

T e r e s a P r a d o s T o r r e i r a

All right, today is June 13, 2001, and this is an interview with Teresa Prados Torreira, the Assistant Chair, Department of Liberal Education here at Columbia College, Chicago.

And we'd like to start the interview by asking you when did you come to Columbia and what were the circumstances that brought you here?

I came to Columbia part time in the spring of 1990 and I had just finished my Ph.D. and had been working and doing some research at the Newberry Library. And I heard that Columbia was looking for some part-time teachers, so I applied and came here to teach two classes at first. And then I became full-time in the fall of 1994 and in the Liberal Education Department.

And what were the courses that you were teaching when you first came here?

As a part timer, first I taught US History I and II and sometimes I, sometimes II and Family and Community History, which is a course that I have taught since 1990 and it's a course that I really like. And then I began teaching US History, women's US History and continued teaching Family and Community History.

Okay, when you became full time in the interview process and then the decision process, what did you envision you would bring to the curriculum and did it sync with what they were looking for and were they open to your ideas, the department, the powers that be?

Well, my background is in cultural history, US History and I've also

been interested in Latino studies so I think they were interested in that combination. And I taught a class on the Spanish-American War in 1998. It was the 100th anniversary of the war and I think that that was interesting and I've taught Latino and US History, which was a class I created and taught for a few times and now I've developed a class on a cartoon depiction of satire in American History; which I think has wound up to be funny.

Had you before you applied for the position part time, had you heard about Columbia, had you heard anything about it?

I had been in Chicago for only a few years, a couple of years and I had been looking for a part time position, academic job and the people told me that Columbia was a good place, would be a good match for me. And when I first came the truth is that as soon as I got here, I really felt at home. There was something about the political climate of the school that was really congenial and so even though I was only a part timer, I really—and that was a problem because of course I was not making much money and I wanted a full time job. But there was something about Columbia, about the atmosphere that I loved from the beginning.

And did that come from the students as well?

Yes, maybe because I am—it is a very urban place, it's an open admission school, a very diverse place and I think that that was so interesting to me. And one of the

nice things about Columbia, is that it's never underestimated me. You are a Latina with a foreign accent. The society tends to be very condescending and I never felt that way at Columbia. It's been a place that has always been great to me and I feel very comfortable with the students. So it was a good place for me, so it's been home for me since I got here.

Why don't you speak to what your definition of the mission of the college is and then maybe if you could move into you know your personal teaching philosophy and how Columbia might be, fulfilling that might be easier than maybe at another place or more difficult?

No, I think the mission of the school is great, the idea of having the doors open to the whole city and the idea of getting a second opportunity to those who have not done well in a more traditional academic setting. And the idea of



respecting or valuing students who may be are not good in a traditional academic way, but they have tremendous talent in other areas. All those things are really wonderful and I feel very strongly about the mission of the college.

On the other hand I do not think of them, of Columbia as any kind of a religious cause. Some people here think about the mission of the college—they were talking about, I don't know, this sacred mission thing and I don't view it this way. I think it was Mulvaney who used to say it's just a school, but I agree it's just a school with a very interesting approach to education. But I don't like it when people get too sanctimonious about the mission of the college.

No, I think that that's interesting too, but there are characteristics of it that you really believe in—
Oh absolutely.

—that obviously are not available elsewhere.

Absolutely. That's why I like Columbia. Well I like Columbia for many, many reasons. One of them is it's mission which I agree with and I want because it has a very progressive, open, political climate. One thing about Columbia is that people can challenge the administration. People can complain and protest and I don't think the administration penalizes the faculty for doing that and that's always been wonderful. So I like all those things. On the other hand, I guess what I'm trying to stress is that for me it's not a political cause, it's not a religious cause, it's a wonderful job and it has a wonderful social dimension, that's it.

And how does that impact or how do you integrate that into the classroom experience or your approach to teaching, or maybe if you could talk about some of your values in the classroom?

Yeah, well I teach American History so many of the important social, political issues that are relevant today end up being discussed in my classroom. I'm not the type of historical who tries to avoid contemporary issues. On the contrary, I love discussing those issues. So my classes tend to be very political. I encourage the students to explore all those issues that they are struggling with, that society is struggling with. And it's a good place to do it because there are so many different voices. The classrooms are so rich. People have many different experiences. For instance, students who maybe have been to high schools that were not so strong academically have so many interesting things to say from a social—from a political point of view, they tend to be more savvy in other ways. So it really is a good place to explore those issues.

And let's talk a bit about what have been some of the important events to occur at Columbia now that you've been here over a decade, so maybe if you could begin to touch on those.

Well, as I told you, I was a part-timer and one of the most interesting things for me here is that I was one of the founders of P-Fac and I think we got together it was in 1993, I think it was.

If you could explain what P-Fac is and how it got it's name.

Okay, P-Fac is the group that part time faculty founded because we felt that we needed to be represented, that the school was not taking us seriously as teachers, as

members of the community and that we needed an organization. So one day Jenine Ciezadlo from Liberal Education, approached me and asked me if I would be interested in getting together with a few other people to discuss this. And you know I come from Spain, I went to the University of Madrid, in the 70s. It was one of the most political places on earth, so I was ready to do it.

And so we got together at the Hokin, John Stevenson and Mary Beech, Jenine Ciezadlo, CJ Sanders and I, all of us were from Liberal Education and we started talking about this and Mary Beech was the one who threw out the name P-Fac, which I thought was very funny. And so we were debating—"well should we have another meeting or what should we do?" And I thought well, we are already an organization and let's just decide right now that we are an organization and then move on from that point and so that's how we founded it at the Hokin. I think it was in the fall of 1993.

But the interesting thing for me, or one of the revealing things, is that within a couple of months I knew that there was a possibility of a full-time job here and it never occurred to me to stop working with P-Fac and move on, not because you know I'm very brave on principle, but because I knew the kind of climate Columbia has. I knew that I would not be penalized for being on P-Fac so this is something good about Columbia. So I continued very active with P-Fac, and eventually I got a job as a full-time person. And so I stopped working with P-Fac because I had become full-time, but I've continued to be very interested in the

progress of this group which has grown tremendously and it became a union and now I think it's a serious force to reckon with in the community.

That's interesting, when you talked about too the climate of Columbia because, it sounds like you're saying too elsewhere many people would have felt in their own best interests that they better not make waves.

Yes and I knew, by then I knew Columbia well enough that I didn't have to worry.

Can you talk about some of the organizing issues the things that brought—and interestingly enough those were all Liberal Education members so it started in Liberal Education.

Yes.

Maybe speak to that a little bit, why would something start like this in Liberal-Ed and what the front burner issues were?

Well perhaps it started here because people who teach history and philosophy and sociology, are people who do that for a living and were part time people who thought of teaching as our profession. We didn't have other professional jobs. We were not making tons of money elsewhere and did this as a hobby. This was our job and we were very serious about it. And then it takes a very long time to prepare a history class, a philosophy class. It takes a long time to grade papers for those classes, so I think we wanted the institution to recognize what we were doing and so perhaps that's one of the reasons.

And at the beginning we were hesitant in terms of, we didn't really know how supportive our depart-

ments were going to be, but we knew that we wanted to have a number of things recognized like seniority and some kind of security. We were talking about health issues, and I don't remember a lot of the issues we talked about. But many of those things were addressed later, when P-Fac became a union.

You were already full time when the union vote took place.

Yes, yes.

But what was the response between the time, the founding of P-Fac and you become a full time faculty member, what was your feeling or the response for other part-timers? You know was this something exclusive to liberal-ed or did you find reception outside of liberal-ed?

Well, I think some people were afraid for no reason. This is my personal opinion, but some people even now some people tell me sometimes, I haven't joined the union as if I was going to be happy with them because they haven't joined the union. And so there is an element of fear still, that people associate with joining a union, that there's going to be some kind of repercussion and there was a fear in the past, when P-Fac was still so young and weak.

But gradually, I think or rapidly rather, other departments became very interested. For instance English which has a part-time faculty very similar to hours, people who do that for a living. And my surprise was that even other departments, such as marketing because the mistake is that part-time faculty in other departments don't really need the money. They do this because it gives them prestige, or because I don't know they have

nothing else to do and I think that's really (*inaudible*). Most part-time faculty are interested in making money and to be compensated thoroughly for the tremendous amount of work they put into this. And so right away, other departments began to call and ask for help and to get their teachers also interested and they began to join our meetings.

Who were some of the early supporters or allies that you had within the department?

In this department?

Yeah, and then within the broader college that you remember?

Well, I think some people here wanted to believe that P-Fac was not going to be unioned, that it wasn't a professional organization, that it was never going to challenge anything. And so they were disappointed a little bit or nervous when they realized that that was not the case. But in general, Liberal Education people were very supportive with some exceptions. With some exceptions people were very, very supportive and they continue to be. In Liberal Education, the faculty are all very supportive of P-Fac.

Right. How about in the college, were there people that thought it was a great idea or people that also had been part timers?

The truth is that I—

You had moved on.

I moved on very quickly, but I remember one meeting with Caroline Lotta and she was sympathetic, but I don't think she really knew what we wanted and Mary Beech began to cry because she was at the very beginning of the whole process. So she began to cry because

she was so desperate, so frustrated by the fact that the administration didn't really understand that we needed some compensation for our work, that we needed more rights. And so I remember that meeting being very, very sad, but I think that the continuation of that story—I'm not the right person to ask because I was there right at the beginning, and then I moved on.

Then from your point of view, as a full-time, but having seen the origins of this organization, were you surprised that it became a union or could you have seen that coming because of the response of the college or as it panned out now that you're observing that evolution what did you see happening?

I was not surprised that it became a union. I think that was its future, that was its destiny from the very beginning. I was very glad that it happened. It's not easy as we know, it's not easy to organize and part time faculty who have very complex lives and just having a meeting was almost impossible. So I think it's been a tremendous accomplishment and I think both the part-time faculty and the administration deserves credit for having maintained a fruitful dialogue in the last few years and I already know what would happen in the future. But it seems to me that the climate is a positive one. It's one of interaction and respect.

Do you think the union was necessary? Could that climate or that interaction or that mutual respect have happened with that not present?

I think it was necessary. It was necessary, so that the rest of the community understood that this was really a serious group and that they should be taken seriously. I think it was important. That step was necessary.

Okay, great. That's terrific that this is part of the oral history project, because I don't think anyone else certainly has had your experience and insight on it. But it hasn't been talked about and I think it's important to document that, that was an important chapter, ongoing.

Yeah, I just think you should talk to people who were there during the time when we became a union because I don't have that experience. It would be really helpful I think to have that.

Yeah. Okay, let's move on. Could you name another important or event or challenge at Columbia since you've been here, again specific to the department or to the college?

I think the accreditation process was important. To some degree we went crazy with that. The administration I think was unnecessarily nervous and insecure and so there was a moment that was awkward and uncomfortable because the nervousness and insecurity made a number of administrators assume that in order to get this done and in order to be taken seriously by the NCA group, what we need to do was to stress uniformity throughout the school and that is ridiculous, it was ridiculous. Uniformity has nothing to do with quality of education with academic standards and so I'm glad that's passed and we moved on. But it was an important step to get accreditation once again and to be able to relax.

Was that '96?

One of those years. No, I think later.

Later?

Maybe '97, '98 because I was coordinator and I was not coordinator in '96.

So did you meet with people from the NCA at all?

In large groups.

Did you get the impression even in the large groups so that they respected and valued Columbia or did you get the feeling that they wanted Columbia to be more like everybody else?

No, I think they respected Columbia. They were impressed by the enthusiasm that they saw among the faculty, our commitment to the school and I think they saw that it was a very interesting place. They wanted to make sure that yes, that certain standards were met, but it was very easy to prove that we are a good school. We have standards. And so I don't think we should have been that nervous about it. We have good faculty and that's one of the advantages of, I think one of the positive things about the evolution of this school is that we are becoming or we've become stronger, from an academic point of view and I view that as a positive thing.

How do you see the issue of growth, because the college has grown tremendously since you've been here?

Yes, I think it's good. I think Columbia is an interesting place. The more students benefit from it, the better. And I realize that it is a problem for many departments because there is a lot of pressure. Even for us, there is a lot of pressure, tremendous amount of work to do and the faculty, the number of faculty hired has not grown as fast. And so growth has put tremendous pressure on all of us, but I think we are handling it well and I had something to say, but I forgot what I was going to say.

We can come back to it. If you remember it, just jump in with it. And your perspective too on the leadership because Alexandroff was here when you came and then John Duff's tenure is done and now we have the new president. Do you like the direction or how do you feel about the direction that the college is taking with the leadership?

I never met Alexandroff, I was a part-timer, so I never even talked to him. But I think he really was a visionary and from what I've read and heard he was a wonderful man, with wonderful ideas. But change is inevitable. Because I wasn't here 20 years ago, I don't have that image of the golden age and so on. To me the evolution of the school is positive and it's necessary. The times changed and so should institutions. I think I'm in favor of the new restructure and it seems to me that it would help the school be more competent. I don't have a strong opinion about it. Some people are passionately in favor, some people are passionately against it. I'm neither. I think it's a good idea, but we'll have to see. We'll see how things evolve.

My feeling is that the school is becoming more professional and more rational and I think that's good. I just hope we maintain some of the idealisms, some of the romanticisms that we all associate with Columbia, the creativity. All those things are wonderful and we should be able to maintain that as we become a more efficient institution.

Is that value one that you think others share and that will help it continue or are you worried that it's disappearing?

No, I don't think it's disappearing. I guess what I'm saying, is some-

times, when there is a lot of emphasis on rationalization and making things more efficient, something is lost and I hope we don't lose that. But we couldn't survive simply on idealism. If we are going to have such a big institution, as Columbia has become, we need an efficient way of running it. And also, I think it's good that powers are so concentrated as in the past and you'll notice something nice about having a very personal type of relationship. For instance in the past, anything you needed, you knew that you could ask one person and if he agreed things would happen, Bert Gall, because he had so much power. So there's something nice about that, you pick up the phone, Bert I need this. And if he agreed, you would get it. Well, that's not going to happen anymore. And on the one hand I'm sure many people miss, are going to miss that. On the other hand, it's a big institution. You can't have one person with so much power. It doesn't make sense anymore.

And you're saying because there's a lot of stories from people from the past that, that's the person that they picked up the phone and called. As recently, Margaret Sullivan talked about her summer camp, that was '93 and—I mean it was a little bit more complicated but basically Bert liked the idea and it happened.

And it happened, yeah.

So that's interesting. So that's something that is going, another end of another golden era. You talked about the mission of the school you know what you liked about it and your limitations on it. What about in your tenure here as a teacher, has your

philosophy changed or developed, has Columbia influenced it or you know how has that evolved if it has?

I think I had to relearn things, or I had to forget many things. When I first came to Columbia I had a way of teaching, that did not work here. I was a typical graduate student with my million notes and I proceeded at the beginning to go through my notes and lecture my students and that's not the way you do things here. It doesn't work. And so I had to reconsider my whole approach to teaching history. My teaching has become more interactive. And I do miss sometimes not addressing some of the complexities that we would be addressing if we had a graduate program for instance, so I miss that. But in general, I think Columbia has made me a better teacher.

Well, what kind of things, now you talked about the lectures that you've kind of done away with. Can you give some examples of some of the things that you brought to the class that you wouldn't have imagined yourself doing before or when you first came here?

That I do now you mean?

Yeah, like what are some of the innovations that you've brought into your classes to teach history because I think that's important too, maybe specifically speak to your field. You already mentioned that we don't have a graduate program in history but this isn't a typical place to teach a history course. You know there's no major, no department.

I don't think I'm referring to any material in particular, but the way you organize your class is different or should be different here at Columbia. The group interaction

and trying to balance the wide variety of skills you have in your classroom, those are the things that I've learned here that are so important for the class to work. And also using the present very much to laminate the past is, I think is crucial here because the students relate to the present, not to the past so use that present situation and somehow connect it to a past situation.

Or also the use of the arts has been useful and I use now plays for instance when we talk about the suffrage movement I use really wonderful gems, suffrage plays that were written in the early 1900s. And that sort of thing, the use of poetry, the use of films and TV, I'm going to work as I told you I'm working on a classroom cartoon. So—

Could you speak a little more about the cartoon class and do you—was that something that came up because you're teaching at Columbia or—?

I think so, and the reason I decided to put this class together is because we are always complaining that our students don't vote; they are not interested in politics. But I also feel that here at Columbia, we do not stress political history. We tend to stress social history, cultural history and so I thought that political history is important and on the other hand, I know students are not very interested in it so I said, "well if you use images and humor and cartoons and I'll use Saturday Night Live clips and so on and we can address political issues." So it's going to be a lot of work to put this together, but I'm excited about it and the class filled right away, the first day registration because of the name, so.

Some of those things that you were talking about bringing in almost the center of the class poetry, plays, different forms of art I think of when you look at those traditional college history textbooks, those things are really on the periphery. Those are, well if we have time you get to that or you know aren't doing anything else. I'm just curious, is this something that is only specific to Columbia or could other schools learn something from Columbia that aren't geared so much towards the arts or towards the visual?

Well, I think they should learn something because what those things help you do is connect to a younger generation who is not particularly literary, but it is interested in visual things and maybe literary in a different way. And so if you use poetry, if you use funny plays, if you use films and so on you can connect not only to a diverse student body like the one we have but to a new, a young generation that has different values than what our generation has.

And that would be true at any institution.

Any institution, and then at the same time you're having fun and they are learning things from—I really believe in an interdisciplinary approach.

And could you speak a little bit more to that interdisciplinary, again is that something that it has evolved with your experience and a value that you see present at Columbia?

Yes, I think the culmination of this is going to be the new major that we are going to be proposing on

cultural studies here. Liberal Education is going to be interdisciplinary and we are working really hard at including interesting courses from other departments. And it's not been difficult really, because there is such a wealth of wonderful courses from Art and English and Film and I'm excited about it. I think this could be really interesting to develop this program. And I think that the school needs that. It needs an academic program that addresses culture and it studies culture in a serious but also in a fun way.

Well, that leads to another question I have because you said the school needs an academic program. Do you see maybe that as something that the future holds that the Liberal Education or general studies will come into its own at Columbia and be—do you know what I'm saying?
Yes, yes, yes, certainly.

So many other departments would say Columbia arts, Communication, Television, Film and we're the ugly step-sister?
Yes, and I hope that the restructure will help that too because now we are a School of Arts and Sciences and we're going to have our own dean. And I think that's going to help—that we are not a service department. We've never been but that's the perception people have and that's not going to be the case anymore. And this major will really help to prove the community that we have something really interesting to offer. And of course we have to do our job, we have to do a good job too. It's not going to happen just like that. We need to convince the students that this is something that will help them, but I am very hopeful that this will help the whole department.

Because certainly this would be something that is innovative. I mean a lot of the works that we use for other parts of the college or other parts of its history, innovation and creativity and those usually aren't used for liberal-ed. Yeah, true. And we are trying to make the program very creative and we are trying to incorporate the best of the Columbia tradition, the hands on approach, the creativity, the interdisciplinary approach. And at the same time, also incorporate the best of our disciplines, the best that history has to offer and sociology and anthropology, humanities. And we've been working very well together and it's really helped the department focus and I'm hopeful. I'm really hopeful.

And do you look for those type of things when you hire faculty? And I'm asking you maybe to imagine a comparison. But in this department are there characteristics in an anthropologist or a sociologist or a historian that Columbia's liberal-ed department wants that maybe a more mainstream school would not?
Yes. Yes.

And could you maybe talk to that like what—?
What I think, we really want people who can work well with a diverse student body that's crucial who understands and appreciates an urban environment and but also who appreciates the arts and they have an interest in exploring those venues because so many of our students are interested in the arts media and so yes definitely that should be considered.

Okay.
Just one thing.

Yes.
I also think Columbia should do a better job at encouraging people from Liberal Education and English and helping them to do their research and value that kind of research that we do. We don't produce paintings, we don't produce films, we don't produce music, we produce books and articles and that here is not always valued. And as the institution matures I hope that a more theoretical approach will also be valued and respected as it should be.

Do you see signs that that will happen? Has that—?
I think so. I think so.

Yeah.
Maybe because I am happy that our new dean is a historian and I think she values that scholarly work and I think she will be important in that, pushing that.

No, I think that's a great point that has not been made before you know what's created here.
Um-hmm.

And you've touched on some of these already but anything else that you would want to talk about in Columbia's present or future that has to be addressed or that maybe you have reason for concern?
No, I think the main challenge will continue to be dealing with the part time faculty and I don't know how that will evolve, but I think we should all try very hard and be very creative and responsible because that's a problem that needs to be addressed. And then of course this has been a very odd year and the school feels really fragmented and fractured and it is time to put this awful year behind us and move on.

When you say fragmented is that because of the restructuring and the debate around it?
And all of this terrible news about Columbia throughout the year. And did you receive the Reader this week?

No, I haven't seen it yet.
Embarrassing, it's been a terrible year and so I think it's time to move on as a group, as an institution.

Would you have handled, well not you particularly but do you think things could have been handled differently that some of these things could have been avoided or is it because we have new leadership and new growth?
Oh no, many things could have been avoided absolutely. I think we made many, many mistakes and we made many bad decisions and—

Will we learn from them?
I hope so.

I forget what Queen Elizabeth called it, the Ana Soreblis or something, you know that one year.
Oh that's right, right.

Areblis—Ana—
Right, that's right. But these were important I mean not only because of all of this news so many wonderful people have died this year.

Yeah.
John Scheibel and Hollis Sigler and Alexandroff several other instructors, that plus all of these horrible stories—

Right, no that's true. I didn't think of it in those terms. I mean the avoidable, unavoidable-tragic. Where do you see Columbia

headed? Where you know, and with your idealism or your rationalism, what do you see in its future?

Well, I don't know that Columbia is going to become the best arts and media school in the world. I think that's a bit of a stretch, but I think it has the potential to become a really, really interesting place and if we combine the present, the current creativity and the past and the present. I think if we on the one hand, maintain some of the wonderful ideas of Alexandroff and what I mentioned before the idealism, the mission of the school, its progressive climate and we combine that with the current president's interest in them, efficiency—I'm not saying that that's all he's interested in, but with a school that is running in a more professional way and that pays more attention to scholarly work and to otherwise artistic work and so on, I think we could be a really powerful institution. So I'm hopeful for Columbia.

If some of those things happened do you worry at all about maintaining the diversity of the student population?

It is a problem. On the other hand if we grow and do well we can spend more money on scholarships. We are now tuition driven. We don't have an endowment and I think that's a very important area to work on.

To move away from being tuition driven?

Right.

Right.

So, that we have a big endowment, so that we have money, enough money for scholarships because that

is true. That's part of the evolution of the school. It's becoming more middle class and it would be a shame to lose some of the flavor, the variety, the richness that the school has had in the past. And I would not be interested in being at Columbia if Columbia became very suburban, very homogenous say, it would not be as interesting a place as it is now.

Well, that kind of answers my next question is you know what makes you stay or what might make you leave. But some of those things—not what would make you leave, but is that what makes you stay is—?

A lot of things make me stay. One is my office, in front of a beautiful Lake Michigan.

I think for any future listeners they should know, and I'm sure there's other departments but liberal-ed has possibly the best office suite. It looks out for the full timers, it looks out at Michigan Avenue out onto Lake Michigan.

It is wonderful.

Fabulous.

It is.

With your office—

That's not the only reason. I like the place, as I told you, this has been a wonderful place for me. I've gotten very comfortable, very supported since I got here and despite the problems, despite the difficulties it's been a great place for me. I liked it when I got here and I love it now. I have good colleagues and I love the students here and it's an exciting place. It is a happening place that's for sure. There's always something happening.

If your child came and said I want to go to Columbia would you encourage them to do that or—?

Um-hmm, yeah that's a hard question. If my child said he wanted to be here, I would say yes, but I'm going to give you some advice. These are the people to avoid, these are the people to—no, I think it would be a great place. It's a great place for young people. They need to be interested in some of the things that are done here, but it is a great learning environment. The students learn from each other tremendously and the faculty are excellent, it is. I would have no problem. It would be cheap too.

Yeah, right academically. Is there anything before we finish, is there anything that we haven't touched on that you might feel is important?

I'm sure when I finish the interview, oh I should have said this, but no, not really. I hope this is useful.

No, absolutely. You've talked about many things that have not been touched on before so I think it's really an important interview. All right.

Thank you.

Sure.