

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

Allen: Dee.

Van Brunt: Yes, Nancy.

Allen: The last time we were talking about Evergreen, you were telling me how it was when you first arrived at the college, and what your general reactions were. I recall that they were positive, but if you have anything else you want to say about them, please do that. But I wanted you to refresh my memory about exactly when you came. I remember that you had at least two different jobs, but I don't remember what they all were. Will you tell me exactly when you came, and how long you stayed, and what your jobs were?

Van Brunt: I came in November of 1975. I was hired as the student payroll person. I sort of liked the job. I enjoyed it, and I was there for, I don't know, four or five months. I had never worked in an institutional setting before. All my prior employment had been as office manager. I also was a pediatric allergist assistant. I was sort of my own boss all those years, and I wasn't used to the different levels of supervision.

So one day, I wrote a memo to the students and temporary employees at Evergreen about the processing of their payroll cards. It came to the attention of my supervisor, Sheila's supervisor, who was Rose Elway. I was called into her office and reprimanded for putting out a memo without having it passed through my immediate boss and my secondary supervisor.

Allen: Good lord!

Van Brunt: That's how I started at Evergreen. I had to learn how to play the institutional game. I was there about six months and I got a phone call from the Budget Dean, the Instruction Dean, up on the second floor who was an academic employee. There were two different kinds of employees at Evergreen, academic and business.

That person was Willie Parson, who was just a lovely, delightful, charming, interesting fellow. He interviewed me to fill a position who had been held by Helen Hannigan. Something went there, and she was demoted down to the Business Office. I never knew the whole story. I don't think I wanted to know the whole story. I felt sort of strange taking the position of somebody who had been in it for many, many

years, ever since the college started.

Willie hired me as the budget person, his budget assistant. I was in charge of the payroll for faculty and academic student employees. Willie came by often. We were just two doors apart. He would just stop by and see how things were going and so forth, sit down, and he usually pulled up a chair next to me. We visited just a very few minutes, and we had meetings once a week, but these were just informal.

One day he came into my office and he sat down across the desk from me. I thought that was strange, but I didn't say anything. We chatted for a bit, and he didn't seem unhappy with me, there was nothing, nothing that I recall that was upsetting or whatever, but I thought that was strange. So I asked him why he sat over there instead of next to me. I thought maybe I smelled bad or something. He told me he just wanted me to recognize that when he came in—it was a test—and sat on the desk opposite me on the opposite side that he had something serious to discuss. If he sat next to me, it was just a congenial visit. That was the first lesson I learned from Willie Parson. And to this day—which is 42 years later—I still miss that man. I learned a lot from him over the years. He was a special fellow.

Allen: But what specifically did it mean to sit on the other side of the table? I understand it meant it was serious, but why?

Van Brunt: If he had to ask me why something happened, or to criticize something, or talk about anything—a personal issue with me—then he was opposite. He never ever came and sat on the opposite side of the desk again. We got along well, and I was able to do whatever it was he asked of me.

Allen: But I think that's scary. I think it's scary to be told "Well, if I come in and sit down a certain way, I'm going to really have to talk to you seriously."

Van Brunt: It was a little scary, but it didn't happen and I didn't think much of it after a while. He was an interesting fellow. I learned a lot about him in his personal life. They'd never had children, he and his wife, Sylvia, who was a librarian in the Tacoma City Schools. I learned that a toothpaste tube that wasn't rolled perfectly was very disturbing to him. I learned that they had white carpeting all throughout their home. I just realized Willie was a very, very—I can't find the word, Nancy, but everything needed to be just so.

Allen: Totally neat and orderly.

Van Brunt: Yes. A year or so later, they had their nephew—his name was Danny, it's funny I remember that—he came and lived with them for a year. I heard lots of interesting stories about what went on at home. He'd never had a child, and to have a teenager in the house was quite an awakening for him.

Eventually, he went back to teaching. I don't think he liked administration very much. He was a beautiful teacher. He left. He didn't leave Evergreen, he taught biology at Evergreen. Then later, when the Tacoma Campus was formed—

Allen: When Maxine [Mimms] started the Tacoma Campus?

Van Brunt: Maxine and Betsy [Diffendal] started the Tacoma Campus, Willie eventually went up there. Then he also mentored junior high and high school students, and did some tutoring for them in biology. He was a great member of that community, not only the Evergreen College community, but also the Tacoma community.

So that's my Willie Parson story. I'd see him from time to time, and then he just sort of disappeared into the ethos. He retired. Went back to the South, where he and Sylvia had come from. He died, she died.

Allen: So Willie hired you on the academic side?

Van Brunt: Yes.

Allen: One of the things I always think about Evergreen—because I was there from the very first year, so I was there four years before you were there—it always seemed to me like faculty, especially in the very early times—because faculty had designed the place to the extent that it was designed—they left a lot un-designed because we were supposed to design it as we went along, kind of. So we had so little structure that we didn't create ourselves. I mean, we just had to decide what was going to happen. [laughing] And it was not like an ongoing structure that we had. We just had to make it.

Van Brunt: You had to make up the structure.

Allen: And so it always seemed to me that we were really privileged, because the staff had to be part of the State structure. We were part of the State structure, too, in the sense that we got our paychecks, but we didn't have to follow any State rules.

Van Brunt: Yeah. And that was interesting to me in the fact that my first job downstairs was highly structured, and I got into a bit of trouble, as I told you earlier. When I came upstairs to work on the academic side, it was more like you described. I worked quite independently. If I had a problem, I often didn't bother Willie. I would go down to the Business Office and talk to the Controller. Most of it were accounting kinds of questions. There were good people down there who were willing to teach me, actually. Because probably Willie, coming as a faculty into the deanship, may not have known the accounting answers, and I just didn't want to bug him. So I found my ways to get the help I needed when I needed it.

And the deans weren't used to a whole lot of structure because they were all faculty people, most all of them were. They all were at that time when I come upstairs. I had never worked—except my first job out of high school when I worked for the telephone company—I never worked in a very structured—I had to make my own structure.

Allen: Yeah, but you also sometimes worked alone, as I remember.

Van Brunt: Yes.

Allen: When you were in the doctor's office, for example.

Van Brunt: Yeah, it was my job to make the office go, and same thing in the pediatric office. I started as an office manager and then learned about allergy testing and giving allergy shots and so forth. Later, when I worked for an orthodontist, same thing. Yeah, it was strange to work in a hierarchical situation, but I never really accepted that that's how it was. I just sort of did it—I don't know.

Allen: Well, maybe it wasn't really. [laughter]

Van Brunt: But it worked fine in the deans' area, until somebody came along as the Budget Dean. I think it was after Barbara Smith. John Perkins. He had no budget experience at all. We had one little issue that wasn't with John, it was the accountants downstairs.

After Willie left, Barbara Smith was hired, new to the college. She was hired as a dean, as a Budget Dean. I worked with her for many years. We did really well together.

Allen: Were you always in charge of the faculty budgets?

Van Brunt: I wasn't in charge of them. The deans—

Allen: It felt to us like you were in charge of it.

Van Brunt: But I saw to it they were paid. I made up the payroll list for the faculty at the beginning of the fall. I paid all the part-time faculty, all the adjunct faculty, and the students that worked for the academic side of the college. I was responsible for that.

Allen: But the way that a faculty member knew about you, or at least the way I knew about you—actually, I didn't realize that you were the person that, if I had a complaint about my budget, like I wanted more money or less money, I had to ask you.

Van Brunt: The program budgets.

Allen: Yeah, program budgets. That's what I'm talking about.

Van Brunt: Yes, I also sort of administered those.

Allen: Yeah, you sort of administered them, I would say! [laughter]

Van Brunt: Yes

Allen: Because I remember, I didn't have any trouble with you. But one time one of my teaching colleagues had a problem, where you said he was overspending his budget. He was a visitor, and he was this guy—I think he probably hasn't retired yet, he's still an academic on the other side of the country—but his name was Roger Nelson Lancaster. He was gay, and he had done this amazing book on Nicaragua, Nicaragua under the Sandinista revolution. So he was really hot. When he came to Evergreen as a visitor, he spent too much money somehow. I don't know how he did it. But you had to call me, because I was the coordinator of the program—

Van Brunt: You were in a coordinated study and he was part of the group.

Allen: Yes. I hardly ever didn't teach coordinated studies. So I had to talk to him about, what is he doing to overspend his budget, and can he please stop it. [laughing] That's really the one kind of control that I ever felt. But I'm sure there must have been more reactions to people when they discovered that their budget is controlled by somebody besides them. And there must have been some people wanting bigger budgets or something like that.

Van Brunt: Often that happened. Most of the faculty were extremely responsible for it. And if they needed just a little more money, there was a pot I could draw from, and have that transferred into their budget, if it was institutional money, or if it was soft money that came from the Foundation or something, I had a special budget that what they needed to purchase could be done through that budget.

Most of the faculty were quite responsible. Once in a while, I would have [chuckles] a faculty come in very angry and very disturbed because he just needed more money, and sometimes—one of them in particular, I remember—he was really abusive toward me, the way he spoke to me and the way he came into the office.

Allen: Would you like to give some details?

Van Brunt: Yeah. I'll tell you it was Steve Herman, because I'm sure Steve had lots of—there must have been many stories about Steve Herman all over the college.

Allen: Yeah.

Van Brunt: And I was used to him coming in and being demanding. He had a summer program that he took students down to southern Oregon every summer to study birds, to band them and so forth. It was

a wonderful program that went on for many years. So, I was used to Steve. I was used to him for lots of reasons, because we collected the money that the students paid for that program. Other than paying for that program, there were lots of costs—food and setting up camp and mileage and all of that stuff. So I did that for Steve every year.

But this particular day, he came in and he literally was screaming at me. I just stood up. I put up with a lot from him. I don't know that he ever apologized to me.

Allen: Wow.

Van Brunt: But that day, I guess I'd just had enough, and I stood up to me. And he was quite tall and I'm short.

Allen: Yes, he was quite tall.

Van Brunt: I got right up in his face as best as I could and I asked him to leave my office, and he was welcome to come back when he would be civil. And he just kept on screaming.

Allen: Ooh!

Van Brunt: He did come back within a few days, and he did apologize, and we took care of whatever his need was. I don't recall what it was. That was interesting. But I did sort of manage those budgets. I was one of three people with that responsibility at Evergreen. There was Donna Whittaker, who did much the same, except she sort of managed the business of the science area over in the Lab Buildings. And there was a man, Al, who did similar stuff in the Library.

Eventually, many years later, we were all demoted and they hired an accountant from the Business Office who became a supervisor of the three of us. That was sort of unpleasant because we'd all worked rather independently, and all of a sudden some structure arose. That was much later. It was after Barbara, and it was towards the end of John's [Perkins] term.

Allen: So you had three different bosses. You had Willie, you had Barbara, and you had John?

Van Brunt: John Perkins. Who came after John? Oh my goodness. Oh! Well, after John, then Karen Wynkoop was hired from the Controller's Office to come up and be in charge of the total academic budget—library, labs, and deans. Everything, yes.

I'd gone to Karen over the years for assistance or help or to teach me something, and so I wasn't unhappy about that at all. I was glad to see her up there. She was intelligent and humane and a nice person. I couldn't ever say anything unkind about her. But it meant that Donna and Al and I were working under different circumstances.

Eventually, I left the deans' area and moved upstairs. She worked directly under the Provost. We went upstairs and our offices were close to the Provost Office, so I worked directly under her, and she reported to the Provost. Those years were good years. I enjoyed those.

At a certain point in time, when I was still down in the deans' area, I was assigned as the—I don't remember the term, whether they used Ombudsperson or whatever—but we opened a campus down in Vancouver on the old Fort property down there, and I was sort of the liaison. I think I'll call it that. I was the liaison person between that campus and this campus. I don't know what their administrative person down there—there was a faculty in charge, Jin Darney, and the other faculty down there the first two years was Phil Harding. Phil could be difficult to work with budget-wise. Jim was a dream. But they had Ann—and I don't remember Ann's last name right this minute—she was hard for them to work with, so I went down there, I don't know, every couple months for a day or two and smoothed things out. That was interesting work, actually. I enjoyed it.

In '83, I don't know if I was upstairs under Karen or if I was still downstairs—I've lost the sense of time when things happened—but one year—the 1983-84 school year—It was Richard Nesbitt, who was the manager of the Communications Building, which was a sort of performing arts and associated disciplines—most of the faculty were over there. Richard, when he was hired, he was told he could rotate into the faculty every so many years, so '83 was his year. He asked that I come over there for two quarters—while he taught in a coordinated studies program—and manage the building, you know, the people in the building and so forth. So, I did that, and I loved that. That was wonderful.

But on Valentine's Day in '84, he called me from home and asked me to come over to his house. I thought it was really strange. I was busy working and I said, "Can't you come here?" And he said, "No, I need you to come here. Now." It was just a very, very strange request, but I got myself together and I went over there. He asked me to sit down. He offered me a cup of tea, which I said, "No, thank you." I was very fond of Richard. He was a single parent with a little boy in the first grade, Pan.

We were sitting there talking. He had just read *The White Hotel*, and got up and got me a copy of it to read. Then he came back and sat down and, I don't know, I expressed that I was cold. It was really cold in there. He got up to fix the thermostat and was down on the floor the next second. I got down on the floor to see if he was okay. No response. His heart was beating. I called 9-1-1, and he had a heart attack and died right there.

Allen: What? I never knew that. Oh my god.

Van Brunt: There I was. I don't know what time it was. I think it must have been late morning, I don't

remember that exactly. The medics came and they took Richard away.

I called Walter Niemiec, who at that time I was fairly close to, and Richard was very close to. They were hired about the same time. Walter managed the whole Lab Building Complexes. I told him what had happened and I said, "Somebody needs to go pick up Pan at school when school gets out. Would you do that for me?" So, he did that, and brought Pan to the house, and the two of us told Pan. Then we called Richard's ex-wife and Pan's mother. She lived in Portland, so we called her and she came up. She was up there by 9:30, 10:00 that night.

And so, lots of personal stuff for me and the Nesbitt family went on for years. I took care of Richard's estate here. I closed up his house. I got to know his sister in New York. And, of course, Pan's mom, I've said, in Portland.

But the main thing was I stayed over in that building until we hired a new permanent manager. I probably stayed there a year and a half. I can't remember that. And I still was doing some of my budget stuff for the student payroll, but I think my colleagues—I think Donna took on a lot and my office assistant took on a lot. I stayed over there for quite a while. I don't know how long it was, maybe a year and a half.

Allen: So that is how—I'm just putting in stuff that I know from my own experience—that is how Josie Reed figured out that you would be a good executor of her estate.

Van Brunt: Well, I was not executor of Josie's estate.

Allen: Oh, that's right. But you had power of attorney.

Van Brunt: Yeah, I'd had her power of attorney for healthcare for a while, because both her daughters lived in the southern part of the United States. She didn't have any family here. Three or four people helped. Josie—I don't want to go into all the personal stuff about her illness—but she went downhill fast at a very early age. She was in her late sixties.

Her friends gathered around her to help her. We drove her to appointments, we cooked, we came to the house and did what we could to take care of her. We did everything we could. It was Ernestine Kimbro, Zeta, Alice Nelson, some.

Allen: Me.

Van Brunt: Nancy Allen.

Allen: You called me at 2:00 in the morning to tell me when Josie had the stroke.

Van Brunt: Okay, and myself. There was a nucleus of us that cared about her very much, and wanted to

do whatever we could.

Allen: Right.

Van Brunt: She had established a trust. She owned some beautiful wetlands property, and she had inherited quite a bit from her mother, so she put everything—she was advised by an attorney to put everything in a trust. So, after she died, her girls took over the trust, and it still exists today. They've protected a lot of the property around them. They bought up some new property and so forth to keep the integrity of the land. They're still going on today.

Allen: Yep.

Van Brunt: Back to Evergreen. You know, I've lost a lot, Nancy. I don't know whether I came back to the deans' area after the stint at the Communications Building.

Allen: One of my questions was how you divided up your time at Evergreen into periods. What were the different periods? It's clear that the different periods are about different bosses and different buildings.

Van Brunt: Yes. I was really fortunate. Most people go to work in a place, especially if they are not faculty, they're just the people that hold up the institution.

[Telephone rings]

Allen: Should I turn this off?

Van Brunt: Health advice. Anyway, the phone rang. I had opportunities. I had the Vancouver opportunity. I had the Com Building opportunity. I took on—I ran—we tried to do elder hostel. I think we did it for two or three years, and I was the person who coordinated and did the elder hostel. I got to do that. One summer, Gail Tremblay had a wonderful grant for Native American teachers, who came to Evergreen for six or eight weeks. She brought people in the arts and pottery and dance, authors, Native Americans [telephone rings 00:35:40]. Excuse me, I have to answer the phone.

[End Part 1 of 3 of Dee Van Brunt on January 18, 2019]

[Begin Part 2 of 3 of Dee Van Brunt on January 18, 2019]

Van Brunt: The workshop was a wonderful thing.

Allen: Oh, Gail.

Van Brunt: It was Gail Tremblay's workshop. It was amazingly wonderful. I had two Native American students that helped me. We were in charge of everything to do with those people, except teaching them—their housing, their comfort, their questions, whatever they needed. I met fascinating people. I remember Linda Hogan most of all because I loved her writing. She was here and it was just wonderful.

The participants were wonderful, and one of the outings—and Gail wasn't able to go, so my husband, who just seemed to be anti-Evergreen from the day I went to work there, was interested in participating in this particular outing, because we were going to visit John Hoover's home; John Hoover, who was a Native American wood sculptor, woodworker. Norman was interested in that, so we gathered all the people together. We had two or three drivers, and off we went to John's home. It was just wonderfully amazing. His wife wasn't there. He was able to offer us tea, and showed his shop, and talked to us about his history in the work he did. It was a wonderful, wonderful day. Then Norm went on another fieldtrip with us up to the Makah Reservation.

That was a great experience. The students that worked with me on that were wonderful, and I'm still in touch with one of them today. That was nice.

Allen: Another question I had was how you had contact with students, which I now am understanding some of. Basically, they were working with you on different projects that you worked on, or they were interns or something.

Van Brunt: Yes. Number one, I had my own student employee. I was always in charge of the student employee payroll for the academics for the whole time I was at Evergreen, almost 22 years. So I saw them. They delivered their timesheets to me every month. And others in the deans' area and upstairs—the Provost—everybody had students who worked with them.

And then students came to me for academic money to work on individual contracts, projects that they had as students that they had through their individual contracts.

Allen: Oh, so individual contracts had budgets, too?

Van Brunt: There was an individual contract budget. There were budgets set up for certain students who'd gotten money from the Development Office, or special grants given by the academics and so forth. So I had a lot of student contact, which I loved. It just made it wonderful.