

Dee Van Brunt
Interviewed by Nancy Allen
The Evergreen State College oral history project
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FINAL

VanBrunt: Where are we?

Allen: You had moved to Olympia and you are not yet at Evergreen.

Van Brunt: No. We moved in a very stormy night in late November to Olympia. I mean, the van came the next morning. Anyway, we rented a home across the street from where I live now. Got the kids in school and so forth. Got settled in. Norman got settled in to his new office and I started looking for a job, because I didn't like being on unemployment. I didn't think that was a good place to be.

I interviewed at Something Office Machines in downtown, just east of downtown. I interviewed at two orthodontic practices. I interviewed at a physician's office. Every single interview I had, either after the interview or prior to getting an interview, I was told, "Oh, we have a younger group at our practice here. I just don't think it will work."

Allen: How old were you?

Van Brunt: I was 38 years old. I was just devastated, and I didn't have the good sense. At that time, we weren't very aware of this kind of bias. I was just undone by it, so I just sort of stopped looking for a job for a while. Because I just came home in tears. Norm says, "You don't have to work. I can support the family." I said, "But I like to work." [chuckles]

I remember seeing an ad in the newspaper about a job Children's Orthopedic Tea. They were forming new bridge guilds. I didn't want to go to the tea, I didn't know anybody or anything, so I called the woman after the tea the next day, whose name was in the paper and phone number, and told her I really liked to play, that I hadn't been able to go to the tea. She says, "I've got several calls like that. I'm going to pull together a group of women who called, and as soon as I've done so, I'll call you and tell you where you guys can meet."

We met at Carol Hunt's house a month or so later. There were 11 of us, and they were all older. I was the youngest woman there. They were all older. We decided to form a new guild that played in the daytime. I started playing. We had a wonderful time. I made the dearest friend of my life, Dorothy Rogers. We were very close till the day she died. Later, the daytime group continued as a

daytime group, but an offshoot of it was a couples' dinner evening group. We'd take turns hosting and so forth. That was great. I had a social life.

Then that year, I remember going—they were having women's—what did they call them? I want to say awareness groups.

Allen: Consciousness raising.

Van Brunt: Consciousness-raising group. Actually, when Norman and I lived in Bellevue, we struggled so. We struggled through our whole marriage, but in the early days of our marriage, we joined a couple of those groups in Bellevue. Met some neat people from Seattle. That's a long time ago now.

So, we tried that stuff, and then I went to this one. It was a woman in Ken Lake that was hosting us. There were only one or two, and so that just sort of fizzled, or else I fizzled. I don't recall. But I realized that what I had been through in looking for a job wasn't the way it was supposed to be.

Allen: Yeah, that's good.

Van Brunt: I don't know how I applied for the Evergreen job. I don't know if I was doing ads in the paper. I went back to job searching again. I had interviews in probably September Of '75, and Rose Elway, who ran the Business Office—no, Alan Spence ran the Business Office. I was hired in student and temporary payroll. Sheila Gray was the boss at that time.

It was okay. I learned the job really quickly. Met a lot of students, a lot of staff, especially part-time staff. But I met anybody who came to the counter. I met a lot of people. That's where I first met Ellie Dornan, who was covered from head to toe with turquoise, and was crazy as a loon.

I worked down there, and I started putting out my own memos about payroll time and different things, and I got my hands slapped a couple times for not passing the memo through—I'd never worked in a hierarchical situation, and I didn't know how to work in that kind of—I've always been independent, and my jobs, I was lucky. Once I was trained or learned the job, that was that. So I had a little trouble with that, and those were the only—I found an old evaluation and that's what I got my hands slapped for, being "impetuous."

Then the job opened in the Academic Deans area as the Budget Coordinator. There was a woman in the job by the name of Helen Hannigan. Apparently something went wrong, and she was demoted down to the Business Office. I really never knew what happened. I felt bad that somebody was still there and had been taken from the job. I didn't find out about that until after I had the job.

But Willie Parson hired me, and I fell in love with Willie Parson. He was a wonderful boss, he was a good trainer, he was honest. He taught me something I've never forgotten. "If I sit next to you or just at the corner with you, everything is fine. If I sit across the desk from you, everything's not so fine." In other words, if you marched into my office and he sat down there from me, across the desk, it meant he had a little problem with me.

Allen: What's confusing to me is where this is coming from.

Van Brunt: I don't know. He just told me.

Allen: No, he says he thinks that he sits far away from you if he has a problem.

Van Brunt: If he sits across the desk from me, on the other side .

Allen: that means he has a problem.

Van Brunt: . he might have a little problem with me he wants to discuss.

Allen: I see.

Van Brunt: If he sits here or here—and he was good at touching. I mean, we just clicked. We just clicked. I just loved that man. He was a hypochondriac later, I found out, but it didn't affect me or how I worked with him. It was his white rugs at home and his toothpaste lid, all this stuff. I loved working for Willie. Then, he was done, and I think they hired Barbara [Leigh Smith]. I think Barbara was the next hire in that position, Barbara Smith.

Allen; Because Willie was a faculty member.

Van Brunt: But he became the Academic Dean for Budget.

Allen: Right. So he rotated into the deanship.

Van Brunt: He rotated into the deanship for four years, and he was in that deanship when I was hired. He was my boss for quite a while. Then was his turn to go back to teaching, and Barbara Smith was hired. I was actually on that hiring committee, and I do not remember who else we interviewed for that position. I don't remember a thing about that hiring committee. Because I got on a lot of hiring committees- That's what you did at Evergreen.

Allen: Okay, I don't want to go too much further along in time about your job yet.

Van Brunt: Well, my job had to be learned.

Allen: What I want to talk about was what the college was like in 1975, when you first came.

Van Brunt: I was brand-new. I didn't know the college. I didn't know about the college. I didn't know

its beginnings. That came over time. And again, I mentioned my first job was in a position where I had to report to this person who reported to this person. I'd report to the other woman in the office, then to Rose Elway, then to the head of the Business Office. That, for me, was a struggle, because I had never worked dependently. Never.

Allen: So it wasn't like the rest of the college in that it extremely hierarchical.

Van Brunt: Very hierarchical. Extremely. It was difficult, but there were nice people that worked down there. Got to know Lorri Moore, who eventually we picked for my job, and has probably done a hell of a lot better than I ever did. She's been wonderful.

I went along. I did fine. Then I moved upstairs and I started to learn so much more about the college, and the way the classes were taught. At the time, I felt like I was in this warm, loving, huggy community. The faculty treated you like any other person, the rest of the staff treated you like any other person. Yes, you had a boss, but you did what the person asked, and you collaborated with them. It was great. No matter who they were—Charlie Teske would come down and talk to me. It was a wonderful place.

It was a caring, caring community, except for a few faculty. There were a few faculty, like Sid White and a few others. Richard Alexander at the time. I came to really like Richard Alexander, but it took me a while.

Allen: Yes.

Van Brunt: I mean, there were a few of the arrogant ones. Mark Levinsky was difficult, but then you learn about them. I just felt very at home. I loved where I was.

Allen: Okay. I don't know if you remember this, but I think this is the whole reason I wanted to interview you, I guess, is that one year—I mean, you were so good to faculty about their budgets. That's what I'm saying. And you knew how to work the State system, and how to break the rules occasionally so that people would be helped.

In my specific case, what happened was I was running the Spanish program, and we were going to go to Spain in spring quarter. But I, on my own dime, went to Spain to find out where we were going to go. Were we going to go to a school? Were we going to go to a town and live with families? What were we going to do? I went there over Thanksgiving vacation and the first week back. I went to Spain and I paid for it all myself—all my lodgings, all my travel, everything. Then, the summer after this year that I spent spring quarter in Spain with the students, again with no per diem or anything.

Van Brunt: Oh, really?

Allen: Yeah, we had no per diem in the beginning. I came back, and in the middle of that summer, I was broke. Surprise! I'd paid for all this travel for myself. So I called you up [chuckles] because I thought you would know. What I thought was maybe the college can hire me to do some summer work. Maybe they need a report written or they need me to do something. Because I need money to get through the rest of the summer. Because, you know, we got paid for 10 months.

Van Brunt: You were spread over 10 months, and also the only way you get it is to teach, and you probably didn't have an assignment for the summer.

Allen: Right. No, I didn't want to. I didn't teach very much summer school at all. There were other people who did, but I didn't. Anyway, so I call you up to find out, is there some way I can make some emergency money? And I told you the story of how I had gone there in November on my own and all that. You said, "Well, let me see what I can do about that." Then you just basically got me a check for the travel expenses that I had paid. [laughter] Somehow, a check.

Van Brunt: We had faculty development money, and maybe you didn't know it at the time, or didn't know you could apply for it. Who knows? But I knew where the money was. [laughing]

Allen: I know you did. So you got me some of that money. And I thought [laughing] it wasn't very much money, it was a couple of thousand dollars or something, but it was exactly what I needed to get me through the rest of the summer. It was great! I just wanted you to know that this was so great to have somebody like this around.

I think a lot of other people felt the same way about you, and I've heard from so many people "Oh, yes, she knew how to break the rules when it was necessary." [laughing]

Van Brunt: I probably didn't really break the rules, I just knew where the money was!

Allen: You knew what they were and you knew where it was.

Van Brunt: Well, I'm glad I helped you that summer, Nancy. [laughing]

Allen: Yes, you did. You certainly did. It sounds like you didn't experience the crazier parts of Evergreen.

Van Brunt: No, I think the crazier parts happened in those very early years, and by the time I was there and then my first, second, third hiring committees and all were pretty smooth. Much later, I could have killed Walter Niemeic a couple times, but that was later on—about how he'd get tired of interviewing and pick the best one, which is often the worst one. I love Walter as a friend, very much. Lorri worked for Walter all these years because Karen Wynkoop had gone.

Allen: What do you know? I think it's one.

Van Brunt: Very good.

Allen: I'm so happy it's on.

Van Brunt: I am glad it's on, Nancy.

Allen: Me, too! Okay, Dee. When did you come back to the United States from Afghanistan?

Van Brunt: We came back to the United States late in the summer of '68. We had sold our home while we were overseas. We'd sold our home in Auburn, and they told us all my treasures, my childhood and young woman treasures that had been stored in the garage, they were gone, and they hadn't been restored like the real estate person was supposed to do for us. All that was lost. All my childhood books. Everything lost.

We came home, but before we came home, we had another offer to do a similar kind of thing, another Columbia teachers thing, and it was in . . . near Bermuda, one of the islands.

Allen: Curacao?

Van Brunt: No. I can't say it. But Jim [who is Jim?] decided he wanted to go back and get his doctorate. He applied at Manhattan, Kansas—there's a university there—and WSU. He decided to go to WSU. I came home and stayed with my sister for a couple days in [Novato? 00:02:12], and I went to the moving company to get my stuff moved up here. We'd rented—unseen—a downstairs duplex near the college. I bought a new car in San Francisco, and loaded it up with the kids and all the stuff, except that we had with us, and we moved to Pullman.

From San Francisco, we drove to Walla Walla and spent the night in Walla Walla, and then went on to Pullman the next morning to this new basement-level duplex. It was a daylight basement, but it was pretty small. It had a little tiny living room, a kitchen/eating area, two bedrooms and a bathroom.

And there, we were supposed to live for a couple years.

Allen: Wow.

Van Brunt: I guess then he shortly arrived, and school started. It was close to September. He started in his paid T.A., so that helped pay for tuition, part of it anyway.

I went to work as a teacher's assistant in the kids' elementary school. We got to know our neighbors next door, [Dionne and John Dills? 00:04:07], who knew Rudy and Gail [Martin]. Gail doesn't remember, but he was infatuated with Gail, but he was married to his wife, who was a very rich woman through heredity and so forth.

Somehow, my philandering husband philandered with his wife. On Christmas Eve of 1968, Jim tells me he's leaving me, he's divorcing me, and he's moving in with Dionne next door.

Allen: Oh, god!

Van Brunt: And he has gone to Moscow, Idaho, filed for residency. He didn't really file, he got a post office box in Moscow. It's just over the line there. That was that. **Allen:** I don't understand what being a resident of Idaho has to do with— **Van Brunt:** Because you can get a three-week or six-week divorce.

Allen: Oh, faster divorce in Idaho.

Van Brunt: Yeah.

Allen: Oh my goodness.

Van Brunt: so I've rolled with the punches over the years. I think I had one tearful discussion with him, and then I thought I remembered something. His mother met my mother in Carmel on Jim's and my wedding day. His mother told my mother, as all the girls were getting ready—we got married in Carmel—that I was really getting the rough end of the stick. She did not hold much regard for her son. My mother didn't tell me that till many years later, when she says, "I could have told you so." [laughter] So I thought about that. I remembered that. And also, she had been up that fall to visit us. She lived in Long Beach. I loved his mother. She was a wonderful woman, I just loved her. I liked her more than my mother. But she had come to visit and that was nice. So that Christmas Eve, it was not a very happy Christmas.

Allen: Yeah, I can imagine.

Van Brunt: I had these two little kids, so I stayed. As soon as the bad weather—you know, there's winter over there, and there's ice and snow—so I couldn't drive over. But my dad had started in Seattle and so forth, and I thought, well, I wasn't going to go home crying for help—I was too proud—so I took the kids one weekend. We stayed in that motel on the corner of 45th and 1-5. I went to the school district, I guess, on the Monday morning, and asked about schools and so forth. I don't know how—oh, Dad had cousins there and I visited them, and they said—their kids had already grown and gone through the Seattle Public Schools, and things weren't too good in the schools right then—they said, "You know,

Bellevue has a wonderful school district. Why don't you settle in Bellevue?" Well, I didn't know Bellevue from anywhere, but we went over the next day to Bellevue. I just found an apartment, rented

it, put the deposit down- I took the kids. We went back to Pullman. We packed up. Did I wait till the end of the school year? I think I decided to move in June, when they were out of school. I didn't think it was good to move them real late in the school year. That's too hard on them.

So, I moved over in June. We had saved quite a bit of money. I'd bought and paid for the new Ford wagon, and I kept everything except his very personal possessions. He wanted to marry Dionne because she was a rich woman. By the way, he thought I was a rich woman when he married me, because my uncles paid for my wedding. My family didn't pay for my wedding, my uncles did, and he thought my family had money.

Allen: Oh my god!

Van Brunt: All this stuff in retrospect. So he had his money again—he never had it with me—he had his rich woman that he was going to marry. I moved over to Bellevue. The first thing I did after we just got settled, and then the kids found playmates and stuff, and we had neighbors in the apartments. They were really nice. They were at Crossroads, 156

th and NE 8th. It's east of downtown Bellevue. We rented an apartment. There was a swimming pool right across the street. The kids found playmates. All was well. Then I started looking for a job. Other mamas would watch them and stuff. And next door, just right behind the apartment complex on 156th, was a little group of physicians' offices, and there was a pediatrician, and next door was another pediatrician that specialized in allergies. I went into the first pediatrician's office. No, they'd had their staff for many, many years. They didn't need it. I went into the next one and he says, "Well, as a matter of fact, I'm just setting up my practice. I need an office manager." So he hired me on the spot. I don't think I filled in forms. I don't remember what I did. They were from the Tri-Cities area, and he was just setting up this pediatric allergy clinic. I went to work for him, and I knew how to office manage, you know, I'd run the credit union for several years and I knew how to do all that. I learned how to order stuff, you know, I learned the business. And I loved it because it was mostly all children. Some of them were terrible asthmatics and had awful allergies and so forth. So after a while, the office work wasn't all that much and it didn't keep me very busy, so he trained me to do allergy testing and allergy shots for children who came in for shots, so I had a dual job. So then, I was there . . . '69 . . . I think we were only there for a year and a half and he says, "Dee, I'm going back to Tri-Cities." I'd been to his home a couple times for dinner and stuff, and his wife hated Bellevue. She was lonely for her family. They didn't have any kids yet, and her father had a huge medical clinic in the Tri-Cities, in Richland, and he invited Kenly to come and join him and be a partner. His wife didn't want to be in Bellevue, so I lost my job. He invited me to come, but I didn't know Tri-Cities. Then I had to start looking for a job again. I found one with an ophthalmologist practice. A German woman, from Germany was running the front office and doing the interviewing and all that. She showed me once how to use this machine to read the patient's present glasses or contacts. I could not get it with her hovering over me. I just couldn't get it. I got very nervous, so I did not get that job. I looked a little further, and I think there was an ad in the paper and it was for an orthodontist office manager. Well, orthodontists, too, are mostly kids, so I got that job. Same thing exactly. Office management, payments, do the bills, do the ordering for all the supplies and so forth. Then he taught me how to make the models, the plaster of Paris models, and retainers and so forth. And then I learned how to chairside, be a chairside assistant—help put on the braces, take them off, clean it all up after they'd cemented. In those days, it was pretty messy stuff.

In the meantime, Robert had made a friend of a young man that had a big brother from Seattle Big Brothers, and it was Norman. After a few months, Mike was a little older, he was 11 or 12, and he told his mother he didn't want a Big Brother anymore, and my mind was spinning. I thought, this was really weird, but Michael was of an age where he probably got tired of having somebody take him bowling and this and that. It's hard to—so Robert wanted Norm to be his Big Brother. Robert

would go with them and do things.

I called Seattle Big Brothers and I made an appointment. I went over there and interviewed them, and found that they did really pretty deep screening, talked to the parents. They were pretty careful. They were very careful. They said, "Would you like it if we did another search on Norman?" said, "Yeah, I really would. I'd feel better. It's been a couple years." Maybe it had been many years. I don't know. So, Norman became Robert's Big Brother. Two or three times a month—it was usually once a week. He would pick up Rob and they'd go fishing or they'd go do this or that. He did things with him. Took him camping one time.

Somehow, somewhere in that time, after that happened, I decided the apartment complex wasn't a good place for the kids. There too many people coming and going, and the kids didn't have much supervision, including mine. So we moved into a little house in Lake Hills, which is just south of where we were, a mile. There was a swimming club there, and a wonderful school. Rob had the most amazing schoolteacher. Katy was in junior high at the time, I think, so she went to the same junior high.

All was well, and Rob and Norm continued their relationship or whatever it was.

Allen: You're not having any sense that you're going to end up married to Norman?

Van Brunt: Oh, no. No, no. He was sort of odd. He'd never been married. He was 46 years old. He dressed terrible. It was sort of like Mike Beug's old pants, you know? I mean, it was terrible stuff. He had terrible taste. He'd taken Rob over to his place, but he never invited me. And this wasn't between him and me, this was he and Robert.

That went on for a while. Not much time has passed. It got to be the summer of '71, and the children went back to their dad's in Pennsylvania. When he got his doctorate, he and his wife—who was then his wife—moved to Clarion, Pennsylvania, to a state college there. He became an English professor and she became a librarian. That's where they spent their whole careers, or from '69 on.

That summer, the kids went back to their dad's for a month, I guess, they went for. And Norman called me one day and said he missed the kids. Would I like to go out for a drink? I said, "Sure." We went to some bar in Bellevue, I don't know, I can't remember where it was. He excused himself—I guess he had to go to the bathroom—from the table, and the man and woman from the next table started talking to me, and I responded. I was waiting, you know. He came back and he looked at me and he said, "Let's go." He was jealous. I found out later that it appalled him that I would talk to somebody else when I was out with him for a drink. I mean, this man was off the wall.

I apologized and said, "I'm sorry. I'm awful outgoing. If somebody speaks to me, I talk back."

He took me home and that was that. About a week went by and he said to me, "Let's try again. How would you like to take the ferry and go up to San Juan Island?" I thought, well, I'd never been up in the

San Juans yet. I used to take the kids to Mukilteo to Useless Bay. We found that beach and we loved it.

So, off we go to San Juan Island. Had a very nice day. We found a beautiful, quiet beach and had sunset there. Very pleasant. We missed our ferry home. Hãd to come home the next day. Then, I don't know, I think he came over once or twice and we just visited and had a drink. Then the kids came home and all sort of reverted back. Then, in October, he asked me if I'd like to marry him.

Allen: Wow!

Van Brunt: He worked for the State of Washington Department of Highways as a land appraiser, but he though all that.

also purchased and sold land for highways development. At the time I knew him, in the beginning, he was buying up all the homes on Mount Baker for Interstate-90. It broke his heart. He had to take people's homes from them, and he suffered terribly **Van Brunt:** He worked for the State of Washington Department of Highways as a land appraiser, but he though all that.