

L u k e P a l e r m o

Today is April 12, 2001, and this is an interview with Lucas Palermo. He's a faculty member in the Television Department here at Columbia College.

If we could start with, if you could tell us when did you come to Columbia, and what were the circumstances that brought you here?

Well, it's interesting, because I came to Columbia in two different times. I came to Columbia in the late '70s, as a student. And I had worked on a degree in teaching—actually it was teaching math, and was actually working at a high school, and found that that perhaps wasn't really my thing. And a job opened up in the audio-visual center at the high school, and I took it. It was a staff job. And that was early '70s. And television had just become a thing in school. It was really the cutting edge, and the school was Lyons Township High School, and they said, "we're really interested in getting into this, are you interested in more of this and some photography?" I said "yeah."

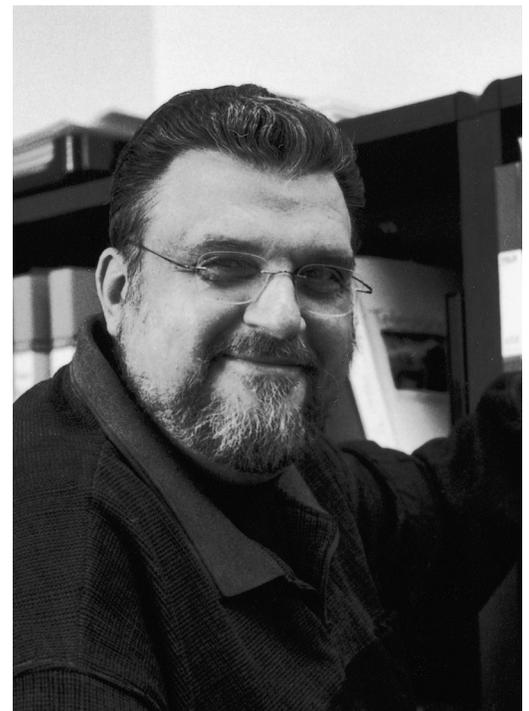
So, I started dabbling around and they said, well, you probably need to get some more background in this area. And of course, the place that came up even back then, for photography specifically at that point, was Columbia College. And I came down here to one of the open houses in the middle '70s. And I said, "well, this would be a good place to sort of switch these gears."

And that's what I did. I took a couple of photography classes. And

that helped me in the job. Sort of that practical hands on, you do it on Wednesday, in school you're working on Thursday, or teaching it on Thursday. And then I looked in the television program here at that time and so I started taking courses in that and brought that material back. And started building a program and the high school and continued taking classes.

Then in 1973, was offered a job at Riverside-Brookfield High School, as kind of the department chairperson of an Audio-Visual Department. And they really wanted to do some cutting edge stuff, they had zero, they thought they were going to put a big splash, big budget into this, and said, "are you interested in doing television?" And I said, "yeah, that would be great." And so started there and continued taking courses on and off at Columbia. And in 1984, I actually finished the degree at Columbia. And started teaching part-time. Thaine Lyman, who was the chairman of the Television Department at that time, liked what I was doing in class, and knew that I was already a teacher, and said, would you like to teach part-time. And so I started teaching part-time in 1982 here. And so I was teaching and student at the same time, which is really weird. But, it's just an odd set of circumstances. But that was what Columbia was wonderful about. They recognized that I was a good teacher, and that I enjoyed teaching that stuff. And it was like, you got to be a pretty good part-time teacher. I was younger at that time, and worked with the kids, really with younger people.

And so that's what happened. I started teaching part-time in '82 and then the job with assistant chairman of the Television Department opened up in 1986. And Ed Morris asked me to come down and talk about the job. And it really wasn't the job I wanted. I was already kind of a department chairperson at the high school doing well, I knew high schools pay rather well. And I didn't really want a full-time faculty position at that time. And so he said, "well, I can't tell you what job is open, but you must come down and interview with me." And I turned him down three times. And finally, during Christmas break in 1985, he said, "just come down and talk to me, all I ask—come down for lunch," and so I came down. It's the assistant chairmanship job, that's open, but the gentleman who was in the job currently didn't want anyone to know that he was leaving. And so he said, "that doesn't want it public at this point," so I couldn't really



tell you but I, and so then he told me. And he said, "I think we can really work together, and I'd really like you to join the team."

And who was Ed Morris?

Ed Morris was the chairman of the Television Department. Thaine had passed away in 1983, and Ed took over the chairmanship in 1984.

So he was looking for his own assistant?

He was looking for his own assistant.

And he wanted you.

And he wanted me. And so then I took the job, and I started here as a full-time faculty member in August of 1986.

Okay. Before we go on, I want you to go back to your days as a student. Could you describe Columbia from—I mean, I know you were working full-time and you had a profession, but if you could put yourself in the point of view of a student. And

Obviously, it was a much smaller place. Of course, everybody's going to say that because that's probably the biggest difference between 25 years ago and now. I think the students are still the same type of students. We still attract the students who are so committed to the arts and to the media. At that time, the media departments were really the big ones. I mean, Television Department was one of the largest ones at that time, because it was an upcoming sort of romantic medium. Now we're sort of thought about it in some terms as an appliance, but at that time it wasn't the case. So it was a bigger draw. So the department was again, professionally oriented. They had many part-time teachers. Thaine

Lyman, at the time that I was a student, worked at WGN. He was a real craftsman, a real artist. And he shared everything that he knew with every student. And he worked full-time at WGN and was full-time here. I don't know how the man did it; I really don't. I think it fixed the poor guy's death actually, that he overworked himself. But he'd be here days and nights.

And the students knew that, and we, all of us that had him as an instructor, knew that this guy was this committed and he was sharing this knowledge that we couldn't get anyplace else. We could get the textbook stuff and we could get the rest of it, but we couldn't get the practical application and the sort of what you have to do to be successful. And Thaine and the rest of the part-time faculty, I think, shared that. It was like, we love this business, we love this art form, and if you do as much as we love it, we'll share whatever we can and make this a successful network. All the wonderful things, I think, that Columbia is known for were crystal clear in every classroom, and I think they still are. But in a bigger institution, it's a little harder to see it sometimes, but in a smaller place that it was at that time, you knew everybody. You knew all the faculty; you knew all the students.

Even as a part-time student, you know, and I had to come at night because I was working during the day, or Saturdays, I still felt like I was part of the mixture. The community was a little easier to build that, than it is now in terms of a student body. And Thaine shared a lot of information. I learned a lot from him, about you know, what life was like out in the world of television, and what you had to do to succeed.

What would you describe then at that time, or maybe if it's changed, too, the mission of the College—or the mission of your department and its relation to the College and the mission of the College? Are they one and the same; are there differences?

No, I think they're pretty much one and the same. Thaine always said things like, and I still quote him to this day when I do an open house. In the television industry, as television professionals and artists, we rarely create a television program about television. So that means that as journalists, as television professionals, we have to be familiar with every other part of society, including history, including psychology, sciences and the rest of the arts, because if we're going to be informed producers, writers, directors, the medium that we're actually learning is only kind of a technique in the concepts, and we have to become researchers on every other topic. So I think that our department's mission, still very much aligns itself with the College's mission to put this art in some perspective, in some construct, authoring the culture of your time sort of thing. I think just because of our discipline, it lines itself up with that. And he felt that very strongly, working in the industry. So I still share that with parents and students now. Because students, as you probably now, I think students nowadays are a little more savvy, about, well, I'm going to take my General Studies courses over here, or I'm going to take them at the junior college level, or why do I have to take them at all.

And so we'll say, "you're going to work in this industry; you're going to become a visual arts, a story teller, but the stories aren't about

us, and you have to understand a lot more about this world than just television and production and writing. And if you learn that in the construct of this College, where the courses are designed to help foster that connection between the arts and all the rest of society, you'll be much more successful."

And I think we kind of win that battle in a lot of ways. I think students finally realized that that's the case, especially when they get to be juniors, sophomore, junior level, they realize, God, if I have anything to say or anything to do to make this art happen, I have to know or be able to find out how to know about a lot of different things.

I'm interested in your curriculum. Maybe even you can go back to, as in the early days at the high school level, when you were teaching television, what did that consist of and what did you bring to Columbia and how has that curriculum developed? Has it changed? It's obviously evolved. How has it evolved?

Well, what I brought to Columbia, and I think what made me attracted to Ed, was that I had an interesting mixture of a television art form as a television artist and an educator. And as an educator, I understood the importance of—and not to the bureaucratic sense, but to the importance of curriculum development, testing procedures and objectives and entry-level skills. Of course, at the high school level, especially public high schools, must conform to some pretty rigid standards in terms of, have your seniors met this? And when I came to Columbia, that was a little loose, you know. And Thaine wasn't you know, an educa-

tor, per se. Obviously he was a great teacher, but the rest of those forms and the kind of, were just there on a smaller scale. And I think, when Ed came in he realized that we had to formalize a little of this more for teaching 12 sections of course, they better be very similar in terms of what's going on, entry-level skills and exit level skills and how the students are being assessed. These were words that weren't in the vocabulary of the college, probably weren't in the vocabulary of most places at that time.

So, I think, I brought that sort of, here's our goals, here's how we can do it. I was the first one that standardized the syllabi across the board. I don't want everyone teaching everything the same, but by the time the students leave here, they must have achieved this in order to make the next class work. And that's what was kind of missing, that all these students that took 10 different teachers down here, then got separated and rejoined to take the next class. And some of them had this level and some of them had this level, and the teachers at the upper ends were kind of struggling for, wow, where do we strike the medium, the happy medium, we sure we get everybody, don't lose everybody.

So the curriculum at the high school, though not as sophisticated because we were working with far younger people. We were teaching them how to use this medium to speak with their voice. And in the early '70s, of course, you didn't have Camcorders at home. You didn't record every wedding. To see yourself on the television was a monumental experience, because it just wasn't done. It's hard for people to remember back, that

there were no video stores and people never saw anybody but professional talent on television. You never saw yourself on the television. So for us back then to actually being recording students and their work, and actually were able to show it back on a television, although now seems so mundane, seems so exciting. And so, to be able to use a medium that they were in awe of and actually tell their own stories and shoot their own neighborhoods, and their classes, or whatever they were trying to convey. They actually learned kind of a respect for this medium, rather than just being passive with it and sitting and watching what was going on. I think that was really important.

Eventually, working with the high schools, I decided at the high school level, that teaching television for the sake of teaching television, separate from the rest of the school, was not a good idea. Because when cutbacks came, the first thing that was going to get cut, was the sort of education that appeared to be extracurricular and sort of non. And that's too bad, because I think that television as well as other art forms, play a role in every class, in every curriculum. So I abandoned the idea of teaching television during the school day hours, and chose to teach the students the techniques once a week and in the evening. And the high school that we do this, which is really kind of—it's a great high school; they were very forward thinking people.

Was it at Lyons or?

No, this was at Riverside. They were very forward thinking people. And I convinced the superintendent that rather than meeting one

period a day for 5 days, which is 50 minutes, one times 5, we meet once a week on a Monday evening from like 5:00 to 8:00. And I could teach the students the techniques and the concepts, and then we could have the students available during the day, to work with teachers on using television in every other curriculum. So it didn't stand in this ivory tower by itself. And also, I think it put it in perspective, because students just doing silly projects that have no meaning, you know, learn only silly techniques. When the red light goes on, you hit the green button. But if they were paired with a teacher, or a group of students from another class, then they could share their knowledge about this art. And the students would share their research on whatever topic and together, which is the way it's done in reality outside of here, they could work on a project together.

One of the most successful things there, we had a—I was working with a sophomore English teacher, who was teaching advanced level English classes. And she had her sophomore students. Sophomore's, the worst level to work with in high school, by the way, never work with sophomores.

Why, I have to ask?

I think it has something to do with hormones, I'm not sure. But the students are at some strange point where they're just, they're like overgrown 8th graders or something. It's a very weird level to work with. But she had this, several sections of this advanced English class, and she said, "they're reading all the classic books at this level." And she said, "I want them to do something that challenges their interest, but conveys, enforces

them to really get into these books." So we came up, we stole part of the program idea from Steve Allen, who used to do a program called, *Meeting of the Minds*. And we decided that we were going to do a series of programs where 6 students sat around the table with a moderator, and they had to portray a character from one of these books. And we had *Julius Caesar* and *Lord of the Flies* all together. And the discussions were going to be about a current topic, like abortion or capital punishment. And they had to portray the character and speak impromptu on this topic in that character's voice. So you had Julius Caesar sitting next to Adam DeFart. I mean, it was the most—and the students really learned and they loved doing it, but they really had to read that book. Now, how would one of the young people from *Lord of the Flies* attack the topic of capital punishment?

We did a lot of things like that at the high school, and so we made television a part of all the curriculum.

So they were producing a show?

Yes, and our students were the producers, were the writers. And so they were doing what producers in our industry do, they pair up with someone who's the content expert, and together they produce a show. So we sort of set that model in place, it's still in place, it's still going strong over there. The young man that took my job, when I left, was a former student of mine at the high school, and so he understood what connotation was. And so, he's been there for 15 years now and doing quite well.

And that seems to be very much in keeping with what Columbia tries to do, not to give the assignments or projects that are very abstract, but what you might be doing in your –

And also to have you not work at something like television for the sake of television. It's difficult.

Explain.

We're in one of those industries where you can get absorbed with technology, and you can be producing very little but look like you're doing an awful lot, because there's so much graphics. And it's hard to steer students at the beginning past that, because it is what is attractive to this age group. Oh, my God, we get to edit, we get this and we have non-linear—we have graphics. And we keep saying, "that's great, let's get this out of your system, play with the stuff, learn how to use it, but the most important thing is, what are you going to say with it? What are you going to do with this?"

The storytelling side of it.

Yeah, the understanding that these tools do a lot more than make visuals happen, and it's a lot more powerful than that. But I think it takes students a couple of semesters to realize that. Because they've only been used to being passive viewers of this material, and when you say, "we're going to produce a program about this, or we're going to, as we do in our department—our own soap opera." And they say, "well, that's kind of silly." And we said, "no, a soap opera's a form of society, it's a message, there's stories in there. Now you can do something with a soap opera forum here, and it'll be broadcast." Our soap opera was broadcast at one time, on 108 channels around the country because we were up-linked on a satellite for UNAP, which was a student network.

And they found out that they did issues—because I taught the soap operas for many years. But they did issues like—we purposely steered them away from doing a soap opera about college. It was like, that’s a stretch. Let’s do a soap opera about something that you have to research and learn about. And we did a soap opera about two television stations in the city of Chicago. And one of the reasons we picked television station was because we had sets all in place, we had studio, you know what I mean. We didn’t build have to build fancy things to get us off the ground. But they had to learn about how adults work in real work environments, and how office politics and this kind of thing, and it was great.

How did they do that? Did they go observe; did they interview?

They observed; they interviewed; they talked. They did other things to learn about what was going on. And then it went off the wrong track, because we need to check that out, because that doesn’t sound logical. And so they wrote and produced and eventually, you know, really got into some topics, like drug addiction and homosexuality and the homophobic atmosphere. And they did one program. For a whole semester the character, it had two gay characters and they handled it beautifully. They didn’t make it silly and stuff.

And we were on the cable system in Downers Grove. And we got a call from them and said, we have to stop airing your soap opera, because that the gay theme—these guys have touched each other. I mean, it was literally a touch on the shoulder or something, but he had a shirt off. We purposely—we use, for all of our television programs

that we produce, the lowest common denominators in broadcast television. So we tell them, “if it’s not going to pass broadcast standards, we can’t do it. There was nothing about this that was offensive.” And Downers Grove told them, it was going off the air. And the students were shattered and shocked. And I said, “hey, this is reality.”

They said, “fine, then we’re off from Downers Grove.” So the writers created a lesbian character in the next semester, and her home was in Downers Grove. It was like, okay, guys, you got them back. This wasn’t that long ago that is should have been causing such a—

When did you start that soap opera class?

1987.

And was anyone else doing that at that time?

No.

So 1987 it continues.

We got lots of coverage. We were in Soap Opera Digest and Soap Opera Magazines, Channel, CBS—CBS Morning Show and the network came into the whole piece when they were celebrating the 25-year anniversary of the soap opera—that we were a student soap opera. And they came here—did the satellite live from here. It got a lot of coverage when we were first, we first put this out. Because it’s a serialized program that we were doing within a curriculum, which is tough, because it’s not extracurricular. There are four classes that meet together at the same day and time, and each one of them have a different part in the production. There’s writers, there’s producers—

And is it a 16-week course?

It’s a 15-week course.

15-week course, and the programming or the content change every time the course is offered?

Well, the people change, but we try to keep the, you know, the continuity going, but that’s difficult. But we weren’t sure—

So is it still set in two TV studios?

No, it’s evolved. It moved from that to one of the places that the people—you had to have places for these people to meet outside of work, and so they can’t open the restaurant. And so suddenly, the restaurant became the focus. So things that shifted over the course—what is it now, 15 years?

And now, this past semester, it was called *Hungry Hearts*. It evolved titled, but it still actually came from some of the main characters that have strung through. And it’s with cooperation of the Theater Department—has been magnificent. What we didn’t want, were our students trying to play actors. So we audition every semester for all these roles, and our producers go over and to the Theater Department and audition. And so there’s the soap opera, we do a news program called *600 South*. We do a live news program, updated program called *News Beat*. And now the latest one, is a sketch comedy show like *Saturday Night Live* that we do, and we just started this past semester.

But I was involved with each one of them from the start. And we used to do a music program called *Music Alive*, which was music performance done with the City of Chicago. Because you know, I sort of worked on this idea, carrying it over from my high school curriculum days, in making the curriculum outside of

the walls, that it wasn't just in this building, this curriculum went beyond this. And if we're going to—it was—I don't know what you call it, an active curriculum, where people would at the advanced level—students would be working on a real project, but in the construct of the curriculum. I think you can't separate these two. And too many colleges have got caught up in, well, this is an extracurricular activity, like the newspapers are, and like other things are. And then it becomes this elitist group of people that wind up working on—you got to go through hoops.

These courses that make up our programs, are courses within the curriculum, they're within our required courses, some of them. Some of them are directing classes. And students can sign up for them. They don't have to go through hoops. And the course objectives are to have the students understand what it's really like to meet deadlines, to work within a budget, to deal with some of these things that they're going to be faced with. But do it within the curriculum and have—I think other places in our college have done it now, too, when I see things like the fashion, photography, you know, where they're actually melding these two things together. So we had a writing class, a producing class, a production class, and the actors. And each class had an instructor that focused and helped the students with their one component, and the four instructors were team that worked together. And so we met all the time and we said, my producer's doing this—what do you know. And all the students met at the same day and time. And so there were 70 students, 80 students, involved in each of these productions. But they all had their set of responsibilities, as it would be.

And then the next semester they could take the other section, if you were going to try it from the other side. The producer could take the production side, because it was part of the curriculum.

That was path breaking, now, mid to late '80s. Anything else that you'd like to talk about that maybe in the '90s, or other things that you've introduced into the curriculum that students could find here at Columbia that they would not be able to find elsewhere?

I think the live—as chairman—you know, I was interim chairman from '98, to last June. And when I took that role as chairman, I really wanted the Broadcast Journalism Program, which had its moments before that. Broadcast journalism was the first interdisciplinary study at the college back in 1986, was on of the first.

And that was with television, journalism--

Journalism and radio. I obviously worked on the one with television and journalism. And it—we had again designed the same kind of thing that we did with the soap opera, with a show called *600 South*, which was a news magazine program. And it worked with a class of producers and a class of shooters and editors and a class of writers and reporters. And it had gone relatively well.

But when I became chairman—when Ed retired as chairman, I said, you know, we really have to do something more with this Broadcast Journalism Program. And so we had this CCM, which is the monitor system rom, communications.

We've got to do live. This would make the students—it'd be really interesting to do something live, where they have to hit the time, and so we kicked off this live news update program called *Newsbeat*, when I took over the Chairmanship. And that's worked out really well. They're now doing it twice a week. Students write the packages. ABC donated a set to us last semester, their old set from Channel 7. We had dedicated a studio specifically for this use. It's called the Ed Morris Studio, and it's specifically for this broadcast journalism. So I'm proud of the fact that we got the Broadcast Journalism Program to do more and to really do some more cutting edge stuff. And I hope that they'll continue, and we'll get on every day live, because live is much different than something that's posted or taped. It's really tough to do live news. And they take it for granted because they see, Chicago's got some of the best local news in the country, including better than New York. So what they see the 2, 5, 7, 9, they take for granted, not easy to do. And I think if they're going to be broadcast journalists, this is the medium they're going to work with. They better understand what this is like, to have deadlines, serious deadlines, and to produce something live. There's a whole different energy when you produce it live. So that was probably the other part of the curriculum that.

How has the market affected the curriculum, or the industry's effect on the curriculum, and if it's positive, negative, both, if you could speak to that?

I think it's always positive. I'm also a member of the Board of Governors of the Chicago Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, so I have my hand in the professional

world pretty deep. I'm a chairman of the Emmy Committee locally. So I see and produce judging panels for professionals all over the country.

And I think the industry has had a very positive influence on our curriculum. It's hard—we have to be careful to stay somewhere near the cutting edge, but to not be the cutting edge, because you know, we'll go off in this direction and everybody else goes off over here. We can't be too far behind, so you have to keep your fingers on the pulse or you'll lose it. And I think the television industry has adapted to these changes in technology so well. And I think the Internet and the web-casting thing, which is just at its infancy stage, is starting to stabilize and it's looking like what we predicted—that that kind of technology is really going to be another delivery system for what we know as television. And that what we know, as television, will just broaden its parameters to include inner activity and the Internet and sort of multiple screen viewing. But television—bring information and entertainment to a large population, is what we're still going to do. It's just that it won't necessarily take the broadcast look.

We haven't for years. Most consumers and students who come here for the first time feel like the television's what they see at home on the broadcast channels, and in the last 20 years, it has been so much more with cable television, corporate television, medical television, training programs. There's whole television facilities and personnel built within corporations, that no one ever sees because

they're doing all internal training, communications, and role-playing, and scenarios, and situational-based tapes that are all produced to help the play. So there's a whole part of television that the world never sees. And so we've been doing that for years, and have internships in all the different places. And I think this Internet situation and this new technology is just another adaptation of us working with television.

So that anticipates my next question, because when you think about how fast technology changes and evolves, what you're talking about is constants. And so could you be more specific in what are the constants that have remained the same?

The constants are visual storytelling, interviewing, documentary, entertainment programming, news, you know, the things that television does best can be done no matter what the technology is. And so if you understand how to edit sound and visual together, to make a statement, doesn't matter whether you're doing it on a computer, on a tape. If you understand how to shoot the imagery to tell the story, it doesn't matter—also if you're shooting it on film, or tape, or digitizing it. And so the technology becomes a really helpful tool, but it's not going to change what is the basis of this. And so, we keep telling students, we're keeping up with the technology as much as it can. But it changes week to week. There's no way we're going to say everything we have is state of the art. It's close. But the important thing is understand how to use these things.

Now what is changing a little bit in terms of the constants, is that now we have an audience that might be able to respond to us, this interactive idea; that's the latest, where we have to produce a program that perhaps has multiple endings in the entertainment arena. So that we can have the viewer decide, would you like to see how this came out?—it's called branching, in terms of writing. So it had to teach different writing styles and different producing techniques, because now we're going to give people choices that we didn't before.

Is there a resistance to that or embracing that?

No, I think there's embracing that, especially when we matriculate students who now were weaned on a computer. They see this, and you know, well, this is great. You have to just sit in front of the TV. We can make choices and do things. I think that's true with news, you know, all of that sort of interactive. I think it's a good thing. I think it's going to be a big buzz thing at first, just the way the Internet was, and then it's going to calm down. And the important parts, that will help communicate better, are going to remain and the other stuff's going to fall to the side.

I was thinking of it, too, though, in that stroke between the artist and the commercial side of it where the artist says, well, this is how I want my story to be. Well, that's not what the people want. Is there that kind of struggle?

Well, there always is. You know, that drives our industry, obviously. We have far less people in our industry versus film, where there

are filmmakers for the sake of making film, where they're not really connected with some commercial entity, and in our business it's not quite that way. But I think there's a little more of that now, with big conglomerates buying television stations. It's caused a little more of that ruffling because the people who are in the power don't necessarily understand what television is, and they're presidents of GE or Disney.

But I think that this technology has actually helped that, because what used to be mass audience distribution at the broadcast level—because I'll be narrowcasted. And there is a place for a documentary about these kinds of thing; there's an audience. It doesn't have to get 9 million people in the ratings. And I think that from the broadcast side, is very helpful. I think it will always be a strong tool for communication and learning, which is you know, what the other side, the non-entertainment sort of side of it is, the information and learning. You know, it's a great tool to learn from.

What if we move out of your—or broaden the discussion beyond television? For the College itself, what do you think is in Columbia's future with respect to the challenges it has to face and also maybe where you see it heading, for better or for worse? Columbia is an embarrassment of riches. And I think that's what happened. I think we've grown too fast, it's been wonderful growth, but it's been uncontrolled growth. And I think bigger and more isn't always better. And that's difficult to say, when the operating budget is 93 percent tuition dependent. We're caught in a cycle. We need

to have more students to up the ante, but yet we can't in hard times supply the students with what Columbia has done so well for so long, and that includes part-time faculty teaching classes, small class sizes, enough equipment to go around, hands-on from the first day, and disciplines like ours. So I see it as a problem.

To go back a second, what has that meant specifically for your department? Have you been stretched to the limit beyond? Have you been able to retain students? What are the issues that face television?

Well, we—Ed and I made a decision back when this was happening in fast pace, that if we didn't have the facility to give the student the level of education and contact with this—any of these facilities that they needed—that we were going to put a ceiling on enrollment, and we capped ourselves.

You did?
We did.

When was—do you remember when that was?

That was through the late '80s, and you know, when it was really—we've had 15 sections of this class and we could have probably opened up another 5, but would we (a) have found qualified teachers that could really teach it; (b) would we have had to cut back studio time for the students' editing time. More students—we keep a very careful student to facility ratio, and if this facility is for Video Techniques I, and it can support this many students, then we stop taking students at that point. Good for the students, bad for the department, because by putting the caps on, the students went to other departments.

And so that was our choice. Ed and I both stood behind it for years. I think it's kept our growth at modest, but it's kept our graduates and our students very happy, because we haven't—our average class size is 12.5. And although some people think that that's nothing to be proud of, we're proud of it. If you're teaching something that's this complex and involves this many different concepts and technology, you can't learn it en masse. It's just too hard to handle. And if you don't have the opportunity to create the work on your own and take it away from here and work with it, you aren't going to learn it. And so it becomes a balance between facility, students and faculty.

And you made that decision or helped with part of that decision for your department. Can you address the issue of open admissions at Columbia? Would that work for Columbia, or do you think that Columbia should remain open admission?

Oh. By capping them, I don't think that has any impact on open admission. That we weren't capping the limit based on anyone's ability or non-ability. All we said, "was the first 100 students that enrolled for this, you know, that's where we have the seats." So yes, I agree with open admissions. I think that allowing students, especially in this geographic area, to come in with a high school diploma, whether they've been successful or not at the Chicago Public Schools or any of the suburban schools, that with support they could pull themselves up and work at it. Not lowering the standards of what we do—but you're going to have to do this work, because unfortunately your

reading level, your writing level, your whatever, is behind, and you're going to have to work really hard to get up to speed. But we're not going to shut the doors on you because of that. You're going to have an opportunity to work that out. If you choose not to, that's your choice.

There are student who get behind between the first semester and second semester, it always has been. I think it's a 20 percent, in our department. But they're afforded the opportunity. And more often than not, you'll find a student who has been, for whatever reason, deprived of the opportunity to really help themselves or work hard, and when given that opportunity—really shine, especially when they find something that they really have a passion about. And we see that over and over again, students who came in really floundering and lost and low reading and writing, and the motivation was in order to get to the next class, you're going to have to get this, you're going to have to go to the Writing Center, you're going to have to work on this. And they do. And so without that open admissions ability to let the students do good, it's a problem.

Now, do I think we should let everybody in who wants to—just based on sheer numbers? No, obviously I don't think that. I wouldn't have supported us putting ceilings on. But the ceilings have nothing to do with this, absolutely not, absolutely not.

You shared with us one of your favorite success stories from your high school teaching. Do you have one from Columbia and your experience here at Columbia with the students?

I have many of them. Well, what I—I came here in 1986, as assistant chairman. Ed had a heart attack in September of 1987—no, that same year. So I was sort of thrust in this position, barely knowing where the men's room was. And he had already made a commitment with the City of Chicago to work on this program called *Music Alive*, but nobody had a structure in place. And they said, oh, we're going to provide up and coming bands from the City of Chicago, the City and the National Association of Recording Arts, and Sciences—the people who do the Grammy. These three groups were going to get together and were going to produce a cable television program for the Chicago Cable System, which was new at that time. And they got Northwestern, Columbia—I think it was DePaul, but there were five colleges. And we were among them, and we felt very proud.

I'm sorry, this was '8--

This was '86, right. And then Ed had this attack, and he had the connection with the City. Now, he had fostered this work, and suddenly I'm brought in on these meetings. And they're saying, well, we don't have any structure in place; we don't know how we'll work this, you know. So each college sort of did their own thing. Northwestern did their thing, and I think it was Kennedy-King, one of the Chicago schools, and we did our thing. And that's when we started this idea of working within the curriculum. Every other school did it as an extracurricular activity.

And we said, "well, for the first semester, we're going to produce—" they wanted each college to produce four shows in the first semester. So we said, "what we'll do, work it in the curriculum, week one we do this," you know—we have a 15-week curriculum to work with. And we'll use the other milk truck, we have a truck that goes out, we'll shoot some of it in the show, we'll shoot some of it out here.

And the first group of students that we had, were just wonderful. They embraced this, and we don't know quite what we're doing for sure. We know that Maris is going to provide us with the groups, you're going to have to meet with the groups like clients, you're going to have to sign contracts. There was this real live situation. But we created courses that were in the curriculum that worked with this, and we just created them out of nothing. It said, "okay, this is going to be a directing class, this one's going to direct music," and therefore it's going to have to meet our criteria for directing class and was going to direct music and therefore was going to have to meet our criteria for directing class, but the music they are going to direct was going to be music performance. And there will be a group of students getting independent study credit who work with the producers, and they will actually be working with the City.

So we had these meetings, we had the City over here, we had the lawyers. It was wonderful. It was a really, really wonderful experience. And the students from that first class, turned out later years to be

like our chief engineer right now and part-time faculty. Because we so—you know, you work on something so hard for the first semester and you're kicking off and it's successful, you're bonded forever. And I think that's what happens here at the College, is that when something this exciting goes on, the students who are involved are bonded here forever. I mean, I'm here; I was a student here.

And I think that happened, and that was a really exciting time because we were charting totally new ground. Music Alive stayed on the air until 1977. One college survived the first year, Columbia. The rest of them did one show a semester and it fell off the map because they couldn't sustain the production because it wasn't in their curriculum. The moment you tie it to extra curriculum—it works great when you got this extra student, but the moment that student graduates, now what do you do with it? Where ours was a curricular issue; we had a directing class that just directed music. We used the remote production class to shoot the remote. We had independent studies working on the producing roles. And *Music Alive* was really the one that charted the new ground in terms of the curriculum for the soap opera which followed and all the rest of these programs which followed. And I'm very proud to have been the person that kicked off teaching the soap opera, teaching *600 South*; I taught *600 South*.

What was that?

600 South is the broadcast journalism, the news magazine show. So I—

That was not live, right?

That was not live; that was a taped. So I taught that one first, I taught Music Alive, I taught the soap opera, and now currently I'm teaching the sketch comedy show.

So now with the sketch comedy, the most recent example, is the first thing that comes to your mind, does someone bring an idea to you and do you think, how can we make this into a, bring this into the classroom. Are there things you projected because you just can't figure out how to?

We go to the students for our inspiration. The soap opera came about because we were looking for a venue other than music. The students were saying, those people who love to do music, they're having a good time, but those of us who like are into drama or entertainment, we're not into music. The sketch comedy came about—when I was Chairman those 2 or 3 years, I wanted to create a class that was about writing television pilots, and brainstorming and coming up with a pilot idea, and then pitching the pilot idea to the Department, these students, and seeing which one would take off.

And so Sara Livingston taught this class. And she said it just kept refocusing itself on sketch comedy, sketch comedy. She said the kids were really into the *Saturday Night Live*, the this, the that, they already had a drama, they had the this. They wanted to do a sitcom, but the sitcoms were difficult. It almost repeated the conceptual structure of the soap opera. But the sketch comedy's a totally different animal. And so that idea came from the students, and came to the Department.

So you had this pilot class?

Yes. We had a pilot class that said, sketch comedy, we already had an idea. So we took their model and turned it into the curriculum. And this is our second semester, and it's gone real well. It's adult-themed and it's pushing the envelope like, *Saturday Night Live* and Howard Stern do, sort of. And the kids love it. Again, there's a class of writers, and there's a class that's production-producing, and then we audition in the Theater Department, because the Theater Department with Sheldon is connected to *Second City*, and they do sketch comedy classes, so this is a perfect venue for students in their area who want an opportunity that you perform in a sketch comedy show.

And possibly be?

Who knows? You never know. So we got together, there's 3 of us teaching as a team, and we wrote the curriculum, and we're now tweaking it. And the students are wonderful at the end of the semester; we always have at least a one-hour session, especially with new classes. Okay, where did we go, what were our objectives, didn't meet them, and all the changes we've ever made in terms of curricular structure for any of these—and these are complicated curricular issues, when you're talking about four classes that are producing a product. You've got to walk a very fine line between—it's real easy for the faculty and the students to allow the product to dictate the process. And you can't have that. We are not in business to produce product at the College. We're in business to teach the process. So you open yourself up for a dangerous problem where oh, this student is on camera, but this product needs to be really good, so they're not really good; let's get them off camera and put—

Someone else.

And we don't allow that. We said up front you know, everybody's going to get an opportunity to work on the parts they wish to. We're not going to do musical chairs; we're not going to force people to perform functions they don't want, but everybody's going to get an opportunity to work on this, who's enrolled in this class at the same level, all the way across. And the process is going to be more important than the product.

The age-old sports question. Do we play to win, or does everybody that shows up plays?

Our feeling is—but at the same time, you have to look and say, okay, if this product is being seen by public, you have to be careful with the product that presents the College well. So there's a fine line in teaching four groups of students who are doing four different things, but yet they have to meld together to make this product, is not easy. Believe me. It takes hours and hours of pre-work and then hours and hours of work during the semester. We meet as a group constantly, and help consult with our—we have executive producers who are students, and they are the executive producers of the show. They make the decisions. And we work with them on a consulting basis as teachers and say okay, this is an issue; how are you going to solve this issue; what are you going to do?

So you turn it over to them?

Yes.

I'm just wondering; I'm curious as to why you didn't take the chairmanship, the permanent chairmanship. Is it because you like to teach so much?

Yeah, it is.

I mean, sounds like it.

Unfortunately, the chairmanship—and I'm going to say this whether they like it or not—the chairmanship has evolved into a position that is so administrative. And I understand in this lightweight administration that we have, in terms of people—we're very light at the administrative end in terms of numbers of positions. So the chairmen sort of take on a great deal of administrative work. I found it ironic that as chairman I was less engaged with students and the curriculum, forced by the load of administrative work that's necessary, but for me, it took me away from the whole reason I came here, the whole thing that keeps my flame lit. And so I did it—

And is that teaching?

That's teaching, and working with students and curriculum.

And curriculum design.

This is what I enjoy doing. And it took me out of that role, unfortunately, so I opted—you know, I did my stint and I said, I'm going to go to full-time faculty. So that's what I'm doing.

So what does teaching, you know, television, and all that entails, give you that teaching math did not?

I love math. I really do, I'm a math nut. But the only person in the classroom that was excited about math was me. And so I didn't have to be a cheerleader for myself; I already knew I liked it. And the students had a hard time—you know, it just wasn't that creative. It is creative, but at the high school level, they just don't see it, it's ritual and it's going through the.

So now I teach—I don't want to make it sound also, and it's sure sounding this way, good grief, that I'm only teaching advance-level classes when I work with these shows. I teach the entry-level studio class, because I love working with the entry-level students. And in the entry-level class, we teach concepts about analog signals and digital signals, and a lot of that material is based on algebra. And I tell the students, "remember this in your high school math, remember we talked about the XYX," and they go, "oh, my God." And I'll say, "but look at how this is going to work." And I draw this XYX, and this whole thing about how audio's transferred to digital and how video's transferred to digital. It's a very mathematic way. So I've been able to come back and introduce my mathematic skills. And of course time-code, you know, time-code is the code that's on every frame of video. It became popular during the O.J. thing. But we work with that as editors constantly, because things are five seconds longer, ten seconds, and you have to subtract these numbers. Well, it sounds easy, but the numbers—frames are in base 30, seconds are in 60. When you have to subtract 10 frames and 43 second from some other number, you're working in different bases. There's 30 frames in one second, there's 60 seconds in an hour. It becomes a mathematic difficulty. So I am able to actually take what I taught editing, teach students how to subtract and add time code in a very easy fashion using some basic arithmetic skills.

So I keep bringing math back. But what I didn't get from the math was student product. You know, students doing exercises is okay, and when the light bulb goes on, it

still charges me to see the students understood when I've explained something, but it's not the same as students coming in and saying, this is my work about my retarded brother and his life and her home, and this is my documentary. You're crying all over the place. It's a different skill.

And I've got the best of both worlds. I'm able to teach and able to do professional television work. You know, I still—as I said, I'm part of the Board and the Academy, so I still keep my professional involvement but yet I'm able to teach. Because for a while I had my own company and we did the Olympic training tapes for 1984 and 1988, very lucrative, and I could have left and gone on and done that, but I missed the teaching part of it, and I knew that I couldn't go back.

Just Olympic training tapes for people covering the Olympics?

No, no, no. We did the training tapes for the rhythmic gymnastics for all over the country.

Really?

For the basic routines. We won, my partner and I won the bid nationally.