at that point. You know at that point, up until then it had been half inch porta pak open reel you know sort of not a thing professionals would use. Though some people made some incredible work with those pieces of equipment.

But you know technology advances allowed us to really do it. It really—we began to produce shows for cable, we had a remote truck that would go out and do productions in a variety of places. So, it was a really sort of vital and sort of thriving place through the '80's.

Okay. When you—I want to back up a little bit—
Yeah, sure.

—say more philosophical, what got you interested in television initially.

The department or the box in the corner of the room?

What—when did you decide to make it your life's work?

That's an interesting question. I have a MFA in film and video. Actually it's technically probably a MFA in film and I have also gone to NYU film school so you know I sort of have a quasi snobby film background. I had a mentor in

graduate school by the name of Stuart Komensky who was actually a very distinguished mystery writer wrote a couple of texts about genre studies in both television and film. And Stuart is the one who really sort of got across to me that you know things that were often looked down upon had value. Stuart was the one who knew I loved film. He really got me to embrace it. But even more so, he got me to appreciate the other things that I liked to watch but you wouldn't talk about in mixed company.

I wrote a paper in graduate school on professional wrestling which is absolutely a fascinating thing when you do sort of structure—I did a structural (*inaudible*) analysis and deconstructed the storytelling. It was—it was—it was really interesting.

So, what happened was as time went on I realized that I am a TV kid as well being a film person. I mean I was—not to go too far back, like my mother figured out early on that if she sat me in front of the TV that I would be happy. So, I realized as time went on, I had this sort of this astonishing, I had a very good knowledge of film. I mean I think I still do to this day. But you know in high school, I saw 300 movies in one year which is sort of a crazy thing to do. But I did.

So, that was a movie a day (*inaudible*)

And that's why, that's what it was for a stretch. I grew up in you know Skokie, Evanston, so I had Northwestern and that was back in the day when there was just plethora of films to always to see on campus.

I always realized I always—I knew about TV. I knew all the shows, I knew about characters and since I started to look at television, I got really interested in it. And the other thing is I became more—as time goes on you become aware of the impact of television had. And I think that was the process that occurred really more while I was here that we took it for granted and we take television for granted and how important it is.

And so it sort of became very easy to say this is what I'm going to spend my time doing. This is what I'm committed to do.

Is part of that that say that as an art form or as a profession it is more acceptable than film. And that I mean does that have to do (*inaudible*)—

I don't know. I'm trying to see if the word accessible is the right word. It's sort of—TV is everywhere. I mean so, and in many respects today particularly there is high art, low art, (*inaudible*) I mean there is everything on TV. And in many respects that my you know I love a good slapstick comedy as much as a serious, complicate, dense narrative.

So, to me television offered that times ten on a continual basis. It's just a more reflective—film is an interesting process because film production takes a long time in the you know the system of film outside of the (*inaudible*) very long. TV tends to be a lot quicker, things happened, shows get pitched. I just became aware of the fact that it was really the thing that was most reflective of the world we live in. You want to understand what's going on in the world, you watch TV.

So, I guess I sort of you know I guess I not so much fell in love with television as discovered my love of television. You know we all underestimated. I just—there's a recent study out that I love quoting where they did the observation of television watching. It's out of Ball State. It's called Middle Town Media Study.

They say TV watching is underreported by 164%. No,—

And people are shocked by the amount of television that children—

That people watch.

—the people watch, children watch. So, that underreported? Underreported. And that people who have said they don't watch any TV watch on the average of four hours a day cause they watch it at friends' house, they watch it at—you know what I'm saying they—

What's in the background?

And you know they're sitting and you know talking on the phone or writing a letter and the TV is on and they don't think of it as TV watching. The fact is that the TV is the most commonly used multi-tasking tool so you do watch TV and do something else.

But TV you know the dean at Ball State said that TV is still the 800 pound guerilla media and it's like—so it reaffirms that you know TV is gone though ebb and flows in terms of popularity and how people look at it. At Columbia College too by the way and it's just an interesting thing.

I ended up here and that's what I was thinking about because I could have easily ended up in the film department.

I'm going to ask you about that in a minute.

Oh, there's great stories about that.

But what—okay so, that you're here now you're full. You've chosen. You're like this is the place. You're working with Ed Morris. What did you bring to teaching? What did you want to teach? I know you talk about rewriting at first— Right.

—you know what—what did you personally as an individual bring to the curriculum (inaudible)— The thing—I mean I—I mean I did contributed to a lot of classes over a lot of years. I can say that I did. The thing—the two things I think that I brought that still sort have a place here are important, one is I was the first one to really push writing for TV. And it's my sort of encouragement that writing for TV first became part of the concentrate—the core in the major. It was very clear to me that every television student needed to take a writing class and learn about the storytelling because that was really the first place we really worked on the issues of storytelling.

And is that also a point where you talked about the imagine of the Television Department at Columbia College that were you trying to move it into not or at least away from the imagine of being just this technical (inaudible)—

I think, I think that's true and I think, and I think that was always that image that did us a disservice. I think it was an image that was fostered a lot by Thaine who was the chair before Ed who was very

much—came out of a TV station mentality and sort of union guy mentality which he was about you know technicians and jobs and those sort of things. He was very job-outcome focused but very technically focused.

And think that's a stigma that still hangs around the TV Department. You know that's—today it's ridiculous. Even, even by the time Ed had been chair for a while, it was a very not true but it was an image that hung around.

But yeah I really pushed you know from one writing class we now have a whole writing concentration. So, things have gone that way.

The other thing that I brought to the table which is multi-camera drama directing which is an odd and peculiar interest that I have which we still do in the department. We do for sketch comedy. We do for some of the drama that we do. I teach it still.

Were those that aren't savvy in the field, what changed that signifies the multi-camera (inaudible)—

Well, it's just embracing of another style that's sort of a classic—the TV Department wasn't as interested in narrative stuff in that's part of the push. Those interested and those ideas lead to the development of a soap opera that we did for many, many years in the department. And it was a multi-camera drama thing and it was really—you know Luke taught it. Ron Baily taught it. But it was something that had been in the department but really never flourished. And it's a pity because it's a uniquely television thing. It's how they do daytime soaps. How they do sitcoms, multi-camera.

So, it was really an important part of us and it, it now has really has a place in the department which is a wonderful thing.

Can you expand a bit on that the idea of bringing to the department that students in your department are going to become storytellers or are storytellers— Well, that's where—

—that's a common thread really almost throughout the college and I'm not sure if—I'm interested in how each department sees themselves as storytellers or aiding in this telling of stories.

It's—I'm thinking about that. That's for the long pause.

Take your time. We learn to not be afraid of the pause.

Yeah. It was something that was always a part of the department. I think what since I've been chair I guess I can say in some respects and it started before that as well. But I think my time as chair has been a lot about focusing that. Was—one skill that we can give students that is forever, it the skill to communicate to tell a story.

Technology changes, genre change you know if I talk about reality TV ten years ago, you would have went uh, and now it's a huge and popular successful genre. You know things come and go you know and it's fascinating.

But the one thing that is forever and I would argue applies if you end up doing something else besides television wherever you are in your life, the ability to communicate and tell a story is the basic coin of the realm for us as people. And I think that the Television

Department's commitment in the last five years to do that is really, really an important, important thing.

It really—like I said, everything else you know we can teach you know it can be summed up simply. If you teach kids two things, we've done them well. You can teach them how to tell a story and how to learn then we've succeeded. Because everything else is you know you're never going to teach them you know cope with a situation out in the world because you can't guess what's going to happen. You can't guess what door is going to open for them in their careers. You can't guess where they might end up.

But the truth is if you teach them how to tell a story which is the most important thing we do in our business, if you're an editor, a cameraman, a lighting designer, a set designer, it's all about telling a story. And if you teach them how to learn so that when they walk into you know to go get hired to do something, go operate an audio, an audio mixer for a basketball tournament some place and they need to go do that, they can go, okay I can learn how to do this.

Or if they walk into an office and you know end of working for a producer that says I need you to research this, this and this. It's all about—so it really comes down to those two skills. So, I think we've identified that. There's a long—sorry if I'm rambling (*inaudible*). There's a long history of sort of—sort of the '80's, the '90's and the '00's have been sort of very different for the TV Department. I think

in the '00's we very much sort of come and really horned in on and focused on that.

When you talked about as chair— Yeah.

—as being something you wanted to focus on, could you talk a bit more about the transition from being a full time faculty member in the department to the chair of the department and again what you're kind of philosophy—or expand what your philosophy as chair is and how the role of chair has changed?

Okay. As time went on when Ed was chair, he became I think Ed imagined I'd be chair at some point. I think I imagined I'd be chair at some point. So, in many respects, he took me into his confidence. You know it was you know it was love you know—

Mentorship or (*inaudible*)— Mentorship. Yeah, I think I don't think there's any argument about that. Lunch would more times than not be at the Exchequer—no at Checker's Pub where in the Blackstone was Ed, Luke and myself sitting and talking about what was going on. And clearly and Luke—Luke was an incredible leader himself, that's why that combination was so great for a long time.

Transition to chair for me was interesting in the fact that in between—I will (*inaudible*) I love Ed dearly but Ed stayed on too long as chair. And it's only a retrospect that we can sort of see that at the time we all sort of worked really hard to support Ed. But Ed sort of before '92 and Ed after '92 were sort of two different Eds. And I just you know Ed got older the school changed a lot of stuff went on.

So, Ed finally retired as chair in the late '90's. And the Luke came on. And Luke is a brilliant and great organizer and all these things and I think if he was sitting here himself he would tell you that doing the chair job made him really crazy and unhappy.

It was an odd time at Columbia too because in many respects I think we in the TV Department felt we were under attack.

From?

From? There was a certain man who was here up until recently who I would argue is an ongoing nemesis for the department who on one hand the hypocrisy of this was something that will never sit well. On one him saw himself as a great friend of Ed's which I think he genuinely was. And the other hand undercut Ed especially as Ed got older and was less able to deal with him. Do I need to say Bert's name. We all knew who I was talking—

You don't have to. Yeah

Yeah, I mean we all know it's Bert—

Not very comfortable—

Oh, I'm fine talking about Bert. I mean there is a lot of ironies there because they both respect him and really question a lot of what he was responsible for here over the years. But you know everybody (*inaudible*).

So, very much felt under attack. I mean it was a really so of not a good time for us and Luke took over as chair and it made him ill. I mean I really can say that. He is—he has a very clear sense of right and wrong and at that point in

Columbia's sort history in sort of the '90's, not a good time to have a clear sense of right and wrong because let me tell you, there was no clear sense of right and wrong. I mean stuff was going on just crazy, crazy.

So, I mean you were here for some of that so you know.

Yeah.

You know a lot of the end of John Duff's time all of the things that was going—just very strange and you know the end of the '90's was tough.

The TV Department enrollment had been declining the '90's and we've come under attack for that.

Yeah, yeah.

On the flip side if you look at it, the tuition had been going up all those years and gee whiz the number of African-American students in our department dropped incredibly because they couldn't afford to come to the college any more. And yet at the same time the college in particularly Bert would want to beat you over the head about, about enrollment.

At the same time they had no sense of how to support any department. It was almost like—this is the irony and I'm drifting off but this was always the irony of Columbia College, on one hand it presented itself as so or liked I'm raising my right fist and giving the good old fashion right on. So, we're social, we're leftist, we hip, we're you know cool, we're all his stuff. Yet at the same time, there was this Darwinian thing going on about survival of the fittest you know.

It was always about feeding the beast. Oh, you're growing? Here more food. Keep growing. And it was never the idea that any sort of control growth, balanced growth, it was always you know like I said, survival of the fittest. And I always thought that

Sink or swim.

And yeah it's so—it's so in opposition to sort of the public persona everyone would have loved to have believed Columbia College was about. You know I always think about, someone asked me recently what I think the best, the biggest difference between Columbia College today and Columbia College ten years ago. And they looked at me odd when I said this but I believe it wholeheartedly. Columbia College is a much fair place today. And that's by me a good thing.

Does that mean things always go my way or go the department's way? No. But at least I feel like Columbia College is a much fairer place. It was a very unfair place for many, many years.

So, I was drifted off from the (*inaudible*). So, basically what happened, Luke ended up getting ill and I took over—I took over—now you are going to ask me to remember what year.

Yeah.

I took over as acting chair in 2000. I mean I'm finishing my third year. Help me with this.

Acting chair 2000-2001.

There you go. So, thing I'm finishing my third years as real chair.

Your assistant chair you did mention that.

Before that. (inaudible)

I was assistant chair to Luke while he was sort of—

Okay. Okay.

Yeah, it was funny. We figured out that at some point and I think Luke will agree with this, that we figured out we were in the wrong jobs. Cause I was the one that was you know—some things you're right. Some things I won't talk about but it was my job to go out and like stare down people at meetings a lot of times. And I'm up for that.

Be the advocate?

Yeah, be the advocate and probably also to be an asshole about some things. And it doesn't always serve me well but I don't have a compunction about that when I feel I'm doing something that's for the department or that I'm right about. And I was pretty tough about some things and had some pretty tough interactions with people. And that's okay.

But so that's the point I took over as acting chair and that was an odd year just because acting chair are like in never, never land. I mean there's really a never, never land. So, it was better the year after that when I became a real chair and that was a good thing. I mean Caroline Latta was a dean at the point when I was acting chair obviously. And she was incredible and supportive.

But it's just you know it's a funny, you're in a funny place.

Right. And was that—how was the transition as well—I mean you've got a lot of layers to this before your faculty. Was there a lot of I don't instability in the—I mean did the faculty perceive instability in the department or was (inaudible)—

I don't know.

—moving toward—

I think there wasn't so much instability as everybody was sort of going—what occurred is Ed was sort of winding down. Everybody was sort of going off in their own directions and we weren't pulling together as a group.

Ed sadly at the end of his last few years as chair had a hard time saying no to anybody. So, it led to sort of everybody going off and no one not—you know it was like no one was home at the store you know. And there was a couple of us that were home. But everybody else sort of wandered off and was doing—I mean some times wonderful interesting things but doing their own things and there's no—there was no ability of the department to sort of pull together and move forward so that occurred.

I had always—I mean my transition to chair in some respects was—parts of it were easy because I had always been involved in governance. I had always been—I have a little certificate. I'm founding member of the first curriculum committee you know way back in the day. Those were interesting meetings. But I had always been involved I mean in the technology committee. First technology committee too. But I had always been involved you know didn't spend a lot of time on the council but that's okay.

But I had always pitched and always been on committees. I'd always known a lot of people too. You know I'd always gotten to know—I knew a fair number of the chairs. I knew you know I had—my elder you know you talk about Ed as my mentor my other mentor is really Sheldon Patinkin has been a really good friend forever who you know you wake up and go Sheldon Patinkin is my friend. It's a wonderful thing.

And you know Sheldon is obviously still an ongoing part of my life. But he was also a mentor and he was such a—talk about having sort of a yin and a yang there in some respects, you know Ed and—Sheldon and Ed were like the perfect sort of you know very different guys and very different approaches to chair you know. You know in many respects I had great role models.

Well, you talked about too the old Columbia or the Columbia when you became the chairs as kind of futile lord—

Oh, yeah.

And—

John Mulvany where are you John. John I miss you at moments.

But you also said and I don't know if the two are connected I would imagine they are that Columbia is a fairer place now. How has the role of a chair changed?

Well, that's, that's you tagged a lot of it. Columbia was—there was a time and place where certain people always got favorite treatment and a lot of that was connected to who was chair. And

there's a genealogy there. You know you go from Mike to Bert to whoever and those are the people who often got things or departments could have needed. You know there is a stretch in television where in the '80's where we could have expanded tremendously. Never saw an extra square foot yet other departments did.

Let me think who was in control of that? Oh, yeah. So, but the point was that's what it was tied to. Certain people were favored, certain people weren't. Certain people had to fight and scream for everything they wanted and certain people got whatever they asked for and a lot of was who was chair. Were you connect to the old boys's school, did you go out drinking with certain people, who was at retreat, you talk about retreat. You know who would close down the bar at retreat or who was in the poker game at retreat. You know it's all stuff that went on that why I go to the fact that I think it's for good Columbia is a fairer place.

You mentioned—I want to come back to some of those things because I think for those people that you know have come to Columbia I don't know when you would—you know since in the '90's and beyond—
It's really in the '90's.

Yeah.

I was looking—I was on sabbatical in '92 and always to me that's always clearly the breakpoint between old and new Columbia—

And is that when Duff—that's when—
Is that about when Duff, yeah

Yeah.

It's about when Duff started? Is that when Duff started? That would have been about right.

(inaudible)

And it's also when—we can figure out it's in Mike's book no doubt. We uh,—and it's also when you know for me *(inaudible)* Ed started to slow down. And it's also when the college started to have those huge growths you know growth spurts and so—

Right. Right. Well, I want to ask you about because I think this is the stuff that is the most mysterious or inaccessible or things that people have no idea. You said you were part of the first curriculum committee.
Oh, yeah.

And I don't know if you can you know can give some insight into what that was like if it was informal, you know did you meet at people's houses—
No—

(inaudible)

(inaudible) what happen was it came up at a retreat and people sort of volunteered to do it. I mean literally that's what happened. The idea that there actually would be curriculum review from the college—from a college-wide perspective was like shocking to people What are you talking about?

And it came up at a retreat and I really wish I could remember who started the ball rolling, but a bunch of us volunteered to do it. And what was interesting is we got together and initially that group—I wonder if I had memo somewhere I could find out who are in those early meetings. I want to say Phil

Klukoff, oh gee, cause Phil was always interested in that. I mean Phil had come from a traditional educational background and really know I mean that was actually the first committee I ever was on was the writing *(inaudible)* curriculum that Phil really pioneered. And I always thought of his contribution to the college I would guess won't go underestimated but he had a lot to do with a lot of changes for the good that the college experienced.

And you mentioned a couple—

But just that writing across the curriculum and the notion, you know he re-enforced fiction writing had a special place in the school and deserves it and still has a special place in Columbia College. I think what John did and what Randy does in fiction writing is great, but there was a need that was addressed when Phil came aboard and really started pushing the notion that our students needed to know how to read and write in a conventional sort of way. And it's—it's—talk about the slow march to Columbia becoming a more normal school in a good way and that was part of it. And Phil just was you know Phil was a good guy. You know was an honest straight forward no BS, sense of humor, good sense of humor and just you know carried that banner and pushed that for a long time. And like you said you know those who probably knew him later when it was Columbia II and his *(inaudible)* boy how long he sort of carried himself around here when he wasn't well. Don't remember you know the Phil of another time.

I think that when certainly I know it's one of the reasons Louis initiated this project—Yeah.

—is because what you said about that there's going to be a lot of people that their contributions—It gets forgotten and that you know—

—and not for—not for any you know various or conspiratorial reason but then—

Cause we take it for granted because we have a healthy, wonderful English department now. But that's the point. So, we got started, we were on the curriculum committee. So, we got started and we started meeting and reviewing syllabus and we you know brought up the notion that gee whiz four departments are offering the same class. Does that make any sense? And all of a sudden, department everybody after I want to say the first year maybe two all of a sudden it was like now we must have a representative from every department. Cause what happened is we started questioning things. We started and you know stuff still went on. People still pulled deals. I mean all the same sort of thing you know. But at least we started talking about curriculum in a sort of an intelligent over (*inaudible*) sort of way which had never been done.

You would be—if I showed you syllabus, if I could go back in a little time capsule and showed you syllabuses from the late '80's early '90's you'd be shocked at we called this a syllabus and the teachers be teaching from this you know. But the curriculum committee really started that role and started that process the slow evolution to where now we have thinking credibly functional curriculum committees in the schools which makes sense.

How have they—maybe you can speak to this from that—the perspective of a curriculum committee but also from your department that how is Columbia maintained this kind of balance with legitimate, sophisticate contents that has to be approved or meet some standards with the continuation of innovation and creativity in the curriculum and course offerings? Cause I know people outside Columbia do not believe how—

Quickly.

—we can really respond to current events, current trends.

I think, I think a lot of it has to do with while we really organize and codified so much of it, there still—it was still tuned to Columbia (*inaudible*). Yeah, I can't stick a class in a week before school starts any more. You know what I mean. I have this idea, they just came out with this. I'm going to have a class now. No, you and you know that's fine.

The truth is we found a middle ground and that's—

You're okay.

Okay. We found a middle ground with so much of this which is where I think we're are best off. I mean those sorts of issues curriculum you know I think we all were a little you know the whole organizational process and oasis, process sort of scared the scrap out of all of us. But clearly as it's been humanized by our associated deans you know who've done a great job across the board, you know it really is, it's a system that works okay. We can live within these structures. It means we have to think ahead a little. And can we respond? Yeah, we can still respond because you

find ways of setting up appropriate vessels of special topics class that you can tune. It just takes a little more creativity and we are still so much more reactive than any other four colleges put together. We're fine there. It works.

Okay. I have to because I am paying attention to the clock and there's a lot of things I want to ask you about your take on or description of—you came from film.

Yes.

You said you could have been in either department. What have been kind—

Actually I interviewed—it's funny you ask that. I was interviewed by Tony Loeb for a position in the Film Department. Yes, that's (*inaudible*). You want a funny story? I'll give you a funny story.

And then maybe lead into (*inaudible*)

(*inaudible*) yeah. Obviously you know I call it the Film Department yet if you look at the letterhead it's the Film/Video Department. It's been 15 years I still don't recognize that.

The truth is—

I had (*inaudible*)

And you know, you know, Van and I have had good times and bad times. And we're good now and that's a good thing cause I much rather you know I you know this irony is all the fighting and crap that went on between film and video I look at those people and I like virtually everyone of them. And that's what sad about it. I mean that's what good about today.

They decided they were going to take over—they were sort of debt

low you know, Thaine passed away, Ed was just coming on. They basically made a land grab and tried to take over the video area.

And so I was called in for an interview with Tony Loeb because they were going to try literally and I was teaching in the video area. I always remember I should—you know I walk and shook his hand. I sat down in a chair and I sat down and I seem to sit there really low.

And I was and it sort freaked me out and then I went to look for Tony and my head went up and looked at Tony and I and it was like, why is my head at this unnatural angle. And literally if I remember correctly, maybe I'm embellishing possible but I don't think so.

His desk was on a platform because Tony had issues. His desk was on a platform. Tony had issues we assume about his stature. And while I can pretty much remember that his desk was on a platform, I also think the chairs or the legs were probably sawed off by a few inches but who knows.

So, I had an interview with Tony and obviously you know I you know—maybe I would have ended up there.

And you were—were you in the Television Department. I was currently teaching in the TV Department when that happened. They were clearly going for a land grab and one of the things that happened when I took over is he called them four letters words good for these— I don't know.

Okay. Well, Ed, Ed was very quick and able with a variety of four letter words. I mean his, his warmest greeting to you when you

walk into his office is “what the F do you want?” And that showed he loved you. You hate to think about what he said if he didn't love you.

But the point was he basically stopped the grab that was happening but they went on later to name themselves film and video which to this day I think confuses students and doesn't do anyone any good. I mean it was about politics. It wasn't about anything else it was about politics. It was about favorite status which is part of what we're talking about.

You know somewhere along the lines and this is my take on this because I know this is what you want me to talk about. TV Department for many years was like the biggest department in the college and really supported was the college cash cow when Thaine was chair and all that. I think Mike always resented that. I think Mike saw the TV people as sort of pedestrian and saw the film people as sort of artists and I think that carried—and I think Bert felt the same way and that sort of mood carried forth.

And rightly or wrongly I think the Film Department many of the people felt that privilege status and sort of dealt with this in that way. I think it sadly colored the relationship between the two departments in two years.

There's a very famous dinner. Did Dan talk about this?

No. NO. Very famous dinner between senior faculty in film and senior faculty in television.

Who organized it?

I think—that's a great question. I don't remember. This may have been in the stretch—boy I can't remember what year it is. It may have been in the stretch when they were going through rotating acting chairs in the Film Department there. You know when Doreen and Chap, Dan and Judd you know there's a stretch where there's that. We all ended up I want to say Italian Village sitting around a table basically trying to resolve our differences.

My recollection of the meal was that we were basically looked as like you know peasants from the underprivileged county that you know that you know what we did wasn't really worth—

(inaudible)

Yeah, yes. That you know that they were still living in the, what I'd call the '70's independent film maker mode. This was already the '80's. It was the '80's, late '80's I want to say. But the point was it was sad. I mean it was sad because the two departments could have had so much to contribute to each other let alone the thing that's always made me most angry about the film versus TV thing is that the people who suffered the students, the students.

Film majors who would have benefited from some exposure to television cause let me see lots working TV. And some of the things that they do so well that we don't you know you can only do some many things. You know the cinematography, the audio post production that they do in their department that we don't do in our department. We could have benefited from it to and it's sad.

And been ahead of your time because now that's a hot topic and I'm not even in the field. But you're—I just saw an article the other day about film makers moving into television.

In the Trib this week I mean the—yeah, Friday I think. But that's right and that's where—the truth is what happened over time even though the departments were still officially you don't say at war you know for years. You know other things entered into it. There was interactive multimedia was another bone that sort of happened in the short term.

The truth is what happened early on is there were bridges and actually I was one of the first people to sort of start making those bridges cause I argued that on the QT we very quickly—you know for example made Screen Writing I a prerequisite for the TV upper level writing classes. And TV writing was a prerequisite for Screen Writing II. So, we started to build those bridges. Paul Max Rubenstein. Have you interviewed Paul Max Rubenstein?

Uh-huh.

I wonder if you can do that? He left sort of a little unhappy but you can—you should include that part. You should cut out the reference but Paul would be a great, interesting interview.

Yeah.

Paul Max and I together taught the first sitcom writing class. And that was part of the idea. The idea is that TV and film you could teach together. You could do things together and obviously you know the relationship both fostered by—by my wonderful Dean Doreen

and by Bruce, you know it's a whole different world. You know cause Bruce comes from a world where there wasn't a distinction.

What did—what does the if you could briefly comment on but what do you think the future holds because there is so much emphasis on not to say Columbia but in the wider world and when we see new program offering media literacy that people are going to be expected or to have the edge that you're—these departments are going to have to—
Work together better.

—work together.

Yeah, work together better. I know some people you know should you have you know a lot of places film and television are together. I think one of the strengths of Columbia College right now is that the Film Department and the Television Department are complimentary but have very different cultures.

I mean it's really if you go if you interview students you'd find out their cultures are really different and it's a good thing cause it means students can be a sort of exposed to both sorts of environments. You know TV does some things exceptionally well. Film does other things exceptionally well. And it's really great they're both here.

I you know I'd love to see the media literacy issue you know we teach culture, race and media in the Television Department is home based there. I think that's a model. I mean that notion, that's a model for what we need to do. Yes, it's home based in television because it's Joan Beaudoin's child and she's real you know Joan I mean she's done everything but you know but build a building for it.

But the idea that students were all the different departments go across borders and take that class is exactly what it should be and we need to do more of that. I mean that's something you know Bruce and I always talk about it but how do you mix TV/film students together. They do it out in LA very successfully now. And film students get exposed to the TV world and they realize it's a possibility. But the point is as time goes on I think we'll do better, better job.

Writing we do it pretty well. Post-production we do it pretty well. Production we haven't sorted it out yet but that will happen.

And the truth is another way where we are stating to merge the cultures is frequency, the monitors. You know film is starting to—film students are contributing their films to frequency and that's what it should be. It's a much better world in that regard. You know the truth was film and TV went after each other—you know I have my perspective on it cause I saw it—I was TV in much more a defensive posture through that stretch.

But it's interesting it was a lot—I mean I don't know you say life—people like use a family model to Columbia and old Columbia.
Yeah.

And whether it was dysfunctional or functional—
Dysfunctional without a doubt.

But it was allowed to happen too. I mean at lot—
What do you mean it was allowed. It was encouraged. Mike and Mike did it and Bert learned it from Mike. Part of the point is that people were pitted against each other. People were encourage—

Part of that Darwinian—

That's exactly right. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

Cause I was thinking of that more in terms of students. You know before end student service, you know a lot of attention toward retention that it was kind of a sink or swim attitude

(inaudible)—

Which it never was that in the TV Department. And you know in some respects you know—I mean that's I go back and look at times you know the grug bugaboo, the big notion that (inaudible) The TV Department when everybody else was growing and you didn't have any more room to grow and weren't given any more space, we made a very clear choice not to stick twenty kids in a class that only should have had fifteen.

And then you look back maybe we should have done that. Maybe we should have played the game the rest of the way the college was playing it. But we were always very serious about that. But if you also going to look at TV Department's graduation rate, and the nature of our community in the department, I think there are benefits from what we chose to do many years ago and the fact there's a real strong sense of community. A lot of our kids we have an excellent graduation rate the whole bit.

Okay there's now—

Okay. I'm fine. You can have as much—I mean I'm good until twelve. I mean I'm—

I kind of been put a pretty strict restraint on my time so that's why I watch it so carefully. But I want to know—

But we got too many good stories.

I want to know—no, this is great, this is great. But I want to know you know you talked about you mom you know using the TV as the babysitter. You have three children?

Yes.

Now, what role does television and the culture of television play in your household I just have to know.

I've actually attached remote controls to each of their hands. And they're sort of real humans now, they are more than just—no. It's interesting because this is an ongoing challenge. My kids have very specific amounts of TV time they are allowed to watch. They have very specific shows they are allowed to watch and I watch, me personally partially because I like watching TV, isn't that convenient. I watch, I watch, I watched everything they see. They don't watch something new without us watching it together. And I sit and watch a lot of it together.

I was very proud of my kids are now—my oldest are now six but I say about by the time they were four, they understood that commercials are designed to sell you things and things don't always work the way they are shown on the commercial.

My tact has been—I've learned a lot from TV as a kid. I think a lot of my interest that I have and I have a wide variety of interest because I watched a lot of TV as a kid. I know that's sort of—some people think that odd but I think that's true for me.

And in the same way, I have tried to expose my kids to the same sort of thing. Make sure they get—do other things you know my kids to dance, they do judo, they do a lot of athletic stuff, but it's about a balance. But I think the big trip is it's very specific the amount of time and the shows are specific.

You know it occasionally it's a wonderful thing, my kids sat and watched the travel log on France for 45 minutes over the weekend. They're six. But you know what I'm saying but they, that's a good thing. You know they're interested and there is value there and it is not what they normally watch but that's okay too.

So, that's how I juggle it. TV you know is the ultimate tool if used properly and it's the ultimate tool if used negatively. You know what I'm saying. It can be as bad—it can be as bad an influence as you let it be and it can be an absolutely to educate and inform on an occasion it's comforting. I don't think there's any—you know I think we all find that.

The other thing I have to come back to—

Okay.

or had to come back to you said if you want to understand the world, you can watch TV. And could you expand on that and maybe not that you have to spend any time belaboring some that's been belabored but you know the Janet Jackson and you talked about entertaining or informing. I mean what does I don't know if you can do this but what do you mean by that? If you want to understand the world watch TV. TV is an odd thing. You know TV there's two—you have these schools

of thought about television. TV is—is either the mirror to our culture or what drives our culture. Everything is gone to hell because of TV. You make us get tattoos and pierce our bodies.

The truth is it's a much more dynamic and complicated process. TV what's interesting about TV it's filled with things that both have our immediate response sort of medium short, medium and long-term feedback loops. You know there are programs that have been in production for a year that end up on TV but there are programs that (*inaudible*). So, ultimately if you want to look at TV and what people are thinking about, it's all there. It's a matter of deciphering it but it's all there.

I mean you could tell is there no better summation of the question in our culture about appropriate behavior and standards than the Janet Jackson incident in the Super Bowl. Does anything sum it up better than that on both the serious issues involved but also the ridiculous nature of the discussion all at the same time.

Richard Clark I mean that's going on right now. Think about it you know how, how, how it's depicted on the various news networks. How you go from Fox to CNN to ABC, CBS, NBC thing and how it's shown differently and how it's reflected differently in our culture. It's very complicated but ultimately all trends and ideas on one form or another pop up on television.

When and I think your department and I missed this and I'm sorry I did but that you had a panel on the most important moments in television.

No, that was the top 25 series every TV major should know and pretty much everybody else.

Okay. I'll change the question a little bit.

Okay.

But you could include those.

Could you give like a top five or top—you know they always talk about Kennedy, Nixon and funerals you know or—

What you mean like most important event?

Yeah—

We're going to work on a list but I'll give you the top five off the top of my head.

Okay.

Number one of course is Janet Jackson's nipple. I am joking. It's actually the jewelry—

You'd think it was.

I just remember—I mean I'll tell you it happened. My wife and I are sitting and watching. It happened. I turned to my wife and I said, was that her boobie and she looked at me and said yeah, and we went back to you know okay what the heck. I mean that was all the ripple it caused at our house. And it's just like—that's a whole other discussion. That's great.

Edward R. Murrow. Rather than the debates I'd say the Kennedy assassination. That's the first one I remember. Walking on the moon. Watergate. Berlin wall coming down. How's that for a good five.

They were—were the McCarthy hearings televised? They were—
But that's why—

Okay.

I mean (*inaudible*) when I say Edward R. Murrow it's his response to that. That's a famous show. Actually that—actually see it now which is what the series made in their top 25 list.

Yeah because I think like—and you said Watergate, I don't remember the McCarthy hearings but that ability to pull back the curtains.

That's what TV is great for. It changed our perception. Think about how, how war—how embedded reporters—but the—but the difference between the first Gulf War and the second Gulf War. It's a very complicated text but it's still ultimately—there is no other text. And some would argue the Internet is equal but the problem with the Internet is that there are no standards on the Internet. There's no sort—there's no foundation on the Internet the same way there is on television.

There's still no more detailed text of who we are, what we do what we think how we feel than television.

And I want—I wish—I wish that you know that television as text—I, I you could spend a whole another hour—

No, it's wonderful stuff. I mean it's but that's why you know I ended up you know it goes back to your original question. I ended up in the TV Department. I'm I happy? Yeah.

But too that idea of you know that the support or technology or television as technology that expansion of that vision at Columbia and in the department.

All right. I've got to. There are so many things I wanted to ask you more about but if you could address open admissions and you know perhaps how you know what your feelings are about it, it's importance to the college and then also students. You know how they've changed.

Okay. Open admission. I'm a big supporter of open admissions. Open admission was a lie at Columbia College for a number of years.

Hell yeah we took them in the door. Did we do a damn thing to support them? Uh-huh. You know it was accepted. It was accepted that the students would fail and that always made me nauseous. I mean here's another good story.

I used to work for many, many years I worked the last day of registration and I always did.

You liked that day.

I did. Yeah I was you know it was sort of—it's funny that you say that. Yeah because there was always great fun people sitting around. You know there's always—you know I often would sit next to radio so it would be like Mary (*inaudible*) who was a part time teacher at that point. And there was great people around. You know you sit and do all the stuff. And I would always sit that last day.

And you'd see kids coming to register for classes. Last day of registration. When I say last day, I mean last day to drop out. I'm talking the last Saturday. People registering for classes and I knew there was one person smiling about that you know who counted every person who would come in the door and thought every person is another step towards Columbia glory.

But it made me ill. It made me ill the idea that you'd let this kids in cause the were doomed for failure. They were absolutely doomed to failure. And the fact you know what Mark Kelly's done and what the college has really embraced is what it should have been 15 years ago.

I can't even think what Columbia would have been like if we had—you know it goes back to you know we—it goes back to the joke about we're the right on college. We're the hip liberal thing and it was really we should have been you know a big college Darwin because we really that's what we said. You know. (*inaudible*) We'll take your money. It's up to you whether or not you will survive. It's sad.

I think open admissions I mean the thing I missed you asked me about students all roll right into that. The thing I miss most about Columbia today is there are students who can't afford to come here any more. And that's sad to me. I think it impacted my department. I always you know when you go back and look at the decline in enrollment the TV Department—

(inaudible)

Well, uh, you know it's funny I'm program review right now. And I looked at the drop in African Americans in my department, it always had an incredibly strong African American presence. Shocking. Shocking. I miss it. I miss, I miss—and TV still I would argue as much if not more than any other department in the college. If you walked into TV you'd say it looked like Columbia but believe me we are hanging on by our nails.

Where are the older students gone. Like where do they go to school now that used to come here?

They go to community colleges I think. I think it's price point a lot of it I think. I think we priced ourselves out of so many people. I assume that's it.

We also are so much more geared towards, towards a regular student now. You know last night classes I have a hard filling that class. I work on it. I work very hard and I get my dean supports me in this and it's a good thing but it's a battle because I understand. You know you can't run a class with five people when it's supposed to have 15.

But it's true. It's harder and harder for them. And we also—I mean the flip side is we do ask more of our students. There are more time intensive classes. Where it's hard for someone who's working a job to come and you know the sketch comedy class you know is from 4 to 8 or 4 to 9 whatever it is. It's a long class. But you know there's three classes going and it's very exciting, interesting hard for full time people to say yes, I'm going to go duct out and go start my class. I have to leave early. So, I mean that's where you know some day we are going to figure that out again. You know Columbia II was not the right idea of how to figure that out. But some day hopefully we'll figure that out again cause I do think there's a lot. I miss them. You know. I miss you know. I don't miss the students who you know I used to remember very clearly this student who sat in my class with headphones on. And that ended quickly and he didn't last long. That was very early on.

That's clear signal they don't have anything to learn from you. Yeah, boy. And I see I treat this I don't think that's what it was with that kid. I mean that's what's it's really about. So, the good news is our Columbia College wants to come here more prepared to be here, yeah. Do a better job of preparing them, yeah. But I think of all of the sort of lost souls from years where we said we were open admissions.

Okay. I'm going to ask you know but you have to answer quickly. But I'm going to touch on everything that you know— That Louis wanted you—

Well, not even that but even stuff I've added. How do you feel about evaluation of administrators? Important but complicated. I—we just had a guy—funny I just had a conversation with this about somebody, with somebody. I think it's an interesting idea but someone who has just been evaluated myself, you have to be very careful.

Whatever eval—I think it's important but the tool that is used has to be a very well designed tool.

And you— You can't give people a blank piece of paper and tell them what do you think of your administrators. It's a recipe for disaster.

And is it—but aren't those same concerns that's concerns for faculty evaluation? Yes, but I think we have a better culture and more standards of faculty evaluation. I think there's a better sense. There's you know teachers understand about teaching. You know my favorite word (*inaudible*). I mean you know we understand about teaching.

Teachers don't necessarily understand about administration. So, you're going to ask them about is someone doing a good job as an administrator. That's an interesting road to walk down.

Yeah. Okay. And what is your view on staff immunization or even why it's—you know why that's happening now. Whatever you (*inaudible*)— I'm—I uh, I think back to—it's funny also just said this to somebody. You know there didn't have to be a staff—a faculty union—part time faculty union at Columbia College. I mean that a door that—that could have been easily avoided in its time. I hope we don't make the same mistake twice. I think the staff absolutely—I think they should do it—you know—I'm you know staff is a vital part of this college and I recognize it. And our staff and they need to do what they feel they need to do.

So, am I for or against it? I don't have an opinion either way because it's not really my—it's my issue but I understand why it's being talked about. I really do.

That's interesting. And the connection with the part time it is hard to unionize. You got to really be— Well, you know—

It's hard you know it's very hard. And the college blew it. The college could have avoided that but you know. I mean that's my impression of what happened.

They made it possible. That's right. You know as a part timer you know that was something even I never understood why I was being paid you know in the day so much more to teach other places than I was at Columbia College. But it was like okay you accepted it because you loved Columbia College.

Well, we are out of time. Okay.

We are more than out of time. But Michael I want to thank very much. Okay.

For your time.

