

## A I P a r k e r

**...Al Parker, January twenty-seventh, 1998. And let's just start out with a question about how you got here. What were the circumstances?**

Circumstances—you have to bear with me now, because I don't want this to be a narrative. The circumstances were that World War II had just ended. I was in the Air Force at the time. When I got out of service I was lucky enough to get a job in radio at one of the radio stations here in Chicago and I was hired as a disc jockey. That was the old WIND, which was a very hot station in those days. This was the era when AM radio was king and FM was still undeveloped real estate. In any event, I started working there. I did the overnight show, which was called *The Nightwatch*: midnight to eight a.m., newscasts every thirty minutes, commercials all around, music—primarily—as a source of entertainment, occasional guests. And it was great because I was quite young. I was only about twenty or so at the time. And after I had been there a while, I received a call from Columbia College. The man who called was the father of Mike Alexandroff, our recently retired President, Norman Alexandroff Sr. He had heard me on the air and concluded that since I was a so-called broadcaster that perhaps I could teach. Well, that was the furthest thing from my mind. I never taught anyone or anything. Well, I take that back, I guess I did a few private lessons with people who expressed an interest and I tried to help them. Maybe in my misguided attempts there, I somehow picked up a few

pointers. Anyhow, I talked to Mr. Alexandroff and he explained what his needs were. But you have to understand, in those days Columbia College had a total enrollment of about a hundred students, ninety to a hundred students, of which eight or nine were broadcast majors. In a sense there was no television yet, they were radio majors. So I agreed to teach a class simply called *Radio Broadcasting*. And in it we tried to get our students to be comfortable in front of a microphone, to be able to run the equipment, and to be able to prepare the material, to have something to say. And it was kind of fun, I enjoyed it. And so with my schedule permitting, I would teach one class a semester, occasionally a little bit more than that. Anyhow, that's how it all started. So it's a long time ago.

**What were the students like when you came here?**

The same as they are now. I mean, I've been asked that question repeatedly. There's not much difference. The only difference is obviously students today are exposed to all kinds of technology that no one could even imagine back then. But the students were the same. That is, they knew that there was an attraction to radio. They felt some connection with—they weren't sure what it was and they just thought it would be interesting to find out about it, some part of radio, as an extension of show business—which I guess it really is, it's part of it. Regardless of how you might try to tie it together, some people would dispute that. But I can see the connections. I think that anyone who was heard on radio, seen on television, whether they're news people, reporters, talk show hosts,

commercial voices such as mine—we're all in a sense of doing something that's a little bit bigger than life and we are, in a sense, in show business. That's what the kids were like back then and that's what they're like now. There's really not much difference.

**Were other people teaching with you?**

Not many, just a few. Literally, at Columbia, just a few, a handful; I was one of them.

**Now, were you teaching full-time?**

No, I didn't have the time then to teach full-time. That came some time later. I taught just one class. My primary focus was being a broadcaster and that took the majority of my week. I worked a full forty-hour week. Also, within a short time, because of the fact I enjoyed—I guess—some modest success on the radio station, I started getting calls from producers and advertising people to represent them, selling their products on the



radio. So that, I guess, was the birth of my freelance career. That's how that started. And, as I said, I guess I became a professional juggler. I did my job in radio, freelance representing different advertisers, and taught a class or two as my schedule permitted at Columbia.

**When did you become full-time or a chair?**

It was many years. When I joined Columbia there were no chairs and so there were just people teaching classes. That evolved many years later, into about the '60s.

**The '60s, so, who are some of the people that you remember best?**

Well, there are the usual success stories that obviously—I always feel guilty about mentioning just the key players who everybody knows because they're familiar in radio in television. The people who deserve most of the credit are the ones that people don't know. They're the producers, the writers, the technicians—that if I mention their names people will say, "Who were they?" So when we have open house or an orientation, I'm almost forced to say, and it's true, that Pat Sajak was one of my students. And everybody knows, you know, that silly game show that only earns an X number of bazillion junk dollars a year. Bob Sirrott, who's on Fox First Thing in the Morning, Chet Copeck the sports guy, Eddie Schwartz—the former morning and then later evening, also beginning on WIND and then WGN—Nick Charles who does CNN sports; any number of people who are very well known were students at approximately the same time, late '50s, early '60s. Bruce Dumont, who is President of the Broadcast

Museum, one of our students; Bruce was gracious enough—a little less than two years ago—to make the Broadcast Museum available gratis to Columbia and to me because the school was doing a scholarship fundraising event in my name. And I was reluctant to do it because the whole idea, it just was uncomfortable to me. I agreed to it because—you heard me mention earlier that I was trying to reach a student? Well, he's the first recipient of this scholarship so he's gonna have some bucks that he wouldn't have had otherwise. That's why I agreed to it. Students who are really needy, it'll be possible for them, now, to extend their education here or possibly just begin their education.

**What in terms of students, faculty, who are some of the faculty that you remember best?**

Well, my current faculty is a very impressive one and they're all working professionals. That's something that I feel very strongly about. It's always been our great strength at the school. What makes Columbia different is the fact that literally, everybody teaching, certainly in radio and in sound—which is part of my department—are all hard-working professionals. And I try to accommodate their schedules to make it possible for them to do what I do. I still work in the business as a broadcaster even though I'm a full-time chair. I have to back up a little bit and then I'll answer your question. I retired, not too many years ago, as being the voice of ABC television here in Chicago to devote more time to the school. But I did not retire from broadcasting. I do many commercials and industrial trade shows. This is a great trade show town, as you undoubtedly know, and I do a lot of that. My faculty,

let me start with one of my ladies who is dynamite, her name is Cheryl Morgan Langston. She's the former Operations Manager at WMAQ, the all-news station in town. Prior to that, she worked for Westinghouse at KDKA in Pittsburgh, which is the country's oldest radio station, it's really an historic station. Prior to that, she worked at WIND, which I mentioned I began at. I recommended her to the station as an intern. And internships were new at that time. Businesses, radio stations, production houses were reluctant to hire, I shouldn't even use the word hire, to accept interns. They didn't get it. We'll just ignore the phone, we'll let it ring. By the way, this phone is exactly the same ring as—you ever watch Homicide on television? Listen to the ring on the phone. I guess it just ended. I sometimes feel as though I'm a cast member of Homicide. It's the same ring. So, whoever is there will wait. All right, where the heck were we? I was telling you about Cheryl. She went from being an intern at WIND to being Program Director. This was remarkable because, first of all, it never occurred that a woman would be given a position like that in a major market; a black woman at that. So, it was a real banner year for women in Chicago, minorities and white women.

**What was the year?**

I'm not sure of the year, it was back in the late '60s, early '70s. She's one of my faculty and is outstanding. Another one is Karen Morgue. Karen was a student who then went to work at the old WLS back when WLS was primarily a music station. And she began working, started out as a secretary, got into the research, music research, and then got into

sales research and was able to really help the station with demographics. She's my senior faculty. Jim Mitson is another faculty member who is a graduate. We've had our radio station since about 1979. Jim was a student about that time, when we really weren't a station. It was literally make believe radio. We had what was called a carrier operation. We would be heard in the President's office, in the Student Lounge and that was about it. And Jim was so, he was such a radioholic that he would literally, as a part-time student earning a few dollars, stay many times way beyond the accepted, or expected time just to keep us going. He, after graduating, he was hired at one of the stations out of Chicago as Program Director. It was remarkable that a young man starting out would work up to, literally, a matter of months into a managerial position. Sometime later he came back, met the present wife here in Chicago and the motivation was to stay here and I offered him a position of faculty. And he works at several stations around town as a producer, the proboard operator as well. There's Hope Daniels, who was Senator Braun's press secretary until not too long ago and also was in charge of public affairs programming at WPNT, the old Point. She's with me now and another media related person. And then Barbara Calabrese, who is not in the media, but Barbara's great strength is she is an outstanding speech pathologist and she helped me develop the speech classes that we now have here—which are so vital they are prerequisite classes for our students who are serious about doing air work. And it differs from almost any kind of a speech class that a student might have in,

say, in the theatrical area; throwing with your voice and making sure that you're heard in the last row of the balcony with minimal acoustics. She has really expanded that aspect of it. And Barbara also helped me, I had—prior to her joining me I was trying to be a one-man band and handling our internship program myself and that clearly was getting out of hand. So Barbara took over the internship program as well and expanded that. Karen, Cheryl, I mentioned Hope and Barbara, that's it. And then we have five faculty on the sound side of radio who are outstanding technicians in their area. I have Doug Jones, who manages our sound facility. I should explain that. The sound program is 676 North LaSalle Street. It's a former leading production recording studio that was known as the Zenith VV Studios here in Chicago. As a broadcaster I'd been there hundreds of times recording for various clients, so I was very familiar with it. When the owner of the facility, who also happened to be teaching for us, expressed interest in selling it, I thought that was a super idea. He took that idea to our new President, John Duff. And to his credit, he could see the wisdom of that, as did our Provost Bert Gall, and it took a little while to negotiate the deal and we finally bought the facility. It's outstanding for a sound studio. And that's as I said, on the Near North Side of LaSalle and Huron.

**As long as there's been a department has it been Radio and Sound?**

No, it started out as a Radio Department. Actually, the Sound portion of it, and it was very modest at the time, was in the Television Department. And somehow, that seemed a little strange.

Television is video, looking at things, sound is being heard, and radio is sound. And so I took the thought I had to my late friend Thaine Lyman, who was chairman of the TV Department, and said, "What do you think about this? Doesn't it seem that audio sound belongs in radio?" And, to his credit, he agreed. And so we made that change and then we...

**When was that?**

Oh, that had to be back in the '70s. And then we became the Radio and Sound Department. And our faculty there are also as equally outstanding in their area. Doug Jones is one of the leading designers of studios in the area and he has international reputation. He helped the Egyptian government and Russian government build facilities in Moscow and in Cairo. And I guess he's still in demand in a lot of areas where studio facilities—enlarging or just building new facilities are a need. He's very good at that. Another one of our specialists is a guy by the name of Vance Canders, who is an outstanding recording specialist and has done a number of albums in some very leading, new, you know, musical groups. Still a third is a fellow by the name of Dominique Cheenne. He's one of our more recent ones and we got him from the University of Nebraska, I believe. And he is an outstanding acoustical specialist. Whatever you ever wanted to know about acoustics, he knows the answers to. And that's rather interesting because not too many years ago acoustics really weren't really thought about. When new buildings would come up: Acoustics? Oh yeah, what are we gonna do about this? That explains the mess that the Arie Crown Theater was in for so many

years. It's a massive theater—as I'm sure you're familiar with—but nobody could hear anything. And just recently, many millions of dollars were spent at Arie Crown to correct this. They raised the roof, literally, at the Orchestra Hall last year; same purpose. That's what Dominique does, he's very good at it.

**How long does a person...**

Not too many years, about half a dozen or so. More seriously in the last few years, because the changes in technology have been such that we're able to do things and teach aspects of it now that we didn't have the expertise in. We didn't have the right people teaching. To round off the specialists, another one is Jack Alexander—who's traveled with some of the outstanding entertainers doing field, being in charge of field audio and remote audio—which is a very difficult thing to do. He worked with Barbara Streisand in Vegas, he worked with Ringo Starr when he was making his American tour, to mention just a few of the better known international names. And Jack is an outstanding specialist in controlling audio, knowing how to set microphones up so that they are strategically located. We have another faculty, Alexander, who's an outstanding musician via his expertise, which is considerable in the computer area and utilizing music through the computer. As a matter of fact, he is doing a concert tomorrow evening at one of the northern suburbs, in Wilmette. He works with a clarinetist, whose name escapes me at the moment, who is with the Chicago Symphony and they work together as a team; fascinating man. And, I'm sure I've missed somebody and I'll probably have to pay for it. I've mentioned

Doug Jones, Dominique, Jack Alexander, Benj Kanters and [Dominick Jones]. So I guess I mentioned all five. All these ten people, five in radio, five in sound, are really outstanding in their area.

**Let me go back. You mentioned internships...**

We generally average, between Radio and Sound, anywhere between thirty and forty, sometimes a little more.

**And how far back does this...**

Internship program, probably about... Well, I'd say about eighteen, twenty years ago, broadcasting has a terrible reputation of having a mindset among top management of, "Hey, nobody ever helped me get into this business, do it yourself, kid." Where so many other businesses were much more civilized and gracious and say, "Sure, I'd like to help because it's my way of being able to, perhaps, pay back something to a business or a company or a profession that's been very nice to me." Broadcasting did not do that. In some instances, even today, we have a negative attitude. And so internships were a hard sell, they really were. My late colleague Thaine, who I mentioned earlier who was the TV chair, was with WGN. I was at ABC and we used our connection at both of those stations to jump-start internships, at least through those very well-known television stations. And then Radio got on the bandwagon shortly after.

**I want to—it's a small question, but what building was that in?**

That was at 600 Michigan. We've been there since '79. The chronology is, when I started at Columbia—and we talked about this earlier before we started this interview—I was in the Fine Arts Building. Columbia College was on

the seventh floor, I have an affinity for seven floors, I don't know why. I should probably buy lottery tickets, which I've never done, and buy all sevens. We started at the Fine Arts Building on the seventh floor, and it was part of a floor at that. They didn't have much space on that. Then we moved to 207 South Wabash at Wabash and Adams—seventh floor. Then we moved to Lake Shore and Ohio—seventh floor. Then we moved to 600 South Michigan? You guessed it, together gang—seventh floor. And here I am in this building—seventh floor.

**When did you move to 600 South Michigan?**

'79.

**Oh, so when you moved in here then...**

Yeah, within months or a year we were on the air, right.

**Is that a matter of—what did it take to get a radio station?**

Well, that was a problem. Sometimes, regardless of how much you try, you can't really get a radio station. Columbia didn't have much money at the time and it came to my attention that the University of Illinois, Circle Campus, had a radio station and they weren't on the air. They just weren't using their facilities. Well, you know the old adage, I suppose I could have challenged them and gone to the Federal Communications Commission as a concerned citizen and said, "There's a spot on the FM band that University of Illinois has access to and they're not using the station," raise my hand and say, "How about us?" It didn't seem like the ethical thing to do. Fortunately, Mike Alexandroff was friendly with the man who was then the Chancellor at the University of Illinois. And he

arranged a lunch and talked about the idea of our sharing. My idea was to approach Don Riddle, who was the Chancellor at the time, and saying, "How about sharing this facility, because it's a financial hardship?" For some reason, Illinois students weren't tuned into radio, or not enough of them, and so it was a modest undertaking but I'm sure to them at the time it was more than modest. I guess it cost about thirty, thirty-five thousand dollars a year, then, to maintain the radio station, and they were having a hard time justifying it to the Board of Trustees. My proposal was: Let's split the cost. We'll be on the air half the broadcasts a day or week and they would split it. Riddle thought that was a great idea, took it to their Board of Trustees and, of course, they summarily dismissed it. So, OK, back to the drawing board. We were obviously disappointed but about a year, year and a half later they changed their thinking and that's how we got the radio station. To show our appreciation and to be as fair as possible, I suggested that any Illinois students who had a change of heart and be qualified scholastically—with a GPA of I think 3.0, same as our standards now for internships and our radio station—would qualify and I graded them. And today, it hasn't happened in some time, if an Illinois student were to call today and say, "I'm currently enrolled at Circle at Illinois and I love radio," and came in with a transcript that showed qualifications, we would honor that. So that's how that came about.

**That raises an interesting question about the administrators. So let me ask you, among the... who**

**were some of the people you remember best at Columbia?**

Well, of course Mike Alexandroff was Columbia. And without Mike there certainly wouldn't be a Columbia now. There were periods of time where Mike would go home without a salary just to meet the payroll. I didn't know that at the time, but I found that out later. Bert Gall, who is our Provost, as you know, was a student of mine. And Bert is remarkable in that he's never worked for any other company. He's been with Columbia College since his student days and his growth has been incredible. I remember the late Jane Alexandroff very fondly. She was very instrumental in her area of helping division and the direction of the school. Those are some of the key players. They were the key people that got Columbia on the map, so to speak, and helped us perpetuate the idea that we were really a school for all students that was an open admissions school and that any student with a high school diploma could enroll and go to Columbia College. It's one of our problems today, which explains why the retention isn't higher. I'm sorry to say, apparently, a lot of high school students who come to Columbia have not had the best high school education and frequently—at the end of the semester—they're gone. That's the kind of thing, as you know, that can be worked on. But it's very interesting for instructors who are successful in their area.

I'm very fortunate, that this being Chicago, I have the best in all aspects of broadcasting: managers, owners, technicians, talent, writers, producers, who will come in and teach class. Primarily, they're not doing it for the money, because they don't need it. The money is modest anyhow. Even if it weren't

modest it would still not be an incentive. The incentive for most people who teach part-time is just what I mentioned a little while ago, as corny as that may sound to some people, and that is the opportunity to give back to the community, to some young people, what they have learned in the business. And I could carry it a step further and say that I feel my broadcast strengths—and I still work at it—I'm lucky enough to still have my voice, I can get up there and wail away with the best of them half my age, which explains why I'm weird enough to walk seven flights a day to my office and cover a couple of miles in the Loop on foot instead of busing it or cabing it. It's difficult to get a handle on why things develop the way they do, but Columbia's primary strength—and I know I'm getting away from what you were initially asking—was and still is the teaching. Texts are very helpful, having the best in technology is essential. And today, I'm proud to say that I think our technology is up to date, and it's constantly changing, so we have to be aware of that.

**How would you describe the mission of Columbia College?**

**How would you describe it in relation to American society?**

That's really, you know, you can go on for hours on that and I don't want to. Let me sum it up in just a few minutes. I think our mission is a very simple one and always has been. And that is: To provide the finest education that we can to our students, so that they'll understand what communications is all about and pick an aspect of it that has some appeal to them, that they are obviously suited for. And it took me a long time to come to the realization that—frankly, not too many

years ago. So this says something about the vision that I lacked and recently gained only in the past few years. It took me a long time to come to the conclusion that we prepare our students for a lot more than just working in broadcasting. The private sector of business today is very communications oriented. They need video, they need audio, they need training seminars for people in their business—top executives—to learn how to communicate with a business. So, what we prepare our students for has the same kind of application in the private business sector as it does for the radio or TV station. And I think we are doing that. I think we've been doing that since the very early days and weren't sharp enough, weren't sophisticated enough, to realize that. It wasn't just a kid with his hand to his ear saying, "Hi everybody. Here I am on radio station XYV and I'm your host for the next few hours." It's having enough sense to know that we all communicate. And the more verbally adept we are, the better vocabulary we have, using our voices effectively, being able to write effectively—which is an important part of what we do that is lost on many students, there are lots of people who don't have writing skills, which explains reasonably why many of our students do disappear, unfortunately. It took a long time to come to that understanding but I think we have that vision now. I think that's part of Columbia's mission, that many of the departments are doing more than training their students for their specific area, whether it be Film, Dance, Theater, Music, Science and Math, or our other departments. I think our mission is to give as broad an education as we can within the constraints of a liberal arts education and prepare

the students for a career, where the student has a sense of what he or she wants to do.

**You're describing something that has emerged during the course of your years at Columbia. Could you explain why?**

How did it emerge? You mean, for me, personally or...

**Start off with you personally and then maybe go on...**

Well, when I first started teaching—I have used the old expression in this for walking around money. It sure wasn't for much else. It was a few extra dollars at a time when incomes were very modest. And then I realized, after teaching a few semesters, that I was honing and sharpening my skills. That to justify my song and dance in front of a classroom, I had to know what I was doing. I had to be able to demonstrate to them that what they were doing was wrong and what I was recommending was right and I had to then show them how to do that. Well, you can't really do that unless you understand it and have the talent and the vision to be able to do it. So, I then realized how important Columbia was to me. As much as I enjoy broadcasting—and I still do—it's still a game for me. I've always said that broadcasting has never really been work. Because if you enjoy something as much as I do broadcasting, it really never is difficult work. And yet, I worked ridiculous hours, overnights, holidays, weekends. Of the twenty-six years I was at ABC, seventeen or eighteen of them were absolutely awful hours. Yet, I did it, my family understood it, thank goodness, because I really enjoyed what I was doing. Columbia, I don't think, and I'll... Their vision was to survive, to survive by having students. You have students by offering an educa-

tion that perhaps other schools weren't offering, or not the same kind. So even the fat cat students, back in those days, who could have afforded Northwestern—we occasionally would have some of them come in and say, "Hey, I'm enrolled at Northwestern but I think I'd like to take a class in commercial announcing or control board operation. I don't learn that there, we just talk about it there." No offense Northwestern, because I know you're doing better. But I think it was that kind of a hands-on understanding that gradually gave Mike and the Board of Trustees, once we had a Board of Trustees, the understanding that we had something here that nobody else—there was something magical about Columbia. People didn't know about Columbia College in those days; there wasn't press. Today, it's hard to pick up a newspaper, particularly on the weekends, where you don't read something about the Dance Center or the Music Department or an art exhibit or whatever. There's always something, or virtually always something, about Columbia. Back then, people would say, "What the heck is Columbia College? Is that affiliated with Columbia College in New York or Columbia University elsewhere?" And, of course, we weren't affiliated with any of those places. It was just a tiny little fledgling school getting by on the fact that the best people in the business were recruited to come in and teach a class a week, and eventually the ones that really liked it were recruited as full-time faculty.

**So this vision of education that you're describing, it became understood that that was what Columbia was about?**

I think that really—started to look at seriously even though it was

thought about. But it started to be looked at seriously probably in the '70s.

**Why then?**

Because things began to kind of get in focus; faculty was strengthened. There was hardly solvency at that point, but, nevertheless, the school was looked at as a home for potential candidates who wanted to make their career in film or whatever their area of expertise was in, not just—obviously, the bulk of students didn't come here for a liberal education, they came here to learn something specific. And I think it took that amount of time for us to get the strength and the number of people needed to do this. Prior to that, it was just a few people, people like myself, teaching a handful of classes. It just wasn't enough to create the attention, to generate the attention that was needed within the city and people from elsewhere. It wasn't too many years after that that we started getting students from other parts of the country who heard about Columbia College.

**Do you think the accreditation gave...**

Oh yeah, I think the accreditation gave us, and I don't use this inappropriately, the legitimacy that Columbia—I think—deserves. I think the trade school image that perhaps Columbia had was probably justified and getting the accreditation went a long way towards changing that. I'm sure that was very helpful, undeniably.

**When you started was Columbia still called Columbia College of...**

No, it was simply Columbia. It wasn't the Columbia College of Oratory that it was going back to, right, right. It was called Columbia

College. But you must remember, in those days, you know, what kept Columbia College together was advertising, radio—there was no television. If it weren't for radio and a film class or two or three and a few advertising classes, acting classes, it would be very questionable what Columbia was about. Radio, there was a magic about it, there was a magic about advertising, writing. There were serious students who wanted to get into sports, wanted to write for the media. And of course, since there was no television yet, radio was the primary focus of most people for their information. They couldn't tune into TV, there was none at all. But the radio was listened to, [Maley] and all the other great entertainers. Chicago was the hub of all the great soap operas at that time. I'm going back into the '40s or '50s, Chicago was really the radio capital of the United States. I would say that the fact that this is Chicago didn't hurt Columbia College one bit because of the communications strength that Chicago already enjoyed

**Can you think of another school that's comparable to Columbia?**

It's hard to say. I was asked by the administration last year to find a counterpart so that I could invite some faculty in and some collegiality and find out what they're doing that we might benefit by, and the reverse of that is true. I did a lot of research on that and I came to the conclusion, and it was rather surprising, that there weren't many schools in the country that specialized—to the extent that we do—in broadcasting, in radio and sound. A lot of ads that would simply say: Department of Journalism. And then they would say, in some instances: Broadcasting, Television. And then maybe after an asterisk, if

it was there at all, you'd need a magnifying glass to find it. Howard University in Washington, being very close, they're a smaller school, that department is smaller. And the two colleagues who were gracious enough to come into Chicago, the woman is one of the leading producers of documentaries and programming in general for NPR radio out of Washington. The man is a recently retired President of the ABC station in Washington. He was the General Manager and Vice President of that station. So they came very close, by virtue of what I'm telling you about their backgrounds, to representing faculty very similar to ours. The difference is that there aren't nearly as many at Howard as there are here at Columbia. So the number of classes is not nearly as great, but they're pretty close. They do a fine job, by the way, of educating their students... they're very good.

**All right, let me ask you: in your whole career, what are some of the most important events at Columbia, that occurred at Columbia?**

Well, I think I would have to use one word to describe it, and that would be growth. The constant growth forced us to always take a serious look at our class offerings, change, fine tune, eliminate class offerings by virtue of the fact that the business was constantly changing. And I'm not referring to just the technical aspect of it. Everybody knows that radio was in the last few years discovered to be cash cows. Bankers, financiers realized that radio stations were worth a lot more money than anyone realized and some broadcasting stations were sold for many millions of dollars, many millions of dollars. A good example is a little former ma

and pa station where one of my sons worked as News Director, WXRT in Chicago, very popular radio station, broadcasters looked at it throughout the country as being a unique station and maintaining a sense of image that is not the slick, constantly changing image that the media seems to think America must have. XRT has always traveled to a slightly different drummer. Well, the man who owned XRT, Dan Lee, it was a little ma and pa radio station. In the early days, it had a very loyal, a very small audience, and that station recently sold for over seventy million dollars, that and their sister station, which was a more recent acquisition. Westinghouse bought it. I'm sure now it probably—if it were on the market now it would be worth another five or ten million dollars. How long will that last? Hard to say. But we had to, as a result of that, take a long look at our management classes, our sales classes, and realize, and our colleagues at Howard University agreed with this, that we should strengthen those areas; that students can no longer ignore them. A student can't come into Columbia and say, "I don't want to take a class in sales or management because I don't want to do that. I want to be talent or I want to do hands-on production." I think you need that sense of realization of what the dollars are like just as you need a sense of history and business. So, it's very important that we are constantly looking at, and adjusting and changing, classes to a great extent. I think one of our greatest challenges in the department, and I think it's a school-wide challenge, has been to get our students—when they come in, just checking the school out, coming in

with their siblings or their parents or their friends to see what Columbia's like—to realize that if they come here and if they want to major in a specific area, let's say it's radio, that they really need a good education; that it's important to get a good general studies education. Because without that, they're gonna be very uncomfortable. They really have to have a pretty good grasp on what's happening around them and not just in their immediate area and interests. Many of our students don't read newspapers, they hardly ever pick up a book. You would know that, I guess, perhaps, better than I. We have to almost force-feed them. It's very difficult to do, it's a challenge.

**Are there classes that are not offered..**

Not too many, some classes have, mercifully, probably disappeared. We had a class called—I forget the exact title- but it was a class that dealt primarily in careers for women in broadcasting. Well, when that was offered I think it was appropriate that we had that class, because there really weren't too many women in our profession. Today, by contrast, there are more women in local sales, as sales representatives in radio stations, in Chicago than there are men. In my years at ABC Television—and I can't help but go from radio to TV because my career covers both areas and I have taught TV courses as well as radio—we have women directors, we have women technicians, women floor directors, women executives. When I started in '63 they were a novelty. I would say the changes that have occurred have largely—and of course, the technical classes that are no longer needed, because certain technical areas have been absorbed by constantly growing technology, which means that it's now possible

to teach certain technological ideas in a class that covers a broader base than perhaps it did five, ten years ago. But for the most part, sales classes basically are the same, except that today young people have to realize how important the research is and what the numbers mean. Without numbers you can't sell anything. The hardware that a radio person is armed with—going in to see a client—is based on the number of people who listen to that radio station. What are the demographics? Are they primarily men, women, mixed audience, what are their ages? And so the hardware, the tools that are around today, didn't exist fifteen, twenty years ago. So, we still offer sales classes but we teach them entirely differently than we did back then. Then it was the big smile and the handshake and the pat on the back and, "Yeah, we've got a radio station here because we play great music and we've got some hot personality." Nowadays, it's very, it's a long hard look at the reality of: How many people do you have? What are their ages? The beer company wants young males, primarily, because they buy more beer. Or the other need for, let's say, an automobile dealer, is to get a radio station where there are some successful thirty and fortyish young people who have made some bucks and who can afford to buy an expensive automobile. So they're very selective about the radio stations they buy their time on.

**Students just groan about it sometimes...**

Well, I think they also need a sense of history. We're very lucky that we have the Broadcast Museum and we encourage our students—in fact, some of our classes actually visit the Broadcast Museum as part of

their regular fifteen week offerings to get a grasp on what it was like; what it's like now. We're lucky we have such a great facility.

**One chronicler described Columbia as a dying institution for the 1960s students. What was Columbia about at that point?**

Well, whoever said that obviously didn't have much vision, in my opinion, because I never thought of it as a dying institution. The fact is that I gave up my full-time tenure, grandfather—they would have had to literally remove me after I was deceased—broadcasting job at ABC television because I thought that there was more challenge here. I left because it was time to move on to other things and I saw the growth of the department. I don't believe that view, and I've heard that that view is held by some people, let's leave it at that, I think the vision was lacking. That's about all I can say about that. I don't think whoever felt that way really ever had the vision.

**Do you think that—I would assume that somebody wrote the numbers of the students or something like that, do you think that the energy and the... was there in the '60s?**

To a limited degree. It was hard to say much before that time that Columbia was gonna be successful. I don't think anyone could have said that. So, there's probably some truth to the fact that there was some uncertainty about its future: would it even be around? How would it change over the years? Obviously, growth forces change and I'm sure that Columbia College ten years from now—and I certainly won't be around in my present capacity by then, I hope I'll be doing a little fishing, or wher-

ever I happen to be I won't be here. It's very difficult to say what the changes are going to be. I don't think anyone can have that vision. But the changes that have occurred over the past fifteen or twenty years have really, in many respects, been due to—obviously, the technology and the business end of it, yet the same skills that were important initially: good writing skills, good verbal communicating skills are just as relevant today, just as important today as they were then.

**So, is there some sort of motor behind this growth?**

I think the success of many of our students was what motivated a lot of other students to come to the school. They simply heard that so and so was here and they listened to this guy on radio or read his byline in one of the local newspapers—let's forget radio for the moment—or was a great cinematographer and he went to Columbia College or she is responsible for some great fashion design, innovative occurrences. I think these success stories were the impetus for many young people saying they'd like to go to Columbia.

**So there wasn't anything that the administration did...**

No, to be perfectly honest, I don't think that there was any kind of great vision. Everybody did the best they could to keep Columbia an honest and hardworking school, that we give our students the best education they could get. I don't think any of us had a crystal ball, I don't think any of us could say, "Oh yes, I see by the year 1999 or '95..." I think that's nonsense. I don't think anybody had that vision. I did not, I just kept on doing what I enjoyed doing and still enjoy doing. I enjoyed teaching, I still enjoy teaching. I try to

get into the classroom and when I do I enjoy it a great deal. And I think that the success of our students, which has always been very gratifying and they're everywhere... My wife and I were in Europe and I saw one of the, in London, one of the famous double-decker buses, and a couple of guys who were saying, "Hey, Al Parker." And I looked up and there were a couple guys I recognized, "BBC, call us tonight." I knew who they were and I called them that evening. One was the anchor for the BBC news and the other guy was the producer. And I met with them, talked with them, I had no idea where they were. We were at Disneyland some years ago, my wife and I and two of our grandsons were there. There was a guy working in some production capacity for Disney, very nice job, who had gone to Columbia College. So, you know, these have always been gratifying experiences because—well, at the risk of sounding like a jerk, I don't like to do this to myself—it was very gratifying to, a few weeks ago, to have an alum, who is my age who's very successful as a sports entrepreneur, say over a luncheon that his career would not have occurred if it weren't for Columbia College—and, on a personal level, the direction that I and some of my colleagues were able to give him. And I've heard this many, many times. Now that is extremely gratifying. Then you know you haven't made any mistakes, because these people aren't stroking us to make points, they're speaking from the heart. And when you hear that, you know, you've done some good. Most of us really go through a lifetime with a job and when it's over with, it's done. I'd like to think that what

we've done here kind of lives on, because so many of our former students are the leaders of important communications facilities today and they all, they got all of that here. And who knows what they'd be doing today. One of the saddest stories that I can recall—and it's always been in my mind—was a very talented young man, extremely talented, this guy had it all, personality, charm. And he had the ability; he would have been a very successful broadcaster some years ago, probably back in the early '70s. And he was ready to graduate, he had prepared audition tapes and he was, he had already received interest from some potential employers. He met a young lady whose father had a very successful business and you know the rest of the story: he went to work for his father-in-law. He could move into a fine home and have 2.3 children. And then one day, about four or five years after that, I bumped into him in downtown Chicago on Michigan Avenue. And we talked and I said, "How are things going?" He says, "Well, great." He loves what he does. And then, in a short time, just, his guard was down for maybe a second, couldn't have been more than that, and he said, "Well, I'll never know what would've happened if I went into broadcasting." OK, I don't think there are going to be any tactics for this guy. By now he might be enjoying a life on the Riviera somewhere while we're sitting here in a winter in Chicago. So, I'm not passing any judgement calls here.

**Final question, what do you see in Columbia's future?**

It's very difficult to say, in my opinion, what the College future is. I hope that the future will not

change Columbia's profile drastically; I hope that that small school mindset will not be totally dissipated. I have a fear that it might and that disturbs me greatly. Because if that left Columbia, if I were still here, that would be the time for my leaving Columbia. I'll probably be out of here before that occurs. That is a concern. If we become another college—not that there's anything wrong with being a fine college, and teaching someone a skill, craft, give them, provide them with fine education. We have been different, as I said earlier in this conversation, and I hope that Columbia will continue to be different. I, I don't, I have a fear of drastic changes, I'm just concerned that the increased growth that we have may make it more difficult for us to maintain that vision. And I hope we don't lose it, because I think it's really essential to Columbia's ability to continue to give young people the kind of a communications oriented education that we've been able to do for all these many decades.