

Marilyn Frasca
Interviewed by Barbara Smith
The Evergreen State College oral history project
March 6, 2018
FINAL

Smith: This is March 6, 2018, and this is an interview with Marilyn Frasca done by Barbara Smith. So, you've seen the general protocol of the overall topics, but we're happy to start wherever you want to start and cover which ever topics you want to cover.

Frasca: Okay. When I have to actually talk, when I'm thinking about it and everything, when I'm the spot, sometimes I can't remember the things that I want to say. I looked over the questions and I thought—what I do is I just sit for a moment and see what comes to me. So I took some notes in the order they came to me, and what I want to do is read them to you.

Smith: Okay.

Frasca: And then you can stop me and ask me any questions, and it won't take very long.

Smith: Okay, that's fine.

Frasca: Because this is what I thought immediately. Some notes regarding Barbara's interview:

Retreats were a good thing. Seeing people as friends on a mission to keep Evergreen alive and open. Education was always the priority. Talking about innovation in program teams, always astonishing to me. It provided energy, fortitude.

Piling into my tiny RV with staff and faculty on a winter retreat, all of us freezing, not dressed right. A bottle of cognac appears. Nothing better.

The key to my coming here: Mark Levensky. I met him when he was Humanities Dean for one year at New England College in New Hampshire, where I taught. I'd been there for four years. He, his vision for a humanities program, was like this cartoon. [Shows the cartoon to Barbara.]

Smith: Oh, wow. Beautiful. Can I have a copy of this cartoon?

Frasca: You're taking this whole thing.

Smith: Okay, great.

Frasca: The cartoon says, “A three-dimensional person releases a flatlander from his two-dimensional jail.” A circle drawn around him to the jailer, it appears the prisoner has vanished in thin air. She continues to read:

The idea of another dimension in education never dawned on me until I met Mark, who took it as seriously as I took my own painting. It was as if we were all in flatland. I was the only one who was able to see what he saw. He left for Washington after a year and invited me to apply to Evergreen. I did and was hired. I knew this was serious work.

Smith: What year was that?

Frasca: That was in 1973.

Smith: Okay.

Frasca: She continues to read:

This wasn’t just a job. I knew this from Mark, from Peggy Dickinson, from Merv Cadwallader. It was the first time I was joining a team and they wanted me on it.

I was never a brilliant student, and when I look back at my childhood, which was splendid, I was really barely conscious till I was sent to music and art high school at 15. Drawing, painting, art history was my first serious invitation to join a team. A new culture of seeing and thinking. Evergreen’s invitation to be on the faculty was my second serious invitation, and that was 18 years later. I was 33.

Smith: Wow. That’s a long interlude. [laughing]

Frasca: Without those invitations.

Smith: Yes!

Frasca: She continues to read:

The amazing thing was that I was joining a structure that supported innovation in teaching and did not label me as “the art teacher.” I could work in and out of the arts with scientists, writers, philosophers. It was intimidating, challenging, and sometimes embarrassing because, like the students, I, too, was learning new disciplines from my colleagues in the teams I taught with—ornithology, biology, Greek philosophy, communications, political science, economics.

In the early years, the students knew about and wanted to be at Evergreen. Perhaps our publicity or our public presence went to sleep. Enrollment changed. Students were confused. We had

to reshape ourselves into a more familiar academic program. Evaluations became equivalent credits. No departments became specialty areas.

The country shifted. A culture wanting to learn became a country wanting to make money, to achieve. Difficult to achieve anything popular if there are not grades and no majors. Evergreen became Evergreen 2.

Smith: When was that?

Frasca: I couldn't tell you.

Smith: Probably with the first specialty areas, as they were first called?

Frasca: When they first started, it wasn't that ominous. It really felt necessary because we were sort of a little bit out of control in terms of arts faculty wanting to teach in interdisciplinary programs, but constantly training students how to do basic things in the arts. So, wait a minute, maybe we need an introductory program so that they could go through there, and then when we get them . . . so therefore some of the faculty can rotate into beginning parts, and then they can have the freedom to do these other things. So, at the beginning, it made some kind of sense.

Smith: Right. Of course, I think some of the beginning students were more advanced students to begin with.

Frasca: You mean in the first few years?

Smith: Yeah.

Frasca: Oh, yes. No, no, everything changed. Different kinds of students were coming. No, that changed.

Smith: Interesting.

Frasca: She continues to read:

The faculty hid under its new language. That would be the language of specialty areas and so on, and trying to speak so that students understood us by referring ourselves to a school that looks like other schools. We are like them. See? We do this, we do that. We have intermediate, we have this, we have intro.

Smith: Translations.

Frasca: She continues to read:

But pretty soon, the faculty hid under all of this until the language owned us. We talked more about who should do what rather than talking about teaching. Barbara Smith tried hard to keep the conversation going. She published essays by faculty regarding teaching. She supported innovation, and created the Washington Center.

Administrations changed, however. So did the country. And, once again, faculty learned a new language given them by a newly formed union. We then had Evergreen 3. When meetings were about creating new structures and salaries only, it was time for me to leave.

I had an extraordinary life as a teacher, and for this, I'll be forever grateful.

Smith: Wow! That blows me away.

Frasca: Three Evergreens.

Smith: That organizes it, actually, in a way I haven't heard from anybody else.

Frasca: Yeah. Couldn't just feel it, those three Evergreens?

Smith: Yes.

Frasca: I think right now . . . is the most difficult one. But I'm not there, but in just hearing about it and so on and talking to different people . . . Maxine [Mimms] and I talked a lot about it. We both agree that . . . let me come back to my own teaching. The thing I learned as a teacher at Evergreen—given the fact that it was so diverse, and we never knew what skills people had and everything—I had to work with what came in the room.

Smith: In the students and colleagues?

Frasca: Yeah. Whatever came, when they came in, here's where they are. How do I have that person know that whatever they have is what we're talking about? It's not something outside of them. If they have a little bit of skill, that's where we begin. That's it. That grew over the years. Whatever was already present in the student, that's what I built on.

Smith: How did you ascertain that?

Frasca: I ascertained it by—one of the things I had to learn how to do—don't let me forget, this is all a prequel to getting back to the present time—but I learned how to do this because when I first came to Evergreen, I had just begun to study with a psychologist named Ira Progoff in New York. I went constantly to see him and to do work with him, which is a kind of writing that, as you know—should I act like you don't know?

Smith: Uh-huh.

Frasca: Okay. It's a kind of writing that a person does to look at the contents of their own life. You look at it through writing. You never share it if you don't want to. Nobody collects it, nobody looks at it, nobody judges it. It's you giving yourself permission to put in writing things you've always thought about and wondered about yourself. Mostly people are very good at that when they study somebody else. They're excellent. "I'm going to write a paper on Georgia O'Keefe. I can't wait to find out about this."

But about themselves, there are categories that they've just blocked out. They don't even want to go there. They skip over big pieces and so on, and they have feelings come up they don't know what to do with them and so on. But this gives a little structure so that they can do that. So they look at their own lives and they write what comes to them. Not what they should write, or what would be good for them to write about. When they do that, they are surprised. They look at it and they say, "Oh my god, that year was really a great one. I'd never even thought." That becomes a seed for a change in one's thinking about one's past. But it came from them.

I learned how to use this in a variety of settings. In the art world, working with drawing, it's very simple. I learned to apply that work to the drawing work, and I would do it in a very simple way. I tried to get other faculty to try this.

Smith: Explain how you do that.

Frasca: Here's what I did. For example, who was talking to me . . . they're a new faculty. Every one of them has taken me to lunch, different ones. Not the newest but they say, "Marilyn, I hear that da da da," and I say, "Here's what you do."

Smith: They want to learn from you.

Frasca: You want to get them in their own shoes. Don't make them feel like they have to depend on you. If you do, they'll never know what they're doing. So I say, "Here's what you do. The first day, you say—say you meet on a Monday—you say to them, 'This week on Thursday each of you are going to produce 50 drawings, and each drawing will be the size of your hand. And each drawing can be in any style, in any shape, in any form. You can copy things, you can trace things, you can use any material, you can use coffee, you can use lipstick, you can use art supplies, you can use dirt. Whatever you want. Fifty of them. Make a box the size of your hand, make 50 drawings, and I'll see you Thursday.'"

And they were like thrilled. Even the ones who don't—"You mean I can just do anything?" I said, "Just anything, anything you want. You can spill things, you can do anything."

So they bring their 50 drawings the size of their hand on Thursday and everyone usually does. And they put them up in the room. Everybody is sitting in front of their 50 drawings.

Smith: Describe some of them.

Frasca: Some of them are little landscapes, or little drawings of animals, or just their hand, or splashes. Some are in black and white, some are in color. Some are done with nail polish. Some of them are photographs that they worked on a cut to be the size of their hand. They've done all these different things.

They're each sitting in front of their 50 drawings, and then I say, "All right. I want you to close your eyes. Everybody relax." And we do a little meditation. Everybody calms down. It's really fun to see because each person is sitting in front of their 50 drawings and their eyes are closed. I have to help keep myself from laughing because they get so serious because I'm so serious because I know this is important work, even though it's a total mess. And they're starting to get courage because I did not say, "You can't put that up. That's disgusting." I never say a word.

Smith: Or, "This is good" and "This is bad."

Frasca: Nothing. So I sit there. They do a brief meditation, maybe five minutes. Then I say, "Okay, in a minute, I'm going to ask you to open your eyes. And when you open your eyes, I want you to take down 20 drawings for another time. We don't know what we're going to do with them another time, but take them down."

Smith: And no selection principle?

Frasca: Nothing. "Just take them down because you just don't want them up there." And they take them down, and then there's 30 left. Then they look at that and then I say, "Okay, of the 30, choose three that remind you of something you've felt in your life. It feels. It doesn't look like anything in particular, but when you look at it, there's a quality of feeling."

So, they do it. No problem. They put three drawings up. And everyone's got their three drawings, and everyone has a feeling that we don't know what it is. Then we go around the room, and all of us try to say what feeling is present in those three drawings.

Smith: As an outsider?

Frasca: As an outsider. We don't try to guess . . .

Smith: . . . what they're saying, what they would say.

Frasca: And I have to keep them quiet. They want to tell you what it is. As you know, the artist cannot speak. You have to know what we see.

Smith: Right.

Frasca: So people will look at the three drawings and they'll say, "It seems really scary. Those drawings, there's something about them that's scary." Then I say, "Describe that. What does that mean to you? What is scary?" They say, "Well, I don't know. It just makes me feel . . ." And I say, "When you looked at the drawings, what happened to you? What happened to you when you looked?" They say, "Well, I just got up." I said, "You know what it sounds like? It sounds like that's kind of exciting." They say, "Well, yeah, they're exciting." "So wouldn't you think that excitement might be part of the quality of that? It's exciting." And they say, "Yeah." I say, "Is excitement scary to you?"

Smith: Wow.

Frasca: And they say, "Well, you know, isn't that interesting? I think it's scary if I feel excitement when I look at the drawings." So we're having a conversation in which we are developing a language to talk about visual images that involves personal feelings and response, without ever mentioning the word "art" or "quality" or "skill" or nothing.

Smith: Wow.

Frasca: Usually we go around the room and everybody's blown away, especially the artists who made the images, because I invite them. "When you're listening to people talking about your drawings, you try to feel what they're feeling. See if you can feel what they're feeling." Rather than the impulse is to say, "What a jerk. I didn't do that." [laughing]

Smith: Yeah, "He's really stupid."

Frasca: No, no, but they try to feel it. So it really works out. After that I usually ask them to find one of the three that shows a technique that you would like to get better at using.

Smith: So this is the artist responding?

Frasca: Yeah. "Look at it. What technique? You used this, this, this. Which one was the most fun for you to use?" And they choose a technique, and for the following week, they make 10 drawings using that technique on the feeling that they tried to do.

Smith: Wow!

Frasca: So that they're developing work in series that came from them, but they're doing it in a team of people who are all doing the same thing, and they're developing a way of seeing and talking about images. So, I try to tell this to people.

But anyway, I wanted to get back to the other thing I was telling you about. The thing that's present is the thing I like to work on, rather than make up something and hope they get it. Okay.

Smith: Right, you want their interpretation really, too, more than external.

Frasca: Yeah, and I want specific questions from them, not the kind of questions like "What should I do?" I want them to say things like, "I really want to learn how to fix this ear. It's really important." And then I give them a lot of clues how to do research, how to do it and so on, and then they go do it. But a lot of times students just say, "I don't know what to do. I don't know."

When I heard about all the stuff that was going on at the college recently, in the beginning, when the kids occupied the President's office and all that, I thought that a big mistake had been made. Right away, I thought, what is present? Just like in the drawing, this is something that's there. This is what we have to do. Everybody's going to be affected by this. It's so obvious. We stop everything.

Smith: Right, and work on it.

Frasca: And work on it. We close the whole campus. Okay, I'm the President. I say, "Okay, Yolanda, Joseph, Peter." All of them in my office, occupying my office. I get to know their names. I say, "You people, you are responsible for making an agenda for the next week of how we can talk about these issues, how you want to do it, and you're in charge. We're giving you an office, we're giving you a secretary. We're going to print up your agenda, we're going to send it out to everybody, we're going to work together and we're going to follow your lead. Thank you for coming in here. God lord love ya!"

But what else happens? The security comes, the police come. Bad people! Everything boom, boom, boom, down, down, down. And it just went worse from there.

When it emerges, you recognize it and invite it in and make it happen. It's like remember how in the old days at Evergreen, somebody would raise their hand in the faculty meeting and they would say, "You know, I think that our relationship with the downtown business office, the Olympia town, is kind of not that great right now. I think we should da da da da." And whoever it was would say, "Fantastic! Let us know what happens. Do it!"

Smith: Wow. [laughing]

Frasca: We didn't keep giving things out and not doing things.

Smith: Right.

Frasca: We took responsibility. That's why hardly anyone would mention anything because we knew that would happen. [laughter]

Smith: Too much to do then!

Frasca: If we criticized the long-range planning committee, they'd say, "You're on the next one."

Smith: Or, "You're on it next week." [laughing]

Frasca: Right. So we rewarded observation with affirmation. When something happened it was an affirmation of freedom, or that we were able to say these things. So when that starts closing down, it can't get anything but bad.

And then the whole—people, you know, I hear they're reshaping it, they want to give it a different . . . and I thought, again, what is the matter with people? We are probably the only college in the country—and you would know probably for sure—that has this extraordinary Native American presence with a Longhouse and a fabric thing and a carving shed. Just turn their attention away from all those issues and just celebrate what's present.

Smith: What you've got, yeah.

Frasca: "The Evergreen State College Tribal Center for the Pacific Northwest invites students to come and study Native American heritage. We are having a conference of 20 tribes that are coming in June, and we are going to celebrate da da da." Just turn the whole—you know, Irwin Zuckerman used to keep thinking things like this. He kept thinking we're going to go down, because we don't have a focus.

There was one time when we in really bad shape—you know, we go in and out of these things—and there was one time we were all scared, and Irwin felt the pulse of something and he said, "Marilyn, we could really turn this around. We have to identify ourselves as a peace college."

Smith: I remember that! Yes! He wanted the whole curriculum to be peace studies. [laughing]

Frasca: Yeah. And so a lot of the stuff that we do—Maxine has been a very important mentor to me because we agree on so many things. There was a period there when . . . I don't know when, Jane Jervis, was the President?

Smith: Mm-hm.

Frasca: And I don't know, they hired some guy?

Smith: Enrique Riveros-Schäfer.

Frasca: Oh god.

Smith: Yeah.

Frasca: Well, before they even hired him—I don't know if you remember this—Phil Harding, Sally Cloninger and myself and a few other people came to a meeting and we said, "We have a serious proposal." We really spent a long time on it. We wanted the whole process to stop. We did not want anybody else coming in. We wanted somehow to initiate some different way of working based on what we already knew worked, and what we didn't, we wouldn't do.

Smith: In terms of administration you mean?

Frasca: In terms of administration.

Smith: I never heard this before.

Frasca: To try to think about it in a different way.

Smith: Did you have ideas?

Frasca: I don't remember. We had no success, of course. But we really thought—and Maxine's thing that she's always said is, "Don't just do something. Stand there."

Smith: What? Refuse to leave? Just stand there?

Frasca: No. You know how the thing is "Don't just sit there, do something!" She does it the other way. "Don't just do something, sit there." Like people are just doing things to do them.

Smith: Right, rather than having a real point of view or a vision.

Frasca: Exactly. That was sort of a period when that was going on.

Smith: Well, that was sort of the point of view of some of the protestors, so they just kept pushing. They thought they were doing something but it was a different agenda.

Frasca: Yeah, they were doing something, and they could have been supported in a different way.

Smith: Do you think this is about scale, about the fact that the college got bigger and bigger and bigger? Or the kind of people that came, or the students changing, or all of that? Getting old?

Frasca: Partly it's the culture changing, but partly, I think, it has to do with something about . . . how do you ensure that people know and understand the job they're taking as a faculty? How do you prove that? I think we never figured that out.

Smith: I think we hoped that the team teaching would help that acculturation process, but it had to be with the right people, too.

Frasca: Exactly.

Smith: You've got to have the right people.

Frasca: Because I think partly people said, "Oh, yeah, yeah, I love this idea. This is great." And then they come in and they say, "Oh my god, I hate this. What are we doing here?" Then they start bickering and saying, "I'm not going to teach with that one. I want to do this. I want to do that." So it starts in the faculty level.

With the students, I got the sense that, I don't know if people were doing what we did in the early years. The faculty went around to all the high schools. We used to do big workshops and talk to students and do little things, and visit and talk to faculty and guidance counselors. We always had little assignments.

Smith: Yeah, that happened when I first came. We were way under-enrolled in 1978 and everybody went out and did things.

Frasca: I don't know if it resulted—

Smith: Now we have professional staff doing that. And Dan Evans did that. In my interview he talked about how he went and talked to all the guidance counselors, which I didn't know.

Frasca: Yeah. But something about the way the college is being presented to the world, I don't know if that makes a difference. Whatever that is, it's not right, it's not working. It's happening the wrong way or something. So kids are coming here because they think they can do anything they want or they think—the reasons are very strange. Or, the students themselves have changed. Or maybe the fact that enrollment is difficult, therefore . . . I mean, maybe they just say yes to everybody who wants to come here.

Smith: They do, yeah.

Frasca: The interesting thing for me is, over the years—I retired in 2000, I did some post-retirement—but not in the past couple of years, but I would say up until 2015 or 2016 maybe, I've been invited back by people who still know me [laughing] because they're learning to do journal workshops with their students. Just a couple hours, two, three hours with them, usually in the first week of the program because they know it bonds everybody and it's like a retreat.

So, over these years, it's been really fun for me and stuff. The last time I did one was about two, three years ago—I don't know what was going on then—and I'd done them for different faculty, and for Heesoon [Jun] in her psychological counseling program. Because she said that when she doesn't do it,

everyone's scattered. "But when I do that, they work together the whole time." She doesn't do what it is.

Smith: She sets the stage.

Frasca: She says, "I don't have to know. Just do it and then we'll go." So I've been doing it for many years and it's been wonderful. She's always had a diverse group, everything's great. The last time I did it—the last couple of times—I couldn't . . . the students weren't there. I would say, "Okay, we're going to do this work," you know, and give my whole spiel. And usually, I'd get them all usually excited in their responses, and this time they were like in another world. Some of them were looking at their phones. There was one person doing her nails, an older woman. And I'd say, "Okay, do you get it? Are you with me here?" Nobody would say anything, or some person would say, "Uh-huh." I had like 40 people in there, and I thought, what is going on here? I don't know if I'm even going to get through this morning. Because the whole thing depended on that energy of people being interested. And then I thought, wow, I don't know. I don't know if I could work here right now. [laughing]

Smith: Well, usually people will comply with a request, and out of that behavior, they get like your original story. Then they find out, well, this isn't what I thought it is. It's much more fun and interesting.

Frasca: Yeah. I felt that over the years the quality of the attention of the students and the interest in actually being there, sitting in the room, being alive and awake, that has decreased.

Smith: I think that's true. That's what I hear from a lot of people.

Frasca: Yeah, that's decreased.

Smith: And it's partly phones. They're distracted.

Frasca: No, their whole life is somewhere else. It's always somewhere else.

Smith: Your work really centers on creating a culture change and centering them.

Frasca: Absolutely. Because if you really are, as I remembered we were, we were co-learners, we were in this together. "You are free to take responsibility. I'm not testing you, I'm not grading you. Therefore, you have to do something for yourself." And if they don't do that, the whole thing falls apart.

Smith: Right.

Frasca: If they aren't enthusiastic and interested in something . . .

Smith: Yeah, but you create that, Marilyn, the way you teach.

Frasca: I can create it, but I think other people do, too.

Smith: But you can learn to become more excited and interested. And it's partly, like you said, they're asleep.

Frasca: They're asleep. And then they have to—

Smith: I still remember my son saying—I said something about school when he was at Capitol High School and he said, "You don't get it, Mom." I said, "What?" He said, "It's about behavior control. That's what school is about." [laughing] I go "Well, it can be a lot more than that."

Frasca: Sure. God bless him, he got through it.

Smith: Yeah.

Frasca: No, it is true that they have been mesmerized by a certain expectation, and by an obedience.

Smith: And searching for the right answers.

Frasca: Even they don't believe it. [laughing]

Smith: They're like little performing dogs or something.

Frasca: Yes, exactly. "I tell you these things, you tell them back to me and then I know you know them."

Smith: Right.

Frasca: Rather than I ask you, "What do you want to know?"

Smith: Right.

Frasca: And then you say . . .

Smith: . . . "I don't know." [laughing]

Frasca: I say, "You have two minutes." And then they say, they know. They just don't believe they know. Or, they're not willing to put . . . what is the phrase? . . . put their eggs in one basket or something like that.

Smith: Commit.

Frasca: Commit. That's the word. They're afraid. What if I change my mind? What if I don't really want to do it? What if it's wrong? In the journal workshop when I say, "The whole thing is do what comes to you. Trust that." That's the whole issue. They don't trust themselves about anything, in some ways. But if I say, "This whole work depends on what comes to you," then they say, "Oh, god, I don't know. Nothing comes to me. I don't think visually. I never have any memories." I say, "Your favorite chair. You were four years old. Where did you sit? Who fed you? Was it in a highchair? Were you on the floor? Couch? Where were you?" And they say, "No, it was green." I say, "You're wrong." And

then they say, “I’m sorry.” I say, “You jerk. How could it possibly be wrong? It’s your memory!” I had to show them that at that level . . .

Smith: . . . they’re the experts.

Frasca: . . . that they’re the expert on themselves. They don’t know that because people say, “You’re not the kind of person who should study mathematics.” Somebody told them that. They believe it. “You’re not a person who gets mad. You’re not a person who lets people get away with things.” I mean, the person who heard that message the most was Lynda Barry.

Smith: I didn’t know Lynda.

Frasca: Lynda Barry is now—

Smith: She’s a famous person, isn’t she now?

Frasca: She’s a famous person. She also is a professor at the University of Wisconsin. Full professor with tenure. She has a BA from the Evergreen State College and that’s it.

Smith: All right! Really?

Frasca: She never did any graduate work.

Smith: How did UW manage that?

Frasca: She proved to them that—they hired her to do some short-term teaching in the arts, and she requested that one of the neurologists teach with her, because she was interested in how the brain and creativity work. And they agreed, and it was so successful, they brought her back. Then she started to work with local schools in Madison—young people, preschool—and had her students work with the young people and do writing about learning, and how they do creativity and so on. It kept sort of snowballing into all these other things. And now she lectures and goes around the country.

But she credits me for saying, “It’s whatever comes to you.” So she is on a mission to help people trust all those images, all those ideas that come and so on. That’s one of my most favorite stories of a student.

Smith: You worked a lot with teachers at Evergreen, too.

Frasca: I did.

Smith: How did that go, and what did you learn from that?

Frasca: You mean working with my colleagues?

Smith: Yeah.

Frasca: Sometimes it was really great, and sometimes they weren't interested in any of this. [laughing]

Smith: Yeah, that's probably luck of the draw.

Frasca: Do you remember what happened at the faculty retreat? I don't know if you were there. It was a faculty retreat at Fort Worden. We were just getting going. I don't know what year it was, but I had done some journal work in the program Words, Sounds and Images with Peter Elbow and some people. A little bit, not much then. I was just getting going.

But anyway, it was a very small little thing I was trying out over here. I was still being trained by Ira Progoff—and we were at the dinner, and somebody said, "There are going to be some events after dinner. Why don't the people stand up and say what they're going to be?" And people said, "We're going to play poker over here," or, "So and So is going to read part of their dissertation that they just finished," or whatever. Peter Elbow stands up and says, "Marilyn Frasca will conduct a journal workshop in the church." There was a little church there.

Smith: Did he warn you he was going to do it? [laughing]

Frasca: No! And I couldn't get out of it, and I was ridiculous. So I went there and I was horrified and frightened. I started doing it, and about 20 people came, and about 15 people walked right out.

Smith: After what? Five minutes?

Frasca: Yeah, after I started talking about what it was going to be. They said, "Thanks. Bye!" When I taught with a bunch of scientists once—Niels Skov, Steve Herman, and Pete Sinclair and me.

Smith: That's a great team.

Frasca: Yeah, well, I went to all their lectures and did everything with them, and only Pete Sinclair came to anything I did.

Smith: Aw-w-w.

Frasca: Steve Herman and Niels Skov would have nothing to do with drawing, nothing to do with journal writing, nothing to do with any of it. But Pete was great. Pete Sinclair was wonderful.

Smith: A deeply thinking person.

Frasca: He's doing the journal work there for a while, right? This is a good story. We were doing the journal work for a while and everyone's learning to write what comes to them. So everyone's writing, writing, Pete's writing, everybody writes. After a few weeks Pete comes to me and says, "Marilyn, I can't do this journal workshop anymore. It's really frightening." I said, "What are you talking about?"

He said, “Marilyn, on Monday we did the journal work. I sat there; what came to me was one of my students from the past who I wondered what happened to that person. Did they actually go to graduate school or anything? And you told me, write it down, so I wrote it down. Tuesday, the next day, that person knocked on the door. Now, I don’t want to bring these things into my life.” [laughter] I said, “Well, maybe you were just allowing yourself to be psychic.

Smith: It’s called a coincidence. [laughter]

Frasca: It was very funny. Levensky, of course, always made the journal work that I did and the drawing classes I did very key to anything we taught together. Very important. And then he would do philosophy lectures and writing workshops. Others, it was sort of okay. People like Joe Feddersen, he thought it was marvelous. And Susan Aurand. The other arts faculty, not so much.

Smith: The psychology faculty must understand this.

Frasca: Yeah, they must.

Smith: And education, too, in lots of ways.

Frasca: Yes. What really got me going in terms of thinking about doing it as part of the academic work was Sandie Nisbet, who taught The Ajax Compact.

Smith: I remember that. That was my first year.

Frasca: Yeah, the older women coming back to school, and she had a bunch of them. She wasn’t even on the faculty then. She was an adjunct or something. And she asked me to do it for them. It was so successful that she was like raving about it, so she had me do it every time she ever did—and Doranne Crable, bless her soul.

Smith: Yeah, she was creative.

Frasca: She definitely wanted me to do it. I’ve been invited by film faculty to come and do workshops with their students. Any group that they know the student is going to do some individual work on their own of some creative nature, it helps support their process.

Smith: Interesting. I remember you teaching Summer Institute, and that must have been Drawing from the Landscape and some of those.

Frasca: Those were great.

Smith: Of course, then you get the choir because people are signing up because they’re interested.

Frasca: Yeah, the Summer Institutes were always successful. They always were. Even the ones that were difficult were successful in the end.

Smith: I think you just need to create more and more opportunities like that as the place gets bigger and bigger and bigger.

Frasca: Yeah. I think the size is . . . it has to be in a different equation to something. The number of faculty, you have to assume—or you have to find—those people who are able to create communities connected to education, the really lively ones. So the size of the student body should never grow bigger than a certain amount of these people.

Smith: Right, like the student-faculty ratio. It's not about class seats, it's about community building groupness.

Frasca: Exactly. It's some other thing. It's got to be. And those people have to somehow be mentors to others, like you created in these institutes, because when you think of Sally Cloninger bringing together all those people in the studio to make videos—

Smith: Those were amazing.

Frasca: I was always so serious and they'd do these exhibitions of their work, and it was so much fun. I was always "Get out there and draw." You know? But Sally created this party.

Smith: Yeah, she did.

Frasca: She knew how to work with older adults who have a sense of humor, who are alive, and they know how to take a joke and they know how to be roasted. She just knew how to do that so that people were their age. How do you get teachers to be their age? They're not 12.

Smith: She was pretty young back then. [laughing]

Frasca: Yeah, but so was everybody. I mean, we were probably all around the same age. I'm going to be 79.

Smith: Oh! You look pretty good, I have to say, 79. Of course, Dan Evans at 90, even more of a model.

Frasca: Yeah.

Smith: I see you and Sally and a number of other people just that it came from your gut that you cared about community and that connectedness and creativity. And that was evident in what you did and how you did it.

Frasca: And Llyn De Danaan and Maxine Mimms, good friends of ours, they would come over. You know at least for two hours, we would talk about Evergreen. And if anything happened—I remember one time—I don't even remember the issue—it's so interesting—I remember the dynamic and the process almost more than the actual issues.

Smith: That journal stuff still.

Frasca: But it's sitting around here, Maxine on the couch and so on, and we say this, that and the other. And Maxine said, "Oh, my god! That is not good. That is not good. That should not be happening. Give me a phone!" [laughter] So I give her my phone and she calls Dan Evans immediately. She says, "Dan, my god, what do you think this is? You can't have that!" Da da da da! And then she argues and laughs and talks to him. Then we have supper. It wasn't like there was this big thing that we couldn't get involved in that was after us in any way.

Smith: She did that at a retreat we had at Harrison Hot Springs. She called Dan Evans and gave him her two cents.

Frasca: Yeah, right! [laughing]

Smith: Were you there?

Frasca: No.

Smith: So then we're driving back, and we went to Blaine—that littler border crossing—and Dee Van Brunt was really worried because she had liquor in her suitcase, so she's all—we're in this big van and the customs guy comes up and he goes all around the van and he looks, and he's got this really grumpy face. He says, "Roll down the window," so I roll down the window he asks questions, and then he said, "By the way, your President sent your pink slips"—everybody in the van a pink slip. Dan called the customs office.

Frasca: He did?

Smith: Yes!

Frasca: As a joke?

Smith: Yeah. And how he got them to do that, I don't know. But I'm going to ask him the next time I interview him.

Frasca: That's the thing. But don't you think when the third floor became something that we had to constantly negotiate with, that is when the union came in, there was a spirit that sort of went away, I think.

Smith: I don't know because I wasn't there. The union came after I left.

Frasca: That's what I think. People were mostly talking about those kinds of things. I told you Maxine was a mentor to me, because I would get these notices in the mail about one thing or another from some dean or something and I'd freak out, and I'd call her in Tacoma. [laughter] I'd say, "Maxine, did you get this?" She said, "Oh, Marilyn, throw it away." I said, "Oh, good." [laughter]

So when Joe Feddersen came on board, he taught with me his first year and he was so serious, and so worried and frightened because he'd never done this before. One day I saw him in his office after he'd been teaching for a couple weeks, and he was just staring at a piece of paper. I said [whispers], "Joe, are you all right?" And he said, "They're telling me that I have to do this, this, this and this and this and this, but I can't do those things. I'm teaching. I don't have time to do these things." I said [whispers], "Joe, throw it away."

Smith: Borrowing a line from Maxine!

Frasca: He was so relieved. I said, "You have to pick the work you're going to do."

Smith: Exactly.

Frasca: "You have to choose. You have to say, 'I want to do this. I am going here.' And then you bring your love to those things."

But he was a very important person. I also taught in the Native American Studies program two or three times with David Whitener, and I taught with Mary Hillaire when she was first there.

Smith: Was that where you met Maxine? Because that was all rolled together back then.

Frasca: No, I met Maxine the first year I was here in the mailroom. Somebody else told me they had a similar story. I can't remember what it was. But anyway, I was getting my mail and Maxine came in and she said, "What are you doing in the faculty mailbox? You can't take mail out of the faculty mailbox." I said, "I am faculty." She went "Hahahaha!" She laughed and walked out. That was my experience. [laughter]

Smith: You must have had another experience.

Frasca: Oh, yeah, I met her through Llyn, and we became very good friends. She was really something.

Smith: Yes. Well, that was full circle seeing her last weekend, wasn't it?

Frasca: Oh my god.

Smith: God, what a woman!

Frasca: Bless her heart. Really. She has helped us all. She's been so important. I don't know. I could go on with stories about Maxine.

Smith: Yeah, great stories.

Frasca: There's one you have to hear about Maxine. I'm sorry I'm not good at years, but a faculty meeting—it was a deans meeting—in the big office. Remember, we were small enough we could all fit.

Smith: Library 2205?

Frasca: We could all fit in those things. So we were in there. I don't even remember who the dean was or anything, but I was in there—a lot of people were in there—and it was sort of an important meeting because they were talking about—we had to really shift the budget—it's always the same, you know, who's going to get what. Everyone was very serious. Maxine had come down for it from Tacoma and got in the meeting. I don't even know if that was her dean or not, but she just walked in and sat down. And everyone was talking, talking, talking. People are kind of cranky.

She says, "You people, don't you ever talk about real things? How are you ever going to affect these children that we're teaching if all you think about is whether or not you have this or you have that or you're getting the good deal? You've got to talk about real things. Like you've got to talk about your love and your spirit and your sex. You've got to talk about your body. I bet, for example"—and she points at this lady who came and taught Chinese. This was probably in '75 or '76.

Smith: I wasn't here.

Frasca: They brought someone in, a purely academic Chinese scholar. She must have been about 50. Tiny.

Smith: I don't think she was here when I came.

Frasca: No, she was only here for a short time. She joined the meeting and never said a word. Just sat there. A scholar. She taught Chinese, but she wasn't Chinese. And Maxine says, "You never talk about life. You never talk about sex." And she points to this woman and she says, "For example, you. Has anybody been in your pants lately?"

Smith: And the whole room gasps! [laughing]

Frasca: And she said, "Once, in Taiwan." [laughter] Maxine screamed with laughter. So did everybody else. And the woman started telling the story about how she met this man.

Smith: It's like you doing a workshop!

Frasca: I swear, it changed the whole dynamic. Everybody became real people—laughing, nervous, embarrassed, all the things that everybody protects when you go into a meeting. You don't want to show any of those things, and she can't stand to be in one unless you are showing those things. How are we doing?

Smith: I think we're fine. Do you want to talk at all about the way forward? Are there things that you can imagine would be good moves now for this place that you gave so much of your life to? It sounds like you're still connected if people are still calling you to come and teach them how to do your workshop.

Frasca: Not anymore. I don't know anybody there anymore really. I get e-mails a lot of times, but mostly it's from people who have been to Lynda Barry's lectures around the world. Or they send me an e-mail: "If you ever do anything, please include me."

Smith: Was she your student?

Frasca: Oh, god, yes. She was a student with me and Mark Levensky in Images, and she was a student on contract with me. And the funny thing is when she was a senior, she asked to do a contract with me in something. You know those really gifted students, sometimes they're too into Evergreen, they're too into the culture. They're just home all the time, or they live here, they want to be with Evergreen-Olympia people. And I knew this girl was global the minute I met her. She spoke like in parables.

So I did a contract, and I said, "I'll only do it on the condition that you get published somewhere. You've got to go find out who will take your cartoons. If you get somebody to do that, I will take your contract." And she did. She got the Seattle Sun and some others. Then they went viral. This was before the Internet, so actual she got published in actual newspapers people were reading and seeing. That was really great.

About going forward. Barbara, whatever happened in the beginning, would you have done a lot of research about Meiklejohn and all those people? That work has to be done again. I don't know who will do it, but it has to be done again in the world that we live in with the technological diseases that we have. We had other diseases then about the canon, and about what academia is supposed to be like and what learning was. We had different ones. Now we have new ones.

Smith: And new resources, too.

Frasca: And new resources. I feel like some big work has to happen about innovation in education in college and graduate school or whatever. Something about how we even use the language about higher

ed. I think that there basically has to be a re-conception of the process of being educated as an adult, and we have to assume that adults are younger rather than older. We were moving toward the older. We've got to just decide. Let's decide. What if a group of people said, "Let's decide, when you're 14, you're old. You're old enough to go to college."

Smith: Right.

Frasca: Let's make that decision.

Smith: Well, you are, lots of places in the world.

Frasca: Let's open the door. Let's bring young people in. Let's not try to find the safe people that don't use technology —let's bring the ones who do phones and earbuds and everything. Bring them all in, and let's re-confine and reconfigure how things happen, so everything they hold in their hand is part of the teaching. "Where's your phone? You can't come into class without a phone. Where's your iPad?" Where's your this, where's your that? I mean, go into it and redesign the language, and redesign—because that's the same issue that we were talking about earlier. It's present in the culture.

What is present in the culture: why is there an opioid disaster in this country? Why are people dying from drugs? What are they going after it? What the hell is going on? Those are the issues that are part of the youth and the young people. And somehow we have to have like a major summit, and invite brilliant people. And pick them. Get a grant. You need a big grant. And you invite people like . . . I don't know . . . popular people. You invite Beyoncé and you invite Oprah. You know, you get a few big names, so that people, you know, some kid in New York says, "Did you hear that Beyoncé went to a college and has designed a program, and we could actually go to it?" I mean, just turn it upside down.

That's my—if you keep honing it down and trying to be a better four-year college, and you have to look more like the University of Washington, it will happen but . . .

Smith: . . . it won't be the same.

Frasca: . . . it will be a missed chance. A summit. I'll come to it and I'll do a workshop. [laughter]

Smith: It seems like some features of Evergreen are completely transferrable to that.

Frasca: Absolutely.

Smith: One is about structure that's big enough with time and space to do things actually, to create a new community and vision. But the content matters, and the mission, the vision.

Frasca: Yeah.

Smith: Let me see if there's anything else that stood out for you. Did the script—these questions—did it get to you about where—

Frasca: Yeah, they did immediately. And that's why I had to think about it. The whole thing about just coming here. That's why I had to write right away about coming here, and then I remembered the retreat and all that, memorable programs. They all were memorable, really. The most memorable one was the Autobiography, Fact and Fantasy.

Smith: Who did you teach that with?

Frasca: That was a trip. This is a story I like to tell students when they say, "What was Evergreen like in the old days?"

I taught a program called Autobiography, Fact and Fantasy because people were taking turns doing some kind of autobiography program. Someone said, "Marilyn, it's your turn. Will you just do this, because you're not teaching in core and you're not doing—you should do that." And I thought, all right. So I had to think about it and I thought, okay, this is going to be young people. Autobiography? What do they have to write about? They haven't even lived their life yet."

So I did one of my own writing exercises, and I came up with the fact that, well, they don't have to be who they are. They could be somebody else.

Smith: Fantasy people.

Frasca: The whole thing was based on the fact that this is an opportunity—10 weeks—for you to become the person you, for whatever reason, prevented you from becoming. It might be a scientist or an astronaut. Or you might want to be somebody who lived in a different century or was a different race or a different gender. You have five days to choose that. I gave them all exercises, like the drawing, how to find—

Smith: Exploring.

Frasca: They all came up with their character, including the faculty. The faculty were Karin . . . I can't remember her name. Anyway, Karin was a writer—she was in a wheelchair, she was paralyzed—and Craig Carlson. We all chose characters, too.

Smith: What were you?

Frasca: Craig became a baseball player, and you knew the team, the state, everything where it's supposed to be. Karin became a Chinese calligrapher. I said, "Now, one day a week, we become that

person.” I hadn’t chosen a character yet. One day a week, we would all become whoever it is. And there were 60 people in the program.

I chose a day and they all came as these—I’m telling you, there were people in costumes, women as men, men as women. People brought things with them, special things that they needed. Craig came in his baseball outfit. Karin came with a kimono on in her wheelchair and everything. I was just myself because I hadn’t done anything yet. They all had to make little presentations, and I used that day to discover a lecture series—in those days we had a budget—and I said, “Now, everybody here is going to need something, to hear something from somebody. I have no idea. What kind of speakers do you want?” We put them all in a hat, and somebody wanted to learn something in mathematics, somebody wanted to learn how to play the clarinet. We had all these people and give lectures to the whole group on whatever the one person needed.

Smith: Wow! And was that related to their alternative identity?

Frasca: Yes, yes, yes. Music lessons. How to read theory. The clarinet player. She was 18 years old and she’d always wanted to play the clarinet. Her character was a black clarinet player from New Orleans who was dying, and she needed to learn how to play before he died. That was her whole idea. There was a vet in there. His character was a 16-year-old girl getting ready to go to the prom. It’s something he always wondered about and always wanted to do. He came in a prom dress.

So I got really scared, as you might imagine. And Mark Levensky, we would meet in that big room where the offices all were around, in the . . .

Smith: . . . fishbowl.

Frasca: Yeah. Mark Levensky saw me. It was sort of over, everyone was leaving. He went like this (Marilyn gestures) and he came in and he said, “How’s it going?” I said, “It’s horrifying! It’s really going well. They’ve all become somebody else.” He said, “All right now, Marilyn, you need to find someone in yourself who can handle this.” And I said, “Oh, god, I can’t.” He said, “Remember how you talked to them.”

So I found Mary Simmons. I did a retreat by myself. I went off by myself and wrote, and I said, “Who is in me?” And I got this person, Mary Simmons. I said, “Would you help me?” She said she would. And I did a series of lectures by Mary Simmons on this whole thing over the quarter.

Smith: Who’s Mary Simmons?

Frasca: I have no idea who she is. She was a black woman, 40 years old, lived in San Francisco. And she had an uncanny ability to talk about the relationship between what happens in nature and what happens in a person. She was very bright, and I was able to—I wrote all the lectures down, and I have a whole book of them. I really do. So the next time I saw Mark, I said, “Thanks, that was great advice. It’s working out great, but it’s sort of a little bit out of control.” He said, “Well, you just have to make sure that it’s only one day a week they become this person.” Because they have families, they have responsibilities. So I said, “Okay.” [laughter]

But then the next thing that happened was nobody wanted to have conferences—we had conferences every few weeks—nobody wanted to have conferences with Marilyn Frasca. They all wanted to have conferences with Mary Simmons. [laughter] Craig Carlson would not have a conference with anyone unless you were outside throwing balls at him.

Smith: Sounds like him. [laughing]

Frasca: Karin Syverson was her name.

Smith: Oh, yeah.

Frasca: Karin redesigned her office so that she could do calligraphy at a special kind of table. People who came in there had to take their shoes off. They had to put on a little kimono when they came to conference. They had to sit in this special chair. The whole thing was like madness.

At the end of the quarter, everyone had to say goodbye to their character, and they had to have an event, like a party. Like when a friend visits you and they go away. We had a schedule . . .

Smith: Sixty events?

Frasca: Yeah, of all these parties. They were all over the place. Some were in Seattle, some were in Tacoma. They were everywhere. People rented spaces for them.

One person took one of the rooms in the Comm Building and turned it into a hospital room with real everything. I don’t know where they got it—IVs, a hospital bed, the whole thing—because the black musician was in hospice, he was dying. They didn’t even have the word hospice at that time. She was going to perform on the clarinet—her first performance—a jazz tune. And she did it. She learned how to play the clarinet.

Smith: In 10 weeks?

Frasca: In 10 weeks.

Smith: Whoo!

Frasca: Here's the other amazing thing that happened. People who had inhibitions of various kinds chose someone who didn't have those, so suddenly they could do this. Learn a language. They just shifted their brain. One person who was dyslexic had a horrible time doing this thing or that, and they chose someone who wasn't. And they could feel a whole different way of approaching the world. So that program was so deep in its effect on people. One person, though, left the program.

Smith: Because it was too traumatic?

Frasca: No. She came up to me and she said, "Marilyn, thank you so much. I just have to tell you this means the world to me. I finally found my path. My character wants to have a baby, and I am going to leave school for a while and think about that—do I really want to be a mother, and all that? I said, "Well, you can do that in the summer. You don't have to do it now." She said, "No, this is my decision." So she left, and two or three years later, I saw her with a stroller. She said, "Thank you, Marilyn. This is my baby." So things like that happened that were amazing.

Yeah, that's my most memorable program, other than the programs I taught. The astonishing thing though, Barbara, was that nobody could believe this. I've had friends who teach in other institutions—at Yale and other places—and I taught at Bennington. I taught lots of places, but I could look at 10 weeks and decide what those were going to look like. And nobody bothered me.

Smith: Complete control.

Frasca: Nobody said, "You can't do that." I could say, "Week three"—which I've done many times—"we're all going to La Push. And we're going to stay there for five days, and everybody's going to come back with da da da da." And we did it. Not only did we do it, we got support for it. The college would say, "Do you need a van? Just ask for it in advance. Do you need this? Do you need that?"

Smith: Now people are more schedule bound, and it's partly because we've got students who are married, have jobs, money's tight. That's harder. You can actually turn some of that around though.

Frasca: No, but you could just say they come to class, and they've got two hours scheduled. You just take those two hours and have a retreat then.

Smith: Right.

Frasca: "We're stopping. Welcome! There's pizzas, there's this and that." I mean, you can do anything you want . . .

Smith: Well, that's the beauty of the whole system at Evergreen.

Frasca: . . . but you've got to have the imagination. You really do. A lot of people bring with them the restrictions of their own past learning.

Smith: Right.

Frasca: "No, no, you don't do that." I had a summer program—it was a Drawing from the Landscape thing—I did La Push two or three times.

Smith: I remember that.

Frasca: And we went to La Push and we got totally rained out. Terrible rain was predicted for days and days.

Smith: And you camped?

Frasca: We were camping. We were all in tents. People's stuff went into the ocean. I mean, it was terrible. So we managed to get back home to the college. I think we were at the ocean for three days, and we were scheduled to be in a retreat for six. So, we came back to the college. And this was summer, so nobody was using—this was before we had the Arts Annex, and we had designated studios in the lab there right on the first floor. I said, "Okay, let's camp here."

Smith: Did you set up tents and everything?

Frasca: Some people did. Some people went out in the woods, some people stayed there. People took over the lobby. Then we remembered there were kitchens in those labs, so we were able to cook, and we had refrigerators that the scientists used. We used them. And we camped out in Lab One for five days. We cooked three meals a day. People slept different places.

Smith: Making do.

Frasca: It was fantastic. You know why those things worked so well.

Smith: Yeah. I hear very consistent philosophy through all your stories that really tells how you think. You've got a very clear theory.

Frasca: I do. It's affected how I make my own drawings, too, now. I think maybe I'm doing this kind of drawing because I miss teaching. Because I just make this abstract texture and look at it and see what comes from it.

Smith: How it speaks to you.

Frasca: And then I draw it, whatever it is.

Smith: Wow. You could have been a psychologist, too.

Frasca: Yeah, I could have been. But I think that would have been too much pressure. [laughter] I think I am a psychologist, but in a different way. I'm going to take you over to my studio so you can see some of the new ones.

Smith: Good.

Frasca: Are we done?

Smith: I think we're done. This has been fabulous. Thank you.

Frasca: You're welcome.