

**Thad Curtz**  
**Interviewed by Stephen Buxbaum**  
**The Evergreen State College oral history project**  
**June 29, 2018**  
**FINAL**

**Begin Part 1 of 2 of Thad Curtz on June 29, 2018**

**Buxbaum:** Good morning. This is Stephen Buxbaum. It's June 29, 2018, Friday, and I am with Thad

**Curtz:** Hi!

**Buxbaum:** Thad and I are doing our first recorded session for The Evergreen College oral history project. We're going to just dive right in. I'd like to start by talking a bit about your formative years, pre-college. Did you grow up in one place prior to college?

**Curtz:** Sort of. We were in New Haven till I was in the third grade, I think. Then we lived in a kind of *New Yorker* cartoon post-war suburb, next to the freeway in southern Michigan—the nearest town was a place called Belleville—and it was 800 almost identical houses, one next to the other. The nice thing about it from a growing up point of view was that you could walk across—we were in the last street, so you could walk across the street—through the sand burrs in the yard across the street, and then you were in a cornfield. So, basically, there was a lot of kind of open country space. We had a couple of dogs and I spent a lot of time butterfly-collecting and kind of wandering around outside. Then, when I was in, I think, the eighth grade, we moved to Ann Arbor.

**Buxbaum:** In Ann Arbor—it was a college town—was that related to your father's work?

**Curtz:** Yeah, my father worked for the university. He worked for a research lab for most of my childhood, and then for a start-up called Conductron that was trying to do tokamak fusion. They needed more cash flow, so they started a game division, which my father ran for a while. Then he had a heart attack, and then he became the Chair of the Computer Science Department at the University of Kentucky.

**Buxbaum:** Did you move down to Kentucky as well?

**Curtz:** No, I was already out of the house when my parents moved.

**Buxbaum:** His career was primarily in research and education?

**Curtz:** Yes.

**Buxbaum:** You were born in Clearfield, Pennsylvania.

**Curtz:** Yes.

**Buxbaum:** That caught my attention. But you didn't spend much time there, it sounds like.

**Curtz:** No, just my early childhood. I brought a few pictures. My mother's father was a Presbyterian minister. He had a church in Clearfield. I was born in 1943, so my father was in the Army. Here's my grandfather, Reverend Charles Reeve. So I think, for the first year and a half or two years of my life, I was basically doted on by my mother and my grandfather—certainly by my mother. My father came back in '45 or something, so my mother was in Clearfield basically from the time I was born until the end of the war.

**Buxbaum:** So you were the first-born for your parents?

**Curtz:** Yeah, the oldest one. I have a sister who is three and a half years younger than I am, and then a pair of brothers who are 10 and 11 years younger than I am.

**Buxbaum:** It sounds like your grandparents had some roots in Clearfield.

**Curtz:** Well, my grandfather had been the minister at the Presbyterian church in Clearfield for his whole career, except for a year he spent in Nebraska when he got out of divinity school. They were sent to a mission church in those days, so he had a year in Nebraska.

It's kind of funny. When my mother died, there was this whole collection, a big box of letters that my father had written to her while he was in the Army, more or less a letter a day. My sister took those home and she is now reading them and PDF-ing them and sending them out. It's a little eerie to read about my impending arrival in the world [laughter] through these old letters.

**Buxbaum:** What do you remember in particular?

**Curtz:** It's kind of funny. There's this poem called "My Grandmother's Love Letters" that Hart Crane wrote about finding these old letters in the attic, and about how complicated it feels to be reading his grandmother's private life. You just start out with your parents thinking they are this kind of uniform block. My mother and father, when I called them up on the phone, they used to both get on the telephone. For years, I thought about them as just "my parents." Period. And then you get to the point where you start thinking, gosh, let's see. When I was the age of my son, my parents must have been the age that I am, and their private lives must have been just as complicated a mine is. So, you have some kind of shift about your relationship to them.

**Buxbaum:** Yeah, the ongoing awakening of adulthood.

**Curtz:** Yeah. Anyway, both sides of my family are this kind of funny mix of Protestant, hardworking, white American middleclass-ness, and a kind of crazy streak. My grandfather, the Presbyterian minister, married a young woman of beauty. She had already had a breakdown—at least a couple of breakdowns—that her parents did not tell him about until after they were married. The family

diagnosis, in retrospect, was that she was bipolar, so she was in and out of a mental hospital of one kind or another for most of my mother's childhood, until she died when my mother was 13.

On the other side of the family, things are wilder, I guess. My great-grandmother was adopted by a couple of Erie, Pennsylvania farmers. [chuckles] The neighbors are supposed to have said that the Cooley's adopted one girl for the parlor and one girl for the pantry. My great-grandmother was the girl for the parlor.

When my grandmother was 19 or something, her mother and she moved to New York so she could go to the Art Students League. She married an Austrian Jew had immigrated to the United States as a teenager, and reinvented himself as an American and had become a stockbroker. He got involved at one point in his career with some kind of stock market swindle-scandal that he went to jail for. My father never talked about this once in my life.

So, on that side of the family, there's a certain amount of wildness as well as this long-time Yankee stability.

**Buxbaum:** Mathematician is a unique profession, from my frame of reference anyway. How did your father end up on that track? Do you know?

**Curtz:** Well, my father dropped out of high school during the Depression to work and help support his mother and his sister. He met my mother when she moved into the apartment that my grandmother had in the ground floor of her house in Cleveland. The family story is that he helped my mother move in, and he came upstairs and announced at the dinner table that he was going to marry that woman who had moved in downstairs. She was seven years older than he was at the point that they met. I think he must have been maybe 18. [chuckles] He's supposed to have taken other people who came to date her aside and told them that he was going to marry her, and that they had better treat her with due respect.

In the Army, they had a kind of crash program for giving college educations to people who looked promising when the Army tested them, so my father went and spent a year or something in some crash program like that. My mother gave him some giant book about mathematics for popular readers. I don't know whether that was how he first got interested in mathematics or what, but then he went to college on the G.I. Bill after the war and went off and did a Ph.D. in math at Yale. So he was a pretty good mathematician. I had this kind of childish image about how he had been a great mathematician, and whenever I said this, he replied, "No, I was a solidly respectable mathematician."

**Buxbaum:** How did your parents influence what you did with your education? Do you recall any particular wishes expressed by either your mother or your father?

**Curtz:** No. I don't think my parents ever said, "We really want you to become X, Y or Z." It was taken for granted in my family that school was important, and that you'd do well at school. But other than that, no. When you got to college, you had to say what you were going to major in, and people kept asking you. I think probably what I told people was that I thought I'd be a biologist. I had been a pretty serious, avid butterfly collector in my teenage years.

But when I got to college, the first two years in college, I signed up for this semi-interdisciplinary program that Yale ran called directed studies, mostly because you got small classes. It was all taught in seminars. It was only interdisciplinary in the sense that the art history track and the history track and the literature track and the philosophy track all proceeded in tandem chronologically. So you were studying Greek art in one class and Greek philosophy in one class and Greek literature in one class at the same time. But that was it. I don't know if the faculty ever talked to each other, and certainly there weren't any assignments to compare this with that that you're doing in some other class.

I majored in philosophy. Basically, I ran my college career pretty much by asking everybody who the really good teachers were, and signing up for whatever they were teaching. I became a philosophy major rather than a lit major because the list of required courses that you had to take if you were a philosophy major was shorter than the list of required courses that you had to take if you were a literature major, so it left more room for signing up for other things that looked interesting.

**Buxbaum:** You landed in Yale in 1961. I'm interested in hearing more about your time at Yale. First, I'm curious, how did you land in Yale? What was the process of deciding that's where you were going to go? You had spent some formative time in New Haven. What was the attraction?

**Curtz:** No. I applied to various fancy colleges, and it was a considerable shock to me to be turned down by Swarthmore and Harvard. Yale admitted me and the University of Michigan admitted me, and I think those four places were the only places I'd applied. So, it was pretty simple from that point of view. [chuckles] I wasn't going to go to the University of Michigan if I could possibly help it. I'd stay in my hometown.

**Buxbaum:** Was there such a thing as a safe school application back then?

**Curtz:** Yeah, the University of Michigan was a safe school application.

**Buxbaum:** So, you gravitated toward Yale. Applying to fancy schools, was there an expectation that you'd go to a fancy school? Was that something that you were just hoping for, or was it an expectation?

**Curtz:** I've always been a very good student. There were a lot of other things that I wasn't very good at [laughing] that mattered in teenaged life, but I was very good at school, and liked school. I don't think

my parents gave me much of any advice about where to apply, although I assumed that they took it for granted that I would apply to places like Yale and Harvard and Swarthmore.

**Buxbaum:** You already spoke a little bit about—was it actually called interdisciplinary studies at Yale?

**Curtz:** Directed studies.

**Buxbaum:** Thank you. Was directed studies something that was available to any incoming freshman?

**Curtz:** Yeah, you could just apply to it anyway. I don't know whether there was some process, but if there was, it wasn't—there was some limit about how big the directed studies program was, but I don't know anything about the process of deciding who got in was. But there certainly were no interviews, or a long competitive application or something. I just checked some box saying I'd like to do it, and the college said, "Okay, you're there."

**Buxbaum:** How big were the classes?

**Curtz:** Oh, they were Evergreen-seminar size, you know, 15 students, the size that the Evergreen seminars were at the very beginning. And faculty, I think I had very good teachers, relatively speaking, especially in the first couple of years that I was at college, because they were people who were interested enough in teaching to want to volunteer for this program.

**Buxbaum:** When you were a freshman, do you remember what your response was when you were pressed to say what you were going to study, what you were going to major in?

**Curtz:** Oh, my whole educational career, I tried to postpone. I and all my friends used to say, "Well, we're keeping our options open." [chuckles] At some point, I had to declare a major, and I told you how I did that. My parents never said, "Well, what are you going to do with your life? What kind of job are you going to get if you major in philosophy?" There were never any questions like that in my family.

**Buxbaum:** You were at Yale from 1961 to about 1965?

**Curtz:** Yeah.

**Buxbaum:** The sixties were a pretty event-packed decade. How did the political and social events of that time influence your direction, particularly in terms of your college and career?

**Curtz:** Politics just started impacting, I think, American colleges in general as I was finishing my college career. The really big occupying of Columbia and so on happened after I graduated. The big political event was that William Sloane Coffin was taking Yale students South—I don't remember whether during my whole college career, but certainly during the last couple of years of it—to ride buses and to campaign for civil rights in the South. It didn't occur to me—I don't know if it didn't occur to me, but I certainly didn't go.

The year I graduated, the philosophy department denied tenure to the teacher who had been way and away—well, one of the two teachers that mattered the most to me in college. And there was, I think, the first set of campus protests about college decisions at Yale. There were a bunch after that, but we picketed and wrote letters to the papers and did all sorts of things like that for six months about it.

Other than that, I arrived at Yale running scared, having been turned down by Harvard and Swarthmore. [laughing] I did a few things, but basically I was a student when I was at Yale.

**Buxbaum:** Denial of tenure is capital punishment for a place like Yale. It sounds like that was a big deal.

**Curtz:** Yale ran on the principle that hardly anybody—hardly any junior faculty—got tenure; that you having taught at Yale was enough to guarantee you a good job someplace else if they didn't give you tenure, and you shouldn't expect to get it at all.

**Buxbaum:** It wasn't explicit that it was denial of tenure due to certain political actions of behavior?

**Curtz:** No. It was messy, and I thought that the various members of the philosophy department behaved very badly in the course of it, but it wasn't about politics at all. Maybe it was about academic politics of a certain kind, about [Bernstein having certain notions about what mattered about doing philosophy that didn't fit with the notions of various other members of the department. But it certainly wasn't about his taking public political stances of any kind.

**Buxbaum:** It sounds like Yale was a small enough student community that some of this stuff was fairly apparent. It sounds like you were witnessing some of the details of either the action—

**Curtz:** Oh, yeah. It was in the *New York Times*. There were letters from the Yale faculty in the *New York Times*. We marched up and down with picket signs outside the President's office for quite a while. The graduate students, too, not just the undergraduates.

**Buxbaum:** I see. When you were at Yale, where did you live?

**Curtz:** Yale had residential colleges at that point. You had to be married to get permission from the college to live off campus. They have a freshman quadrangle that all the freshmen live in the first year, and then there's a lottery for residential colleges, and you move into a suite in the residential colleges with three or four other people.

**Buxbaum:** Was it a fun place to go to school?

**Curtz:** Uh, it was very exciting. I don't know that I'd say I had fun. I worked really hard. I had a great time. As far as being a student goes, it was a terrific place. There weren't any women at the college at all, so if you wanted to date anybody, you hopped in a car and drove off, 120 miles across New England, to some women's college. Drank beer and danced for two hours, and then piled into the car and drove

home again. Or, people came for weekends. But I didn't have a lot of money. I was on scholarship. I didn't have money to put up somebody at a hotel room, particularly. And my father was sort of funny and complicated about money. He simultaneously wanted to behave as if money was no object, and he was anxious about it his whole life. He was very generous about it, but he also made me feel, one way or another, that I needed to not spend any money I could avoid spending.

**Buxbaum:** After Yale, a Fulbright took you to Paris for a year; starting in the fall of 1966, that's where you were. Why Paris?

**Curtz:** Well, the war in Vietnam was going on, so if you were my age in 1965, you had four choices maybe. You could go to Canada, you could go to jail, you could go to Vietnam, or you could go to graduate school. So, I had to do one of those. [laughing] Given those options, I knew which one seemed the most desirable to me.

I'd studied French in college for four years, so my French was reasonably good. I had studied French in high school my whole high school career. I thought about, gosh, I'd like to go to France. I went to see one of my philosophy teachers and said, "All right, I'd like to apply for a Fulbright to France. What can I do there?" He told me what he thought would be interesting, and I wrote a proposal to do that and got it.

My parents—my father especially—got to be really interested in wine, and ran a little wine importing business with a few of his friends on the side. When I was in high school, these trucks used to arrive, and he and his friends and I and various other people, who had ordered cases of wine through this process, would show up and unload all these wooden cases of wine off the back of the truck. Both my parents were very interested in cooking and food.

So, there were a lot of reasons for me to want to go to France of that kind. I would have learned more philosophy if I had stayed in the United States in graduate school, but being in Paris for a year was nice.

**Buxbaum:** What were some of the highs and lows of being in Paris?

**Curtz:** Well, Paris. [chuckles] I lived in a maid's room on the very roof of one of these old Paris apartment buildings—red tile floors, teeny little garret room, which I thought was pretty romantic at the time, squat toilet down the hall. All the rest of the rooms were migrant workers, I think, probably, certainly most of them—Spaniards who were working in Paris doing one thing or another, families and kids.

It was right across the river from the Louvre. On my Fulbright salary, I was relatively rich compared to lots of French students. I had a little restaurant that I went to and had dinner. I walked

over across the river and looked at the paintings. Walked around Paris. Went traveling some at the end of this. Rode around—rented a car with a bunch of other Fulbright students and went out to Mont Saint Michel and Normandy. At the very end, I rode around Burgundy and the south of France with a couple of art history students who were going to look at Romanesque churches. Life was good.

**Buxbaum:** Yes, sounds like life was good. But in '66-'67, there was a considerable escalation in Vietnam.

**Curtz:** Yes. Also, I met Jo in Paris. She was on a Fulbright, too.

**Buxbaum:** Maybe you should say something about that. Where did she come from?

**Curtz:** She'd been at Mills studying French literature, and she'd written a Fulbright proposal. The Fulbrights are handed out—I think, still—on a regional basis, so every state has a certain quota—I think state, maybe region—of how many Fulbrights. So it's a lot easier to get a Fulbright from some places in the country than it is from others. Michigan is probably somewhere in the middle about that.

She was in Cannes—she wasn't in Paris—but we met in a dormitory at the Fulbright orientation. She ended up traveling back and forth between Normandy and Paris a fair amount. A rocky relationship, off and on.

**Buxbaum:** It sounds like it withstood the rocks, though.

**Curtz:** Yeah.

**Buxbaum:** I'm curious to follow up a little bit more on that. First though, in terms of other aspects of life in Paris, was Vietnam a backdrop in Paris at all? Were there demonstrations there?

**Curtz:** Very slightly. The French weren't fighting. The French were done in Vietnam. They'd already been through that. The year after I left, Paris blew up essentially in '68. But to the extent that I knew anything about what was going on, there were very vague rumblings about student unrest in places like Nanterre, where the student strikes started in '68.

**Buxbaum:** So, you missed the big strike actions?

**Curtz:** Yeah.

**Buxbaum:** You came back and you landed in Yale Law, but it sounds like it was a short-lived experience, a semester and a half.

**Curtz:** Yeah. I figured out that I didn't want to be a philosophy teacher. And then I had to do something in graduate school. I may even had been admitted to Yale Law and deferred it for a year when I got this Fulbright. I think maybe I had been.

Anyway, law school was what you did if you wanted to keep your options open. Then I could write a letter to my draft board saying, "Please extend my student deferment. Here's what I'm going to



do.” It got a little complicated because you were supposed to demonstrate that you were carrying on a coherent course of study. [laughing] So when I switched around three times, it got to be a little complicated. Eventually, they called me up after I was in graduate school at Santa Cruz, but it turned out my eyes were too bad for the Army to want me.

**Buxbaum:** When you came back, did you come back with Jo?

**Curtz:** Yeah. We spent a year in New Haven. Jo worked as the master’s secretary in one of the residential colleges and I went to law school. And I figured out that I didn’t want to be a lawyer.

**Buxbaum:** Which perhaps that wasn’t a super-serious choice, at least initially.

**Curtz:** I had a funny conversation with my Fulbright advisor, who I only talked to about twice when I was in Paris. He said, “You are not going to want to be a lawyer.” And I assured him that that was not correct. [laughing] But he was right.

**Buxbaum:** When you were at Yale, did you have one advisor throughout your entire student career?

**Curtz:** You were supposed to have an advisor. I think maybe I met once with my advisor. The advising system was basically not functioning.

**Buxbaum:** So the advisors didn’t play a super role. How did you make use of advisors there? Were they just a sounding board when needed?

**Curtz:** I didn’t.

**Buxbaum:** Was there any mandatory aspect of talking to an advisor before entering Yale Law School?

**Curtz:** I think you were supposed to—not for the Law School at all—I think you were supposed to talk—you got a reading list over the summer and it said, “Please read all of these books, as many as you can, because your advisor will have a conversation with you about them.” I was working in a Ford plant on the assembly line that summer, and I’d come home and go sit beside the swimming pool somewhere or the other and try to read these books. I was very dutiful; I read a bunch of them. But I got there and went to see the advisor and he never mentioned any of these books! [laughing] We had a cursory conversation. He said, “You’re in directed studies. That sounds fine. That will take care of your curriculum for the next two years.”

You didn’t have any choice in directed studies. There was this package of five things that you signed up for. One of them was a biology class, which was significantly less interesting—at least to me—than the other classes in the humanities. If I had had a really good science class at that point, I might have changed what I decided I wanted to do—I don’t know—but this was pretty nothing.

And I worked. I had this scholarship job. I started out bussing in the college dining hall, which I didn’t want to do, and wheeled and dealed and got myself—I’d worked a little bit at the University of

Michigan Museum in the butterfly collection, so I got a scholarship job at the museum at Yale, which turned out to be mostly tending an entire room full of tropical cockroaches in metal boxes.

You'd walk in and the whole room would rustle. They were tropical because they wanted to make sure that if they escaped, they didn't infest the steam pipes, so they were in a climate-controlled room. They couldn't live outside. It was hot, it was steamy. And I wasn't smart enough to figure out that if you became a geneticist and worked on cockroaches that you'd have some scholarship student to deal with the cockroaches; that you wouldn't have to do it. [laughter] I think that probably also decreased my interest in pursuing biology.

**Buxbaum:** Ah. So butterflies were one thing but cockroaches were another.

**Curtz:** Yeah.

**Buxbaum:** Interesting. You worked each summer that you were at Yale.

**Curtz:** Yeah.

**Buxbaum:** Busboy, museum—was that the first summer?

**Curtz:** The first summer, I bussed in the University of Michigan cafeteria, and sold subscription tickets to the University of Michigan theater program on commission. The second summer, I worked at Ford. And the next two summers, I worked at the research lab doing computer programming at the research lab where my dad worked.

**Buxbaum:** Did you get that job that your father alerted you that that was an opportunity?

**Curtz:** Yeah. My father may even had gone to work and said, "You, my kid needs a job. We're hiring some people for the summer. Why don't we hire him?"

My father taught me to program—I was 17, I suppose—on this gigantic machine at the University of Michigan, which occupied the entire basement of the building. It used punch cards, huge stacks. I think the only thing he ever said about this that I remember is he thought all of his children ought to have a trade, just so you could earn a living honorably if you ever decided you wanted to not do something else.

**Buxbaum:** He was really framing computer programming as a trade.

**Curtz:** Yeah.

**Buxbaum:** Was there anything interesting about that to you? Was it a satisfying occupation? It sounds like it was better than being a busboy.

**Curtz:** Yeah, much better. I didn't like being a busboy purely for social reasons. I've kept computer programming my whole life in an amateur way. My father sent Eli and me—when Eli was about 10 maybe—the first actual affordable programmable computer, a Sinclair ZX80. It had built-in BASIC; a

little tape deck that you stored your programs on; used a TV screen as the monitor. But you could actually write programs in it. It had 8K of memory, and for another \$350 you could buy the 16K add-on.  
[laughing]

So, I kind of dinked around with Eli, programming on that machine. Then we kind of progressively, every few years, we'd buy the most computer that you could buy for \$450, so we went through a whole series of increasingly more powerful machines.

**Buxbaum:** It sounds like that would have been about 1980-1981.

**Curtz:** Yeah.

**Buxbaum:** And a fun package, it sounds like, for you and Eli to receive from your father.

**Curtz:** Yeah, it was a fun thing for us to do. We wrote little asteroid videogames and stuff like that. You could steer around the little cross ship and the little V-shaped ship and get them to fire rockets at each other.

**Buxbaum:** Was there ever any thought back in the 1960s about going in that direction, around computer programming?

**Curtz:** You mean for me?

**Buxbaum:** Yeah, for you. No. It was really just that initial time working in the lab in Ann Arbor, but something that stayed with you in terms of a level of confidence and comfort.

**Curtz:** Yeah.

**Buxbaum:** I think we'll probably come back to that a little bit later when we talk about your time at Evergreen, because there seems to be a thread that goes beyond just the Pac-Man.

**Curtz:** Yeah. When the Internet started to be important, and it wasn't easy to use, I thought that the support the college was providing faculty about how to use it was really lame. So I ran a kind of e-mail help-service for people for a number of years, where I sent out little papers about "Here's how to do X if you want to do it, and here's how to do Y. If you want to know how to do something else, write to me and we can talk about it."

**Buxbaum:** Yeah. So, your education trail picks up at UC Santa Cruz. How did you end up there?

**Curtz:** This guy—Harry Berger—that I'd studied with at Yale—there were bunches of people—everybody who had mattered to me, really mattered to me as teachers at Yale—came up for tenure at more or less the same time, and none of them got tenure. Harry was one of them. I think that this happened the year after I left Yale while I was in France.

So, he went off to Santa Cruz where this new college was starting at UC Santa Cruz. He was one of the founding faculty there, along with a couple of other young people from the Yale English

Department—three, I guess—that he took along with him. I'd studied with him for two years. I really liked the work he was doing. I needed to do something else to stay in graduate school with my draft board. If you asked me, I would have said, "Well, I'm keeping my options open." A few years later, married with a little son, one day I said to myself, well, this is my actual life here. I probably ought to stop saying that I'm keeping my options open [laughing] and embrace it for what it is.

**Buxbaum:** Did Jo follow you to UC Santa Cruz?

**Curtz:** Yeah, we got married that summer before we went to Santa Cruz.

**Buxbaum:** That would have been '67?

**Curtz:** Yeah. She was in the graduate program, too, for a while. Then she dropped out. She'd already followed me to New Haven without being married to me, and I think it would have been a difficult issue with her parents if she had followed me across the country again without being married.

**Buxbaum:** You worked with Berger. Can you describe a little bit of his framework of the "ecology of the mind"?

**Curtz:** Sure. He started out as a Renaissance literary critic. He got really interested, first, in this issue about "second worlds" in Renaissance culture, this thing that happens in painting, where the surface of the painting gradually turns out to be a window through which you can look into an imagined world. It's not exactly the real world, but bears certain complicated relations to it.

There are a lot of things like this in Renaissance culture. Shakespeare's stage is a second world space like that. The imaginary, experimental spaces that scientists like Galileo create, which are not exactly the real world, they're simplified versions of the real world that you can enter and work in, and then go back to the real world from. Machiavelli's *Prince*, their utopias are like this. There are a lot of things in Renaissance that are really centrally interested in this phenomenon.

After working on that for a while—when I started studying with Harry, he was teaching Cultural History: Foregrounds of Western Literature or Western Culture it was called. It tried to do cultural history through close interpretation of literary texts and others things, like political theory texts, Galileo's two world systems. He worked on all kinds of stuff. But he was working, by the time I got to Santa Cruz—I guess even before I got to Santa Cruz—on this kind of grand theory about cultural evolution, which was about the shifting relations between realities, appearances and interpretations over cultural development, in the West anyway.

There's a famous Nietzsche quote about this, about the classics. He says, "The Greeks knew and felt the terror of existence, and interposed between it and themselves the radiant figures of the Olympian gods."

So, from one point of view, all reality is cultural creations, projections and so on. But the cultural understanding of the status of those creations shifts, importantly and dramatically, over cultural history. So, you start in a world in which those projections are taken to be reality. People really believe in the gods; they don't think that they are human fictions. That doesn't occur to them, but Zeus and Hera look an awful lot like Greek paterfamilias and families. Gradually—this got complicated—you progressively elaborate on those constructions to support and defend them, and to continue to make them believable. And as time goes on, this is kind of a paradoxical problem, because the more you tie them up and elaborate them, the more conspicuous the fact that they are human inventions become.

And so culturally, historically this process reaches a kind of crisis point in the early Roman Empire, at which all the old forms are still there—the Tribes, the Senate and so on—but they've all been hollowed out. Everybody understands that the gods are human inventions. And it's hard for human beings to live with that; that there's nothing really out there except fictions.

What happens, in Harry's view, is that you execute some maneuver in order to restore transcendence in the system. Somebody like Augustine comes along and downgrades the current system; says, in *The City of God*, "Yeah, those gods are nothing but human fantasy. But, beyond that, there really is something out there." There are lots of literary, rhetorical, theoretical strategies that you employ to create a new kind of set of representations that will be believable, and will function to restore that sense of transcendence. So, in the Gospels, you have these narrators that are conspicuously simple, down-home. They are not fancy Roman rhetoricians.

Then that process happens again. The medieval church progressively elaborates and elaborates and elaborates its theology, and eventually you get to a point—and this happens in literary structures and all kinds of other things, too—you get to a point at which, all through the Middle Ages, the fundamental understanding is there are realities; there are appearances; the appearances are closely linked to the realities; and interpretation is a kind of poor third cousin. Interpretations are completely dependent on elaborating what's there in the appearances.

You get to the Renaissance, this same kind of process happens in the Protestant Reformation. The Protestants come in and they say, "It's right, and the Catholic—all this stuff about indulgences, and that's Purgatory—that's human fiction. But there really is something transcendent out there, which we can get back to through our contact with the Holy Spirit and the Gospels." And a whole set of new rhetorical maneuvers for doing that, and a pretty profound shift in the understanding of the relations between realities, appearances and interpretations. Because interpretation, instead of being third hand

and dependent on the appearances, the appearances suddenly turn out to be only—you have to have interpretation to get beyond the appearances in order to have some chance of getting at the realities.

Basically, that's the kind of thing that Harry was interested in, except that he tried to show how that process worked out in all sorts of cultural stuff—not just in literature and not just in art history, but in various pieces of writing about science, and in political theory, and in social structure and kinds of other things.

So I'd had a lot of exposure to that, what with doing two years' worth of a senior seminar with him at Yale, and then going to graduate school. The first year Jo and I went to graduate school, we went to Santa Cruz in a program called History of Consciousness, which partly existed because they didn't have enough faculty to run a literature program on its own, and partly existing because there were a lot of people that were interested in thinking about cultural history in this interdisciplinary way, one way or another. The next year, they had a lit program, and we transferred into that.

**Buxbaum:** Were you deeply captured by what Berger had constructed?

**Curtz:** Yeah.

**Buxbaum:** It sounds also like some of it was—he was talking about ecology of mind at Yale, I assume.

**Curtz:** Yeah, just started writing about this at Yale.

**Buxbaum:** Is it fair to characterize that was in the process of invention?

**Curtz:** Yeah, he was teaching. He was already teaching something that started with Homer and did Plato's *Dialogues* and kind of did More's *Utopia* and worked with a lot of different kinds of texts, not just standard literature. He got to Santa Cruz, and Cal College had a full-year required core program at that point, and Harry ran that. It was about this stuff, doing Western civilization through this kind of framework that he had been working on.

**Buxbaum:** Sounds like he was having a good time.

**Curtz:** Oh, yeah. He's still writing. He's 92 or something and he's still publishing.

**Buxbaum:** In some ways, you got to witness him having a good time, and participate in a way. Important relationship.

**Curtz:** Yeah.

**Buxbaum:** You transferred to literature. It sounded like that in some ways was maybe the ground was a little bit newer. Was there any particular aspect of why you went that direction in that school?

**Curtz:** I'd gone to Santa Cruz to study with Harry, and he was in the lit program, so I was in the lit program.

**Buxbaum:** Okay, so you followed him over there.

**Curtz:** And there were various other people. The most interesting people on the faculty, to me, were the people in the graduate lit program.

**Buxbaum:** Mervin Cadwallader, was he at Santa Cruz at that time?

**Curtz:** No, he was at San Jose State, I think, or maybe he was already at Old Westbury by then. I don't know.

**Buxbaum:** Thank you. I got that confused. I'll straighten that out a little bit later in the interview.

**Curtz:** The only person—Dick Jones was at Santa Cruz, and I think Dick Jones had some small part anyway in my eventually getting hired at Evergreen, because he'd left Santa Cruz to be on the founding faculty at Evergreen.

**Buxbaum:** Richard Jones, or Dick Jones, came up as one of the planning faculty, so he would have been 1971.

**Curtz:** Yeah, and the first year I looked for a job was the year that the bottom fell out of the market for Ph.Ds. Everybody who had been forecasting job growth turned out to be wrong. Jo and I were living as resident preceptors in one of the dormitories in Cal College at that point, with Eli. I got tired of all these students that were kind of friends of ours asking me how my job search was going, so I started posting my rejection letters. I sent out 225 letters or something to colleges and didn't get a job, so the whole stairway was lined with rejection letters.

The faculty felt badly about that, I think, and managed to put together a lecturer position for me to teach at Santa Cruz for a year while I looked for a job again. I think probably when I told Harry or somebody that I was applying to Santa Cruz—that it looked interesting—I think he probably sent Dick Jones a note or called him up or something and recommended me.

**Buxbaum:** When you first applied to Evergreen?

**Curtz:** I never heard that but I assume that was the case.

**Buxbaum:** I want to go back to something you touched on to see if there is any more to the story in terms of your recollection. At some point during your college career—and it sounds like this may have happened when you were in Santa Cruz—you did make a decision that you were going to teach, you were going to go down that path.

**Curtz:** Yeah.

**Buxbaum:** Can you say a little bit more about what you recall of your thinking at the time? What made you go that direction?

**Curtz:** When I got out of college—certainly when I got out of high school—if you'd asked me what I wanted to do, the one thing I would have told you with some confidence was that I didn't want to be a

teacher. My father had always wanted to be a teacher and eventually became one. Partly, I made this decision the way I told you. There I was. I pretty clearly was not going to be in position as far as my draft board was concerned to go off somewhere else yet again and tell them, “Well, this is still a continuous course of study.” So, in a certain way, I arrived at a point where, as I said, it was clear that this is actually what I’m doing and I’m going to be doing.

It was a perfect career for me. I’d always liked being a student. I’d always been really good at it. I really liked teaching. Why not? [laughing]

**Buxbaum:** Yeah. I don’t know if this happened, but when you and Jo were first talking about what you each were going to do, what kinds of conversations did you have?

**Curtz:** I don’t think we talked like that. Jo went to Santa Cruz—she was already not that interested in getting a Ph.D. I think they probably let her in because they wanted me to come there, and we were a package. She wrote a kind of flippant letter of application about what she wanted to do. But we didn’t have any long, complicated discussions about “Do you think this is the best thing you want to do with your life?” Jo said, “Well, I’m going to drop out.” And I said, “Oh? Okay. You really sure about that?” She said, “Yeah.” And that was about it. I don’t think we had a much more complicated conversation than that about my saying, “Well, I guess this is what I’m going to do.”

**Buxbaum:** What was it like, that sort of first job, doing some teaching in Santa Cruz? Was that your first teaching job?

**Curtz:** No, I’d taught as a teaching assistant already for a couple of years. I taught in the core program that Harry was running for Cal College. There were Harry’s lectures and this massive set of handouts that he did week by week. He was writing a book, basically, and handing out the pieces of the book as he was going along. And then there were a whole bunch of seminars that were run by the teaching assistants that read stuff that was connected to the main readings, and you had a certain amount of freedom about what you did for the reading list you picked. Probably because there were a lot of different people teaching these sections. I taught those for probably two years maybe, maybe three. And then I taught this lectureship probably . . . probably for three years as a teaching assistant.

**Buxbaum:** So that was your formative time. When you were writing letters of application all over the place it sounds like, was it really just to find a job? It didn’t sound like you had an opportunity to pursue something specific. It was almost as if, when you were first applying, you were going to have to take what you got.



**Curtz:** Well, I don't think I would have turned down a job teaching. Well, maybe. The University of Alaska at Fairbanks was interested in a Chaucerian, and was somewhat interested in hiring me. After I looked up what teaching and living in Fairbanks would be like, I decided I didn't want to go there.

When I got this job at Evergreen, I was, I thought, about to be hired at Colgate. I wrote—called up maybe—Evergreen. They had been hanging there for quite a long time. I said, "I have to have a decision from you guys because I'm probably going to get a job offer when I go out to visit these people next, and I need to know whether you're going to hire me or not." So I did turn down Colgate in favor of Evergreen—sort of, not quite.

**Buxbaum:** I want to pick up on that story. This concludes segment one with Thad Curtz. We will be back in a moment for segment two.

**End Part 1 of 2 of Thad Curtz on June 29, 2018**

**Begin Part 2 of 2 of Thad Curtz on June 29, 2018**

**Buxbaum:** This is the beginning of segment two, Stephen Buxbaum and Thad Curtz. I want to pick up where we left off about Evergreen. You alluded to this just briefly, but help me understand, how did you first hear about Evergreen? Do you recall how you first heard about it?

**Curtz:** No, I don't think so. I think somebody at Santa Cruz must have told me about it, but I don't remember who it was.

**Buxbaum:** Of course, you were immersed in a job search, and you were in those at least initial discussions with Colgate, so that was going on in the background. It doesn't sound like you didn't necessarily feel that you were in a position to target your applications to particular places.

**Curtz:** No. There are not that many jobs for Chaucerians. [laughter] So it was much more a question of looking at the job listings and saying, all right, these are the people who are looking to hire somebody who might be something like me and then sending them letters.

**Buxbaum:** Evergreen, of course, was in this mix of alternative colleges. There were a number of them around there. But just to clarify, it wasn't that you were targeting experimental colleges.

**Curtz:** Nope, I was looking for a job. Although I'd done a lot that meant that Evergreen was attractive and a good fit.

**Buxbaum:** Yeah. And in part, it sounds like there was a network in place that helped that a little bit . . .

**Curtz:** I think so.

**Buxbaum:** . . . between Berger and Jones and their connections. So, you interviewed there. I'm assuming you sent off an application. Did you make any particular pitch to Evergreen what you thought might be unique for that college?

**Curtz:** I don't remember. I assume I said something about having done interdisciplinary work at Yale, and about my having worked in the core program at Santa Cruz, and maybe something about having done this work in the residential colleges. I lived in a residential college at Yale, and Jo and I had been preceptors in this residential college at Santa Cruz, so we had been kind of actively involved in what I guess—I don't know if I had the label then—in kind of learning communities in various ways.

**Buxbaum:** McCann interviewed you?

**Curtz:** No, Charlie Teske interviewed me in a hotel room in New York at the MLA [Modern Language Association] Conference.

**Buxbaum:** Was it just serendipitous that you were both there?

**Curtz:** No, Charlie was there because the college was looking to hire people, and I was there because everybody who looks for a job in English goes to the MLA Conference, and that's where all the interviews for the year happen. It centralizes everything.

**Buxbaum:** What was that like? What did it look like? Were you just in a hotel room?

**Curtz:** Yeah, we were just in a hotel room. That's how they did it then.

**Buxbaum:** Was there a line of folks?

**Curtz:** Actually, sometimes these days, I don't think people do it in hotel rooms anymore. When Evergreen does it, we rent a conference room or something and interview people there.

**Buxbaum:** Did you have a perception or a notion that it was a competitive position?

**Curtz:** I don't know whether I knew it at the time, but the college was enormously popular when it first opened. Somebody told me at some point that they had 1,000 applicants for this first set of jobs. I don't know whether I knew that or not.

**Buxbaum:** Did you prepare at all for the interview?

**Curtz:** Particularly, I think I probably knew something about Evergreen and what Evergreen was supposed to be like before I did this interview, but I don't really remember.

**Buxbaum:** What did Charlie ask?

**Curtz:** I guess I told you the other day, mostly Charlie just talked. [laughter] I hardly said anything in the course of this interview. I don't remember what he asked at all.

**Buxbaum:** Do you remember what he talked about?

**Curtz:** No. He talked about the college a fair amount, I think.

**Buxbaum:** Did you know much about him at that point?

**Curtz:** No, I'd never met him before.

**Buxbaum:** Just a guy in a room doing an interview?

**Curtz:** Just a guy in a room, yeah.

**Buxbaum:** At the end of the interview, did you think you were going to get the job?

**Curtz:** Oh, I had no idea.

**Buxbaum:** How did the offer come through?

**Curtz:** Well, there was this long pause when I didn't hear anything from the college.

**Buxbaum:** How long?

**Curtz:** I don't know. The MLA is over Christmas holiday, so it must have been, oh, three or four months probably at least.

**Buxbaum:** That was Christmas 1970?

**Curtz:** 1971. As I said before, I got to this point where I called them up and said, "Well, are you going to hire me or not?" I think maybe they even said, "Yes," on the phone, or said, "Well, we'll call you back." I heard back very rapidly anyway after that. They sent me the paperwork.

**Buxbaum:** Do you remember who you heard back from?

**Curtz:** I think just somebody official. I don't remember who. I don't know whether I talked to one of the Hiring Deans or just whatever secretary was in charge of managing hiring when I talked on the phone, but I didn't have a long conversation. I just said, "If you're going to hire me, you need to do it now, because otherwise I'm probably going to take this other job."

**Buxbaum:** That was January '71?

**Curtz:** No, that would have been January '72.

**Buxbaum:** Thanks. Do you remember what the terms were, when you were supposed to show up there?

**Curtz:** That fall. We moved to Olympia in 1972. Evergreen was like a miniature version of Santa Cruz. [laughing] Tacoma was like a miniature San Jose. Olympia was like a miniature city of Santa Cruz. Seattle was like a miniature San Francisco.

**Buxbaum:** Interesting. So, you got the word in January '72. Eli wasn't even one yet.

**Curtz:** He was just one. He was born Christmas Day 1970, so he had just turned one.

**Buxbaum:** How did you go about preparing for this odyssey up to Washington State?

**Curtz:** Well, we moved up here with friends of ours from Olympia. We were thinking that we were going to live together. Then we went off somewhere, I guess for my father's funeral, and came back and the friends, Lester and Candice, had bought a house while we were gone. They were kind of apologetic about it, but they said that they'd figured out that they just couldn't manage to do this.

We had two apartments. We moved up here at the end of academic year in 1971. Moved up in the summer.

**Buxbaum:** End of the academic year in '72?

**Curtz:** In '72, yeah.

**Buxbaum:** Had Candace been hired by the college?

**Curtz:** No, no. Candace wasn't teaching at all then. She hadn't even been to graduate school at that point.

**Buxbaum:** So they just happened to be moving to Olympia?

**Curtz:** She was getting divorced. They were getting out of Santa Cruz. Candace kind of grew up in the Northwest in the San Juans and various other places, so this seemed like as good a place as any.

**Buxbaum:** So, you came up in the summer of '72. What were your first impressions? It sounds like you had some comparisons between California and Washington.

**Curtz:** It was kind of interesting structurally. Olympia was a teeny town then. It probably was still the same way when you were here. There were several working kind of gypo logging operations downtown, one right across the street from where Childhood's End is. There was one movie theater in town. The first time we were here, it showed *Snow White* the entire summer [laughter] starting in May and running till September or something. I looked in the paper to see about restaurants and there was a restaurant that advertised "Fine wines, excellent cigars," or, "Fine dining, excellent cigars." That was Ben Moore's. [laughing] That was about it.

**Buxbaum:** I-5 wasn't built yet, so there was no Interstate 5 coming through town.

**Curtz:** I don't even remember about that. I think I-5 must have been there, must have just recently been there, because I would have remembered building the freeway and I don't.

We lived out on Cooper Point. We rented an apartment, two duplexes, with Candace and Lester right next door that first summer. Tried to plant a garden. My lettuce all got about that high because I didn't lime anything, I think. I watered it very faithfully, but that was it. That was about as big as it grew. Then they bought a house in town and we bought a little teeny house out on Cooper Point. Lived out there for a few years, and then moved into town; rented a house in town and then bought the house that we're in now.

**Buxbaum:** Did you meet any other faculty initially? Was there any kind of reception in the summer that involved you with campus life or college life?

**Curtz:** Not much anyway. I don't remember whether there as some kind of get-together or not, but I think things just started when contracts started in the fall.

**Buxbaum:** Was that just in September?

**Curtz:** Yeah, there was some kind of orientation period.

**Buxbaum:** What was your recollection of the campus at that point? What was your first day on campus like?

**Curtz:** The students were already talking about how the college had sold out and gone downhill, and it wasn't nearly as good, as experimental and radical as it had been the first year when the buildings weren't done and programs had been meeting all over town.

There wasn't a lot. There was the Library, there was the lecture halls. There was a science building maybe. One of the important things structurally was the college had a lot of room at that point, and so when you taught a coordinated studies program, you got a set of offices and a lounge space that just belonged to the program. Your office was right next to the other offices of the other faculty who were teaching with you, and you had this meeting space for the program that was just yours, so you could put up stuff and do whatever you wanted to with it. After a while, that went away for reasons of space and pressure, I guess. I thought it was too bad. I thought that was a really helpful physical thing, for the program to have a spatial identity.

**Buxbaum:** Going back to those first few days when you arrived on campus, was there an orientation session?

**Curtz:** Yeah, of some kind, but I don't remember anything about it.

**Buxbaum:** Were you handed a program to teach that first year?

**Curtz:** Yeah, basically. It was probably the most suitable program for me to teach, too. It was some version of this dream program of Mervin's. I think this one was called Democracy and Tyranny, I think, and it was Athens and America.

**Buxbaum:** So there was a bit of a template there?

**Curtz:** Yeah.

**Buxbaum:** And a good fit for your background.

**Curtz:** And I think people had probably been planning already. In fact, I'm pretty sure Nancy Taylor and Richard Brian were in it. I think they'd already done a bunch of planning, because books had to be ordered and that kind of stuff.

**Buxbaum:** Were there just two other faculty?

**Curtz:** No, it was big. It was Nancy and Richard and Mark Levinsky and me. I think there were just four of us and 80-some students.

**Buxbaum:** Nancy and Richard and Mark had been in that first year of hiring?

**Curtz:** No, Richard had been on the planning faculty. Mark was just arriving that year, I think. Nancy had been hired to run Admissions and sort of migrated into the faculty, so she had been around.

**Buxbaum:** The structure of the teaching, did you have a faculty seminar to start with?

**Curtz:** Oh, yeah.

**Buxbaum:** Was that how you were really introduced to your teaching partners that first program year?

**Curtz:** We must have had some planning. They must have done a bunch of planning already, at least for the first quarter. We certainly planned the last quarter collaboratively, and I assume the second quarter, too.

I assume we kind of sat down when we started working and they said, “Well, okay, hello. Here’s what we’ve done so far. Here’s the books we’ve already ordered. What else do you think we should do?”

**Buxbaum:** Did you have any sense at that point of the structure of what was expected of you as a faculty coming in and delivering something that was specifically Evergreen?

**Curtz:** It was pretty much specifically Evergreen in the context of this program was pretty much just what I had done at Yale and what I had done at Santa Cruz. It was seminars about texts in the humanities and lecturing. We did a couple of things that I probably would not have done at a regular college. I’d done a lot of theater when I was in high school and a little in college, so at the end of the year, I wrote and put on this gigantic theatrical event in the Library lobby with all sorts of jokes about the material that we had done in the program. Everybody had t-shirts that they wore. We just advertised it to the college, and some audience showed up and we did it.

We did this thing called “The Mother” for the spring. We were doing contemporary American stuff and we looked at a bunch of stuff written by women, none of which seemed quite right. I’m sure it must have been Mark who said, “Why don’t we have them study their mothers?” So we did this big project called the Mother Project, where people interviewed whatever woman had been the most central in bringing them up, and wrote about that and did presentations for the rest of the community about that.

**Buxbaum:** Do you recall how many students were in the program?

**Curtz:** Eighty-some. I have a photograph of this theatrical event, the entire cast of the faculty all lined up. I think maybe that was the second year, because I think Karin Syverson was in the program when we did that. So maybe I did two years of this kind of Western civ humanities stuff.

**Buxbaum:** Do you remember anything in particular about the student reception to the program, the work, the life of the program?

**Curtz:** Not particularly. There were a lot of issues that programs have now about students continuing through the whole program and so on that just didn't exist at that point, because there were only X number of programs. There was no Evening and Weekend Studies courses you could fit into your curriculum, so you were kind of in it for the year.

**Buxbaum:** And students weren't really doing anything else. They were in a 16-credit program and that's what they were doing.

**Curtz:** Yeah. Santa Cruz ran on narrative evaluations, so I'd already had several years' worth of experience writing those. There wasn't much that was dramatically new and different. I guess I had never had to deal with so many people about program planning, about what we were going to read and who's going to do what and so on. But it was not a dramatic shift for me.

**Buxbaum:** It sounds like the faculty seminar might have been a slightly new element to your work.

**Curtz:** Yeah, I guess so.

**Buxbaum:** Was there a sense that that structure—I guess you'd call it coordinated studies with a faculty seminar, and commitment from both faculty and students to just one program per an entire year—was there any sense that that was being fine-tuned or critiqued as you went along? Was there an evolutionary sense?

**Curtz:** Programs were supposed to produce program histories, and certainly those were supposed to be a place where you thought about lessons that you'd learned and how you'd do things differently the next time if you were going to redo the program, and that sort of thing. People's self-evaluations were supposed to be about that kind of reflective process. After a few years, various members of the faculty wrote various manifestos about what they thought ought to be done differently one way or another.

**Buxbaum:** In the larger life of the college, was there more or less unrest and satisfaction with the different programs?

**Curtz:** My world at Evergreen has always pretty much been the program I was teaching in. It pretty much occupied all my time and all my energy. Although looking at some of this old stuff, it turns out that I have been on more committees [laughing] than I remember. I don't think I had much sense about what was going on in other programs. Over the years, some programs have blown up sometimes. Faculty have decided they just couldn't work with each other anymore and programs have been terminated. But I didn't have any sense about how things were going anywhere else really.

**Buxbaum:** Some of the maybe turbulence that you sensed initially in '72 upon your arrival, but it wasn't a deep, predominant unrest amongst students?

**Curtz:** No, I don't think so at all. It was more like a joke or something. [laughter] And I was teaching first-year students. They didn't know anything about what had happened the year before.

**Buxbaum:** So the students in your program were uniformly all first-year students?

**Curtz:** I think so. We might have had some transfer students, but I don't think very many.

**Buxbaum:** At this point in time, all across the country—we spoke of this a little bit earlier—there was all this alternative education action. Evergreen, in some ways, might have been a bit of a mixing bowl for these different approaches to alternative education. Is that a fair characterization?

**Curtz:** That's certainly one way that I think about the founding of the college; that the planning faculty and the early history of the college is about the coming together of half a dozen streams about reform in American education from the '60s—the self-paced learning movement; something about ethnic studies; something about internships and integrating academic theory and practical experience; something about the education for democratic citizenship in the Athens and America program; the PSSC [Physical Science Study Committee] hands-on science, the progressive science teaching movement. All that stuff sloshed around one way or another. [chuckles]

If you look at the people who were hired, you see here's some cadre of people who came from Reed together, because they'd been on the science faculty at Reed and wanted to try teaching science in some way that they really hadn't been able to do at Reed, there's the people who came to do the Self-Paced Learning Lab; there's the people who came with 1970 ethnic studies impulses.

**Buxbaum:** How did those different streams, if you will, blend together? Was there active discussion about that that you were aware of? Were people actually carrying the banner of one approach over another?

**Curtz:** I don't think there was a lot of public conversation about how those things might fit together, certainly not that I was part of. Over time, I think some of those different kinds of faculty ended up teaching with each other, and I think that's probably where things got mixed up one way or another. And in the structure of the college as a whole, once you had a lot of internships going on and people like me started thinking about, well, okay, should we have an internship in this program? If so, what would it be?

**Buxbaum:** What did program development at that point look like? How did a program get invented?

**Curtz:** Well, I think there are different answers. Sometimes in the history of the college there's been some kind of commitment on the part of a specialty area to run a program. I think in those situations sometimes the specialty area has got together and people have said, "Well, we have to have some people to do X next year. Whose turn is it? Well, it's your turn, so how about you doing it?"



Most of the time, I think, this process has been more like people picking college roommates. People have got to know other people who they thought were interesting and started to say, "Gosh, it might be fun for us to do something together sometime. What do you suppose we would do?" I think the occasions on which the deans have said, "You have to teach X" have basically been non-existent, at least during the time I was at the college.

**Buxbaum:** In those first couple of years that you were there, the deans were . . . was Charlie a dean?

**Curtz:** I think so.

**Buxbaum:** And Cadwallader was Provost?

**Curtz:** Hmm. I don't know what Mervin's official title was. I think probably he was the Provost at that point. Mervin was the head honcho academically for that stretch.

**Buxbaum:** Was he somewhat directive in terms of structure and design of program?

**Curtz:** I don't think so, at least not I'm aware of. He had this baby of his own, this idea about what coordinated studies ought to be. He certainly played a big part in the shape of the college in the sense that he made this proposal to the planning faculty about coordinated studies programs, and they had said, "Great! Yeah, we'll do it! We'll do it for the whole college," even though Mervin had not imagined that in his wildest dreams. [chuckles] He had only imagined that as a first-year program and maybe that as a culminating program, and something else in between.

The programs that I taught in at the very beginning, for those first couple of years, were modeled on Mervin's ideal. To that extent, he played some role in having them be part of the college. But I don't have the sense of his doing a lot of advocating about the rest of it.

**Buxbaum:** Good. So, you arrived. Did you share an office?

**Curtz:** No, everybody had their own office in this little circle of offices. We were in the very bottom basement corner of the Library, and there was this lounge space, maybe half again, twice again, as big as this living room, and this set of offices around. And the offices were big enough so that you could run your seminar in your office space. Everything happened in this one area.

**Buxbaum:** So you had about a 250-square-foot center space, and then the offices were clustered around?

**Curtz:** And the offices were big enough to have a seminar table for 20 people or something in them, and a desk at one end where you worked. It was pretty cool. I was very sorry to see it go.

**Buxbaum:** What were you sorry about going?

**Curtz:** I thought it was good for the program to have this sense of a piece of territory that was the program's territory. It meant that when students came for seminar and got out of seminar, they were

all in the same big room together, talking to each other. When they were waiting for seminar to start, they were all hanging out in this big room talking to each other. When the faculty wanted to consult somebody, they could walk next door and talk to them. As I said, it meant that the program had a kind of space that belonged to it, where you could put stuff up and display things, and they didn't have to compete with anything else.

**Buxbaum:** It's almost a physical structural aspect of a learning community.

**Curtz:** Mm-hm. There was one other thing that we did that we probably wouldn't have done someplace else, this thing called the "poster project." We had some money and we assigned these students to little teams. Each team had to produce a poster for the rest of the college. Every week, some group of students was responsible for the next poster. We'd drive up to Shelton to some printer that we had lined up and get the posters printed, and then bring them back and put them up all over campus.

**Buxbaum:** How big were the posters?

**Curtz:** They were poster-size.

**Buxbaum:** It was the large flipchart size?

**Curtz:** Yeah, I don't know what that—they were about yay wide and yay tall maybe.

**Buxbaum:** Maybe two foot by three foot?

**Curtz:** Yeah, something like that.

**Buxbaum:** Those were composite? Was there any structure to the assignment other than to depict . . .

**Curtz:** . . . communicate something about what the program is working on and why it matters.

**Buxbaum:** Did other programs do that?

**Curtz:** I don't think so.

**Buxbaum:** So each small team did a poster?

**Curtz:** Mm-hm.

**Buxbaum:** So maybe four or five students per poster?

**Curtz:** Yeah. Some of them were really good and some of them were not so good. [laughter]

**Buxbaum:** I imagine so! What would go on the poster?

**Curtz:** The faculty did the first one, and it was about beginnings. It was the beginning of *The Iliad* in Greek and in English on the two sides of the poster. Pale beige in the background.

**Buxbaum:** All writing, sort of bullet points.

**Curtz:** There wasn't anything except words down on one side and "Sing, goddess of the wrath of Achilles" on the other side.

**Buxbaum:** Was there an evolution to the posters that made some particularly good?

**Curtz:** Not that I'm aware of, just depending on the students and how thoughtful and clever, and how much graphic sense they had. Some of them were really beautiful and some of them were just perfectly ordinary.

**Buxbaum:** What was a week like? When did you show up? Was there some structure to the day and days of the week that you recall?

**Curtz:** Oh, I don't really remember. I think there was 16 hours a week of contact time or something. There were some lectures. I think in a lot of programs that I've taught, there's been a week when—structurally, there's this ongoing problem about how to provide enough class time for the students, or enough work for the students, without making the faculty's workload impossibly heavy. You teach a seminar, and then you have to read for the seminar, and you assign papers and then you have to read 20 papers, so I don't know whether . . .

In lots of the programs I've taught, there's been a film series, where we did a film once a week and then a critique and interpretation session after it. That's something you can do. It takes a certain amount of work to figure out what the films that will go with the rest of your work are, but at least I can watch the movie and then run a discussion about it right afterwards, without having to have seen the film ahead of time. That's an easy an interesting way to do something else in the week, and it's probably helpful for the students' education in the sense that they're probably going to watch more movies than read old books for the rest of their lives. [chuckles] And it gives you something else to do in the week's structure that doesn't add a lot of work for the faculty.

I don't remember anything else. I don't know whether we did films in that program or not. Mostly we lectured and had book discussions. Maybe we had a separate thing about writing. I don't really remember. This was 45 years ago.

**Buxbaum:** Yeah, I appreciate the characterization of just that first year or so. Things have obviously evolved. I'm looking forward to talking about some of the specifics of particular programs. But before we go there, just in terms of the life of the college, you were the second large group of faculty that were hired. The life of the college from the faculty perspective, how did faculty mix at that point? Was there any structure to that?

**Curtz:** You mean did the college provide any sort of thing about people getting together one way or another?

**Buxbaum:** Mm-hm.

**Curtz:** Not significantly anyway. I guess there were probably faculty meetings every now and then. Some people knew each other already and hung out with each other. Some people had lunch together. I was pretty busy. I don't think I hung out with much of anybody except the people I was working with.

**Buxbaum:** And the business was associated directly with your program, your immediate colleagues?

**Curtz:** Yeah.

**Buxbaum:** Was there any kind of sense of here's the new faculty in this new school?

**Curtz:** There were faculty retreats, where the faculty would all go off together for three days or something to plan. I don't remember whether there were specialty area meetings at that point or not. I don't think so. I think the specialty areas came along later.

**Buxbaum:** We're into that first couple of years and initial impressions. What is your recollection in terms of the next year? Was it a repeat of the first program that you taught?

**Curtz:** Kind of. It was the same kind of program anyway with different faculty I think.

**Buxbaum:** Not Nancy and Mark again but other people?

**Curtz:** Karin Syverson was in one of those programs. I think the second year probably that I taught that kind of stuff, Karen was in it, and I think Mark was in it. So I think maybe the two of them arrived, and maybe there was somebody else with Richard Brian and Nancy and me in that first year.

**Buxbaum:** Athens and America was your first experience?

**Curtz:** Yeah, but I don't think it was called that. I think maybe it was called Western Civilization.

**Buxbaum:** That was for year one and two. What came up after that, and how? How did you construct that next program experience?

**Curtz:** With a few exceptions, I have taught the programs I taught by having somebody that I kind of knew and liked and thought would be fun to teach with. I think the next stretch of things I did was probably autobiography programs—self-exploration, true autobiography. I taught that stuff for a couple of years anyway. Well, Peter Elbow and I. I got to be friends with Peter and Jo and I got to be friends with Peter and his wife. Peter was interested in student writing, so this seemed like an obvious thing for us to do.

**Buxbaum:** Was Peter hired into that same cohort?

**Curtz:** I think Peter came the same year that Mark and Karin did. He and Mark had taught together at MIT in some humanities program. I think both of them were hired the same year, maybe one right after the other.

**Buxbaum:** I'm getting some sense that at least those first two years—these are my words—it's almost like the college was networked in some ways, with groups of people that came from the same spot.

**Curtz:** I think that's absolutely true. [David] Marr and Rudy [Martin] came because they'd worked together at Central, or wherever it was they were out there.

**Buxbaum:** WSU.

**Curtz:** That's the way most people get jobs, the research says. [chuckles]

**Buxbaum:** At least in those initial years, was there anything you remember of Evergreen embodied in the larger community of Olympia and Washington State? We hear these notions of Evergreen always struggling for its viability in terms of the political dynamics of state funding, and also some tension between the college and life in Olympia. Any recollection of that?

**Curtz:** I didn't pay much attention to it, but, yeah, I certainly think that there were people in Olympia who were complaining about all the hippies that the college had brought to town. And there was this kind of ongoing rumbling in the Legislature with bills to close the college being introduced every year by somebody or other. Same guy, I think.

I don't think the college worried much about that at that point because we had tons of students applying. We were growing like mad, so we didn't have to worry. I really did not pay much of any attention to that kind of stuff, but my sense is people figured that as long as we had lots of students knocking at the door, they probably were not going to close us.

**Buxbaum:** Do you remember when that changed, when it shifted?

**Curtz:** We had various enrollment crises along the way. I don't know what dates they were. In 1978, I remember Steve Hunter saying we had one but . . .

**Buxbaum:** 1978 was the big dip in enrollment that is being compared to current times. Do you recall anything about how that might have been reflected in the approach to teaching or the structure of programs?

**Curtz:** We had lots of conversations about what to do about attracting more students. Some of the stuff I gave you the other day partly was probably written some time in that period. Different people had different ideas about what steps to take. Evening and Weekend Studies, I think, probably got started then. Satellite programs. Reorganizing the curricular structures so there were clear career pathways in it. Improving the functioning of the Admissions office. Lots of conversation about what to try doing.

**Buxbaum:** I'm still thinking in the context of the '70s, but could you characterize the student body at that point of time—who they were and where they were from?

**Curtz:** In 1972 when I was there, we got a lot of students who had not been very happy with traditional education, and had either not gone to college when they got out of high school and had done something

else for a few years, or who had tried college and then dropped out and done something else. A lot of them had pretty clear ideas about what they needed to learn and wanted to learn when they came back, and they tended to be really interesting students.

One of the things that happened to the college as it got more famous is it that it got more and more students fresh out of high school. They were different, in terms of what they knew already and where they were in their life paths developmentally, though I don't think I've ever had very much sense about sociological categories to apply to the students. I've been working with them full-time and you have a much stronger sense of who they are as particular, quirky individuals.

I've never had much to say about "Is the student body changing?" And "How are they changing, as a whole?" And "What are the implications for what we ought to be doing about that?" I just said hello to them as they walked in the door and figured out what to do then. [chuckles]

**Buxbaum:** Still in this early period of the '70s, people were arriving. It's almost maybe that there were three waves of hiring faculty, one before you and one after you. And then there was a leveling out. Some people left and started leaving. Do you recall any of that happening in a conscious way who was leaving at any particular point?

**Curtz:** There were a bunch of people who arrived right at the beginning, who stuck around for a few years and decided it wasn't for them and left. There were a few people who left under duress of one kind or another. Cruz Esquivel turned out to have faked his academic record somehow or other and had to leave. Later on, there were some people who left because they wanted to go back to traditional academic life. Peter Elbow left the college because he wanted to have more time to write, and not have to work so much on dealing with students.

I don't think I have any other particular sense about the things that led particular people to go. Some people died. The Self-Paced Learning Lab kind of faded away, and the people who had come to do self-paced learning went someplace else.

**Buxbaum:** Just before concluding this segment, was there anything in particular that made you want to stay? Did you ever consider going in those first few years?

**Curtz:** No. Evergreen has been a terrific place for me.

**Buxbaum:** Why?

**Curtz:** Because I like being a student. If I had gone to Colgate, I would have spent 35 years teaching freshman composition and introduction to Chaucer and advanced Chaucer. At Evergreen, I got to teach all kinds of other things, and read all kinds of different stuff, which has been great for me. And I really like working with the students, so at Evergreen you get to spend a lot more time with them and get to

know them a lot better and talk to them a lot more than you would have if they were arriving at 10:00 at leaving at 12:00 and doing five other classes.

I sort of think that if the college had ever folded, I would have probably done something else rather than trying to look for another teaching job. I don't know. I certainly don't think I would have been very happy teaching freshman composition and introductory and advanced Chaucer for my whole career.

**Buxbaum:** In terms of your own life and work at Evergreen in that first decade, you were doing more than just teaching, it sounds like. You were starting to become active in governance, and there were some other—

**Curtz:** Yeah, I think I did various committees of one kind or another. Jo and I ran the Thurston County Nuclear Weapons Freeze campaign somewhere in there, and that took a lot of my time and energy for a year or a year and a half.

**Buxbaum:** So the external politics, the life of a broader community, or Evergreen in the community. WPPSS was happening, I guess.

**Curtz:** Yeah. I was actually the president of Fair Electric Rates Now. I was sort of a front man for Jim Lazar's work to try to stop the WPPSS plant for a while.

**Buxbaum:** Were there other things that were cooking locally, besides WPPSS?

**Curtz:** I don't think I had much of anything to do with local politics besides those two things. I gave donations to political campaigns probably, but that was about it.

**Buxbaum:** In some ways, my own recollection of this time period, Evergreen was somewhat on the map politically as a place on the map for a bunch of different causes at that particular time. Maybe that was part of the attraction in terms of students, too.

There was certainly a presence on campus of different offices that were student-run and student-directed. Were you engaged in any of those student activities?

**Curtz:** I had a little bit to do with the *Cooper Point Journal* at one point, but very little. I don't think I had anything to do with any other student organizations.

**Buxbaum:** My next set of questions actually go to some specific programs and DTFs, like the Native American Studies Program and others. But I think this is probably a good place to break for segment two, and if it's okay, we'll pick up on that so that it's an unbroken segment. So we're signing off of segment two with five minutes left on this card. That's good timing.

**End Part 2 of 2 of Thad Curtz on June 29, 2018**