Keith Eisner

Interviewed by Elaine Vradenburgh

The Evergreen State College oral history project

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FINAL

Vradenburgh: It's April 27, 2021. I'm Elaine Vradenburgh and I'm here with Keith Eisner. If you want to start by stating your full name.

Eisner: My name is Keith David Eisner. I was born July 11, 1948, in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Vradenburgh: Let's talk a little bit about the time and place you were born.

Eisner: We can circle back to all that, but what I really want to talk about is my first step toward Evergreen. That occurred about 12 years before Evergreen was founded. I was in the sixth grade, and I was one of those kids who couldn't keep still. After a number of warnings, one morning I got expelled for carrying a slingshot. I was really scared to go home. My stepfather was rather . . . he was bad news. But I was scared to go home, and he worked at home and my mother was gone and I thought, oh, jesus.

The vice principal called him up, so he knew I was coming home and that I was expelled. I got home and I kept waiting for the boom. I kept waiting to get whatever punishment would come my way. He didn't say much, and we just did some errands and chores and things. Then I thought, well, [it'll be] when my mom comes home from work. She worked as a bookkeeper. I thought, when she comes home from work—and this was a Friday, so when she comes from work, that's when it's going to happen.

She came home from work and she didn't know. Back then, people didn't use their private phone—they didn't have phones—so I had to tell her. She looked real sad, and I thought, okay, well, here it comes. And they didn't say anything, which was rare because usually it was lectures and, at least with him, slaps and kicks. But nothing.

The next day was Saturday and I kept waiting. I did some chores and errands. My sisters were all "When's it going to happen?" too. And nothing happened. Then Sunday, nothing happened. Finally, Sunday evening, they were in their favorite spot, which was the kitchen table, smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee, and they called me. I thought, okay, here it is.

My mother said, "Why do you think we want you to do good in school?" I said, "I don't know. You want me to do good in school so I can get into a good college." She said, "Yes, that would be good.

Why do you think we want you to go to college?" I said, "So I can get a good job." I said what I thought they wanted to hear. I said what everybody said. You went to school so you could get a good job.

She said, "Yeah, all that's important, but why I want you to do good in school, why I want you to have an education, isn't about career or money. It's because I believe that an educated person has a richer life. You walk down the street and there's so many connections you make, so many things that are deeper, because you've got this knowledge."

Two things blew me away. One, I hadn't heard that. Or, if I had heard it, I never paid much attention. But I heard it, and two, there was no punishment. That was it. There was no punishment, which was a rare thing in that family. No chastisement. It was just those words. I remember I went to bed that night and those words were with me, that you wanted an education so you would have a fuller life.

That's what Evergreen is about. It wasn't about a step in the career ladder, and it's still not, as far as I know. When I knew Evergreen, it wasn't about that, it was about a richer, deeper inner and outer life. So, that was the first—

I'd love to say I went back to school and I did really good, but no, no, no. I was still in trouble blah blah blah, until I got to a place where I realized, okay, I can take this course and that course and be happier and apply myself.

That answers a couple of the questions here about, what did education mean in your family?

My mother was not only the first woman to go to college in her family, she was the first person in her family, and she was hard of hearing. The hearing aids back then right after the war were these big, lunky things that you had to wear on your leg. I remember her [description of] walking into a lecture at the University of Michigan and [it] was like 10 radios were on at once. The trouble was, it wasn't that you couldn't hear sound, it was that you didn't have the ability to filter out sound. The hearing aids weren't that sophisticated.

She's there, and everybody's nervous in a college lecture hall—freshman—and she's got that added, what the hell? It's so hard to hear, especially the professors who would turn away, be dramatic and turn away. But she managed, and she loved education, loved being there. She dropped out of school when she had a baby. Me. She was, I think, in her third year. She supported my father—not the stepfather I lived with later—who got his degree, and then went on to get another degree. I think she always [regretted] that she didn't graduate from college. It was really important for her.

Vradenburgh: What did she study?

Eisner: General things, but chemistry was what she was majoring in. During the war, she was in New York, and she worked at the Palmolive Institute Labs or whatever, on the Hudson River, testing things. In the war, women got to be more of the workforce, which got retracted after the war was over.

Vradenburgh: It sounds like she really planted the seed or helped frame what education could mean.

Eisner: Yeah, yeah, she really did. That was probably one of the most important moments of my life.

Vradenburgh: How did that build from there? I know you said it wasn't necessarily like in a linear progression, but did you find other moments where you felt like, oh, this is what she was talking about?

Eisner: I remember I was a senior in high school, and I was just bored as hell with what was going on. The teacher saw that and saw that I was capable of better things. One day after class, she said, "You're going to do something different. You're not coming to class anymore. You're going to go to the library"—this was English, or literature or some combination—"and pick out some books, and you're going to read them and write about them."

This was a small, rural, conservative high school in northern Michigan, and I was doing an individual contract [chuckles] and I didn't know it. That's what I did all quarter. I didn't go to her class, and I was in the library, and I remember reading *Moby Dick* and some other stuff—I can't remember the other stuff—and writing about them, writing responses, writing essays on them. She'd read them, and then we'd meet, and we'd talk.

Vradenburgh: Was her approach unique at the time?

Eisner: I'd never heard of anybody—it was unique to me. I didn't see anybody else doing this. She was a new teacher, she was just out of college, so I think she was applying something she had learned in her college. No, nobody was doing that, not in public school—maybe in very advanced private schools—but it was a blessing.

Vradenburgh: What year was that when you were in high school?

Eisner: I graduated in 1966. There were things—Summerhill—I'm not a scholar on education, but I knew there were things at that time, new ideas. But this was a conservative little town in northern Michigan. It wasn't some adjunct high school for kids of university professors or something, this was just your regular gravy and potatoes school.

Vradenburgh: You said it was a rural community. What was the primary way people made a living there?

Eisner: It was transitioning from agriculture to tourism. It was Traverse City, Michigan, and beautiful. You've heard of it?

Vradenburgh: Mm-hm.

Eisner: Beautiful bays and lakes and forests. A lot of people would come up from Detroit and Chicago and had summer homes. That was one layer, but the other layer was I worked in the orchards and there were lots and lots of migrants from Texas, Mexico. They would do the circuit. They would pick apples and cherries, and I worked with them in the fields.

Vradenburgh: What did your parents do for a living?

Eisner: My mom was a bookkeeper/accountant and my dad—but I wasn't living with him—he was a chemist for Boeing, and he was also a chemist for Ford in Michigan before he moved to Seattle. [My step father], he used to be what they called a tool-and-die man. You design tools, I guess. I'm not sure exactly what he did, but he did a lot of drafting and stuff. He got laid off in the big recession in 1957 in Detroit, which was a pain in the ass to have him home. But he got a business together. It was a rare coins and stamps business. He'd travel around Michigan first, and then he'd travel around the country, going to fairs and trading coins and stamps. He had a rubber stamp business. He was also a writer, too. He wrote some pieces for different newsletters and things.

Vradenburgh: What were your peers interested in? Were they going on to college? Was it mostly the kind of place where people stuck around and worked locally?

Eisner: When I think about Detroit, I'd be in a class, and I would dumb down my language, just because I didn't want to appear highfalutin. I didn't want to use a vocabulary that was above what other people were using. I had friends, but they weren't thinking about college. One guy was thinking about the Air Force. Sadly, he couldn't get in because his grades weren't good enough.

Vradenburgh: At what point did you move from Traverse City?

Eisner: I moved from Detroit to Traverse City just before my senior year in high school. That was '65, something like that.

Vradenburgh: That's kind of a big moment to be moving to a whole new community.

Eisner: Yeah, it broke my heart. I had such a tight—I said that about peers, but I was thinking more about junior high peers. By the time I got into high school, I was in Honors English and stuff, so those people were all going to go [to college]—and they were mostly girls. I'd be in a class with maybe two or three guys in Honors English and the rest were girls. They were all planning to go to college and were in families that went to college.

In the meantime, in my neighborhood, there were people who were not going to go to college. I worked in a grocery store, a little mom-and-pop grocery store, and none of those folks were going to go to college. I had both worlds.

Vradenburgh: What prompted the move to Traverse City from Detroit for your family?

Eisner: Well . . . that's one of those questions that you wish your mother was still around so you could say, "Hey, why did you do that?" What I gather was that—well, my old man inherited some land on Old Mission, which is a beautiful peninsula. It sticks out of Traverse City.

We didn't have a car for a long time, but when we got a car, we started making trips. We all went up there and my mom fell in love with it. She'd lived in a city all her life. This was a big deal to be in the country. It was a big deal. It was beautiful. I hated it. I loved it and hated it. I was away from my friends, and also I couldn't get on a bus and go anywhere. I was 13 miles outside of town, and they wouldn't let me drive. But that was life.

So, that's what prompted the move up to Traverse City. For me, it was a profound move because I was going from Highland Park, which is in the center of Detroit, so it's technically a suburb, but it was in the city. It was mixed-race, black, Southern whites, white whites, Middle Eastern folks. I don't remember any Asians or other minorities or Native Americans. But [I moved] to this very lily-white, conservative, Republican town in Traverse City. Traverse City was also the last stop for Trump on his 2020 campaign, so it has a claim to fame! [laughter] I forgot what the question was.

Vradenburgh: We were just talking about what prompted your family to move.

Eisner: Yeah, yeah. It was a big deal to go to the country, to be out there and not hearing traffic [but] crickets; and a whole different crowd of kids. I missed my people back in Detroit—missed them tremendously—but I liked the people.

Vradenburgh: Did you feel like you developed an interest in stories and literature and writing as a young person in Detroit? Can you share a little bit about—

Eisner: It just seems like I was reading as long as I can remember. There was one period in my life in junior high where I realized, man, I'm reading a book a day. It wasn't *Hamlet* or anything. I really loved these books called—I don't remember what they were called, but they'd take a famous person and the book would mostly be about their childhood, which means, I think, there was a lot of fiction, too, because most historians really don't know people when they talk about their childhood much. But Davey Crockett and James Bowie. I don't remember who else. Oh, I loved Abraham Lincoln. I loved him as a kid. He was like one of us.

Vradenburgh: What do you mean by that, "one of us"?

Eisner: He lived in a log cabin. But he was poor. He walked six miles to return that woman's change. We know now that [the Civil War] wasn't just freeing the slaves, but he did sign the Emancipation Proclamation. He was a humble man. He was common folk is what the feeling was.

I read a real lot, and I read magazines. [laughing] My folks read a lot, too. In the bathroom, there was always a book they were reading, so I'd be spending a lot of time in the bathroom reading their grown-up book. Some of those were pretty steamy.

I'd read those books and I'd be thinking—the old man also loved science fiction. I remember to this day some of those science fiction stories. I think about them sometimes. Anyway, there were these magazines, and every month they'd come out and they'd have a bunch of stories. I'd read them and read them. I was always reading myself to bed at night.

This is interesting. It just occurred to me. One of the books I really liked—there were a couple of them—one was called *George Washington's World* and *Abraham Lincoln's World*. The narratives would be that, yes, you would follow Abe Lincoln's life, but also you would be reading about what was going on in the world—mostly the Western world—at the time. Like in 1809, when Lincoln was born, Napoleon was basically the big power in Europe, so you read about him, and then you read about some inventor—Eli Whitney, I guess, or somebody in England. Once in a while, there would be somebody from China, but most of the time, like I said, it was the Western world. Then you'd follow them. You'd see what Abraham Lincoln was doing. Then in 1815, Napoleon is in Waterloo, this is happening, and this is happening. It was an Evergreen thing because it wasn't just one individual, it was a sense of the world, and seeing how things fit together. The same in *George Washington's World*.

I just loved those books. I remember in the summer, there would be periods where the old man would have us work. He couldn't stand idle hands, so we'd be out in the front yard pulling these itty-bitty weeds all day. But there were times he just didn't care. I remember being upstairs in the attic in Detroit, and the sweat coming down my face, and just reading these books and just being so entranced.

Vradenburgh: It's like a personal narrative, but in the context of larger historical things.

Eisner: Yeah, yeah. And that was like what you study at Evergreen. You don't just study a life, you study the interweaving of lives.

Vradenburgh: What about writing? Did you do any writing?

Eisner: The first thing I did, I plagiarized. I was like in the fifth grade or so, and there was this really cool story in a horror magazine about a guy who becomes a vampire. I wrote it out, but I changed it. Instead of 3:00 I said 2:00 and things like that. [laughing] I turned it in and she said, "Oh, this is pretty cool." I don't know if she could tell that it wasn't me. At any rate, that's the only time I ever did that.

I always tried to write something in a different way or give a speech. I did a lot more speechmaking. Here's how the speech would go in the sixth grade usually. Everybody would get a topic, or they'd come up with their own topic. Then they'd go to the American Encyclopedia or the

Encyclopedia Britannica and they'd basically copy what was the entry. Then they would read it as a speech. I remember Mrs. Newman going [he must be making a face 00:24:32]. I said, "Oh, I'm not going to do that," because it was boring.

I gave this speech about superstitions. What I did was I got—I don't know, I got maybe a stuffed black cat and salt and different things—and I got up there and I said, "Okay, let's talk about superstitions." Then I'd start pulling out something and I'd throw the salt behind me, and I'd do this. They loved it.

Vradenburgh: That was really performative.

Eisner: Yeah, I got a rare A on it. Another time I came up and I gave a speech about the electoral college. And then every time I had a writing assignment, I'd think, oh, this is so effing boring. I'm going to do something.

I remember once you were supposed to write about three pests or three something. Oh, I know. The class clowns were me, Joe Chillian and Jimmy Edwards. One time we were really driving the teacher nuts, so she assigned everybody "Write about the three pests." So, everybody wrote about how obnoxious we were, which we were. But I wrote about storms and mosquitoes and something else, and it was really good. The teacher read it out loud. I had turned the tables. Okay, the three pests. I'm one of them.

Vradenburgh: Your teacher actually had them do an assignment about how annoying you three were?

Eisner: She didn't say to write about how annoying these three are, but it was obvious. It was an in-class assignment. I would stay awake late at night thinking of funny things to say in class the next day. Lord knows, I needed some entertainment. I always felt like it was my job to liven up the class.

Vradenburgh: It sounds like the school was kind of boring.

Eisner: It was boring to me.

Vradenburgh: Was it the way it was conducted?

Eisner: I'm not going to blame it on the school. At home, I was a little tin soldier. It was brutal at home. I did not speak until I was spoken to. When I got to school I was [makes a sound like a blast]. I'd just waaaahh! Then I got home.

From this point of view, if I would look at their pedagogy now, I'd say, "Oh, hmm." But then I thought they were good. I had a lot of teachers, they'd keep me after and say—Here's another thing that happened. I remember one time Mrs. Wallace really went out of her way to help me. One time I was after class, and she was talking to me about how I wasn't doing the work and I was being the class clown. I said, "You don't have Joe Chillian or Jimmy Edwards in here. Why?" She looked at me and she

said, “They’re not as smart as you are.” I was thunderstruck: one, that a teacher would say something like that, true as it was, but also in a way, I felt some pride, but I also felt sad that I realized, yeah, Joe Chillian and Jimmy Edwards, they’re going to go a different way than I’m going.

Vradenburgh: Other than being the class clown and your public speaking, did you find other outlets for that performative side of who you are?

Eisner: I got into some class plays and things. I could memorize lines easily. It was really easy for me. I’d never say anything without expression. There weren’t a lot of—at least I don’t remember—after-school clubs. The play, there were rehearsals after school. Anyway, I was expected to be home. Then I had a job at the local grocery store in high school and I just came home. I didn’t do a lot of extracurricular stuff.

I was in the debate club—that was fun—in high school. We’d travel around to different—they called them the Border City League. Here’s Highland Park in the center of Detroit—a lower- middle-class-to-poor, mixed-race place. That’s in the center of Detroit. All around Detroit were the suburbs. Grosse Point—you’re heard of that?

Vradenburgh: Mm-hm.

Eisner: Very rich, one of the richest places [in the country]. That’s where the Fords lived. Grosse Point, Grosse Point Village, Grosse Point Shores. We played them in our sports, and we’d also go to their schools and they’d come to our schools for debates and stuff. That was my intermural, extracurricular stuff. It was eye-opening because you could just tell and smell the difference between social classes.

Vradenburgh: Say more about that “tell and smell.” What do you mean by that?

Eisner: They smelled the same as we did, and I didn’t have these words then, but they had privilege. They were all going to college. Not only were they going to go to college, but they were going to go to expensive colleges. You knew that they all probably drove cars that cost more than my family’s car. I mean, the teenagers. I didn’t hate them for that. They were kids themselves. They were scared as shit to come and play basketball against us. They were scared of us. They were scared of the black kids.

In Traverse City, I was also on the debate team. Have you heard of Interlochen Music Camp? It’s one of the premier music camps in the world.

Vradenburgh: Mm-hm.

Eisner: I think Van Clyburn went there and other people went there. We were scheduled to debate them on some stupid—whether there should be a federated world or something, where all countries, borders should be erased.

We went up to debate them, and we were scared because this is Interlochen, they're going to be so smart. And we cleaned their clocks. They really didn't have—what happened, though, one of the girls on the Interlochen team, we weren't mean or anything, but she knew that our arguments were way more thought out. She just started crying. After it was over, the judge awarded them the victory, which was like . . . but, I mean, I wasn't really surprised. Those things happen.

I remember another thing, and I don't know why this came up. I'd seen a lot of injustice growing up in Detroit, and I remember—and I've been thinking about this lately—you were supposed to have a license on your bike and nobody [had one]—but I remember one time seeing a Detroit cop car—or Highland Park maybe it was—and it was a station wagon – and they had stopped these black kids. The black kids didn't have licenses on their bike. Who's going to get a license on your bike, especially when your family's just struggling to get by? The cops just took the bikes and put them in the car and drove away. They didn't do that to us.

Vradenburgh: Did you find that people intermixed? Were your friend groups divided up by race?

Eisner: Mostly, because I was in Honors English, there were several more well-to-do black kids. Judy Flowers, cheerleader. She and I became really good friends, but we didn't go to each other's house. I didn't have anybody of any color in my house because of the old man. I never had anybody come over until I was in college. Even then, it was stressful. But we didn't go to their house, and they didn't go to your house. You didn't do that.

I remember I was in Cub Scouts. I was really excited to be in Cub Scouts. We were looking around for a den mother and this one mother volunteered to be the den mother. I think his name was Robert, and he and I got along. I liked him. There were like maybe four of us altogether who went to his house. He was black. I remember she gave us hot chocolate. Then we did some kind of goofy little Cub Scout project, and then that was the last meeting because the white parents—not my parents but the [ofter] white parents—said no to that little Cub Scout den. It was no more.

Vradenburgh: Even though it sounds like it was a diverse community, it was still really segregated.

Eisner: I just read something. I can't remember what I was reading, but still, we're a real segregated society. We still are.

Vradenburgh: Definitely.

Eisner: I don't remember, but I remember you didn't have people over to your house. You may mix with them in school, but they didn't come to your house and you didn't go to their house.

Vradenburgh: Fast forward a little bit to graduating. At that time, what did you think was next for you?

Eisner: You had two choices in the late '60s as a male. You either went to the Army or got drafted, or you went to college. I knew I was going to college before, regardless of the war. That was just part of the destiny of my family. But we didn't have the luxury that people have now, saying, "I think I'm going to college, but I think I'll take a year off." You didn't want to get drafted. That was '66. The Vietnam War was getting heavier, hotter. But I would have gone to college anyway, I think. The question again?

Vradenburgh: What were your plans after graduating?

Eisner: I knew I wanted to go to college. I didn't have a career thing in mind. I just thought, I'll just go to college. That's my career for now, so I went to a junior college in my hometown.

Vradenburgh: That was still a safe bet in terms of not getting drafted?

Eisner: Oh, yeah. It didn't matter what college. You got a college deferment just for being in college. I went to this community college and I had some wonderful teachers there. I should have left home, though. It was past time to leave home. I was living at home, and there was the old man.

Vradenburgh: Was it a local community college?

Eisner: Yeah—Northwestern Michigan College—and they had one of the brightest, sharpest English teachers—writing teachers—I ever came across. I'm sure I'm teaching in the ways he taught. It was very student-centered, meaning he didn't talk a hell of a lot. What we did was we turned in papers, he'd read the papers, and then we'd talk. From the papers themselves, he'd point out things in writing skills, writing strategies. Mr. Shumsky. He was a great guy. Great teacher.

I was a good student. I studied. I don't even think of it as studying hard. I just read everything, and once I read it, I knew it. I was probably more interested in girls than I was in education at the time. I was probably as interested in both, but political science and biology and literature were easy. How to have a relationship was mystifying. Huh? How do you do this?

Vradenburgh: Was it normal mystifying teenage stuff, or was it because you didn't necessarily have a good situation at home?

Eisner: At the time, it was just a mystery to me. I think part of it was, yes, it was normal. I think it's normal for both sexes. What the hell's going on? How do we do this? Also, at home, yeah.

Vradenburgh: Were you going fulltime, or were you working and going to school?

Eisner: I was going fulltime, but in the spring, I would work for a local cherry farmer down the road. I learned about as much from him in doing that as I did at school.

Vradenburgh: Say more about that. What did you learn from the cherry farmer?

Eisner: I don't know from him precisely, but from working with workers, working in the field, working with Mexicans, Mexican Americans. How to work with people, how to be with people, how to . . . you know.

Vradenburgh: Were you picking?

Eisner: No, I would have been slow as hell. White kids would be put into driving tractors or something more hourly wage.

I think one of my most vivid memories is there was this thing called a shaker that they had [just] invented. It would be this attachment to a tractor. It would grab the trunk and shake the hell out of the tree. Not good, because of roots and stuff. But it wasn't sweets, which you need to have picked because you don't want them bruised. It was sours, which go into making pies, so it didn't matter if they got bruised.

The driver would come along with the shaker and a crew of kids—guys, me and like four or five or maybe six Mexican Americans or Mexicans, I'm not sure exactly—we would move these huge canvas things, because you have to have these canvas-like shields so the cherries, when they shook off the tree, they'd hit the canvas shield and then run down into these metal boxes, like six-foot boxes that you would, you know, so the cherries wouldn't land on the ground. Then you'd have to run to the next tree and then another gang would come, or maybe it would be the same gang, and you'd have to lift those boxes up and dump them into a vat of cold water, then another tractor was coming.

There was this teamwork and this running around. They spoke mostly Spanish, and I felt immediately accepted. Most of the time, I didn't speak Spanish, but I could figure out what they were saying, and they spoke English, too. It was just . . . as opposed to most of my work life, it was a life of the body. It wasn't the life of the mind. That's what I did.

Vradenburgh: You liked that experience of manual labor?

Eisner: Yeah, I loved it, because that was like being a team. It was speed, and you were doing this thing together. It wasn't drudgery, like working in a factory.

Vradenburgh: Was it all men that you worked with?

Eisner: Yeah. There were women pickers, but mostly I didn't really interact with them much. You drive, you set up the cherry, the boxes and the ladders and things, but you didn't . . .

Vradenburgh: How long did you do that work?

Eisner: A couple summers.

Vradenburgh: Tell me more about your time in community college. Were you consistently going until you got your A.A.?

Eisner: Yeah, I stayed till I got my A.A. Then I was ready for a break from college, and the lottery came around in 1970. I went down to Wayne State for a while in Detroit, and then I came back. I kept thinking, well, I've got to keep going to college because I don't want to go to the Army.

The lottery—I believe it was in 1970—was this momentous night where, in D.C., they would pick—do you know about the draft lottery?

Vradenburgh: No.

Eisner: They took all the young men and they put all the days of the year into a hopper. Then they picked one out, and the number they picked out—the date they picked out, say it was December 17—if that was the first one they picked out [and it was your birthday], you were first in the lottery. Men all around the country, and their girlfriends and their mothers and their wives, were listening to this radio broadcast—it might have been on TV, too, I don't know—and they picked the next one, and that would be number two.

I'm waiting and waiting. They got to July 11 and I was up in number 300 or something. The higher up the number, the less likely you were going to be drafted. It was like I was high enough, I said, okay, I've got to—

Vradenburgh: Number one, it doesn't necessarily mean you're going, but you're in the pot to potentially go. Is that right?

Eisner: You would be getting a letter from Uncle Sam. Partly, that was to get rid of—and I just read about this this morning in a history book—the college deferment was very racist and elitist. To make it more fair, they did away with college deferment and they were going to do it by—whoever you were, you still could get out of the draft if you had money. You'd figure a way out of it. That freed me up to say, okay, I'm going to drop out of college for a while and not worry about getting drafted.

Vradenburgh: I guess I didn't realize there was a point or a transition where you could still get drafted even though you were in college.

Eisner: I'm not quite sure about that. Maybe you could still get the deferment. Maybe the college deferment ended later than that, but at any rate, there was this lottery that was—I mean, could you imagine? You were just waiting to hear when your birthday comes up, what date.

Vradenburgh: My dad was drafted. I should ask him about how he got drafted from that or not. I don't know the story. So, you dropped out of college, and then?

Eisner: Now you're challenging me. What the hell did I do?

Vradenburgh: We could even fast forward.

Eisner: Mostly I worked until I realized that—I think I said this last time—I worked a lot in Christmas trees in Michigan. I wound up in Alaska.

Vradenburgh: That's right, and that's when you heard about Evergreen.

Eisner: That's when I realized, oh, man, I do not have the attention span to be a blue-collar worker.

Vradenburgh: In terms of the repetitive tasks?

Eisner: I guess I didn't pay attention enough. I got bored easily.

Vradenburgh: That's dangerous.

Eisner: Yeah, and that's dangerous, and I wanted to be back in school. I wanted to learn, so that's when I started looking at colleges. I'll say this again for the recorder—you've heard this—but it was my luck that working next to me was this kid—he was my age, we were in our mid-twenties—who knew all about colleges around the country because he had worked helping students pick colleges to transfer to from when he worked at Western Washington in Bellingham, so I said, "I want to go to a groovy college on the West Coast."

We had nothing but time, so he took me on this visual tour—mental tour—from University of Mexico in Mexico City all the way up to Simon Fraser in B.C. I don't remember much, but two things I do remember. He said, "Humboldt, and the girls are so cute." I said, "Okay." When he got it all done, he said, "Wait a minute! There's this new college that just opened. It's very"—I don't know if he used the word groovy, but that was the sense I got from him it was like. "You get to do your own thing." I thought, oh, yeah, that sounds good.

So, I sent away for the catalog. Got the catalog—wish I had a copy of it. What I do remember is a picture of Oscar Soule and maybe Larry Eickstaedt and some of the other founding faculty members playing touch football or something. It was just really what I wanted—it was about what my mother said: an education enriches your life—little knowing that I would be writing that catalog in 15 years or so. I applied, and got in. Went back to Michigan before I went to start at the school. Met my first wife there. Then came out to go to school.

One of the questions was, what was my first impression of Evergreen? I was living with my brother up in Bellingham, so in late August, early September, before school started, I hitchhiked down to see the school. Gawd, those days! I'm thinking about it now. Now, if I was going to go to Bellingham or even go somewhere, okay, where am I going to stay? Who am I going to see? I just thought, well, I'll hitchhike down there, and we'll figure it out when we get there where we're going to stay. Not like I had a lot of money to just walk into a motel. Just, okay, we'll figure it out when we get there.

I hitchhiked down, and my last ride, I remember meeting a woman named Wendy Gross, who was also hitchhiking, and she was going to go to the college, too. Later, I remember she was like in one of the first classes that graduated from Evergreen. We weren't really close friends, but there was always this like, hey, you were the first person I saw when I came to Evergreen.

I get a ride out to the college, and it just looks like a prison. Remember, this is 1972—wait a minute, '73, because I was 25—and Kent State was in 1970, and the taking over of Columbia was in the late '60s, so colleges were like, in a way, places that were dangerous, that things could happen. So, there's so much concrete, and the trees were just saplings. The big trees now in front of the Library were just little saplings then.

I look at this place and go, oh, geez. Because the pictures in the catalog, there were a lot of trees, and there were people, and it looks homey. Oh, my god. I walked across Red Square. It also didn't help that there was nobody there. It really looked desolate.

But I walked into the Library and nobody's around—not the Library where the books were but the Library Building—and there's this door open, and there's a faculty member in there, I don't know how I knew. He had a sign. I was shy, but I still wanted to talk to him. I walked by a couple times, and I looked down from the hall, and finally he looks out the door and he says, "Can I help you?" I said, "I don't have an appointment." He said, "C'mon, c'mon." We talked, and it was Charlie Teske. Did you know him?

Vradenburgh: I've just heard other stories of him.

Eisner: He was so interested in me. We talked about education. He explained what he thought Evergreen was and what you could do here. I was going to go to Evergreen anyway, but that really sold me. That made me feel like, oh, yeah, it's concrete on the outside but there's people here.

His was one of the first classes I took. What happened was that my old college screwed up sending my transcripts, so I couldn't be a fulltime student at Evergreen, which I thought worked out for the best. I could take modules, they called them—I don't know if they still have them—but I could take a little class that only met once a week or so.

I took this module, and it was about Shakespeare, which I love, and it was Charlie Teske. But not being a fulltime student meant that I could get to know the town better. The first place I lived in—no, that was the second place—I got to be situated more.

But also that day, that same day that I saw Charlie Teske, I was walking around. Either I went there on purpose or I [just] went there—but Driftwood. Driftwood at that time—the daycare center—

was not part of the main campus. It was off on a little road called Driftwood Road. It was just this house, a four- or five-room house. That was the daycare center. It was funky.

Vradenburgh: It wasn't somebody's house?

Eisner: No, it had been a house, and they [the College] bought it.

Vradenburgh: No one lived there?

Eisner: No, no, nobody lived there. It was just this funky, with moss on the roof. It was so different than the campus. [laughing] I walked in and I met Bonnie Gillis, who was the Director then. There was a way she looked at me. I don't know what I said, but she looked at me like, I'm interested in you. I'm interested in you working here, in not so many words.

Partly it was because I wasn't a fulltime student, so I had a lot of time. She said, "How many days a week would you like to work?" I said, "Oh, four or five." This was because most students go to work [two or three days]. She said, "Really?" I said, "Yeah, yeah." I don't know.

That was more important, that was my education in the first year at Evergreen was Driftwood, and children, and families, and the whole idea of, what is care? What is childcare?

Vradenburgh: Was Bonnie connected to the campus?

Eisner: It was a part of Evergreen, Driftwood was. When I say it wasn't part of the campus, it wasn't part of the physical campus, Red Square and all. It was off.

Vradenburgh: But it was still [unintelligible 00:57:34].

Eisner: Yeah, it was definitely under [the auspices of the College], and she was hired by Evergreen.

Vradenburgh: Got it. So, she was connected to Evergreen.

Eisner: She was connected to the administration, yeah.

Vradenburgh: Just being a part of that thinking about child development in relationship to the learning there.

Eisner: Yeah. What was interesting was, you'd think that—well, you wouldn't probably because you know how things work—but a naïve student would think, oh, what kind of controversy could there be about taking care of kids?

But there were certain faculty, their idea of Driftwood would be primarily a place where students could learn child development. A lab school. Bonnie's idea was, this is a place where we take care of kids. This is a place where children are the most important thing.

Vradenburgh: Was there tension between those two ideas?

Eisner: [Not overly], but she probably—faculty in any college—well, anybody—can be a shit, but faculty can be shits in their own particular way.

Vradenburgh: In terms of thinking too theoretically about things?

Eisner: Thinking that Driftwood, it should be a lab school. It should be a place where college students—that should be the focus. Bonnie felt, no, the focus is the families of students, the focus is the children.

Vradenburgh: Did you mainly serve families of students of Evergreen?

Eisner: They were all students.

Vradenburgh: Student families.

Eisner: Student families. There were no outside kids. It was always full. There was plenty of people. There were a lot of women returning to school. That was another exposure to me, because most of the people I knew when I was in school were all my age and nobody had kids. Maybe a few might have kids, but everybody didn't have kids. So, here are all these people. What's it like with this older [population]—"older," meaning late twenties or early thirties—bringing their kids to school? And the challenge of coming back to school, reentering school.

The educational experience for most people, I thought and - I think still – at that time, were graduates from high school, go to college. Here's some primarily women who went to a little college, went to some college or no college, had kids—have kids—and are reentering at a later age.

Vradenburgh: It sounds like it really played a role in expanding access to the college at the time.

Eisner: Heck, yes. It was great. It was a really good daycare, a good facility. What I learned from Bonnie was I learned she really listened. She really listened.

In staff meetings and things, we weren't gossiping about families, but in a way, you have to talk about families when you're figuring out this kid and that kid, and she would just point out things. Most of the staff, which was mostly volunteer—I wound up being paid because I worked so much, and then I became an Assistant Director in my second year—we were dewy-eyed and idealistic about kids. Bonnie was in her late thirties, maybe early forties, had kids of her own. She actually became a dear friend of mine, and we were friends for a long time. Anyway, she would give us a bigger picture, point out the bigger picture of family dynamics.

Vradenburgh: What's going on in those families that impacted the kids' behavior.

Eisner: Yeah. A prime example of the difference in lenses was naptime, because as daycare workers, we'd see that these kids were running ragged. They needed a nap. Parents would come and let us know after a while, they'd say, "We wish you wouldn't give them naps because then they're wide awake late." I thought, that's pretty selfish of you. We see what the kids—and then it wasn't until I had kids that I thought, jesus christ, what a pompous, presumptuous—you know what I mean? [laughter] I never said that or anything, but I learned. You learn balance. Okay, kids ragged, give them a little nap.

Don't give them a lo-o-o-ng nap so that they're all ready to go till 10:00 at night. We also had parents that would say, "The kid is so tired. He just comes [home] and goes [out]." We realized that, okay, it's not all kids need this long a nap and other kids need . . .

Vradenburgh: Was Driftwood your first experience with childcare, or did you do that before?

Eisner: No, my first formal [experiences]. I took care of some kids. I took care of one little girl of a friend of mine for a while in Detroit, and a couple others, but this was my first formal, and I did individual contracts, so I was writing about it and reading things. That was my first real formal time.

Vradenburgh: What made you get interested in that particular job? Were you interested in child development? Because I know you majored in it.

Eisner: I don't know if I was interested in child development. That's what I said when you had to write down something academic sounding. I was interested in kids.

I was thinking about this question, and I think the thing about children is you have to be present. You just have to be present. You have to be your full self as possible. I think I got interested in children, one, kids crack me up. I love them. They're a hoot.

But also, kids are a way to find out about yourself. Working with, being with children is a way to find out about yourself. Like many people in my generation—but I think especially with my background—I didn't how a clue how to raise children, and I wasn't going to raise them in the example that happened with me. This is true. There were good things that happened, like my mom's speech about education, but I wasn't going to do it the way they [did]. But I didn't know how to do it. I think I was fascinated by children and by families because I wanted to see [how] good ones worked. How they worked.

Vradenburgh: Did you come across Driftwood right away as an option for you to work?

Eisner: It was either the same day that I talked to Charlie Teske or the day afterwards. I just heard about a daycare center, and I walked over and there it was. It wasn't an analytical process.

Vradenburgh: Going with the flow kind of?

Eisner: Yeah.

Vradenburgh: You're working at the daycare, and you're also going to school, and you're learning about kids and writing. Was it all kind of feeding into each other in a way? Do you think there was an iterative…

Eisner: I didn't really get into writing class until my second quarter, when I took Peter Elbow's class, Writing Without Teachers.

What also was going on at this time was I was writing a lot of letters to my first wife—she wasn't my wife then—back in Michigan. She was still going to school in Michigan, so a lot of my time and attention was this long-distance relationship. That's basically how I spent my time the first quarter. [laughter]

Oh, jesus christ, being sick. It happens to so many. I got the classic thing of when you're around kids, and you haven't been around them, you catch everything they have. I was like, is something wrong with me? Then I talked to another daycare worker who was in her second or third year and she said, "This is what happens. You're just going to get sick a lot with kids." Then there was less attention paid to hygiene and Kleenex. Social distance? There was no such thing. So, I was sick a lot.

Vradenburgh: You continued through school part-time?

Eisner: I think it was only the first quarter. I think fall quarter I was part-time. Second quarter, I got in fulltime. Since I already had two years of college, I didn't have to take a core program. Either the second or third quarter, I worked with Winnie Ingram. She's gone now from the planet. I would write about things at Evergreen—ideas, and I'd read books that I can't remember. They didn't make a big impression on me—academic books about children.

I thought, you know what the best book I've book most relevant to what I'm doing? It's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It's from a child's point of view, and it's a child's world, and I thought, okay, that's what I was more interested in than theories. Theories are great. Theories are important, but for me personally, I was more interested in experiential and more creative things.

I took some individual contracts. I was with a [faculty] named Carol Alexa too.
You know what? I think it would have been better if I had been—I would have met more people and gotten more exposed to ideas if I had been in a core program than individual contracts, but that was my independent streak.

Vradenburgh: So, you spent most of your time in independent contracts?

Eisner: For the first year or so. Then I took Peter Elbow's class. It was what they called a coordinated study. That was good. Want to know the greatest thing about that? I do it now with my students. You had to write 15 pages a week. It didn't have to be polished or anything, but you had to fill 15 pages a week, which is a lot. No ifs, ands, buts, excuses.

Now, with my first-year students, I settled on five, and some turn out 10, some squeak by with three, but at least every week, what I call "wild pages." Just putting words on paper. It didn't have to be a complete—you could change the middle of a paragraph. You could say, "I'm bored with this. I'm

going to go on to the time my mother made me a cake." I had a little conflict with Peter, and then we got over it.

My education at Evergreen, when I think about what I learned at Evergreen, it's more Driftwood and working and college relations than the student time.

Vradenburgh: Than actual academic.

Eisner: Yeah. Oh, Sandra Simon! I quit school for a while. Benjamin came along, my firstborn, so I dropped out of school and worked on an oyster boat and did this and that. Then I worked for the Mexican American Affairs Commission as a secretary. I think that was about the two jobs I had. Then I decided to go back to school, and I got Sandra Simon. Have you heard of her?

Vradenburgh: No.

Eisner: She was a terrific, terrific writing teacher. Loud and vivacious, and so honest and insightful. She was great. I had her for a quarter. I had a radio show at Evergreen after I left and she'd call me up after the show and say, "Hey, and this is what you said there." Not a critique so much as just responding. I just remember her sitting in this classroom, and she'd slam the table and she'd say, "You students are a lot closer to writing than you think you are!" She wasn't mean about it, she was just so unrestrained, and she cared.

We were looking at an earlier catalog when we were up at Port Townsend, my friend, Mark Clemmons and I—he had a catalog—and she wrote this in the '80s. It was language that you would see now about women's studies, and she wrote back in the '80s.

Vradenburgh: Ahead of her time.

Eisner: Yeah. She's gone now, too. She was something. Anyway, I don't know where we're at.

Vradenburgh: I want to hear just a little bit more about Driftwood and if there were things that kind of stand out for you as big learnings, or kids you worked with that were really influential.

Eisner: One of the things that really stuck with me—Bonnie would come and observe you. She would just sit, and she'd make a few notes and she would watch you with kids. I remember one time what she said was she loved how I was with kids. "The one thing is you have a problem with transitions. When you try to transition from one activity to another, you get nervous, and you want to do it real quick. Take your time."

I think about that all the time. I think about that with Ava [our 6-year old God daughter]. I think about that in other situations with teaching, with being with people, just being by myself. What kinds of transitions do we make from this activity to that activity? Especially when you're the authority figure, the leader, either the teacher of people my age, or with Ava. How do you transition? I'm still learning.

Vradenburgh: That's really interesting. I hadn't really thought about that.

Eisner: Yeah. I was not expecting that word, transition. Because I was thinking, oh, you know more like—I don't know what I expected, but the idea of being with people—especially being with little ones—is a matter of flow. You are the channel guards, and there are times when you just want that flow to go like this—you can relate to this?—and there's times when you can let it go. Like I say, you never become a master at it. You're still learning. You learn with your spouses, you learn with your students. That's one thing I learned at Evergreen.

Once I got past the "this is the way the kids should go to bed, and this is when they should…" once I started to see into families—and you wouldn't see a lot, just when they picked them up, but that's a lot. When a mother or a father, but usually a mother, is dropping off a kid, and when she picks them up again, that tells a lot. That's a whole volume.

Vradenburgh: Say more about that. What do you mean?

Eisner: First, there's a child. How easily does the child let his or her mother go? At the end of the day, how does he or she react when Mom comes to pick him up? Little trips about "I need this," "I need that," or, "Bye, Mom." Just that feel. It's not a checklist I had or anything, but you see the child and the mother in this moment.

Vradenburgh: Given that the daycare served families who were attending Evergreen, and a lot of the people that worked there were actually students, was there ever any awkwardness around that in terms of knowing about families' lives and you're also peers at the school?

Eisner: I don't think so. For one thing, it wasn't like when I taught at Latchkey where there were some families in real distress. People had their stress, and I think women returning to college—and it was a bigger deal then—but there wasn't any . . . really serious situation. There wasn't something where somebody had to—I didn't feel that. I didn't sense that.

There's something that I do sense, and I sense this all the time. When an adult is in charge of kids and another adult is observing or being part, there's always a self-consciousness that's different than when it's just you and the kids. I see that with Debe and I sometimes. Sometimes I think, Debe, I think you need to tell Ava this now, and other times I'm doing something, I think, I wonder if Debe's thinking that I'm being too harsh on her? You never have those feelings, do you? [laughter] That's one of the things that goes with the territory.

There's one incident that comes to mind. There was this child who had a weak heart. I don't mean metaphorically. He was not supposed to live. He wasn't supposed to have a long life. The kid's mother—the kid's name was Tim—you have a little get-togethers, meet before school, before the

quarter starts, and she had some anxiety, concerns about leaving him because he hadn't been left much, I think because of his heart. He was somewhere two, two and a half. She was really concerned.

The first day she left, he cried harder than I've ever seen any kid cry. His face was red. There's this thing that happens. A kid is crying, it's tearing the mom up to leave, but she's got to go. Either she has to go to get to something, but also you have to leave sometime, mom. You've got to leave, hard as it is. It was hard but she did.

And I held that kid. I held him, it seems like for hours, but I held him for a long time. Bonnie was great, and we had enough staff that I could just hold him. I didn't have to do other things. He cried and cried and cried, and I held him. He eventually stopped crying. The next day, he cried just about as long, and the next day and the next day and the next. Then he started crying less and less. Years later, you know the little library we have?

Vradenburgh: Mm-hm.

Eisner: Rob August came to build that library. We were talking. He was referred as a handyman to us. He said something to the effect, "I'm glad to be doing this for you because you took care of my brother, Tim, who lived to about 25."

That's probably one of the more important things I did in my college life.

Vradenburgh: Yeah. That takes a lot of empathy and patience to just allow somebody to be sad for a long period of time and not try to make them happy.

Eisner: Yeah, yeah. He was a good little kid.

Vradenburgh: How long was he there with you?

Eisner: I know a quarter for sure. He got to the point where he'd come, and he'd play. It was good. But I don't know how long. At least one quarter, maybe a couple.

Vradenburgh: I'm going to take a look and see where we're at.

Eisner: That's all right. Let me look, too.

Vradenburgh: It's almost like you have this combination of working at the daycare center, also doing your writing at school, and then you have this child that was born. You're married, or partnered?

Eisner: No, no, partnered.

Vradenburgh: You're balancing a lot of different things. It sounds like it was a lot. [laughing] Were there other ways that you were engaging with the larger community?

Eisner: I just remembered that one of the things I loved—I still love, but I loved then—was baseball. Evergreen had a bunch of softball equipment. I decided that I was going to play some softball, so I got my roommate I was living with to design these posters for softball every Sunday at 1:00 at the playfield.

I'd rent out the equipment. It was like three or four bats and balls and the bases, these plastic bases, heavy and all that—I didn't have a car, so I'd have to haul it on the bus back and forth—and we'd have softball every Sunday. I'd talk it up, and people would come out and just have a great time. I loved it.

Vradenburgh: You did it out on the campus?

Eisner: Yeah. I was serious as hell.

Vradenburgh: Were there other sports, or was that kind of unusual?

Eisner: There wasn't much sports at the beginning of Evergreen. I think basketball might have been one of the first ones. But they didn't have a gym then, they didn't have a basketball gym. It was just pick-up games and things.

So, I did that, and then I got involved in a thing called Re-evaluation Counseling. Bob and Bonnie were in that, Bonnie from the daycare. Bob and Bonnie also got me to know the community more, the pre-Evergreen community, because they'd been here since the '60s.

Vradenburgh: I've heard their name a lot, and they sounded like people who were involved with lots of community organizing. Is that right?

Eisner: Right. They had a coffeehouse in town. They got busted by the cops because that's where Communists were.

Vradenburgh: Was it the Null Set?

Eisner: Yes. Yeah, you do know a lot. You've been doing these stories for a long time. That's great. Bob taught in public school for a while, and he's an artist. They're both artists. Bob's gone. Bonnie lives in New Mexico now. I got to know the old Unitarian leftists and things. Older people. People with families. That's when I got to know a lot about families because Bob and Bonnie were the first peers that had a family. Up till then, there were just single folks, like myself. Nobody had hardly any real responsibilities.

Vradenburgh: Bonnie and Bob were older than you, though. Were they kind of decade ahead or something?

Eisner: Yeah, I think they were in their late thirties, and I was in my mid-twenties when I met them. It's funny now because that doesn't seem like a big span, but then it was huge. It was like, wow, grownups! [laughter] They really welcomed me with open arms. It was great. It was good.

That was my early Evergreen. I was too tired, especially that first year with the kids, and getting sick all the time, and having a girlfriend back in Michigan. I was too tired to do a lot of extracurricular. Sometimes I think, boy, if I had lived in the dorms instead of living in town, I would have gotten to meet a lot more people. But I did what I did.

Vradenburgh: At what point did your partner move out here?

Eisner: I came to Evergreen in the fall of '73. She came out after school in the spring of '74.

Vradenburgh: Did she attend Evergreen?

Eisner: She took some classes way down the road at Evergreen, like within the last 10 years. She also, I think, did some work for Evergreen and maybe taught something at Evergreen. I'm talking about the last few years. I don't keep track too much.

Vradenburgh: I think what would help me is to have a basic—I wrote down before the basic chronology of your work, but can you remember again of your work and these positions?

Eisner: I wrote it down. I came back to Evergreen after being a student. When I first came back to Evergreen, I believe it was late '80 or early '81. I worked for a place called WOIS, Washington Occupational Information Service. They were not part of Evergreen. They just rented a space in the Seminar Building. I worked for them as a secretary. I got another job, I don't know why. Maybe WOIS was ending, or it was better pay, but I started working for College Housing in '81 as a secretary.

Vradenburgh: When you say secretary, are you talking about the traditional role of notetaking and opening mail?

Eisner: And writing, yeah, copying things. Yeah, yeah. Secretary. Then there was budget cuts, as Evergreen always faced—every State agency will—so my position was ended in either '81 or '82, I don't remember.

But Ken Jacob, Director of Housing—a really sweet, intelligent guy—knew I had some proficiency with writing, so he recommended me to Judy McNichols, who was the head of College Relations then, as a secretary there. Working there, sometimes there would a be a crunch and I'd write up a press release rather than just copy it. I think it was typewriters first. We didn't have word processors or anything. She saw that I could do that kind of thing.

Then she got a job, I think, with the State Legislature, and Mark Clemens, who was a PIO there—Public Information Officer—became the Acting Director. I remember it was this fateful afternoon because Judy suggested, "Here's this person and this person and this person you can hire as a new PIO to take Mark's spot." I don't know if I said it or Mark said it, but I said, "Well, what about me?" "Yeah, all right." That was a big step forward, to get out of being a secretary.

Vradenburgh: Yeah. Was there one position, like you were the officer instead of multiple public information officers?

Eisner: At that time, there was Mark and a PIO. Mark was the Director, and I was the PIO. Later, we hired another PIO. Remember Mr. Balsley?

Vradenburgh: Yes.

Eisner: We hired him. So, I'm a writer. I'm a Public Information Officer. You have a question here where I said, "You said you learned to write when you started working for College Relations." Every writer should write press releases, whether you're writing fiction or novels, because you have to be concise, you have to be quick, and you have to cover the bases. So, I'd write up press releases. Then I'd write, and then I graduated from press releases to writing articles for the newsletter. Then writing and editing things for the catalog and the viewbook and the *Evergreen ReView*.

Mark was terrific. He was one of the best editors I ever saw. He would take your copy and he would point out so many things, both in-the-trenches stuff like grammar, consistency, etc., but also the bigger picture, like "So far this article is going this way, and then all of a sudden there's this." He was just terrific, meticulous, and inspiring, too.

I wrote more and more complex things and became the real PIO. Did that from '83 or so till Mark went to the faculty in the late '80s, and I became the Acting Director of College Relations. By that time, I had a PIO under me. He would write a lot of the press releases and I'd edit them. I'd write press releases, too, when we needed to. We wrote articles, and I worked with Graphics. We'd brainstorm the catalog, viewbook, *ReView*, etc. We were responsible for at least five major publications.

Vradenburgh: Per year?

Eisner: Per year, and then 10 to 15 or 20 other things. Student groups would come to us, or different disciplines would come to us. "We need this catalog because we're going to have an exhibit on so-and-so." I'd talk to the press, talk to radio.

Vradenburgh: Your job was really to represent the college and communicate who you were to lots of audiences.

Eisner: Yep.

Vradenburgh: What was some of your process in thinking through? Did you think about, we're trying to reach this group and we're going to frame who we are in this way, versus this group, and we're going to talk about who we are in this way? Did you have some goals around how you were representing the college and what you were trying to communicate about who you were?

Eisner: Yeah, always.

Vradenburgh: It's a big question.

Eisner: Yeah. Everything you write, you're representing the college. I never felt like, okay, today I've got to write this thing, so we really appeal to this certain demographic. I just tried to make everything as welcoming as possible.

I had a thought just now.

Vradenburgh: This was the '80s, so you're transitioning from that first decade of [unintelligible 01:36:58].

Eisner: Well, we had Reagan for President. There's still the threat that the damn place could be closed, like that. I remember going to a rally.

Every now and then, some legislator downtown would get bored and attack Evergreen, or come out and see women holding hands and guys holding hands, or signs about, by the '80s, "get out of" somewhere, and see Communists and lesbians and whatever they saw, and then they'd want to shut the place down. Oftentimes, they'd do it sneakily. They'd say, "Well, you know, we've got budget cuts and Evergreen is not drawing—it's an expensive little school compared to UW that's got a lot of"—blahblahblah. That was like a smoke cover. Then alumni would rally. Gawd, it was great to have Dan Evans because he could squelch that stuff pretty quick.

Vradenburgh: You had moments where you had to be really reactive to what was externally going on?

Eisner: Yeah. But nobody ever said to me, "We shouldn't write this or write that because we're worried about the Legislature." I was never directed to do that. I'd hear it every now and then. "Oh, I don't know if we should . . ."

You can usually wait people out. [laughter] The people who come and say, "Well, maybe we should write this or that," they're not writing it, and usually they've got other things to do. So, you write it, and eventually it goes.

Vradenburgh: It sounds like some of your goals were around just being welcoming.

Eisner: Here's one big change. This was when I was working under Mark. Somewhere around the mid-'80s, colleges started putting out—colleges for a long time just put out a catalog. But colleges in the mid-'80s started to think, we need to appeal to the 16- and 17-year-olds who are about to make a decision about college. Maybe they don't need a whole big catalog, but something smaller that we called a viewbook.

I remember meeting and planning about that, and what we wanted was we looked at that catalog—it's good, it's serviceable—but it wasn't appealing to 17-year-olds. It wasn't hip. It was more denotative than connotative. It wasn't a poem, so Mark and I did this viewbook. I'll tell you the sad story first. It's not sad.

There were old-line faculty and staff people who did not like the viewbook. It was like selling out, or it was too flashy. Kids loved it. I remember what the first viewbook I came up with, and I don't know if it was from the talk with my mom, but I thought up a "sense of wonder." The first words were

something like "Why do you get up in the morning? What makes your day?" If you have a sense of wonder, you're going to have a richer life, or whatever. It's basically what my mom told me. I wrote that. It was big, handwritten letters—script—"A Sense of Wonder" on the cover and it was a multicolored background. You flipped it over and there were pictures of students. Vivid.

A year or two later, we had some kind of event at the college, and I believe she was a State senator or representative, she came. She was talking about her son, she said, "When my son was little, he was the kind of kid who got up early in the morning on Christmas day and opened all the presents because he just couldn't wait." Then she said, "When he wanted to go to school, he didn't know what school to go to." I'm paraphrasing because I don't remember exactly. "Then he picked up this thing and she read, 'A Sense of Wonder.' This is why he came to this school." Mark and I were in the audience and we were like, oh-h-h.

Vradenburgh: You really tapped into something in terms of that youthful—

Eisner: Yeah, it's my mom talking. Just recently, there was a guy named David Waters. Do you know him? He's this funny, sweet guy. Anyway, he's in his early forties, I think. We went to India, and he was part of the group that went to India, and he runs a hotel. He [manages] buildings and hotels downtown.

One day he said, "I've got to show you something." He took me down to the basement of the Martin Building, where Wind Up Here was. He took me down to the basement and he pulls out this catalog—and I have it now, so if we do photographs, we can use it—'91-'92, and on the back, it has my name as the editor. He asked me to autograph it. He's always joking, but he was serious. He said, "This is what brought me to Evergreen. This catalog." He was on the East Coast. He looked at a lot of different places, and he saw the Evergreen catalog and he said, "This is the place I want to go."

Vradenburgh: It sounds like there's a lot of student stories in those catalogs.

Eisner: There's this thing, a "student narrator," where there would be a photo of a student, and then her or his words. I'm not sure where the idea exactly [came from]—but I remember having that idea by looking at—there used to be this thing called Dewar's—it's a whiskey—and they would have famous actors and stuff giving a little talk about themselves holding a glass of the whiskey. I thought, hell, we could do that. Leave out the whiskey, but just have them talk about—it's about the students, right?

That was—I think I told you the story—that was a synthesis of opposing ideas, and there was always some politics and things. For example, black students would come to Evergreen and they'd look around and they'd say, "Where's anybody who looks like me? The catalog is full of people who look like me." On the other hand, you want to have a representation, but you don't want to have a misrepresentation.

It was a big task. The catalog would come out in the summer. Months before, we'd make a list. Okay, here's what we want to represent. We want to represent some students of color, we want to represent older students, we want to represent students in the sciences, we want to have some first-year students, we want to have some seniors. I think I told you this story but I'll tell you again. One year, some students said, "Well, everybody looks so straight." They didn't mean gay or homosexual, they meant clean cut. "Why don't you have some people with long hair?"

I went and got this science student—sweet guy—and he had hair down to here. It was like, okay. They would come to my office and I'd interview them. He comes in the office and his hair is all short and he's all dressed up. I didn't know what to say. I said, "Oh, you cut your hair." He says, "Yeah, my fiancé when she heard I was going to be in the catalog said, 'You should get your hair cut.'" [laughter] We interviewed him and he was in the catalog and everything, but it was just like, okay, what's reality, and how much are you going to show?

We'd get invited every now and then to a class. We were invited to some class that Thad Curtz taught . . . it had to do with writing . . . and the students were just giving us a rash of shit. "Why can't you show the college like it is instead of this dressed up [version]. Show them all the things that are wrong with the college." I hope I said this, but at least I thought I said, "Well, when you write your resume, do you write the shortcomings you have, or do you write the best things?" But the whole idea of what's real and what isn't, and when are you misrepresenting, and when are you showing your best?

It wasn't something you just picked a bunch of students who were available. There was real thought that went into what . . . mostly, I tried to get them—my ideal quote, just like right now when I'm critiquing students' writing or when I'm writing myself—my ideal quote was an experiential one, where someone would say, "Boy, one day Bob Sluss took us all out to a pond, and we were mucking around, and we found this mollusk that we didn't know existed!" A story that you could see, that you could visualize, that wasn't "Oh, I really loved Evergreen and I've learned so much."

I learned a lot of interviewing skills. I didn't have a tape recorder. I just would write like crazy. Then I'd go back and say, ah, did they really say this? They always got to approve or disapprove. I never printed anything anybody said without their approval. I got tired scribbling away, but luckily, you have some people who just talk slowly. You can practically write what they're going to say. [laughing]

Vradenburgh: That's really impressive, to write it all out. I've never had to do that.

Eisner: One thing you learn—or I learned is you learn what's essential. You start to also get a pattern of people's speech. It wasn't like I was reproducing volumes, but I had to pick through it all.

Vradenburgh: Would you have just a few questions and then . . .?

Eisner: Yeah.

Vradenburgh: It wasn't a lengthy interview, just a couple of questions.

Eisner: No, no. A few questions. Mostly the questions weren't that important. The questions were just getting them to talk. Somebody said something general—and you're doing this now with me—then you'll say, "Can you give me an example of that?" Or, "Do you remember the first day?" Then you get them to get more into the weeds, and that's when you get the good stuff that only they could say.

Vradenburgh: I guess the '80s was a time of affirmative action, wasn't it? Did that play into your communications at all? I know that's more about hiring, but did that influence?

Eisner: What was great about Evergreen, too, is my boss—my big boss, Sue Washburn—with College Development, and then College Relations was under that. She would schedule seminars or sit-downs with staff, with faculty of color, with women. We'd look at gender issues, we'd look at affirmative action. It wasn't like, okay, here's work, and you've got to turn out the copy. All right, we're going to continue educating ourselves. Into the '90s, too. I worked till '92 or '93, I guess, '92. Rodney King.

Vradenburgh: So, you didn't feel compartmentalized like a staff person, you felt integrated into Evergreen's lifelong learning ideas.

Eisner: Yeah, and that's one of the great things about working in College Relation or with the County. When I worked with the County, I did the newsletter, which meant that I walked around and talked to people in other departments.

Most departments were like this. [At] Evergreen, to its credit, the departments had a lot of interaction. In the County and other places, they are separate fiefdoms, especially those that have an elected official, because they've got their own thing going, whereas the college was much more integrated. At least when I was there, you didn't have somebody in one department jealously guarding their [turf]—I mean, yeah, you did, all right? But it wasn't so bad. We're human.

Vradenburgh: Right. I was just looking through the Archives at Evergreen, looking at some of the old publications and reading some of those *Cooper Point Journals* from that time period also, and I was curious about what the relationship was between the more official Evergreen publications and the student newspaper? How did you think about your orientation towards what they were up to?

Eisner: I didn't interact much with them. I was busy. They didn't come to me for anything. I remember staff being pissed off every Friday [when the *Cooper Point Journal* came out] about something. They would be pissed off, too, about *The Olympian*. I never got terribly insulted or felt threatened by—there were many students who looked on—we were on the fourth wing of Administration, the fourth floor of the Library—maybe it's the third—anyway, the top floor of the Library, and we were in the

Administration. We were where people wore suits. Even if weren't wearing suits, we were the establishment, and there was suspicion. Like that picture I showed you. "Eisner, why don't you let the students speak for themselves?"

It's funny, I take a lot of things personally in my personal life, but I didn't take much—if a colleague, someone I was working with, said something offensive or challenging to me, I'd stew on it. But with students or faculty or the public, yeah, I'd listen, and I'd try to do my best to communicate a responsible answer, but I never took it like, oh, my god, they hate me.

Vradenburgh: I feel like that's a skill that not everybody has. Where do you think that—

Eisner: I think you're born with it or you're not, to be honest. There's other times people will—I will just carry, in my personal life, [makes crying sounds]. Maybe not outwardly, but inwardly. But professionally, I don't know, you just . . . most of the time, people just want to be heard, listened to.

I had one guy at the County call up—because we were paving some road he didn't want paved—and he went on and on about it . . . and at one point I said when we were on the phone, "Sir, would you like to hear our response, or do you want to keep going?" He said, "I want to keep going!" I said, "Okay."

I just think in my professional life, I just said you can't. Like I said, people who were in proximity, if they say something, yeah, it rankles. Somebody—a student or somebody—writes in a nasty letter about Evergreen or the County roads system, you just respond. It's much easier to feel like, oh, they're not mad at me personally. Whereas somebody down the hall who says something snippy about a publication I just put out, [angry growl]. You get over it. [laughing]

Vradenburgh: I think you kind of have to in that role, because you're the one that people are complaining to.

Eisner: The interesting thing about being . . . one of the biggest bromides, I think, in life, everybody likes to say, "I don't care what other people think." Yeah, you do. As a public relations person, you're paid to care. You're paid to pay attention, and paid to think about and examine what other people think and say.

Vradenburgh: It was interesting to read—this is not related, but I was reading some of the early faculty reviews in the *CPJ*. They were pretty harsh. [laughing]

Eisner: Nasty, yeah. Nasty.

Vradenburgh: But I suppose that's kind of the role of youth, really, is to push back.

Eisner: Yeah, and here they are, they've got an audience, and okay. I stopped reading it after a while. [high voice] "Did you read what they said?" They'd say the same thing about *The Olympian*. "They've

got this wrong, they got this wrong!" I'd say, "You know what it takes to put a daily newspaper out? Do you know how many words? You're not going to get it all right. You're not going to get everything right.

Vradenburgh: Yeah. Let me look at the list of things to see what else we want to talk about.

Eisner: Okay. You want to hear the best and the worst thing about working at Evergreen?

Vradenburgh: Yeah, I do.

Eisner: It was the best job I ever had. It was the worst job I ever had. It was the best job and the worst job because it was family, and you don't have a clock with family. It was 60-, 65-hour weeks. I didn't mind. Working that hard and long and being away from my family, yeah, it was a drag. But I didn't mind the work so much as the feeling that I wasn't doing enough; that, okay, you get a great article placed in a national publication about Evergreen, and you work with a reporter, so you're [exhales], and then your boss will often say, "But what about this paper, too, or this airline magazine?" And you think, oh, man. Just sometimes just the weight of all the emotion and expectation. It was the most meaningful job I ever had.

Vradenburgh: Meaningful in what way?

Eisner: It meant we were changing the world. I really do still believe that. Not just Evergreen, I believe every college has the potential to change the world, but I really think Evergreen was, and maybe still is, changing the world.

Vradenburgh: It felt good to be a part of that?

Eisner: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Vradenburgh: And getting more people involved in coming.

Eisner: Yeah, and doing what you can to communicate that, hey, this college is something that you should look at.

You know what else I liked? I inherited it. Judy McNichols was the first to start it and then she left, so I wound up being the head of Tribute to Japan, which was this annual one-day exhibit/fair, educating, lectures, movies, demonstrations that happened at Evergreen, and it took an immense amount of work. What it had to do with was, for months, I would meet with the Japanese American Citizen League in Olympia; I would meet with faculty at Evergreen; I would meet with students with Asian Pacific Islanders, I forget what the title was then; I would meet with all these people; I would also be working with Governor's office, because the Governor would come down and give a speech; and working with the Japanese Consul of Seattle—to put this event together. I even liked it better than Super Saturday because it was cultural, because it was about other people.

Vradenburgh: It sounds like your position was beyond just publications, it was event planning, too?

Eisner: Oh, yeah. It was event planning, it was whatever needed to be done. It was like being in a family. It was a family. The thing is, so I'd go in on a weekend. Up and down the hall, there would be other people working on the weekend, too.

Vradenburgh: How do you feel like your relationship to the college shifted, or your insights, from being a student to being then part of the Administration? Maybe it deepened?

Eisner: I didn't think much about my student life once I became an administrator. I just seemed like that was another lifetime ago. The ideas I had and the impressions I had of the Administration, [when] I was one of them, it didn't seem like a huge shift to me. The bigger shift was going from secretary to having a responsibility of information. That's what seemed like a big shift to me.

Faculty were busy. There was some faculty who were sponsoring events and stuff, so I'd talk to them and things, but a lot of times, there wasn't a lot of [interaction with the] faculty. It was like faculty hung out with faculty, or didn't, and staff hung out with staff. But I still was close and tight with Sandra Simon. Russ Lidman and I would have long talks about politics, and LBJ, and Vietnam and things. There were certain faculty—Ed Trujillo, who ran the theater program—that I was friendly with.

Vradenburgh: Interesting. I didn't realize there was not an intentional division, but a separation between the faculty.

Eisner: Some faculty were tight with staff, especially the faculty who were doing stints in Academic Advising, and who were involved with the administration of the college, you had that. Faculty who were deans, provosts, because they were also putting—you worked with them so that you could get the information out. The President.

Vradenburgh: You mentioned a few, like the book, when you first developed that, but were there any other projects that you feel were particularly—

Eisner: I took the *ReView*, and I thought, this is a stodgy old thing. Not to knock what happened before, but I think we need a change. It was like this tabloid that you'd have to unfold. It was like a newspaper, so let's make it like a magazine, and let's have more students [alumni] talking.

I contacted the students [alumni] and said, "Hey, do you have an essay?" I had a few essays printed. I remember once—I loved doing this—I think the first time we had changed the format of the *ReView*, it was 1989, so I said, "What do people think the '90s are going to be like?"

This would be before e-mail. I contacted a whole bunch of faculty and other people and I said, "What do you think of the '90s? What's your idea of the '90s?" I got a lot of writing back, and I edited it, and I got these fascinating predictions about the '90s.

What I liked was I felt like, all right, the most interesting alumni magazines I've seen from other colleges aren't about, "oh, yeah, our college did this and our college did that." But they were articles that anybody would want to read. It wasn't just because, well, this shows how great Evergreen is. If you've got a good publication that makes people want to read it, they're going to know that it's Evergreen. They're going to have that connection. I tried to get away from everything being a promotion for Evergreen to let's make an interesting magazine.

Vradenburgh: Was the *ReView* what evolved into *Evergreen Magazine*?

Eisner: Is that what it's called now?

Vradenburgh: I think so.

Eisner: Yeah, it might be. I may be wrong, but I think it might be still called the *Evergreen ReView*.

Vradenburgh: Yeah, maybe. It's the thing you get if you're an alumni.

Eisner: If you're an alumni, yeah. For a long time—it's been since the college started basically—they've had the *Evergreen ReView*. That was a good thing. I liked doing that. And whenever I did any project, I'd think, not for the sake of news, but I'd think, okay, is there a way we can make this more lively? Is there a way we can get away from [sighs] academic-ese, academic language, or bureaucrat-ese, and make it English? I did the same with the County. I'd take what engineers would write or tell me and I'd try to make it into English.

Vradenburgh: Make it more accessible.

Eisner: More accessible and fun. That's partly part of my motive in life is to make things fun. Every year, they did the Telethon. I don't think they do that anymore. I don't think people answer the phone anymore.

Vradenburgh: Yeah, they usually do text banking now.

Eisner: Every year, we had to come up with some promotion. "Hey, Evergreen is going to be calling you!" One year I thought, well, let's make a good photo. What I did was I asked Facilities to bring a desk onto Red Square, right in the center of the square—just a desk, and then I brought down a chair—and have the Gooey Duck standing beside. Then have somebody outdoors, except they're on the phone, and say, "Evergreen is calling you."

It was a great picture, and it was so different than anything we had done before. It was "Hey, this is fun! Evergreen is calling you!" Rather than a lot of text and a photo of the Development Director. Let's have some fun.

Vradenburgh: It sounds like injecting some whimsey almost into the communications.

Eisner: Right. Another important thing I wrote when I was at Evergreen I want to tell. The most fraught time at Evergreen was when Joe Olander fired Patrick Hill, the Provost. *The Olympian* meanwhile had this long, drawn-out war with Olander, printing all sorts of stuff about him, some true, some not. *Seattle Times*, the *P-I*, it was a story. Embattled President of the college. Finally, somebody uncovered that Joe had misrepresented himself on his resume, which is a big no-no anywhere, but especially in academic life, so he quit. He was asked to resign.

There was a lot, a lot of angst and resentment and paranoia, and blahblahblah, so in the newsletter, I wrote a piece—I wish I had it—about forgiveness, about . . . [sighs] . . . I don't know. Looking beyond ourselves. It wasn't a holy moly thing. It was just about what we were going through.

Vradenburgh: Just the fallibility of humans and that we all aren't perfect.

Eisner: Yeah, something like that. I didn't know what response I'd get, but I heard from so many people saying, "Wow. That really meant a lot. That really took me out of the [raspberry] and into something."

Vradenburgh: Were you the Director at that time when all that junk was happening with him? You had to deal with the public during those times.

Eisner: Yeah.

Vradenburgh: Were people giving you direction about how to communicate, or were you having to decide? How were you dealing with that?

Eisner: To Joe's credit, he never said, "You should say this, or you should say that." I wasn't the press secretary for the President.

Vradenburgh: Yeah, you weren't his puppet.

Eisner: Yeah, I wasn't his puppet. But he didn't turn to me either for advice, which I would have said, "Joe, tell the truth."

Newspapers would call me up and say this and that and I would answer as honestly as I could. I thought more of my work was internal communications about it, about being honorable in such a situation. Not defending, but not attacking, and not ignoring either.

I don't know if there were things I could have done differently. I could see that it was going down. It came that . . . you know the thing that Alcoholics Anonymous says? "Lord, give me the wisdom." No. "Give me the courage to change what I can change and give me the serenity to accept what I can't, and the wisdom to know the difference."

That was my . . . that was my . . . that was my moment when I learned that, that there were some things I could do and things I can, and there are some things you feel responsible for the college's

image, for the college's wellbeing, or for any organization's wellbeing, and there's some things you can't do anything about.

Vradenburgh: Did people blame you for anything?

Eisner: People trusted me. I had been there long enough. But at the same time, I was also applying for my job as a permanent [position], and . . . it didn't work out, let's say. I think it was a good decision. It was a decision on their part, and it was partly a decision on mine. I was eventually offered the job, but by that time, it was time for me to go.

Vradenburgh: It sounds like the timing was—I don't know if you don't recover from certain things, but being part of turmoil is . . .

Eisner: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I don't know.

Vradenburgh: That's when you went on to work for the County?

Eisner: No. I don't know what I did for the first couple months, but then I got a job working with a place called South Sound Advocates, a social service agency, as—guess what?

Vradenburgh: A secretary?

Eisner: Yep. I worked there for a while. That was part-time, and then I got another part-time job at Ecology. I don't think I was called a secretary. I wrote things. I wound up writing stuff for the [Department of Ecology newsletter] *Spills*. Then my first wife got offered a position as a midwife in American Samoa, so we all went there.

Vradenburgh: How long were you there?

Eisner: Two years, from '95-'96. It was something.

Vradenburgh: Wow. I think we're closing in on 4:00.

Eisner: We're closing on 4:00, yeah.

Vradenburgh: At this point, what do you feel like we're missing? Do you want to talk more about different pieces about Evergreen, or what came after Evergreen? Do you want to look at the transcripts and then decide if you want to get back together and talk more?

Eisner: That sounds good. You know, this is the thing about jobs and marriages is that—I mean former jobs, former marriages—you often come away with a sadness that it's over, and you forget that, oh, my god, we had all these great years together. I don't want to just . . . I don't want . . . the last words, or the final impression about my time at Evergreen to be about the divorce. I'd rather it be about how great the marriage was.

Vradenburgh: Yeah, I really get that, and I think Evergreen, it just seems like it goes through those cycles. There's just something that bubbles up and it's really dramatic, and people get caught up in that, and it ends poorly and then it moves on. Fortunately, we're part of a bubble [unintelligible 02:17:37].

Eisner: Let me tell you about the future, what I'm excited about. For years, pre-Covid times, I've avoided alumni [reunions] "Hey, let's get together," and Debe has always gone, and Debe has had a great time. Before Covid, I thought, after the last one she went to, I thought, dammit, I'm going to go to the next one. I'm going to put aside, or you never completely forget your pain.

When Covid's over and the next alumni gathering, I'll go. Debe had a great time with them. I want to reacquaint, reconnect with Evergreen. All that stuff. That was 30 years ago.

At the time I was working as a PIO at Evergreen, the first year was when all that oh, my god, I got a job, a real job. I was also writing for a publication called *Family Times*, where I wrote little short stories—not fiction, but I'd write experiential things about children, both me as a kid and being a father. I'd write about my own kids. One of them was Benjamin, who was five and he was going to kindergarten.

Marty worked, and I was at Evergreen working, and he was to take the bus to where she was. Somehow, there was a mix-up, and he wound up at home alone. He knows Evergreen's number, so he calls Evergreen and he's talking to the [receptionist] named Barbara, I don't remember her last name. Barbara knows everybody. This is the kind of receptionist you want to have, which is why I hate message phones now, because you don't have that human—

Anyway, he says, "I'm trying to reach my daddy." She says, "What's your daddy's name?" "Daddy." Then she listens and she says, "Are you Benjamin?" He says, "Yeah." "Your daddy is Keith?" "Yeah." Okay, then she connects him. Because she had read the stories about Benjamin, and she just had this instinct this was Benjamin.

That's the stuff I want to treasure about Evergreen.

Vradenburgh: That family closeness.

Eisner: That somebody knows you and cares about you.

Vradenburgh: Absolutely. Aw, his name is daddy. [laughter]

Eisner: Yeah, that was good.