

**Barbara Laners**  
**Interviewed by Anthony Zaragoza**  
**The Evergreen State College oral history project**  
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**FINAL**

**Zaragoza:** My name is Anthony Zaragoza, and I'm here conducting an oral history at the Evergreen Tacoma campus with our guest, Barbara Laners.

**Laners:** My name is Barbara Ann Laners, and I was born in the state of Louisiana. I lived there until I was in high school. My early education was in the segregated schools of Louisiana with Black teachers. I did not encounter an integrated program until I was in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. My foundational educational experience was a Black experience. That experience enabled me to know that I could compete with anybody on any level, because those teachers who taught me were people who had gone to a Black educational system. Their advanced degrees were gained at Northern universities. Upon completion of those advanced degree programs, they returned to the state of Louisiana. The only places for them to teach were in that segregated system. Those Black teachers taught us that we could achieve anything if we put our minds to it. There was no saying, "I can't." It was always "You can and you will."

I remember in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade being made to stand at the blackboard for almost a week, because I decided in my mind that I could not do a math problem. Miss Black, the 7th grade math teacher, told me, "Not only can you, but you will do it." I cried every day, and then a friend of mine, who lived down the street from me, Mamie Range, said, "You really don't know how to do that problem, do you?" And I said, "No," so she worked with me. I never will forget that. All the weekend, we didn't play. Mamie taught me how to do the problem, because she said, "You know she's going to call you on Monday to go to the board again." I thought, no, she won't. She said, "Yes, she will," because her older sister, Sally, said, "She will chew on you until she gets a result."

That Monday, I went back to class. "Barbara Ann Laners." I thought, uh-oh. [chuckles] Mamie said, "Don't cry. Remember what we did." I went up and I did what I was supposed to. Miss Black said, "I knew you could do it. All you had to do was make up your mind." I'm thinking, Mamie did it, not me. [laughing]

But it was that kind of thing. I come from a large family trail, and I'm the youngest, so unfortunately, every one of my family had gone through that system, and most of the teachers were still

there when I came through. They had stories to tell about “those Lanerses,” as they called us. Especially my one brother that same Miss Black used to say, “Jerry Laners is your brother?” I said, “Yes, he is.” “He’s a know-it-all, so you should know stuff.” I thought, oh, man. But Mamie Range and I were in the same position. She came from a large family, and she caught the brunt of everything that her older siblings did, and I did the same.

I left that experience with the knowledge that I could succeed in what I did, and I could go to college. That’s the other thing that impressed me about growing up in that segregated system was that we had Black colleges. In Baton Rouge, there was Southern University, Grambling University was up the road, and there was also Leland College. We all knew and were encouraged to prepare to go to college. It was just something that you did. Despite whatever your economic condition was, you could go to college. Black teachers always encouraged us to believe that college was a possibility, and that was the expectation. We were encouraged with “You will go to college. You have to be better than we are. It’s on you. You go, and you get prepared, and you continue the struggle and fight.”

**Zaragoza:** So in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, you and your family move?

**Laners:** No, my family didn’t move. I had members of my family who came to work in Washington, two of my mom’s sisters and her brother. One of them later came back to Louisiana where she died. My mom’s sister lived in Bremerton and her brother lived in Toppenish, Washington. How I got to Washington is an interesting story, and I won’t tell it. [laughing]

**Zaragoza:** Can you at least tell us what year that is?

**Laners:** That was in 1957. It had to do with young love, and a crazed teenager talking about what she was going to do and how she was going to do it. My mom said, “Oh, you’re going to go to Washington and live with your auntie.” Because my friend told her about this grand plan the love of my life and I had. [laughing] It’s funny.

**Zaragoza:** But that love was back in Louisiana.

**Laners:** That was back in Louisiana. That was when we were going to be in the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> grade.

**Zaragoza:** So you weren’t following love, you were being sent away from love.

**Laners:** Yeah, sent away from being foolish, as my mom said. “You’re not going to participate in that foolishness, so you’re going to Washington to live with your aunts.”

**Zaragoza:** Understood. So you arrive in Washington State in 1957.

**Laners:** I go to East Bremerton High School, and that was culture shock, both for me in an integrated situation, and the counselor, Miss Green. Her thing was “You know, folk who come from the South are always put back a grade. We don’t have to put you back. You seem to be competent at every level.”

My aunt, Mary Brown, who was a big-hat-wearing church lady, who was always forceful in her defense of young Black folk, went to the school—and I always will be impressed by this—she goes into the office wanting to speak to this Miss Green, because she needed to let her know about her family. She told Miss Green—and I never will forget this, because I’m sitting there thinking, oh my god, what is she going to say, because she was not known for discretion in terms of her defense—“I just need you to understand that God didn’t just drop white people out of heaven knowing how to read and write. Everybody gets trained, and my sister’s children are trained to read and write, and they’ve always been that way. We encourage education, although some of us did not have the opportunity, but her children have taken advantage of it. And if they said she should be in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, she’s qualified to be here.”

I don’t know if she scared the bejesus out of Miss Green or what, but Miss Green always encouraged me, too. When I graduated from East High School, she wanted me to go to Stanford University—I guess they have these sponsorships. She graduated from Stanford, so she thought that Joyce Lewis and I would be prime candidates to go to Stanford. We were both thinking, no, the rich, young white woman who went to Stanford flunked out, so we’ll never make it. [laughing] Later we found out that she didn’t succeed because she partied all the time with descendants of the Rockefellers and whoever else was there. She said, “No, I just didn’t go to class. I partied all the time. [laughing] If you go to class and do what you’re supposed to do, you will make it.”

Those were my beginnings, and so I started off in Bremerton—Olympic College—and then I went to the University of Washington.

**Zaragoza:** Before we get to Olympic and UW, would you just compare and contrast the school system, and your experience in the schools in Louisiana, and what you experienced in Bremerton?

**Laners:** In Louisiana, it’s easier, your sojourn, in the segregated system. Remember, my first grade teacher sang in the choir with my mother at church, and my associations with her did not end at 3:00 when the school day ended. These were people who knew you at every level of your life, and they had expectations for you. They didn’t assume certain things about you—that you couldn’t learn, and that you were deficient in any way. They just brought out the best in you at every level.

One of the things that I remember is they didn’t tolerate bullying and any of that stuff. One of the things I remember—I think I was in the third grade—my great-aunt, who had been born a slave, and

lived during my lifetime, didn't know how to braid hair. My mom was at work and she didn't have time to braid our hair. She thought—we called her Auntie—her name was Emmaliza Brown—she would be able to bathe us and braid our hair. She could do all of this, except she couldn't braid. So I would go to school in the third grade and I would have 10 braids, and I'll be crying because somebody's going to jerk on one. I remember my third grade teacher, Miss Gandell, said, "What's the matter?" I told her, "I don't want all these braids in my hair because they pull them."

So she took me into—we had cloakrooms—and re-braided my hair. She said, "Don't worry. Just come a few minutes early and I will change your hairstyle." Those kinds of things teachers did, and when children didn't have contemporary outfits, it was no big deal. They would provide that.

The things that I remember was one of our student body's mom and dad were killed in a car accident. Teachers and community got together, and one family took them in to live with them. They stayed in the community. The other families, including mine, we didn't have a lot, but they would see that those children had proper food and proper clothing. My aunt Mary who lived in Bremerton would always send us what we called a "gift box." Every year for school, we got school clothes from my aunt and from my cousin. My mom would always ask if she could include something for the girl and her brother. They would always do that.

So when I was in Louisiana, it was kind of a self-contained Black community from the cradle to the grave. All my associations at every level were with Black people. My educational experience there was that there was not based upon pre-conceived notions about what I could and could not do, and what I could and could not achieve. When I came to Washington, I found it ironic that Miss Green, the counselor at East Bremerton High would even question my ability. At that time, I didn't know what she meant. But my aunt knew, and so she challenged her on it, and she backed off from the notion that I was behind and couldn't do this or that or the other.

**Zaragoza:** What did your parents do? What kind of work did they do?

**Laners:** My mother did catering. She was a cook, and she would cook and serve in the homes of white people, as a kind of a private caterer. My father, before he was injured in an accident, worked on the railroad doing whatever they did then. All I knew was that he was injured there. They were just ordinary working people.

Now, on my mother's side of the family, that's where we found the educated people. One of her cousins was a nurse, who had gone to Southern University and Leland College and obtained nurse's training. She was married to a doctor. The other, a lot of them were preachers and those kinds of folk

who had gone to college. Their children, who were older than I, went to college, so those were the associations that I knew of that college was always available to me. I didn't know my father's folk as well as I knew my mom's folk, because they had moved away. But they set the example of education and achievement, and we knew that we could aspire to that.

**Zaragoza:** It's interesting because my mother cleaned houses and my father worked as a pipefitter, and my stepfather worked on the railroad, so it was very kind of similar in lots of ways.

**Laners:** Because the railroad was the thing that was available to them primarily as you either worked putting down whatever cross ties, or you were a Pullman porter and those kinds of things. My dad's brothers left Louisiana. One went to California and one was in Texas, he was the youngest of that side.

Let me back up. My grandfather, Richard Laners—oh, they were so handsome, the women used to call them the “honey drippers”—he had two families. He had my father and his two brothers and one daughter with his first wife, and she died. The woman that I called “grandmother” was his second wife. She had two daughters and one son, my Uncle Buddy, who was about 6'7”, and a ladies' man. But they were always very loving. When they'd come to visit, that's how I'd get to know them and their children.

My father was the head of the family. I grew up with extended families on both sides. My father's family was wild, because he was not only the head of his immediate family, but he was the head of—as my grandmother used to call them—the “heathen side of the family.” They were wild. They were so wild that when my father died, my mother told his cousin, who was going to Eulogize him, “You've got to be sober for the whole week. I'm going to have somebody stationed at the door of the church, and if they smell one drop, you can't come in.” [laughing] But it was fun knowing both sides of that family.

My father also had extended cousins who were entrepreneurs. One cousin owned a restaurant, and she would provide employment opportunities for older brothers and sisters during the summer, or whenever they wanted to work. So from both sides, I guess I got a feeling and the knowledge that you can do whatever you put your mind to do. Just put forth the effort.

**Zaragoza:** When you graduate from high school in Bremerton, you go on to Olympic . . .

**Laners:** . . . College for two years.

**Zaragoza:** Any memorable experiences from that time?

**Laners:** No, not really. Not really. I just went, did the work, and got out. I got out of there with a 3.-something, and then I go on to the University of Washington.

**Zaragoza:** For junior and senior year?

**Laners:** Right.

**Zaragoza:** Did anything stand out there?

**Laners:** Oh, that was when the Civil Rights Movement was in full throttle, and I was involved in that. One of the things I remembered about that was that I never thought that there were preconceived notions about Black folk. Then I ran into—what was his name? I never remember his name—his last name was Beecher. He taught economics, and he was the be-all and end-all in economics. At that time, professors would have conferences with students. The first thing he said to me was that I was going to get a C. I asked him, “Why will I get a C? I’ve never taken a class or written an exam.” His thing was “you people” always get Cs. I thought, you know, that’s strange. You’re going to prejudge me, and you’ve never seen the quality of my work? By the way, Charlie Mitchell, who had been in his class, who was a brilliant college student was in that class. I wondered to myself, did he get a C? I don’t think he did. I never asked him.

But going to the University of Washington, I found out that most—in fact, all—of my professors were white, and most of them had preconceived notions about Black folks in general, about their learning ability. But at that time, we didn’t have affirmative action, so we got there on the merit. There were limited number of Black folk from America, and most of them were foreign students from Africa and diaspora. But there was some preconceived notions about our ability.

The only professor that was different was a Southern professor, Thomas Pressly, who taught Civil War and Reconstruction. I remember you write blue books, and I made one of the three highest things in the class. He was effusive in his congratulations to me. We got to talking, and I was telling him about my great-aunt, who was still alive, and what she was saying. He said, “Did you record that?” I said, “No.” He said, “You know, she should have been recorded. She was telling you about Reconstruction. She was about 10 years old when it happened.” She described the armies coming to the South, but I hadn’t a clue. I was just listening. I said, you know, I’m going to be entertained, and I was always told that you listened to your elders. But in retrospect, I wish I had recorded it, because that was oral history.

But all of the elders in my family, and even in the community, encouraged us. Their saying was, “You can do better than what we’ve done. Your condition can be better than ours, and it can be if you educate yourself.” The other thing that they always told us was, “You have to reach back and bring others along with you.” Those were the kinds of things in my life.

**Zaragoza:** Do you want to talk a little bit about your civil rights activities while you were an undergraduate?

**Laners:** It was the time of picketing and challenging the status quo, and I think at the University of Washington. In the South, you had SNCC, and our group was called CRAG. It was a group of white and Black students, whoever was there who believed in civil rights. Unfortunately, there were no Brown or Asian students involved in the early efforts for civil rights at the University of Washington.

One of the things we did was we went on a bus to Eastern Washington—was it Richland?—to challenge segregated housing there. But our activities were primarily to challenge segregated housing because Washington State had segregated housing. They didn't have equal, open housing in Seattle until the day after the assassination of Martin Luther King. Early on, one of the major things we challenged was redlining and lack of access to economic resources and those kinds of things, and police activity back in the day, which was the same as it is currently if you were a Black person and in what was deemed the wrong place at the wrong time—if the police caught you, they would do what police did at that time and questioned your right to be there. Those were the kinds of issues. Later on, I began to be involved more in educational issues. That was after I had graduated. But early on, our primary focus was housing, access to capital, and those kinds of issues.

**Zaragoza:** You are moving toward graduation. How were you thinking about your next steps? What are you thinking you're going to do?

**Laners:** After I graduated undergraduate school, I knew I needed to get a job. I come from an extended family, and I had a sister who was a widow, and she had, oh, almost as many kids as my parents did. Her husband, who died, had a limited pension. My mother always said that welfare is not—contrary to what White folk believed, in the South, welfare was not a condition of your life. Your welfare came from those family members and community that could assist you. One of the expectations was that you got an education, you got an opportunity, there are members of your immediate family who depend upon you to help.

Upon graduation from college, I worked for the City of Seattle initially. But before that, applying for jobs, that's a story that everybody needs to understand. Discrimination was rampant. I can remember going to interviews where White folk who had a high school education who happened to be white, would tell me that "You have to be contented with getting jobs as a babysitter or a waitress before you can break into anything." The old folk in the community who had broken through would

always encourage all of us coming after them—this was in the middle ‘60s—that you don’t give up. Every time you confront racism, you challenge it, and you move on and continue the fight.

During those years, when I met Maxine Mimms and those folk who were not much older than I was, also encouraged us to fight to go forward. They supported us. I remember Maxine Mimms, Thelma Dewitty, Ora Franklin, Dorothy Hollingsworth were our way-showers. When they got opportunities, they always made sure to bring somebody up.

When the Great Society came about, that’s when we had CAMP—Central Area Motivation Program—and all those poverty programs. In Seattle, we were fortunate enough to have Black men primarily in charge, and Black women, like Walter Hundley, Dorothy Hollingsworth, and even Betsy Diffendal, worked for the poverty programs. The thing that impressed me was that they always had internships and opportunities for young folk in the community to make a living, to get you some experience.

Those folk, they were our way-showers. When we’d get crazy, as we would say, they would come and tell us, “This is what you’re going to do.” Then they’d have the minister, who was John Hurst Adams, after they had told us what was the law according to them, say the benediction and leave. In my time, I have always been fortunate to have what I call the way-showers, folk who came before me to show me that there was a way. White folk did not give you opportunity. You joined the struggle and you fought for that opportunity. Just because they had opportunity, they did not foreclose the fact that there are folk coming after me, and I have to be there in place, and to argue for them. Maxine Mimms has always been one of those folk who did that. That’s one of the things I’ve always appreciated about her. She has always been there to make sure that those coming after her had a greater opportunity than she had.

**Zaragoza:** What were some of the jobs that you worked at after college?

**Laners:** I worked for the City of Seattle in the Urban Renewal Program. I would go out and talk to families. I was an interviewer there.

**Zaragoza:** Was this mid-‘60s, late ‘60s?

**Laners:** Mid-60s, 70s, I worked for Model Cities. I was in arts and culture, and I knew nothing about that. The powers that be said, “You have a degree. That’s what we’re going to put you in.” My supervisor was Dorothy Hollingsworth, who demanded that we go out and meet with people and talk to them about the cultural things that were needed in the community, what people thought they needed



to enhance the quality of their lives with Model Cities. Who else did I work for? I think my longest job was working for Model Cities.

Back up. I worked for CAMP initially, because my degree was in history and political science, at that time Black folk were interested in establishing Black history and Black studies in the high schools. I was tagged to teach that course because they decided—"they" being Walter Hundley and the late Ivan King—I knew the most about history generally, and Black history in particular, because of my background coming from the state of Louisiana, where Black educators did insist that you knew the history. I taught at Garfield High School—and that was raucous—for a year and a half or two years. I went from there, I think, to Model Cities, and worked two or three years there, and worked for the City of Seattle. Those were my early years.

**Zaragoza:** At what point do you decide to go to law school? Right in the middle of this?

**Laners:** In 1969-1970, I decided to go to law school.

**Zaragoza:** Why did you decide to do that?

**Laners:** I don't know. My dad's brother used to always say to me, "Girl, you talk so much, you ought to get paid for it." [laughter] My uncle, Buddy. I said, "Now, why would you say that?" He said, "People get paid for talking." I said, "Who?" This was when I was in high school. He said, "Lawyers, for one. They get paid good money for talking."

I thought about that, and over the years, it stuck with me. Then I thought about having been around and seen how the justice system worked, and hearing some of the elders say, "You've got to be at the table to make a difference." I thought, well, okay. If I want to be a change agent in that respect, I need to go to law school, and I did. That's where I met wonderful people. I was there for one year. I met Peter Bacho, Plummer Lott, ex supersonic, and Fred Bonner, and all those Black and White folk who I just had a great time with. We would exchange ideas and talk.

One of the people I remember was William Maestas. All the minority students decided "We're going to organize, and we're going to have a minority student organization. I think Willie was in his second year. We were ready to come out, and so Walter Williams—may he rest—said, "We're going to make you the president of the minority law students, Willie. And Willie said, "Well, you know, I didn't learn how to speak English until I was in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade." And Walter says to him, "Well, that's good enough. You speak English now."

They would go to meetings, and it would be raucous. We had a pompous dean, Dean Hunt, and he would use words that we had never heard of before. Willie used to tell him, “You know, you need to slow down, Dean, because I only learned to speak English when I was in 12<sup>th</sup> grade.” [laughing] Dean Hunt used to say, “Well, Mr. Maestas, you will learn a whole new vocabulary while you are here.”

That was a time of action and just meeting people from other groups who had some of the struggles was enlightening. We just kind of joined forces to fight the fight. I was one of the older ones, and two other older women were there, Dolores Sibonga, and Helen . . . what was Helen’s name? I should know. She’ll never forgive me. She was a White woman. Together we could muse about being older women among a group of young things.

My class was the class with the largest number of women, the largest number of minorities, and it was a raucous time to be there. The year after that, Bacho’s class came in. Bacho was the quiet, studious one with that raucous bunch of minorities that came in with him. Those were years that I have a lot of fond memories of.

**Zaragoza:** Which stand out most to you as having their biggest influence on who were to become?

**Laners:** The most memories that stood out to me was Harry Cross, Professor Cross. He taught a large section on property. You went in there with a dread, because he was going to call the name of whoever he was going to chew on for an hour. First, you get in, you sit down, and he’d have to take the roll, and then he would call a name. You’d think, oh my god. Is it me today?

The language was so strange, so the minority students decided to go have a talk with him. He said to us, “Let’s be really clear. I have no preconceived notions about anybody and their achievements. Anything will get you if you don’t study is the subject matter. So if you study, you will succeed.” That stood out to me, and I thought he was right; where I didn’t study, I didn’t succeed, and where I studied, I succeeded.

One other thing that happened to me in law school was that was when I had my greatest love affair. [laughing] Don’t ever go to a professional school being “in lo-o-o-ve,” because that gets in the way of everything. One day I finally decided I’ve got to lay this down [laughing] because I will not succeed if I continue this dual track in my life with time for him and time needed to study. Because in law school, the other thing that impressed me was you were supposed to spend from three to six hours studying every day, and you don’t really have a life. So I always marveled at my friends—the people who were in my class who had families—but completed the course. It was one of the roughest three years of my life. That’s what stood out to me most. I didn’t have any time for me. I guess I did, because

I was starting to succeed. But other than that, if you really are going to do that work, you don't have a social life or anything.

But it was worth it in the end, because I worked for the U.S. Office of Education in the Office of Civil Rights. Then I went on to have a career at the National Labor Relations Board for 10 years.

**Zaragoza:** Tell us a little bit about your post-law school experience prior to becoming a faculty member.

**Laners:** I worked at the U.S. Department of Education in the Civil Rights Division. The section I worked in was higher education. I was a member of the team that would invest to go around to colleges in Region nine or 10. Either labor law was 10 or nine, or U.S. Department of Civil Rights. I've got the numbers switched.

We would go to major colleges and universities in this region to see whether they were in compliance with Civil Rights laws and regulations. That was interesting because I went to Reed College—all the colleges and universities in this state and in Idaho and Oregon to see what their structures were, what policies and procedures they had in place. We were required to evaluate them. One of the fascinating things that struck me about Reed College was students would be standing out in the rain, contemplating how many raindrops were falling. [laughing] "Is that what you're doing?" "Oh, yes."

But it was fascinating to learn how the various colleges and universities operated, what their standards and requirements were, and how some of them were resistant to any of those kinds of issues, in terms of compliance with Civil Rights procedures and those kinds of things. Then I went on to work for the National Labor Relations Board after that for 10 years.

**Zaragoza:** Does that relocate you to D.C.?

**Laners:** No, I worked in the regional office. I think I was one of the earlier women, Black women, hired in that office. That was another time where I confronted white men and their bigotry. Because me and my law school classmate, a white woman, were told that we were affirmative action hires and blahdeblahdeblah. The guy with the least amount of education, who had gotten in back in the day when they didn't really have strict requirements, questioned why we were there. Another white guy kind of said, "You know, that's not right for him to have conversations with us about why these women are here." He informed us of what the other man was saying about us, and questioning our qualifications.

So we decided we were going to take him on, and let him know that we had passed all the things that were necessary. We said, "We went to high school and got a diploma. Did you?" Because

we knew that he hadn't even finished high school. "We went to college and got a degree. Did you? We went to law school and we got a degree there, and we also sat for the bar and passed. Do you have any of those things?" He was honest and said, "No." So we said, "Why would you question whether or not we belong here?" From then on, I never heard of him saying anything about us "unqualified women" being there.

But some folk would question, when I'd walk in and they'd see me. I remember one [laughing] elderly lady in a nursing home in the islands north of Seattle.

**Zaragoza:** Lopez? San Juan Islands?

**Laners:** I didn't have to get on a boat. I drove up there. It was the place where the guy who—

**Zaragoza:** Whidbey or Camano?

**Laners:** I don't know. It was a small town up north. It was where [Robert Jay] Mathews, the guy that the Feds had the shootout with lived. I had to go up there to hold a union election. What fascinated me about that was when I went to the motel, the woman said, "We knew that you were here when you crossed the city limits." [laughing] I said, "How did you know that?" She said, "In all honesty, you were the only Black person we had seen." I said, "Oh, okay."

My assignment was to go to a nursing home the SEUI were trying to organize. I remember, I go in and this little old lady said, "Oh, there's a piccaninny!" Everybody was upset. I knew she had dementia because I had a grandmother who had dementia, so it didn't upset me. They were so apologetic, and one of the nurses had tears. I said, "Look, my grandmother had dementia. She has dementia. I'm not insulted. Okay? I understand what's going on with her." "Well, we just want you to know . . ."

She's older. She was obviously in her eighties, and her life experience was different. "She had dementia. I recognized that because my mom's mom had dementia, so I'm not insulted. Don't worry about it."

**Zaragoza:** What year is this?

**Laners:** Probably in the mid-'70s. She was an older woman. The other experience I remember was that when I was supposed to go conduct an election for gravediggers, and they put me in the crematorium. [laughing] That was an experience.

**Zaragoza:** They put you in it for what?

**Laners:** To conduct the election. That was the space you set up the booth in. Folks came in. [laughing] You couldn't do it out in the graveyard. Right?

**Zaragoza:** Right.

**Laners:** The only building that they had some privacy was the crematorium. "Oh, I see. I hope I'm out of here before nightfall." That was one of the memorable things I had to do.

In small towns, not only in Washington but in Montana, I remember folk were always so gentlemanly. One guy said, "Can I take your luggage or briefcase in?" I said, "No, I'm good." "Well, if you need someplace to go to for lunch, I will come back and show you the places." I said, "I'm good. I can find my way around." But they always wanted to let you know that you were welcome there. I told the union guy, "You know, it's amazing how everybody wants me to know that I'm welcome here." He said, "I hope you're not insulted, but there are not too many Black people that they meet in these small towns." I said, "I figured that one out."

For the most part, I didn't run into a lot of hostility there. It was the kind of experience if you went to Alaska, you knew there were these little towns you had to get in and out of. You go to restaurants and you ask for a green salad [laughing] and you get this brown stuff, and you object. It wasn't the freshest salad, and you would be informed in no uncertain terms by the owner of the restaurant that "This is Alaska. Our vegetables come from the Lower 48. And ladies, the green beans come, they're in a can. I open the can and warm them up." I thought, he really thinks we're the village idiots. [laughing] We said, "It's all right. We'll eat them." But it was fun, and we met a lot of people.

One of the things I learned working for the Labor Board is when you write and answer folks—we were always required to answer congressional inquiries from this district about labor law. If you wrote to the people in just ordinary language, you got along with them. But if you use legalese, you had a problem. That's how I learned how to navigate that. I'm dealing with ordinary people who do ordinary things in their daily life. They don't want to hear legalese, they just want you to tell them what it is in clear, concise language, and you don't have problems. I learned that even dealing with hearings, and conducting elections. As long as you told folk the truth, it was all right.

Now, you may not have been in good stead with some union organizers. I think one of the few complaints I had filed against me was by a union rep who said I had talked anti-union. The Assistant Director, who knew him, said, "No, that's not true. When he loses, he always blamed the agent for his loss. He didn't do his organizing job correctly. Don't worry. I will speak to him and tell him, 'Don't blame our agents for your failure to do your job.'" And he did. From then on, the Associate Director

said to me, “I will not appoint you to any of his cases, so we will avoid this in the future.” I said, “Fine with me,” because I was floored that this guy, who was a union guy, would say that kind of thing.

The other part of working for the Labor Board. You weren’t here. You’re too young to know about this. There was this big fight to allow Blacks and other minorities into the trade unions. Tyree Scott, who I had known from Model Cities, and all those folk. I was at the Labor Board during that big hubbub. I remember one day, Joe Davis, who was the head of the King County Labor Council—they had this organization of unions and he was the chief spokesperson for the organization. Hugh Hefner of Hefner, Cassidy and Price and whatever—the law firm—represented the union. So he called Hugh Hefner to let him know that “They’re coming down! They’re organizing a big demonstration! Coming down Third Avenue to our offices!” The offices were at the north end, down where the Seattle Center is now. “What are we going to do?”

So what Hugh Hefner did was call Joe Davis, the attorney who worked for the National Labor Relations Board. He was going on and on, so Joe Davis finally said, “I think you have the wrong Joe Davis. You should be talking to the union guy. This is Joe Davis from the National Labor Relations Board.” Of course, he thought it was funny, and shared the story with all of us.

I had known that they were going to do that beforehand, because I knew Tyree and those guys. Sometimes in those situations, when some of the other agent guys would be assigned to investigate the movement activities they would always say, “Why don’t you send Barbara? Why don’t you send Fred?” I said, “Nope, that’s your job. They don’t bite. They talk crazy, but what are you supposed to do? They’re not going hit you.” Especially the younger guys, who had heard about Hank Roney, Tyree Scott, who were really lambs in wolf’s clothing. They talked mess to you, but you just listen and then say, “Look, this is the rule. This is what I’m here to investigate. That is not what I’m here about.” They would finally calm down and talk to you. Tyree, may he rest, never threatened anyone. He was a gentle giant.

But those were the kinds of things that I ran into at the Labor Board. That was an exciting time to be there, because that was the heart of the movement for equality in the union; ultimately there was a Consent Decree. I think the woman judge—Barbara Rothstein—was assigned to oversee it. Sometimes we would get to go to court to observe, Tyree and those guys, they were actors. Judge Barbara Rothstein—she was ready for them because she knew you’re going to perform only so far, and I’m going to corral all of this so we can get down to the facts. But they would, as they said, blow smoke

at Hugh Hefner and the union guys. Judge Rothstein would sit there, and after a minute she'd say, "Let's get to the point here. Let's have order in this courtroom." [laughing]

It was fascinating to watch those dynamics go on, and even when there were meetings with Seattle departments about issues, they would come in, and they would all be in a gang, of their little groups, and they'd get started. One time I remember, we were at a hearing with the City of Seattle about employment or lack thereof in construction on city projects. The Hearing Officer had forgotten to turn the tape on. In the middle of the hearing, she announced very boldly, "Well, I forgot to turn the tape on and we're going to start all over." This friend of mine says, "You know, she's dumb. I would have just pushed the button and let them continue. They would never have known that I didn't get the first half, which was really nothing of substance." By the time she figured out she hadn't turned the tape on, they were getting to the substance. I would have just—click!—and continued."

**Zaragoza:** So many struggles at that time, whether in steel or in auto, were built by Black activists and other folks fighting the company on one hand, and the white-led union on the other hand.

**Laners:** Especially the craft unions. I remember the auto CIO units were integrated. But it was the AFL—the craft unions—that were led by George Meany that were the ones that had these grandfather clauses and all that. So that struggle was primarily with the crafts.

**Zaragoza:** And back in Detroit there was the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and DRUM [Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement] and all that in on similar struggles.

**Laners:** DRUM wasn't part of the Seattle movement.

**Zaragoza:** I didn't know Tyree Scott, but I knew folks who had worked with him that came out of Detroit and out of those struggles in Detroit and Chicago, and had correspondence, and were helping to kind and build and educate in a larger way. It's not just this or that little struggle. Together these are part of a bigger struggle.

**Laners:** Right. The AFL have excluded a lot of folk. Because you know that grandfather clause—if your grandfather and your father were members, you automatically inherited membership. If they excluded you, or if they excluded your grandfather, then you weren't eligible.

George Meany was a power in the United States. Because I remember Adam Clayton Powell, congressman from Harlem, when he had enough seniority to be Chairman of the Labor Committee in the Congress, Meany said, "No." He didn't last long as Chairman. But you're right, there was people who were experienced organizers who told us, "Look, you're the neophytes. We're going to share our

experience and let you know how to organize.” That was the time that National Welfare Rights Organizations were being organized in local groups. I don’t remember their last names, but Bernadine and Ida and all those folks, they organized the local chapter. They would go down to Olympia with babies on their hips, and tell somebody, whether they were legislators or not, "Hold my baby. I need to speak.” [laughing] These were activists, and they believed and fought for what it was they believed in. What fascinated me about those women in welfare rights, they were not quote-unquote “educated” women. They were blue-collar workers and all that. But they knew what was needed for themselves and for those coming after them. And they were unafraid and bold, and they would say what needed to be said in whichever way they needed to say it.

Those were the kind of women I grew up around. Like Gerry Ware, Flo Ware, Ida and Bernadine, and all of those women. Mary Lou Williams and Miss Bernstein were also activists. I never knew Miss Bernstein’s first name. She was a little Jewish woman who was always there. All those women were there, but they were all working women, and they were all women who worked in these programs, and the poverty program. They were, frankly, my role models, because if something needed to be done, they would do it.

Model Cities had a group of women who—what were they called "Community workers"—these were women who went out into the community and organized. The thing that fascinated me was that every weekend, they got together and had a potluck, talked about their events, and told us young folk about how you have to deal with people. The thing they would always say to us was, “You have to appreciate and recognize the humanity of everyone. He or she deserved to be heard. They may not say it in the most correct way that we sent you to college to learn, but they have a story to tell, and you listen.” You got from them the appreciation of humanity in each of us, and how we had to be involved with each other in order to succeed.

**Zaragoza:** What’s after the NLRB for you?

**Laners:** I went into private practice. Let me back up. Everything has a story. Judge Jack Tanner used to say—who was an attorney before he was a judge—“You were spoiled. You didn’t know the hard knocks of practicing law on the ground.” I decided, after 10 years, I need to learn how to practice law on the ground, like Judge Tanner said.

I retired, and I went into private practice with Symone Scales. That was the school of hard knocks. I did some labor law, but primarily we did juvenile defense and some employment law, and those kinds of things. Most of the time it was pro bono because we didn’t get paid most of the time.



[laughing] Folks would write you a check, and you would say, “We put the check in the bank and it bounced.” This one guy would say, “Well, you know, I wrote everybody a check, and it was first come, first served.” I said, “Excuse me?” If you get to the bank first, you got paid! If you didn’t, you didn’t get paid.

Another woman said, “Well, you know, at the end of the week, I put everybody in a hat, and if I pull your name out of the hat, then you’d get paid. If not, you’d have to wait until the next check I got.” [laughing] This was fascinating.

What happened was that we signed up to do some work with the public defender. We were private attorneys. When they had conflicts, they assigned the conflicted party to us. But that was enjoyable because I met some of our kids, black, white and green. They were bad kids. They weren’t bad in the bad sense, but they just knew everything about the system that we didn’t know. They would say, “Come here, let me tell you something.” I said, “What?” “This is how this works.” “Okay.” “When you go in and you talk the judge down—but wait a minute. If it’s Black Johnson, you can’t talk this way. But if it’s White Johnson, you can snowball him.” I said, “Why can’t you talk that way to Black Johnson?” “Well, because he told me if I come back, I’d better have a toothbrush if I hadn’t done what he said to do.”

Those are the kinds of things you learned about practicing, you learn about these kids. Once again, you were dealing with brilliance that had, in the school-organized concept had been lost. But they knew how to deal with that system, especially when they changed the system, where you started getting points for this, that, and another. They knew all of it, and they would sit you down. “Have you done this before?” I said, “No, not really, but let me tell you how it works.”

They would show you—so I finally said to one, “If you know all of this, why are you always down here?” They would tell you things, like this one young white boy said to me, “You know, I don’t like my stepdad.” I said, “What does he do?” “Because he thinks he’s my dad.” The story was his mom—you know, young folks in love do things, but his mom had married this older guy who was a banker, and he tried to raise the “young tigers,” he called them, and he didn’t want to hear that. “He ain’t my daddy.” I said, “Okay.”

So when we finally had the meeting that was required with the counselor and his parents and me, his stepdad was a nice man. “He just had some rules that you don’t want to follow, because he ain’t my dad. And I do not like him.” So when we went back to court, I told him, “Listen, your stepdad is a nice man. He does not beat you. He has the best intentions for you. If I were you, I would listen.”

Oh, no. And, of course, his buddies, he had a model United Nations group of buddies—Black, white Asian, all of them, they were going to tell him how you deal with this man. I'm thinking, if you did that to me, I'd beat the snot off of you. [laughing]

The other thing about them was they looked out and supported each other. That's the other thing I learned about juvies. They have loyalties, the likes of which you don't believe. It was them against the world. But if you're a member of their crowd, they are going to look out for you, and they supported each other. They would tell the lawyer, "You know, that's my buddy. You go out and you do the best you can for him or her." "Okay."

Those were the kinds of experiences that I've learned. In my older years, I can laugh about them. Sometimes I will run into some of them now [laughing] and they will say, "Miss Barbara, what you been doing?" I said, "I've been teaching." "Oh, you haven't been practicing law?" "No." "Well, you know, So-and-So's got a problem." I said, "I don't do that any longer." "Well, maybe you could just make some time for him or her?" "No, I don't do it any longer."

**Zaragoza:** How long were you in private practice?

**Laners:** That lasted until 2002, and then even then, I did some private practice. But in the meantime, I had health issues that drew me away from the stress of that. Even now, I have my friends' children who will call, and my nieces and nephews who have legal questions, so I keep my bar license active in case I have to go and sit in for them. For the most part, I was in from 1975 until the mid-'80s, I was actively practicing.

**Zaragoza:** When do you come to Evergreen Tacoma, and what brought you?

**Laners:** I came to Evergreen Tacoma in 2000. Artee Young was teaching here, and her father was ill in Louisiana—I think he was terminally ill—so she wanted to go that year to be with him. She recommended me that I take her place while she was gone. And I did for that year, and somehow it's just morphed into being here for 19 years. I thought I had come to replace her for one year, and it continued. I don't know why they decided they wanted to keep me, but it continued for 19 years. It was because she was going to take a leave. She was teaching Law and Public Policy and those issues, and she recommended me.

**Zaragoza:** What was it like when you first got here? What were some early impressions?

**Laners:** It was open. I ran into a lot of older students who were coming back, and they were curious, and they didn't challenge me as much as later on students. We would have conversations, and the learning environment was kind of laid back a lot.

The first person I taught with was Dr. Willie Parson. It was the confluence of law and science. We taught those issues of law and science, and how they related to each other, and how they impacted each other. I remember we had two students who were very religious. Michael—he was assigned to me—and I used to tell Dr. Parson, "I can't deal with him because in everything, he has to challenge me because the "woman's place was to follow, and not to lead." Dr. Parson would say, "Just calm down. He's going to finally calm down." One day, he didn't calm down, and I told Dr. Parson, "You have to deal with him. I refuse to deal with him any longer."

But it was kind of a wonderful first experience because I taught with Dr. Parson, and then I taught with Eddy Brown. We taught English. What was fascinating about that was that there was an older Black woman whose English skills were not up to par. She was an active participant, but she said to Dr. Brown, "I know you're an English professor, so when I make mistakes in my grammar, correct me at the time."

Other younger students thought that he was insulting her, and she explained to them "No, he's not insulting me. He's doing what I asked him to do, because I'm older, and if I'm corrected on the spot, then it will stick with me more." He would just very quietly say the proper form of the verb or that kind of stuff. She appreciated it, but that was at her request, because he would not have done that had she not asked him. The young Black spitfires said, "Why is he insulting the sister?" She told them, "He's not insulting me. He's doing what I asked him to do."

**Zaragoza:** How would you describe the educational pedagogical philosophy that was part of the Evergreen Tacoma Campus when you first got here?

**Laners:** It was different, because I came from a traditional background, but it was exciting because it was experimental. You were allowed to develop your course of study geared to what it was you know, and to involve that in contemporary issues that your degree in whatever you had impacted that. So I was always allowed to teach things with law, and public policy, and history married to contemporary issues. The thing that I was impressed with was the fact you could develop your classes, and you could experiment with things that would work, and engage students in a manner where they were active participants and learners in that they did not have to memorize stuff. They could bring things to the table that we could all talk about and interrogate.

Of course, I would always have them come sit by me. That was one of the things I was known for. [laughing] “Come sit by me.” If you act up in class, I was being a mama then. One of the young guys said, “Professor Laners, I’m a grownup.” I said, “Yes, you are, but you’re acting like a third grader, so come sit by me.” [laughing]

We had some engaging discussions, and what allowed that is in terms of what you were allowed to develop and teach, and how you engaged students. That was the thing that always fascinated me, coming from a traditional college—where you had traditional things to do—the freedom with which you could develop a program and a learning style in the way that you could deliver it that you define.

**Zaragoza:** Who else was part of the faculty when you first got to Evergreen Tacoma?

**Laners:** Artee Young, Dr. Willie Parsons, Eddy Brown. Joye Hardiman was the Director. Artee wasn’t there the first year. Gilda Sheppard. Tony Reynolds.

**Zaragoza:** What did Tony teach?

**Laners:** Computers. Luversa Sullivan was here. I can’t remember who else was there the first time I was here.

**Zaragoza:** How did things develop over the first 10 years or so of your time at Evergreen Tacoma?

**Laners:** In what way do you mean?

**Zaragoza:** How do things change and evolve, whether it’s the personnel, or the educational philosophy, or what you all looked at, or the student body. How did things change in the first 10 years?

**Laners:** The first 10 years, under Joye Hardiman, to me, it was more open but more structured in a lot of ways. She had very definite objectives that she wanted to achieve. After her, it was Artee Young, who was a stickler for pedagogy. When I came there were a lot more older students who came with a lot more basic needs, and that’s what a lot of the learning was geared to. It was experimental, but we took students where they were. When Artee Young was the Director, it was kind of more of a mixture, but we began to have more younger students with definite ideas of how they thought things should be taught. She still had basic curricular ideas that she believed needed to be taught, so she focused on things that students ask. Such as when they wanted psychology, so she brought in Dr. Dorothy Anderson and Bracey Dangerfield.

With literature, Carl Waluconis was one of the people who was here teaching English and literature. He was great at experimenting with ideas. I taught a class with him. It was English and law together, and we did some wild things. We had two trials. We put Thomas Jefferson on trial. Then we

put the characters of Toni Morrison's book *Jazz* —a contemporary trial, dealt with characters in the book.

But the thing that always fascinated me about Evergreen—now, in some ways, I look at it and to me, it's becoming more traditional—but back then, you were always allowed to experiment with curricula, and to marry some traditional with contemporary issues. I'm not a technology person, and you know that by now, but you still could marry technology with contemporary, just in ways that enhanced the learning environment for students, and those kinds of things. The willingness to experiment has been one part of Evergreen that I was always fascinated with. You were not stuck with the traditional curriculum. You could use your academics—whatever your training was—to marry the old and the new.

**Zaragoza:** How have things changed in the last 10 years that you could point to? How have they further evolved and developed?

**Laners:** I think, to me, when I first came, or maybe it had always existed, but I didn't think we had as much control and interference from Olympia as it has evolved into now. I think folks were allowed to develop their programs, and to teach, and just not worry about what was going on, what they thought about what it was. They allowed a lot more freedom.

To me now they're a lot more—especially this is the last group—kind of direct you in ways, and to me, that stifles the creativity that I recognize that was in the first year. You didn't have to always worry about who was looking over your shoulder.

**Zaragoza:** Could you point to specific things that gave you that impression, or that made things feel more surveilled or controlled?

**Laners:** I think one of the things that happened—I don't know, this is just a gut feeling with this administration—is that they have a way of being and doing and seeing that is more "I'm going to direct you in the way that I want you to go." I think one of the things that the Provost said was that "I will listen to you, but ultimately, the decision is mine to make." Remember that discussion?

**Zaragoza:** Yes, but I don't see that as all that different from Don Bantz.

**Laners:** Yeah, but Don Bantz was not here as much, down on this campus.

**Zaragoza:** True.

**Laners:** He may have been in Olympia, but it was once in a blue moon that I saw Don Bantz. I can remember when he came to—what did they call it, your three-year thing? I just did what I did. He

looked and he observed, but he never interfered in what it was that was going on, not that I noticed. Maybe Joye and those folk in administration would have a different feel. I always came away from the meetings with the feeling that you were listened to much more, and that your views about what should go on on this campus were usually given much more consideration than I believe they are given now. That's just me. Folks may have different views about that.

**Zaragoza:** Part of the reasons that I think the current Provost is here more is because we requested her to be here more, and we requested more support. So I do wonder if some of this is the outcome of us asking for more, and to right some of the historical inequities that have existed between the campuses.

**Laners:** That might be so. I don't have the ability to critique that, but that may be so. My experience early on was when I came, I thought, wow, this is free—you can do what you need to do. Although even today, I've been able to do and develop what I've been able to develop. I think Bocho and I have been left alone to do what it is we do. I can say that—not just in terms of what we teach, the curriculum, we have been allowed to develop and teach what it is that we are most comfortable with and experts in.

**Zaragoza:** Along that line, talk to us about some of your most memorable programs over the course of your near-20 years.

**Laners:** All of my memorable programs have to do with my law classes, and with the classes in politics that Bocho and I have taught together, because those were the classes where we got to delve with students, and make some sometimes arbitrary rules about. One of the years, I think the rule was, if you don't vote and come to class and prove that you voted, you don't have an opinion. [laughing] I remember this one woman student came back to class, she loved to talk and had opinions about everything. Not only had she voted, her husband, all of her extended relatives did. You know how they'd give out I VOTED stickers? She brought all those stickers and said, "See, Professor Laners and Professor Bocho, I voted so I get to talk a lot, because I not only voted, my husband and all of my relatives voted. Here's the proof!"

Those kinds of classes, where you engaged students with legal issues. The two classes dealing with law and trials, the one that I spoke about earlier with Carl Waluconis where we put Thomas Jefferson on trial were smaller. In that, we got to teach a lot of history about the roles of slavery and freedom and democracy at that time, and whether or not slaves were competent to testify against their owners. Those were the kinds of things we were investigating and interrogating. With *Jazz*, we looked at contemporary issues, criminal justice, and police-community relations in that regard.

The other one was the class Dr. Gilda Sheppard and I did together, where we engaged the contemporary issue dealing with Colin Kaepernick. The students researched the issue of scope of freedom of speech and activism in employment. You remember Angela, who was always leery about speaking? I told her, “Your role is going to be the clerk of the court. You will call the court to order with the expression, ‘All rise.’ Can you remember to say that?” And she relished that position. But they actively engaged in those kinds of things. What I’ve learned to appreciate about our students is that they like to engage, be actively involved in what’s going on.

**Zaragoza:** And remember, through the hard work of you and me, we got Angela to be able to give her senior presentation.

**Laners:** Remember, the class we did, where we had debates? Remember that class, that political class we did?

**Zaragoza:** Yeah, and folks were showing up early to practice!

**Laners:** Those were the kinds of things that fascinated me and we’re not just talking at them. They were engaged with this whole process. That’s the thing I hope this campus never loses is the fact that what we teach has the ability to actively engage students on a meaningful level.

**Zaragoza:** That’s right.

**Laners:** Not just remembering and regurgitating things, but actually being involved in doing things. That’s one of the things I appreciate about the Spring Fair, because when they’re on it, they’re on it.

**Zaragoza:** Tell us a little bit more about some other memorable students that you’ve had along your career here at Evergreen.

**Laners:** I’ve had a lot. I’ve had Izetta Middleton and Sandy Daniels. What fascinated me is all the students I’ve had who sent their children and husbands to Evergreen Tacoma. I have had the whole family. Regina Husbands, the mother, was the first student, and she was the major witness in the *Jazz* program. She was this immature, uninvolved lady, and the judge would say, “You have to speak to the record! Speak up so we can hear you and what you have to offer!” Regina has always been that person who was kind of reticent in terms of participating. Keisha Husbands was one of my advisees, and Keisha was kind of like her mom, but more adventuresome. Then came Sashi, the youngest of the lot.

**Zaragoza:** Sashi Brown?

**Laners:** Yeah, Sashi Brown. That’s the youngest of the group, and she was Dr. Smith’s advisee, but every class I taught, Sashi was there. The one thing about Sashi was that she was going to be her and

raise her voice and challenge me. I said, “Look, Sashi, you need to be quiet today.” “Why?” “Because I don’t feel like hearing what you have to say.” “Well, that’s not the proper or acceptable conduct of a teacher.” But she was curious, and adventuresome, and she would contribute to the class. We’d have these back-and-forths.

Then there was Sandy Daniels, who worked here, and she was also a student. Her daughter was one of my students. I remember I taught this class, and she would like to sneak out and go to a party. I would just ask “Where are you going?” “Oh, nowhere.” I said, “Come sit down. Class is not over.” Even today when her mom gets up to tell those stories, her daughter will say, “You can’t tell that!”

Those families, and some of the young men I’ve had, like Larry and Anthony.

**Zaragoza:** The Normans.

**Laners:** The Normans. Their older sister and aunt and the stepfather and all of them. Anthony’s rule was “I’m going to best this woman.” [laughing] So he’d come prepared and loaded for bear to argue with me. But I said, “Look, Anthony, you can’t win. I knew your grandmother.” He said, “That’s not fair!” I said, “I did, so I know your family.” That was a family with whom I had positive engagements.

I can’t remember some of the names of those who were special—we’ve always had students who wanted to better their conditions, and wanted to take in what we had to offer, not just as listeners but as active participants who challenge us in ways that, at least when I went to the University of Washington. Sometimes I would challenge folk, but these students—I think because of the life experience they bring, they are willing to raise questions with you.

**Zaragoza:** I think it goes back to some of the things you said early on, in terms of how we structure this campus; that it’s embedded in the community, not all that different from your education in Louisiana.

**Laners:** Right.

**Zaragoza:** And that it’s responsive to the community itself.

**Laners:** This was and is a family centered community. Those are the kinds of things that will always give fond memories of Evergreen.

The other thing that I’m always grateful for is that this campus takes students where they are. We try to develop their best potential. That’s something I hope we never lose.

**Zaragoza:** Yes.

**Laners:** Just meeting them where they are. I think that’s important to a lot of students, and that we allow them to express their views. I know in classes that I’ve taught and classes that you’ve taught, we



just allow them to speak freely, and to bring out what it is that they have to offer without diminishing them in any way.

**Zaragoza:** What have some of the challenges or paradoxes or disappointments of working at Evergreen been for you?

**Laners:** Hmm. The challenges have been some of the male students, primarily, who just challenged me in ways that I just told one, “Shut up!” I realized that’s not the way to be.

Challenges that some students would come with preconceived notions about how education ought to be, and are unwilling to get out of the box. These are not the young students. Sometimes it’s the older students, but when you sit down and I think about it, it’s because of their life experiences. The failure was not in them, it was in me, because my life experience tells me something different, and there was no meeting halfway with some students on issues. “You’re not going to tell me what to do and how it is. Been there, done that, and I know what you think you know” kind of thing. I recognized that that was my failure, not theirs.

**Zaragoza:** I think I’m more aiming toward the disappointments that you’ve had with Evergreen as an institution, not simply the students.

**Laners:** I just think that it’s changing, the institutional changes. I’ve not been disappointed, I’ve just been concerned about how far we are going to stray from the founding policies of the college. Maybe I’m wrong, but I see it in a lot of ways becoming more traditional, and I don’t think that benefits the kind of students we hope to attract.

**Zaragoza:** From knowing you over the years, one of the things that you and I have talked a lot about is your role as an adjunct faculty, and the ways in which that puts you in a particular position. Do you want to speak to being adjunct? You were adjunct for 19 years, and only recently had the luxury of a multiyear contract, which is not much of a luxury at the end of that three-year period.

**Laners:** No, it’s not. When I talked to some friends of mine, at least they were saying that—and maybe you can correct this—a lot of colleges are moving to adjuncts.

**Zaragoza:** We have far fewer than most schools.

**Laners:** I remember talking to a friend who lives in the East. She said, “At least you have more benefit being an adjunct than a lot of the colleges here.” I don’t know if this is true. I don’t know if it was an exaggeration. She lives in Illinois and she said, “A lot of the colleges have more adjuncts than they have regular faculty.”

But I think the disappointment to me is the uncertainty of that position. I think at this college, I've had more of a say in terms of what I thought about things. I don't know how it is at Evergreen, but it does put you at a disadvantage not knowing whether you were going to be back, what the expectations are of you, and how does that impact the curriculum? The uncertainty of it all was the thing that bothered me. The other thing that bothered me was the pay is not commensurate with what they require you to do.

**Zaragoza:** Right, and I remember you had an issue in terms of when adjuncts are paid. Maybe you want to speak to that a little bit.

**Laners:** That's the other thing. The expectation, I remember, here was that we would report when regular faculty would report. But the first paycheck, we didn't get. We started with the second, and then in January, we were also not paid on the first. At the beginning of each quarter, we were not paid. Where regular faculty would get a paycheck, we wouldn't at the beginning of a quarter. That always put me, at least, at an economic disadvantage.

**Zaragoza:** Because it's not like your bills take a time off.

**Laners:** They didn't. That's one of the things that I think need to be looked at seriously. If you're going to use adjuncts, and if you're going to require them to act as regular faculty, then to me, they should be compensated as regular faculty members.

**Zaragoza:** Barbara, you've also continued to do things outside of the classroom throughout your time at Evergreen Tacoma. One, I know, is the radio show. There are plenty of other things. Maybe you can talk to us about some of those activities.

**Laners:** I did the radio show. I still do, although I'm beginning to really think about it because practicing law has become technical things. I do a lot of pro bono with family and friends and church folk. I used to volunteer at Martin Luther King Elementary school, but my nieces and nephews are older now so I don't have to watch over them. It's just in terms of helping out neighbors, and doing kinds of things, and going through it. A lot of it is related. In terms of radio, I'm compensated for that, but a lot of the other stuff, I just do it voluntarily, helping friends and neighbors go through legal papers, listening to them and trying to direct them in terms of where they ought to be, what they ought to be doing about legal issues.

Continued to go to political meetings, and right now I'll be involved with Larry Gossett's reelection campaign, because it's in trouble. Those kinds of things.

**Zaragoza:** Many people know you from your work in radio. Can you tell us a little bit about your program and the kinds of things that you do on it?

**Laners:** Once again, it started way back when. There was a woman I knew—Anita Johnson—who did a program called “Soul Dialogue.” She was going back East to graduate school. One of the things she said was, “You’re a talkative soul. Do you want to do a radio program?” “Not really.” She said, “Yeah, you can. It’s on Sunday mornings on KYAC.” That station was the first Black station. The station was over in Kirkland. There was Lloyd Jones, who’s Quincy Jones’s brother, did the early morning jazz, Marty Wide, host of contemporary R&B, who did the show after that. She says, “For one hour, you can just talk about contemporary issues and the Black community, contemporary political issues and all of that. You can handle it.”

I started then. When Chris Bennett, a friend of mine for over 50 years, bought his radio stations, Eddy Rye and I co-hosted a program called “Community Potpourri” that went on for a long time, and then I got to the point where I thought, I can’t handle this. He said, “I’m going to move in a different direction.” But Frank Barrow, the director of the program, said, “We do need a community outlet.” So I’d guest host for him most of the time. We’d talk about community issues, issues that were political, social and economic.

Then we allowed for folk in the community who may have issues that they want to raise to call to call into the show to discuss their issues. That’s been the grist of the program, to allow folk an outlet, and to let them know that we’re here, we’re listening, and we recognize that you need a voice to be heard. That’s what we’ve done.

We’ve done coat drives, food drives, toy drives and all those kinds of things as supplements to the broader things that go on in the community.

**Zaragoza:** Any other stories that stand out from your time here at Evergreen of people, or events, or moments in the classroom?

**Laners:** I always remember when Maxine comes, because that’s a fascinating issue in and of itself. She’d gather students around, and she’d always make them feel, no matter what their circumstances are, she always made them feel special. Just the camaraderie that we have.

I’ll always remember events surrounding when Artee Young left the campus. I also remember the students I had had gone on to do great things. Like Olga Donald. She was Artee’s advisee that I inherited. She used to always tell me that she would say to other students, “I hope Laners don’t make me come to the front and sit at the table in front of the class.” [laughing]

Those students who've been there, who I've taught, whose lives I've impacted, like Olga and Amanda, and who've just gone and succeeded done great things. Corretta and Corwin Scott, the Scott kids, students I've taught who have gone from here and just have done things to improve themselves and enhance the community. I am proud of them. And Sandy and her daughter, who are doing quite well in their chosen careers. But there are a whole host of students, some of whom are quite special. Michelle Brownlee. I am proud of Michelle, because you talk about students lifting themselves up by their bootstraps, she's one of them. But Michelle always reaches back and comes back, to let other students know what's going on, and always are available to help them.

**Zaragoza:** That's right.

**Laners:** Kim Brown, who was a student who was an older white woman—she keeps in touch with me—but she's gone on as a result of being here and encourages others "You can do this."

**Zaragoza:** I know also another important person to you here is Marla.

**Laners:** Yeah, Marla German. That's my bestest friend. [laughing]

**Zaragoza:** Maybe you can tell a couple of stories about her.

**Laners:** Marla has always been there for me, but Marla's there for everybody. She is going to show up, and her loyalty to the program, so if she can help you, she will, no matter if you're a student, faculty, whomever. She and Peter Bocho, who I've known for 50 years—I love him to death—and who is one of bestest friends in the world, we all have this camaraderie from law school, and even before then—neighborhood folk.

But all of you, I have grown to appreciate and love. Some of you I argue with, like you, and like Gilda. [laughter] Paul. It's just like family. I miss you dearly, but I can come see you sometime. Gilda is forever my dearest "sister friend."

**Zaragoza:** You can.

**Laners:** And Tyrus Smith. Tyrus was young, but we have Louisiana connections. I met his grandma and his grandpa, who are from Louisiana, and we talked about Louisiana stuff. It's just the closeness and the warmth of each other, and how we're really concerned about each other. Dr. Li is also special and everybody. Family folks fight, and I would be remiss if I said we didn't fight sometimes. But in the end, we do support each other.

**Zaragoza:** That's right.

**Laners:** That's the important thing. We can disagree without being disagreeable. That's one of the things, the part of the curricula that I love the most, students are allowed to disagree, but they've always been told—at least I have, and Sheppard and you—"You can disagree without being disagreeable." Which means that they've had some rip-roaring arguments and discussion, but they never developed, in my observance, into interpersonal attacks. Because folks draw back from that, and that's a good thing.

**Zaragoza:** That's part of family.

**Laners:** Yeah, that's part of family and community. And they know that. I've seen it operate. "Wait a minute. You can disagree, but you don't have to attack somebody personally." That's important to me, because today, in the body politic, it's all down to personal attacks as opposed to be attacking you on the issue.

**Zaragoza:** Final words, Barbara?

**Laners:** I think that this program is a needed program. I think it's a program that we all need to support and enhance in any ways that we can. I know the University of Washington has its tentacles out everywhere, and it has the resources that we don't have. But I still think we have a story and a place in the community of learners, and that we need to get that story out there more forcefully.

**Zaragoza:** I appreciate that very much, and I appreciate you sitting down with me. Thank you very much, Barbara Laners.

**Laners:** Thank you for inviting me.