Paul Sparks

Interviewed by Bob Haft

The Evergreen State College oral history project

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FINAL

Haft: This is November 1, 2021, and I'm with Paul Sparks in our second interview. At our last session, you were talking about the first couple years you were there. But you mentioned that there was a possibility that you weren't going to be coming back. Could you elaborate on that a little bit?

Sparks: In my first year, I was a member of the first team that ever blew up, the first program that blew up. So there was a bit of baggage attached to that. That spring, I designed a program that was wildly attractive to students where we'd go out on the road for a year. The students had a number of collective passions and skills where we would perform out in the world and document our performance. That would be the product. Also, in route, we'd try to spend time with interesting people around the country. I think I mentioned Georgia O'Keefe as one. Buckminster Fuller was another. The Deans declined to do that program, but not without some rumbles from the students. So there was yet another layer of complication to my first year.

As far as I know there is no documentation from that era of the flap that provoked, however some years later York Wong did an evaluation where he termed me as the "enfant terrible" of Evergreen.

The rejected program requires some explanation. That year, the deans and the faculty made the mistake of posting the various program proposals and letting the students vote on them. Mine was, by a significant margin, the most popular proposal.

Merv Cadwallader, who was then the senior dean, and he was also the father of coordinated studies, called me in and said, "If we let you do this program, would you agree to resign if we asked you when you came back?" I said, "Yeah," because I thought if I did this program, if it even came close to working, the results could be incredible and at a minimum it might give me a national platform for my ideas about art and teaching. My response to Merv, was, "Hell yes!"

Haft: Yeah. Do you think there was pressure from whom to . . .?

Sparks: I have no idea.

Haft: Was York a dean at that time?

Sparks: No, York wasn't a dean at that time. York was speaking retrospectively about something that happened in previous years in referencing my reputation.

So, I said "yes" to Merv. But the other deans balked and wanted to go the other direction. If I remember correctly, Oscar (Soule) was a dean then. He said, "What we'd really like you to do is do another program and see how you do with that." Because in those days, we had three years . . .

Haft . . . to prove yourself.

Sparks: To prove yourself. "In our minds, you haven't proven yourself." In my mind, I thought I was soaring but that's another story. [Laughter] I thought I was doing well, but not in the form something that they appreciated. The program went gully wumpus but my students had some impressive public successes and I am pretty sure the deans never looked at my evaluations when they made that decision.

That led me into the next year, a great year, with some really good faculty in a program called Man and Nature that was wildly successful. This was not a surprise even after the disaster of the program I did in the first year. When Charlie Teske, recruited me in Los Angeles, he really got me interested in the idea of coordinated studies.

Having said that, I hadn't been there more than a year or two when I realized that putting all our eggs into coordinated studies' basket was a big mistake. It became really apparent to me there were things that were hard to teach well in coordinated studies. Studio art was one of those things. Science was another. Also, the quality and chemistry of the team was really important and everyone had to be willing to teach writing. It is a labor intensive mode and as the years went on people were less willing to do it in a committed way. Also, the stress of reinventing the curriculum every year with a new team was something that a handful of people did brilliantly but was a challenge for many folks and got dodgier over time.

Haft: Yeah.

Sparks: Unless you wanted a community college basic, basic, basic everything, coordinated studies was not always successful. There are lots of things that you could teach coordinated studies that would work right through to the most advanced kind of work, but the arts and sciences weren't necessarily those things. That was question number one.

Two, it also was apparent to me that it took a very special kind of person to be successful in coordinated studies, and we weren't necessarily recruiting those people. And that was early in the game.

Three, it was apparent to me that our hiring process and our governance process were badly flawed.

Haft: In what ways?

Sparks: Oh . . . the thing I loved most was that we had almost unlimited freedom and that allowed me to take risks and have some spectacular accomplishments. I never could have been successful as I was without that. That was great for me, but the problem was that the same freedom created a lot of problems when some faculty abused it. There was an excess of freedom and very little accountability. Our evaluation system should/could have solved this problem but didn't. A number of years later, I spent some time under Laura Coghlan's supervision reading student transcripts and saw that while a few of our students did really well we were also failing a lot of folks.

Haft: Yeah. [Laughing]

Sparks: Much of this revolved around personalities. Someone would be living in Seattle, not be spending much time on campus and not teaching very well in Olympia and could get away with it. Someone needed to be there to call that person to account, and the system had to support that. That never happened. I expect similar problems exist today.

We had too many factions, too many political factions, trying to control the hiring process, so in any given year, the hiring committee might represent one of the factions. Ideas of treating students like adults or perfecting the art of teaching were pushed aside favoring disciplinary agendas or any one of the political ideologies of the moment. What was then termed "political correctness" and is now called "wokeness" captured the school. Rather than risk bitter confrontations, we hived off into different cells. It became easy to teach by yourself and do something you did really well, enjoyed or was amounted to a light work load and ignore everything and everyone else. Meanwhile, the governance system became even softer and less effective.

Haft: Another thing I wanted to ask you about. Last time you mentioned Kirk Thompson being an advocate for writing. Was that not part of the…

Sparks: In the early days, writing was a big thing, and there was support for teaching writing well at all levels and in all parts of the curriculum. There was a woman who was close to Al Weideman who I think, was from New Zealand. She was a reading specialist so for the first two or three years we had tools to see how well our freshman or transfer students read. This was a big deal when you are trying to teach someone to write effectively. If you can't read well, you can't necessarily write well… I take that back. You can put interesting stuff down on paper, but your writing needs to be redirected in a way that's going to allow someone else to understand it in the way you do.

Writing across the Curriculum was an important issue. Every faculty member who was hired was supposed to be able to teach writing. About six years in, that started to disappear from the hiring

process. We started hiring people who couldn't teach writing. And, on occasions, we hired faculty who were not themselves literate at the college level. This is not a problem only at Evergreen but it was painful to see it happen here.

I remember well working with the deans over a mess a colleague who was an alcoholic and who couldn't write left for us. I was the coordinator of the program and his last teaching partner and ended up writing all of his evaluations. Ironically, the faction that got him hired the first time got him back a second time.

Haft: I know when I was hired, that was never mentioned, but it quickly became clear that that was one of my responsibilities. I was sort of appalled. I thought, I'm not ready for this. I'm not capable or competent.

Sparks: About five years in, people were still using institutional money to foster people to encourage thinking about how to teach writing effectively. One example would be Pete Sinclair and his Journal of Exploration. Similarly, Mark Levinsky wrote about using intensive subject journals as a writing tool, and teaching tool. Leo Daugherty was another example and there were many others. There was a whole shelf of those things in the bookstore.

Haft: When did modules come in? Was that from the onset?

Sparks: No, modules came in for, I think, several reasons. Remember, this is my version of it. I may not be historically accurate. One is we were under pressure from the legislature to have more in-state students. Two, it was clear there were some things not being taught well. Three, we were starting to slide on enrollment and weren't meeting our own enrollment numbers.

Part-time classes were seen as the answer to that. The problem, initially, was they wanted faculty to teach part-time classes as part of their regular load, which, given our 16 units as a fulltime load, was an impossible job. It was a crushing job. I taught some of the first modules and it quickly became apparent to me that wasn't going to work. Faculty were increasingly reluctant to teach them and one solution was to hire part-time faculty.

This went on for a while, and I was not impressed with the skill levels or the teaching chops of some of our local hires. Also the school was reluctant to advertise or hire folks from Seattle. However, when they did we got excellent results. Meg Ford was one example.

While I was convener of the Expressive Arts. I decided to try to sell the idea we'd hire people who both taught modules and supported our facilities which already was a de facto practice in the library. I pushed this idea because at that time it was clear to me that basic skills in visual arts weren't being taught well by the Expressive Arts full-time faculty. What I wanted us to do was to bundle a teaching

load into the job description for the folks who maintained and supported our arts and media studios and to make sure that we hired people of exceptional ability for those areas and to compensate them accordingly. The people who taught the skills modules would be the same people who ran the facilities, so they were an integrated part of the support system. Mike Moran and Peter Randlette are examples of people who did exceptionally well in that capacity. Typically, our modules were fully enrolled and had long waiting lines. Several years later, Phil Harding and I did an analysis of the enrollment patterns of our graduates and nearly all our students had used modules but few did them to excess.

There were two problems with this that were evident from the start. The people we hired often had the credentials to be faculty but were hired at staff pay levels. At one level, this was exploitive but had some advantages for the artists. What I did not think enough about were the toxic political turmoil and faculty versus faculty and faculty vs staff turf wars this system would produce. An example of a fabulous success would be the teaching of Mike Moran who, through the years did all things well and over time was probably one of our better teachers. On the other hand, since the staff, who controlled space, had more continuity than the faculty did (especially in the library) they began to see their modules as the only legitimate curriculum. This occasionally provoked bitter power struggles between the faculty who wanted to determine how spaces would be used when they taught there, and the agendas of some of the module faculty, who in essence owned the facilities and as I noted above who grew to think their classes were the only real curriculum. In this sense, my idea, which worked well in all of its other parts, produced a measure of ongoing heart burn. In a larger sense, it underlined one of the bigger flaws of the design of the college. Faculty and some staff enjoyed enormous amounts of freedom but with very little accountability and the various divisions of the college had different game plans.

Haft: Yeah. The other thing I wanted to ask about, which I don't know when it arose and when it disappeared, was self-paced learning something? SPLUs or something?

Sparks: Yeah. That was Bob Barnard. Bob was hired early. I don't know what his real role was. He was, I think a member of the faculty, but I don't remember seeing him teach or heard about his teaching. He had a strong computer orientation. SPLUs were his brainchild. And, he created a lot of SPLUs, most of which were on science subjects, and for the most part, they were not wildly successful or sought after.

Haft: But it was in an era when—

Sparks: We were still trying things.

Haft: Yeah, right, so it was an experiment.

Sparks: Yeah. A lot of the best experiments were not in coordinated studies. They were outside of coordinated studies. Like Phil Harding's "Experimental Structures." He'd already built one pole building

on campus that was down by the corner of . . . was it Driftwood Road? It's the next block down from Driftwood Road, the corner where you go down from Driftwood Road that jogs and that road parallels the Organic Farm.

Haft: I had no idea.

Sparks: There was a 3-story structure down there built by students. Then the Organic Farm House was an experimental structure. The *SeaWulff* was another. Evergreen students built two 38-foot auxiliary-powered/sail-powered research vessels and over the years, a number of other traditional small wooden boats.

Haft: Who was in charge of that?

Sparks: A variety of people. Pete Sinclair did it for a while. I was the coordinator of Marine History, Vancouver and Puget program convener of that area for two years. The area died a natural death because the convener and faculty of any given year had an enormous job in maintaining and keeping our fleet sea worthy.

Haft: When did the Expressive Arts and those other areas arise, or were they there from the beginning, too?

Sparks: They were there kind of in the beginning, because very early on, the Expressive Arts people started feeling threatened by the system and tended to circle wagons around curriculum and space. Also, the school was slow to provide the facilities promised to them when they were hired. They were teaching coordinated studies, and what they were teaching was either devalued by their colleagues, or their colleagues were not understanding the time-intensive, skill-intensive needs of the arts and were reluctant to build the time in for those things to happen.

The problem for the Expressive Arts faculty was how you could fairly present your discipline in that format. That drove a tendency toward cliquishness. Some of the first arts faculty left early. Peggy Dickinson, who I think was second-year faculty, said, "You're never going to be able to successfully teach art here," and left. She went to the north coast of California, the California State College at Humboldt, and had a successful career teaching ceramics there.

Haft: There were other questions about those early days, because I came later. It seemed to me when I arrived that when I'd go to a faculty meeting, there was a lot of fighting. People respected one another, I think, but nobody was afraid not to state their opinion and to really—

Sparks: Yeah, there was debate. It was real debate. That disappeared.

Probably the disappearance occurred when the ideological orthodoxies around the themes of race, class and gender started asserting themselves at just about the same time that some elements of the faculty created an increasingly inflexible orthodoxy around coordinated studies.

Haft: How about the administrative stuff? Because I know the deans traditionally came from the faculty, but then at some point, they started hiring outside the college. No?

Sparks: Barbara Smith was the first outsider hired. She did a really excellent job, although I think a lot of us in the beginning thought she wouldn't.

Haft: But what prompted that switch?

Sparks: We have had some really good deans, but from my perspective the deanery never collectively performed very well at any time over the entire history of the college. Usually there's been one dean who performed well, and that was the Dean of Space and Budget. That was usually a science faculty. Willy Smith was good. Ken Tabbut was excellent. Whatshisname? . . . Mushrooms . . .

Haft: Oh, Mike Beug.

Sparks: Mike Beug was an excellent dean. We've always had a strong dean in that role. When we had Barbara Smith and a strong dean in that role, we did pretty well. Actually my take on the Deans performance may be too extreme.

Haft: Okay.

Sparks: But a lot of the deans, I think—this is a personal opinion— were usually compromised by the fact that they were from the faculty.

This made making tough decisions or saying no to their friends difficult. Our faculty evaluation scheme was great on paper but foundered in practice because the persons charged with saying or doing tough things were too close to their subjects.

Haft: I'm trying to think. I don't remember who was a dean when I arrived. I remember John Cushing. I thought he did a good job. I liked him very much.

Sparks: Yeah. I agree.

Haft: I heard about Bill Winden being a great dean, but I don't know.

Sparks: Bill was a pretty good dean.

Haft: I imagine Charlie Teske had to be a pretty good dean.

Sparks: Charlie was a great dean but he had already filled that role at Oberlin.

He singlehandedly talked the legislature into giving us the Com Building. But he was early on. Charlie was fabulous to have as a friend and neighbor. One of the best things for me at Evergreen is on my floor in Lab II. I always had these incredible, bright, powerful figures for neighbors. That's where a lot of

really good conversations went on. I had Charlie Teske for my next-door neighbor for years. I had Phil Harding for my next-door neighbor. Fred Tebbutt, had an office across the hall and so did Marianne Bailey. Dave Marr was around the corner and Next to Mark Levinsky. Just all sorts of neat people that I could interact with. I know I profited by that.

Haft: What do you think was your best experience at Evergreen?

Sparks: I tried to have a best experience every year. That sounds brash, but I did.

Haft: I think that's a good answer.

Sparks: Some of my students got to be famous. I don't think that's my best experience. In some kinds of programs, I taught I was pretty experimental. But to do well in a context like that I had to quit being an artist to conform to what my colleague's notions would be about where the program should be going. It was like dancing in overshoes. Perhaps that is too dark. It would have surprised a lot of folks, but I probably had more breadth as an interdisciplinary teacher than most of them. One best experience was listening to Stefani Kuntz make a case for Marxism.

Part of the problem was the values of my colleague which often were politically liberal but artistically ultra conservative. Early on, I tried to make the art conform to the theme of the program, so I taught a very reduced kind of drawing. For example, I taught contour drawing in basic science programs. Because for a science student, a lot of the illustrating techniques for science use contour. But I taught contour with a content. Like in . . . what program was it? . . . it was one of those big science programs. I ended up in a lot of those. Another one of those was a history-related program.

Haft: Did you ever get the feeling that sometimes artists were just plugged into a program because they thought, we need an artist?

Sparks: Yes, we were ornaments, but I tried to make the ornament work. As I noted earlier, in one of the Marine History programs, I taught contour drawing. Then I set a project for the students where they had to use their drawing to document something about people in the Northwest who work with or on the water. That included interviewing their subjects when possible and making that narrative part of the project.

Haft: Wow.

Sparks: I also taught photography in that program. It was using—and it was also connected to writing—so we had a package, and that worked really, really well. I don't know if I still have slides of that stuff, but some of the work they produced was just really incredible.

Haft: That leads me to another question about your personal expertise as an artist. Because you've taught ceramics, woodworking, I'm pretty sure, painting, drawing, photography. Did all of that stuff come out of San Francisco?

Sparks: All that stuff came out from me self-teaching myself. One of my themes is that we should turn folks into independent learners, learning how to learn. Ceramics I started . . . when I taught at Southwestern College, Judy Nicolaides was there—I think she went on to a big-name brand school after that. That school was kind of a place that the faculty stayed there for a while and then went to someplace bigtime. You could just walk in and sit in on her classes, so I started making pinch pots and started making little, funky coil pots and she fired them for me. I had just a very passing interest.

When I got to Evergreen, Bob Sluss and I did Desert Ecology. We decided that we each would do a big project that the other one would participate in. I decided what we'd do would be primitive pottery. When we got to Page Springs, we found this little creek that came out of the wall of the canyon, and went about 100 yards, and joined the Donner and Blitzen River. He ran a population study, and I used surveying techniques to survey the stream so we could illustrate that. Then I did primitive pottery that we pit fired with cow dung; you know the area is open range, so there was plenty of cow dung. And I learned how to successfully do pit firings with dried cow pies. Then I got ambitious.

Frenchglen, Oregon had a dump that was about 150 years old. One of my inventions was the dump kiln. We went to the dump and found stuff that I could build forms out of, so we packed clay around these forms and slow-cooked them. We fired the clay into the kiln itself and then burned out the metal parts that we'd used from the dump. We built pots and sculpture in the campground. Then we fired them with sagebrush and greasewood and deadwood from the river, cottonwood. At night, we'd do firings and cookouts in the Frenchglen dump.

Haft: Amazing.

Sparks: There was an old, retired cowboy from Warner Valley living behind the store/Post Office there. He got real interested and would come to the campground in Page Springs, where we camped for about two months. He'd come make things with us, and one day, he showed up with this big thing wrapped in a rag. It was a figure of a person that he carved out of a big chunk of gypsum with his pocketknife. He was so proud of that. He was in his eighties and would show up at our dump kiln firings with a small bottle of rye whiskey which he shared around. We had a bunch of pictures of our students, cowboy kids from the one room school in Frenchglen with Bob Sluss, myself. Also our students and this old gentleman with his statue.

We fished a lot. The little streams coming off of Steens Mountain turned out to have populations of cutthroat trout in them. What we didn't know was that each stream had its own population of fish that were genetically unique, and probably no one should be fishing these fish. They were relic glacial populations.

Haft: I also wonder about your relationship, or what you saw as the school's relationship, with the town. Because when I came, I was just appalled at the divide between town and gown.

Sparks: Oh, yeah.

Haft: I thought the college, from what I had heard when I was in California, that the reputation was good, and I thought the community would be in love with this place and I found that that was not the case when I arrived.

Sparks: Yeah, from the very beginning, "they" (the townspeople) were seen by Greeners and characterized in much the way reference Trump supporters today. We were the enlightened radicals who were going to bring this place to a new light. But Olympia, you have to admit, was very conservative in those days. And to be fair, the locals thought that they were getting something like Central or WSU and that we would bring some fixes to the enormous economic problems of South-western Washington.

Haft: I know.

Sparks: They were extremely conservative, as was the Washington Legislature. But what was interesting was people never kept in mind that the person who founded that college was a Republican, Governor Dan Evans, who was an outstanding governor and one of our better College Presidents.

Haft: Yeah.

Sparks: Keep in mind, too, both my marriages have been part of the community. There's a lot of staff people at Evergreen who thought that I was a staff person.

Haft: Yeah, when I had my interview, I talked about that. One of the things that really stuck in my craw was the rift between faculty and staff. That existed simply because some of the faculty treated the staff like second-class citizens, where others would treat you just as a peer.

Sparks: Yeah.

Haft: Working on the staff, I learned my lessons about that very, very quickly.

Sparks: Funny thing is that in the beginning that rift was not there**.** In our first two faculty retreats, all the staff of the college was invited to the retreat. Janitors, everybody. And for many staff positions hiring was done within the school.

Haft: Oh, wow.

Sparks: Some, as late as—when did I teach that program? Maybe that was third or fourth year—the janitorial staff were dedicated to certain building spaces. First, there was Whatshisname, Mr. Cleveland. What was his name? We included him in all our program events. Then there was a guy named Ed Harris, who was really cool. When I did "Stones, Bones, and Skin," he'd go on fieldtrips with us. He'd sit in on our lectures. We kind of coopted and brought those people in, or at least I did, and made them part of the family.

Haft: Let's jump way ahead then. What led to your retirement? When did you decided it was time to quit?

Sparks: When I thought that the Evergreen dream was dead. The place had become very ideological, and eventually, I was going to get fired. Actually, not… I exaggerate…

Haft: I don't think that, no.

Sparks: The ideological hurdles really just got to be too much for me.

Haft: Yeah. I remember when Olander came, what a shock that was, and how divisive it became in the faculty, too. People who were pushing for him to leave. Eventually, they proved to be right.

Sparks: My grandfather used to say that his big mistake was joining the Ku Klux Klan. I think he was a member less than a year. And my big mistake was supporting Joe. When Joe was being introduced around campus, there was a woman down in the registrar's office. I can't remember her name. She had six or seven kids, and four of them had gone to Evergreen. She was very good at her job. *(Transcriber's note: Anna Mae Livingston)*

But when Joe Olander was getting a tour for his hiring interview, he went out and introduced himself and said to her, "You're So-and-So," and told her what a good job that people had said that she was doing, and what she was doing at her job. In all the interactions with Joe, I never got a chance to meet him, but I had heard that, and I thought, geez, that's a great This is a big thing**.**

Silly me. I could have thought back to that and seen that one coming. I supported Joe until Joe showed his true colors.

Sparks: To turn back to a less depressing subject, Summerwork was a great thing.

Haft: Yeah. I can't remember how that started, to tell you the truth.

Sparks: I think it goes back to when I first met you in in the slide library, I was impressed from the beginning. I think I designed Summerwork around what I saw in you and your images, and then started lobbying people to hire you so I could have you to work with me in the program.

Haft: Oh, okay. [Laughter]

Sparks: I'd been working on Barbara Smith for like two years.

Haft: I know I owe you the job. I know that for a fact.

Sparks: My aim in designing the program was that it should be intensive, a working community, and target a conservative audience that would only risk a creative class in a summer school fling. Also, a big piece of my scheme revolved around you. You were everything I wasn't as a teacher. I pushed. You coaxed. What I did intuitively you did systematically. I could be the wild man from Borneo and you could be the quiet voice of reason. Part of that success came out of who you are as an artist. A lot of your work depends on sophisticated narratives and that played into my conceit that photography could be taught like writing if the critique process and art history components became a dialogue on how to see and read images.

Also, after the first year we always had the right game plan even if it was always in a process of incremental evolution. By having a predictable, repeatable framework built in to our program design, we got better every year we did it. Knowing how we did things, meant that once we understood the character of our audience in any given year we could customize our efforts to fit them. Finally, by treating the whole enterprise as a collective enterprise everyone felt they owned a piece of what we were doing. And, in truth… it would not be an exaggeration… to say that they did.

We worked our butts off in that program but we swooped and soared and it was probably the best thing of its kind anywhere.

To the reader: I took some liberties in editing the previous paragraphs. Bob's prosaic yeah in the next line is in response to some lines that differ materially from those you have just read.

An interviewer in an oral history is supposed to stay unobtrusively in the background. Bob did that. But it is worth noting that in the references above to our adventures together, I often was clinging to his coat tails whilst we were swooping and soaring.

Haft: Yeah.

Sparks: Your photography and your style and your personality made that infinitely well matched.

Haft: But that program, Summerwork, had a run of 20-some years.

Sparks: Yes, 20-plus years. I expect that it may have been the longest run for any program period.

Haft: I still hear from some of those folks. Brad Sweek, for instance.

Sparks: Oh. Bradley was pretty amazing. He dropped out at one time but he came back, and he did contracts with me, and became a designer. When I last had contact with him, he had the biggest design operation in Seattle.

Haft: He still does. He's very successful. That leads me to another topic, students. Over the years, we both had students who were troubled.

Sparks: Right.

Haft: For whom Evergreen was a life preserver in some ways.

Sparks: Yeah. Some of that got hard to do. I was kind of a magnet for bipolar kids.

Haft: I think the arts in general attract them.

Sparks: Yeah. I realized I had to change the way I taught instead of being so accepting for so many of those students because three incidents happened.

One was I encountered a guy at an Academic Fair who was evidently psychotic. He'd been thrown out of the Marines because he'd stabbed somebody. He couldn't get the programs he wanted, and he went over to try to talk to Byron Youtz, and Byron, for some reason, didn't have the time to talk to him, and he came back and told me how he was going to kill Byron.

In the same year, Jean Mandeberg had given me another student who was in her program she couldn't work with who was like that guy.

Haft: Yeah, I remember him.

Sparks: That was the guy who set his drawing on fire in the wall in one of her critiques. I got him through, and I got him into a counseling program, but I think he eventually got jailed somewhere.

There was a guy Mark Levinsky and I had that we both worked with who piled all the furniture against Mark Levinsky's door and set it on fire. He later came back and peed on Levinsky's door. How I came out of that one as a good guy and Levinsky was a bad guy, I don't know.

In "Through African Arts," we had a Black student who'd gone to Africa and discovered that Africans didn't like American Blacks very much. He came back and was indignant and angry and my colleagues asked me if I would take him into my seminar and deal with his problems, which I did.

All of that just got to be too hard eventually I pulled back.

Haft: How about the other end of the spectrum? The kids who went on and were very successful. Because you had Lynda Barry, didn't you?

Sparks: Lynda Barry, Steve DeJarnette, and Jim Cox.

Haft: Matt Groening.

Sparks: And Charles Burns, who wrote Black Hole and a whole bunch of other graphic novels. I'm real proud of those folks, but I need to emphasize that in working with that kind of student the best thing is stay out of their way but be available when they need it. However, I will take credit for introducing Lynda to the Chicago Imagists, the Hairy Who, and Jim Nutt.

There are other kinds of success stories too but without fame. An example would be Mariko Mars, whom you don't know. Japanese. She had married then divorced a GI. She came to Evergreen and wanted to do arts, so I worked with her on her painting. Eventually, she started doing very, very exquisite kind of rectilinear abstractions. Really nice stuff and she went on to make a modest living at it. Her daughter, Stella Mars became my student. This was in the era where adding language was part of the art, and Stella Mars became successful selling her stuff to shops and online. Then Audrey Mars, Stella's baby sister came my way, and I had a pretty good rapport with her also. I kind of advised her and counseled her, sometimes taught her but she was never officially my student. There were a lot of students like that for me who were never officially my students, but I had a great deal of influence on. Audrey Mars got an Academy Award.

Haft: Oh, did she?

Sparks: She was a producer along with another guy of a documentary about the war in Iraq.

Haft: One of the other things that Evergreen was famous for, I think, is the cartoonists that came out of there.

Sparks: Yeah.

Haft: You must have had a hand in some of those people

Sparks: Yeah. But keep in mind other folks did to. For instance, Richard Alexander had a near encyclopedic knowledge of the comics in underground newspapers. Marilyn Frasca had an enormous influence on the way Lynda Barry wrote and looked at the world and Merv Cadwallader introduced her to the classical world.

Haft: Did you work with Steve Willis at all? Do you remember him?

Sparks: No, he was never my student but he was a guy I talked to every day at the Bookstore. We'd talk about comics. A lot of my best students weren't my students though I did have some families where I got several generations of students, or I got all the brothers and sisters. Like the Knutson—Kathy Knutson, who married Andy Harper.

One of the things I did was when I saw talented students who liked people, sometimes I'd scout them and groom them, and try to persuade them to go back into public schools and teach. Both of them did that but they did so without a push from me. They married each other and were very successful teachers. Andy, three years out from Evergreen, got a Golden Apple award, and Kathy got several awards. Then she became a big deal in curriculum development. They were good.

Then I got Kathy's brother and I got Kathy's sister, Kari. Then another sister had a boyfriend whose name was Dan Braddock, and Dan Braddock was an actor on the stage, also doing social work. Dan worked with me on theater stuff, and he developed a thing called "A Date with the Personals."

What happened is he got two actresses and another actor, and they did performances where they would work with personal ads. They'd circulate the newspaper from the day back in the days when they still had personal ads in the newspaper, before the Internet. People could look at the newspaper and then suggest topics from the personal ads, and they'd do an improv around it. They'd do first dates between two people from two different ads. Then the next generation down, their kids became my students.

Haft: There were some early staff, and I don't know if there were faculty at all that I've always wondered about, too, like Young Harvill. I know his name, but I don't know—

Sparks: There was a lady named Anne Lasko who was maintaining the printmaking studio. And she was a printmaker. And Young was interested in printmaking. He was a student.

Haft: Oh, he was a student.

Sparks: Yeah. He got really, really interested in printmaking. He had a very precise linear drawing style, well suited for a lot of different printmaking modes, and a very keen imagination. He was gaining steam about the same time I had a group of students who were doing filmmaking and were interested in computers, so they were doing computer-generated films. I had a student named Jim Cox, who I told you about in our last interview, and Jim Cox had a film working on TV-camera feedback called *Neptune*. That was wildly successful.

So, there was a group of people who were working with this digital stuff and film. Young also had great digital skills and a great interest, so when he left Evergreen, he developed some sort of program for virtual reality and joined a company that developed that, and he became rich and very successful. He developed software for film and video applications and other art applications.

Haft: But didn't he run the printmaking shop at some point?

Sparks: He ran it for a while because Anne had a baby.

Haft: Oh, okay. They married then. Okay, I've got you.

Sparks: I lost the thread.

Haft: Let's jump way ahead now. What would be your advice to young faculty who are hired at Evergreen now?

Sparks: Don't come. [Laughter] No, I wouldn't advise it for a student either.

Haft: How come?

Sparks: There are still some very extraordinary students, but it's a bad school.

Haft: What has changed? Is it the ethos about faculty having the freedom that they wanted, or faculty being forced to teach outside their areas of expertise?

Sparks: At the start of our conversation, I elucidated some reasons why I thought the school died, or lost its way, and I think an excess of freedom without accountability and a consensus on what the school was about is a big thing.

Haft: Yeah.

Sparks: I think accountability is a big issue. You've got to deliver. I think we lost the notion of what our function was. Basically, we went from a place that prized good teaching and taught people how to think to a place that taught them what to think. That's the poison pill.

Haft: It's a sad case.

Sparks: One thing that makes it special but doesn't often get addressed is that Evergreen came at a peak, a peak in a youth movement. Evergreen in its early years got the best and the brightest and the most adventurous students. Once that initial group went through—remember people like Matt Groening and Lynda Barry, Jim Cox, Chris Rauschenberg, Steve DeJarnette and Charles Burns—they were in that first wave. Also, it is worth noting that people like Chris and his friend Marty Oppenheimer were the children of people associated with Black Mountain. Another factor early on, was that when a powerful or beloved faculty member decamped from brand X to Evergreen students followed them here. For example, when Byron Youtz left Reed some very good students followed him up the interstate.

As the alternative schools around the country went down, we'd get a recolonization. When Mount Angel closed, a bunch of its students came here. When Bard changed, those students came here. When UC-Santa Cruz quit being an alternative school, they came here. That infusion of talent and energy may have kept us above water past what our natural lifespan should have been.

There's this other thing. Experimental institutions have a lifespan. If you look at Black Mountain College, it had a lifespan. When the original faculty and the original students went different directions—it hung on for 15 years more on life support. For years, students would come to Evergreen and learned how to take charge of their lives and then went someplace else to get what they really needed that was not necessarily available here. It is also worth noting that the folks who became famous, often ignored coordinated studies and worked exclusively in individual contracts. If you were a person with passion and ability you could access facilities or toys that normally were not available to undergraduates.

Haft: I remember years and years when Dixie Lee [Ray] was Governor, Evergreen was constantly being under fire to close or be shut down.

Sparks: Yeah. There was a bill in the Legislature every year to shut Evergreen down and turn it into a police academy.

Haft: What was it about the college that kept it going? Was it the people's commitment to it?

Sparks: We continued to attract really good students. Even after hiring went astray, we had a core of exceptional faculty. A student could get a pretty good education drifting from one really good teacher to another. For years, I counseled students to do just that. Find the best people and work with them. Also, there are some more pedestrian reasons. We were also a tremendous deal for out-of-state students.

Haft: Yes.

Sparks: In the early years, it was a great deal for anyone who wanted to get a good education at a bargain price. Also, we were a tremendous option for those students who couldn't get into the Ivy League schools. Always, we were an excellent option for those older students who were ready to go back to school and wanted to do so without a lot of the obstacles and bull shit that characterized some traditional institutions. Evergreen was a great option for them and that group as a whole did very well and added luster to our reputation.

Haft: Yeah.

Sparks: We got lots of bright students whose applications got cut at Yale or Princeton or Harvard and showed up at our doorstep.

Haft: Some of the initial faculty, it seems, were like that, too.

Sparks: Indeed they did. A lot of us were out of step where we came from and came here because we thought we could build a better mouse trap. I took a pay cut to get here and never regretted it.
The outside world occasionally intruded. Out-of-state students brought more dollars with them and reassured some faculty who wanted to feel like they were teaching at a more cosmopolitan place with a national audience. Also, as I noted previously, we were very attractive to older students. They added a lot to the institution because an older student, or several older students in a program, could add role models and a stabilizing influence, and other students could rally around them, or learn from their example. Unfortunately this put us in conflict with the legislature which wanted us to take more high school directs from in state and more local students overall.

Haft: I always wondered about that because when I started teaching there, I think the average age was 35.

Sparks: Yeah, and so to get local students, they had to recruit from high schools. That high school recruitment brought the average age level down, and we were getting more and more students who

thought it was just like any other school, and in turn, we recruited more faculty who could/would teach to the lowest common denominator just like any other school.

I think I said this earlier, the college was supposed to serve southwest Washington, which at that time was the most impoverished part of the state, with the fish industry and the timber industry in the ditch. But the faculty saw those people as the enemy and they had little love for us.

Haft: Yeah, that was sad. I remember when there was this big push to educate southwest Washingtonians, and it seemed that—you're right—it was at the expense of students coming from the East Coast who were getting a good bargain because they didn't have to pay an exorbitant fee.

Sparks: There were models. There was model for us of colleges that targeted blue collar audiences and prospered because they got the best and brightest of those students. People who were motivated to change their lives. But our class prejudices got in the way. We built a satellite on the hill in Tacoma.

When we developed our teacher certification program, when we were still hung up with PLU, I was in the group. I didn't get on very many DTFs ever. People would not choose me for a DTF.

Haft: Wasn't there a mandate that you had to be on some governance committee?

Sparks: Yeah. I would get the ones that did the skunk work, that didn't develop policy or anything to do with teaching. Maybe there was some utility in that. Being a pariah has its advantages sometimes.

But some of us working with doing the teacher cert program wanted a model less like brand X and more like us. There was a very strong contingent of us who wanted three things in the teacher cert program. One, that we not make the program so much about theory but more about the art and craft of teaching. Second was that every person who came into the program had to do a first quarter in the classroom. The reason being there would be a lot of people who applied for teacher's programs. Go through them and discovered they don't like teaching or students. They don't like the workload. Finally, some of us felt strongly that teachers should start from the position of really knowing something. Toss the undergraduate degree in in teacher's cert and replace it with specific expertise.

Haft: That was one of the best things about Evergreen, in my mind, was the chance to do an internship while you were an undergraduate because it was like a safety net. You could go there and do it for a quarter and decide, ooh, this isn't at all what I was expecting. You could drop out.

Sparks: Or you could go out there and do an internship and get a really good job.

Haft: Yeah. I had students in both of those camps.

Sparks: I had a student, when I was doing the Marine History program. Technically, he was Pete Sinclair's student, but Pete couldn't work with him for a quarter for some reason, so he turned him over to me because he wanted to be careful. You protect your good ones. Right?

This guy went up to do an internship with Bob Perry, who the yacht designer who designed the *SeaWulff*. He was going to work with Perry in the design studio. Perry did what a lot of designers do. They had a yacht sales division that produced the funds that kept their design work afloat. Perry fired the guy who ran that, and he said to my student, "I'm too busy right now to hire a new guy. Can you go over there and run this place for 10 days? You're absolved if you screw anything up badly. Just be there and come to me if you've got any big problems." This kid went over there and started selling yachts. He was doing really well, so he graduated and became Perry's Vice President of Sales.

Haft: Wow. That's a great story.

Sparks: People could to that. I had a student who was interested in working with the people who do music for Hollywood films, who planned the music and hired the musicians and got the rights and all that stuff. She went and did an internship, and it turned into a job.

I used to have a woman who was an Evergreen student who was interested in doing little cartoons and writing. She went down—Matt Groening was working with the magazine called *Wet* magazine. Are you familiar with *Wet*? She did an internship with him and stayed for another semester. In those days, you could do another quarter. That changed her life. You can do stuff like that. Yeah, internships.

Haft: One thing that touched me this last week or two was the death of Peta Henderson, our old colleague and student. We had her in Summerwork one year. Remember?

Sparks: Yeah.

Haft: She was great, and we tried to convince her that she could now teach photography. I don't think she ever believed us, but she definitely could have. She was wonderful.

Well, do you have any parting words at all?

Sparks: About 20 years ago when we first started having intimations that things weren't going to stay wonderful, we had conversations in Lab II, hanging out around the Xerox, about starting our own school. Maybe we should have done that. But for a while there, this place burned with an intense hot white light and there were quite possibly days when we were the best small college on the planet. I took a pay cut to come here and I never regretted it.

Haft: Okay. Well I think that's it, so thank you for very much for this. This was a lot of fun for me.

Sparks: This has been really good for me, too.