

Sue McNeil:
Interviewed by Susan Fiksdal
The Evergreen State College oral history project
July 8, 2022
FINAL

Fiksdal: This is Susan Fiksdal. I'm here interviewing Sue McNeil on July 8, 2022. Sue, you were a staff at Evergreen, and also Earle McNeil's wife. I'm very interested in hearing about your experience at Evergreen. It's rare to have someone from the staff who also knows a lot about faculty, so you're a special person.

Let's start with your childhood and growing up. Could you tell us a little bit about where you grew up, and a little bit about your parents and your siblings?

McNeil: Yes. I grew up in Ridgefield, Washington, which is a small town about 15 miles north of Vancouver. We had a 70-acre farm, of which we did hay and grain, and had cows and pigs and the whole bit.

I have two brothers and two sisters and my parents. My dad worked an 8:00-to-5:00 job as well as doing the farm. Part of that probably is he only had a sixth-grade education. My mother had a ninth-grade education, and so they were very hardworking. I always thought, middle-class people, but they were hardworking farm folks. We always had a big garden, and the kids had to work. We helped with the hay bailing, taking in hay, taking in grain, doing garden work. We didn't really have a choice.

Fiksdal: They had limited education. Do you know why?

McNeil: My dad was born in 1902, my mother was born in 1906, and so they were married, went through the Depression, all of that stuff. It's just that kids did not necessarily have access to school in those days. They got married in their teens or twenties and again, worked hard. My dad worked in the shipyards during the war in Vancouver. Just didn't have the opportunity, I guess.

We didn't really have that many books when I was growing up because they didn't read. We didn't have television until, oh, goodness, it was quite late, I think, because we would go next door. They had television sooner than we did so we'd go and watch all the silly things.

Fiksdal: That the kids needed to see, yeah.

McNeil: But again, even with that, there was so much freedom with kids nowadays. We could go over to the neighbors for an hour, and they could come to our house for an hour, or maybe an hour and a

half or half-hour, but there was always a time limit. We had to be back and accountable, even though this was the time we didn't lock our doors or anything as far as what we're at now.

Along with that, because there were the cows and everything, I joined 4-H. Had a cow in 4-H and then that went on into doing sewing. Because of 4-H and doing advanced things in that, I got interested in home ec kinds of things. That took me to WSU for a summer camp that was great back when I was probably seventh or eighth grade.

Fiksdal: Oh, that early?

McNeil: I think it was eighth grade. I was at WSU for a week at a summer camp, and I fell in love with WSU and decided that this is the place that, if I can go to college, this is where I want to go. Now, I'm getting emotional.

We didn't have that much money or anything. I got a couple of scholarships from school and went to Clark Junior College for two years and got a lot of my requirements out of the way, and then ended up at WSU. I was going to go into home ec education, and people kept telling me I needed to be a teacher. "You need to be a teacher."

Fiksdal: Why did they say that?

McNeil: I don't know. [laughter] Because of my home ec stuff, I suppose, because I was doing home ec and everything in high school, but I also took chemistry and physics and things like that because we had a fantastic chemistry and physics teacher. That's why we took them.

I had that science background, but when I got to WSU and had to take organic chem and had to take flat-pattern design for home ec, I said, okay, this is it. I'm changing my major.

Fiksdal: I would have changed, too. That sounds really hard. [laughter]

McNeil: By changing my major, I had to go to summer school to make sure I could graduate on time. It was at summer school that I met Earle. That's another whole story, but we met at summer school and then dated the next year. That would have been the junior year, and then we got married a week after graduation from college.

Fiksdal: You both graduated and then you got married?

McNeil: Right. A week later. We graduated on May 31 and got married on June 7. The fact that his dad was a professor of zoology at WSU and his mother worked in the science department when she was working, and she was fulltime—a mother as well as doing a lot of volunteer kinds of things with League of Women Voters and different things like that—we got to interact with some of the faculty at WSU. Ironically, the person that was the faculty of organic chem, which I dropped, was a friend of theirs. [laughing]

Fiksdal: But he didn't remember you.

McNeil: No, there were like 250 people. There was no way.

Fiksdal: What was your major then?

McNeil: Elementary education.

Fiksdal: So, you did go into teaching.

McNeil: Yeah, so I did my elementary teaching practicum whatever in Quincy-Ephrata. Then came back after we graduated again. Fortunately or unfortunately, the superintendent of the school in Pullman was a friend of the family, and when I interviewed for a position, he knew we wouldn't be there for more than two years, and Earle stayed at WSU to do his master's degree, so he knew we weren't going to be there very long, so it was a little . . . you know . . .

Fiksdal: He wasn't too excited about hiring you.

McNeil: Right. He was looking for somebody with more longevity, and I can appreciate that. Then I went to work at the registrar/admissions office at WSU and worked there for a year. But, as life has it, we got pregnant within the first year. It was a year that we had a baby, and then Earle and I traded off for a while and I worked after that until we moved to Tacoma to the University of Puget Sound.

Fiksdal: When you were working, did you ever teach?

McNeil: I never did teach in the professional elementary thing. There were some job openings and I interviewed for a couple, but one was 25 miles away in a small town over in Eastern Washington and the other one was 40 miles away, and I didn't want to do that.

Fiksdal: No, with a child, too.

McNeil: I thought, why am I doing this? I'm not a teacher. [laughing] I like to support people, but I don't want to be up in the classroom.

As it turned out, later I did do substitute teaching here in Olympia, and I worked in the ESL program prior to going to Evergreen. I was the liaison between the director of the ESL program on the Westside and a Cambodian, a Vietnamese and a Thai person who were working with the students. I was helping them and letting the coordinator know what was going on and what was needed.

Fiksdal: Your background did turn out to matter.

McNeil: Yeah, and I worked with some of the children with Thai and Cambodian and Vietnamese [backgrounds] in reading, small groups.

Fiksdal: That's terrific.

McNeil: Then worked also a year after that over at Jefferson. I guess it was a yearlong with that—but it was before I came to Evergreen—as teaching in a small class. That's where that came in.

I would have liked to have carried on, I guess, in that, but I would have had to go into the full classroom, and I didn't want to do that. I don't like being a policeman, and that's what it was back then.

Fiksdal: A lot of management rather than teaching. I can see that.

McNeil: Yes.

Fiksdal: You ended up having how many children?

McNeil: We have three. We have two boys. After our first one, we had decided we would like to adopt. We had planned we would have two biologically of ours and then we wanted to adopt, just because we felt two per family were enough.

When our second one was born, he was also a boy, so we decided, okay, then we will adopt a girl. At that time—this was in 1970, and it was in the time of the [Vietnam] war and the whole minority issues and all of that—there were a lot of minority children that were available. We decided that we would like to adopt a minority child. We went through Social and Health Services. We were lucky to get a daughter that her father was African American and her mother was white, out of Spokane, living in Spokane. She joined our family at six months of age.

Fiksdal: That's so nice to have a baby.

McNeil: Yeah. I think growing up on a farm and being very isolated in some ways, I had never had experience necessarily with minority-race people. But again, as luck would have it, we had an African American family that lived next to us in Tacoma. She was a single parent. She had a five-year-old and a seven-year-old.

We were there for three years so we were there as they were getting older, and she was working, so I would go over to help when the kids were a couple years older and going to school and helped get them off to school in the morning, and she became a really good friend. That gave an introduction into a different race, a whole different way of looking at life than what I had been exposed to.

Fiksdal: Because you had a close friend. Was she facing discrimination? Did she talk about that?

McNeil: Back in those days, there wasn't that much. There was a movement probably six or seven years after that that the black population did not want white people adopting children, and we didn't understand—what's this all about?—until, as we got further and further into knowing what we were doing, we could understand that, because the kids could not get the same kind of a background and culture that the black people could to their own.

But at the same time, there were so many children that needed to have families, it was a question of, do you want them to have a family, or wait?

Fiksdal: Did you ever meet the biological parents?

McNeil: No. Her mother was 16, the father was 18. They were in Spokane. He was from a military family. Being at that point in time, in 1970, and being pregnant, that was very hard, especially in Spokane.

Fiksdal: It was looked down upon if you're not married.

McNeil: Right.

Fiksdal: She was how far apart in age from your youngest?

McNeil: They're about 18 months.

Fiksdal: You had three kids very close in age then.

McNeil: Yes.

Fiksdal: So, you were a very busy mom.

McNeil: Very busy. Even at UPS, I was a fulltime mom because we had two little ones. Then, when Kerri came, we had three little ones, so I was a fulltime mom.

Fiksdal: Then you moved to Olympia. Earle got his job at the college. You remained a fulltime mom, I would imagine, for a while?

McNeil: Yes. Until the '80s probably. I think Kerri was probably 10 when I started working in the ESL program. I was able to be at home most of the time because it was with a school, so it was only parttime, so it worked out really well.

Fiksdal: In those 10 years or so that Earle had his job at Evergreen and you were home, you still had quite an active social life because you got to know all of his colleagues. How was that for you?

McNeil: It was really fun. It was really a busy time. We had a house, which is a few blocks from where we live now. We were only there for three years and then we moved over to where we are now, and this house that we're living in was at the point where "Should we tear it down or should we rebuild?" So, we remodeled, so I was busy with the remodeling, with garden work, with the three kids. Volunteered in the schools.

Then being able to read the books. Like everyone knows, Evergreen had different classes or different people you taught with and different things every year, so whatever books Earle was using, I would read along, too.

Fiksdal: That's terrific.

McNeil: So, I got a much better education probably through Evergreen vicariously than what I got at WSU. [laughing]

Fiksdal: We all did, Sue. We all did. Suddenly, you're reading books you never would have read in college because you're working interdisciplinarily.

McNeil: But they were much more fun than the ones we had. [laughter]

Fiksdal: Yeah, especially in elementary ed, I could imagine. Then you started working with ESL and that was because in the '80s—I remember in '75, we got a huge influx of Vietnamese people because of the end of the war. I helped out a little bit at that time, making mistakes sometimes, but trying to help out. Not that I knew ESL teaching, but I knew how to teach language. And I spoke French, so a lot of the people that came—the elderly people anyway—could speak French because the French had colonized Vietnam before the Americans got there.

By 1980, you're talking about other kinds of Southeast Asians being in town, so you were working with them. What age were they, about?

McNeil: They were kindergarten through fifth at Garfield.

Fiksdal: Garfield is close here.

McNeil: Right, it was an elementary school.

Fiksdal: You started helping out there. You say it was parttime?

McNeil: Yes. I had done a lot of volunteer work at Garfield anyhow, so I happened to meet the person that was in charge of the ESL program for Olympia at that point, and he happened to be based here on the Westside.

Fiksdal: Did you get any training?

McNeil: No. [laughing]

Fiksdal: Because I don't think there was any. I think no one knew what they were doing at that time, but it's interesting to hear.

McNeil: I was hired more for an office type of management type of thing to support the manager and not necessarily teaching, but as time went on, it evolved into, since I did have the background, he said I could work with his students and work with the kids. They were wonderful. They respected the teachers. They thought that they were on a high pedestal, whereas the American kids were . . .

Fiksdal: . . . boisterous and didn't care. Their traditions are so different, it's true. When did you start thinking about working at Evergreen?

McNeil: After the ESL [experience], I found out that I would have to go back into the classroom—and I tried substituting and that is the most horrible job on earth—I said, okay, I can't do this. There's no way.

So, I started looking around then for other opportunities. It just happened that Evergreen—I don't even remember how I found out about the job, but I must have just started looking for jobs at

Evergreen possibly, too, because I did know some of the faculty. It was the faculty at that point. I really didn't have that much interaction with the staff.

It just happened that they were hiring a parttime, 20-hour job in Academic Support to help Donna Whittaker, who had been there from the beginning, I think. I'm not sure if she came in '71 but she was there at least in '72. She was the purchasing part of the Academic [Division]. Dee Van Brunt and Donna Whittaker were the main support people for the Academic faculty from the beginning is the way I understood it.

As Evergreen grew, they needed more assistance, and that's why Donna was doing all of the purchasing for the programs, for anything that the sciences and the arts needed, as well as all of the equipment and things for the Comm Building when it was built, for the Science Building.

Fiksdal: Oh, my gosh! She did it all.

McNeil: She was very proud of the things [she had done]. People would search out what they needed. It's not like she had to go and find everything, but they would bring it to her. This was back in the days of purchase orders, and she would have to type them out, and work with the purchasing agent to get all the bids. She bought—I don't know what it is now—half the equipment at Evergreen Science Labs back in '73, I think it was, maybe '74—in the early '70s anyhow.

Fiksdal: That was a very big thing because they had to be built from the bottom up. We got a lot of great equipment, I remember.

McNeil: Oh, yes. At the point I was there—I came in '84—the equipment was top notch at that point.

Fiksdal: How long did you work for Donna Whittaker?

McNeil: I started in 1984 and that was halftime. As time went on and the school was growing more, it went into fulltime. Donna retired in 1994, I think it was, so I worked for her for about 10 years, and then she retired. We'd been computerized by then and having to learn the computer system and all of that was a little bit beyond her, I think. But she trained me. She was so great because she knew how to do the job that needed to be done for supporting the faculty in that way.

We registered faculty for conferences for them to go to. Dee Van Brunt handled all of the faculty salaries and the faculty travel expenses. A lot of the faculty were traveling in the early days, so she would help them make the arrangements and tried to fix their bills when they came back.

Fiksdal: She was a huge help. She was a huge help to me. I took students to France and came back with all these bills in French. She needed to know what they were. I gave her the exchange rate and we worked together on that. But she [was] amazing—piles of receipts—and she would just do it. You think of this horrible work that had to be done. Really painstaking.

McNeil: But she got to know the faculty very well at that point. When Dee retired, Lorri Moore moved into that position, and she did the same thing. She learned from Dee.

Fiksdal: You continued on after Donna left?

McNeil: Yes.

Fiksdal: In your same job?

McNeil: Same job, just broader, as the college grew.

Fiksdal: Did you have Donna's job?

McNeil: It moved up to that. Fiscal specialist, I think, is what it finally ended up.

Fiksdal: That sounds quite impressive. You had to know your Ps and Qs, math, and learning spreadsheets, and I don't know what all. It sounds hard.

McNeil: Doing all the orders—the chemical orders and the equipment orders for the sciences as well as the arts. In the process also, when Donna was still there, Walter [Niemic] had gotten funding to build the Art Annex over the wood shop, so I was helping with that and managing that area when Donna was still there. We bought things for the Organic Farm, we bought things for the lab stores, the printmaking studio, the wood shop, ceramics [lab].

Fiksdal: You had a huge overview of what was going on.

McNeil: Right. We accepted the gas that was being delivered once a week. [laughing] It was a variety and you never knew what was going to happen when you went into work for a day.

Fiksdal: It was varied enough that you were interested in doing the job.

McNeil: Yes.

Fiksdal: I was working for Walter until he was promoted up into—once you work for Walter, you always work for Walter. [laughing]

Fiksdal: Let's try to unpack that a little bit. We're talking about Walter Niemic. What was his job when you were working for him?

McNeil: He hired me because he was in charge of the Science Building at that point. He was Donna's supervisor. Donna and I thought we didn't need a supervisor, but Walter was it. [laughing]

Fiksdal: He was young, too.

McNeil: Yes. Barbara Smith brought him in. It was a few years before I was hired so I'm not exactly sure what year he started. She brought him in as the college started to grow and she needed somebody to help with the Science Building, so he was the manager of Arts and Sciences. He had all of the art technicians and the lab technicians, which were working with the faculty. He supervised all of them.

Fiksdal: So, he knew an awful lot of people. How was he as a supervisor? Did you enjoy working with him?

McNeil: Oh, yes. He was great. Sometimes I think it was hard for him to make hard decisions because he always backed up his people.

Fiksdal: In the '80s, we were sometimes letting people go, I think. We didn't have enough students all the time, so that would have affected staffing.

McNeil: Yes. Yet at the time that I started there, there were only two science technicians.

Fiksdal: Oh, I see. [laughing]

McNeil: But as the school grew, there were, I think, six or seven as we got more students and more faculty. Walter moved over—because when Barbara Smith was Provost, she needed some help, I think, in the financial end to do faculty contracts and figuring out the whole financial budget thing—he was moved up—it was a step up—and then he was replaced by Marty Beagle.

Fiksdal: Yeah, I know Marty.

McNeil: And he became the Lab Science manager. But at that point, Walter kept me under his wing. [laughing]

Fiksdal: Oh, really? And how did he do that? What do you mean?

McNeil: I have no idea. He would still be my supervisor and he would give me evaluations and the whole bit rather than having Marty do it.

Fiksdal: That's what you meant by him sticking with his people.

McNeil: Yes. After being in charge of the science and arts technicians, he always looked out for them, and would listen to their stories of woe.

Fiksdal: He did that for the faculty, too.

McNeil: He did.

Fiksdal: He was an amazing person.

McNeil: I feel really bad because I think he kept Evergreen going sometimes, with the faculty and the staff, and I think the new people coming in didn't realize what they had in him. When he was leaving, I don't know that he was really appreciated.

Fiksdal: Oh, really? I was a dean when he was still working, and I thought he was a magician. I could never figure out, you'd walk into his office—of course, he had computers, but he had those stacks of manilla file folders all over the office, and somehow, he knew everything.

McNeil: Right.

Fiksdal: He knew where things were. He understood how things worked. He was the college's guru in the financial sense, I think.

McNeil: He was.

Fiksdal: But he also was very empathetic, as you say, and took care of everybody.

McNeil: Right.

Fiksdal: I didn't go in to talk to him with sob stories, but I know a lot of faculty who did, and I walked in on a couple of sessions with questions about my budget. I was Parttime Studies Dean and I was given a budget, but I didn't know anything about budgets. I didn't know how to do it, and I didn't know how to figure out how many people I could hire.

He didn't train me. He would just laugh at me if I couldn't do it right. Or if I went over or something, he would fix it, and then he'd say, "You can't do that. Here's a little formula." Then my assistant and I would try to use that new little formula. It was really hard. But he was so nice about it. He didn't think we had to worry so much about these financial details.

McNeil: And he would be able to fix things if there were mistakes.

Fiksdal: Yeah, he somehow could fix it.

McNeil: Because he understood the whole picture from the academic standpoint at least.

Fiksdal: And I have to say, I didn't really care enough about the budget to press him on it. [laughter]

McNeil: That was his job, too, to be there for us.

Fiksdal: I guess. I think I was supposed to do a little more than I did, but he was very, like you say, protective of everybody and helpful.

How long did you end up working at Evergreen?

McNeil: I thought I had my 20 years in [laughing] and was going to retire at my 20 years, and then discovered that Human Resources had made a mistake. When I was hired and only worked parttime for a while, they messed up a year somehow, so I had to work an extra year to get that in.

Fiksdal: Sue, a lot of people worked much more than 20 years. Why did you have 20 years stuck in your head?

McNeil: I was 65 at that point.

Fiksdal: Oh, I see.

McNeil: Yeah, so I was going to retire at 65.

Fiksdal: You wanted 20 years because that had to do with your pension.

McNeil: Right, I wanted to make sure that I got the pension.

Fiksdal: We had a different system as faculty, so I didn't know. Got it.

McNeil: I think we had gone through and had hired Michelle Bartlett. [She] took my position, so at the point when they said, “Oh, you can’t retire yet,” Walter said, “Okay.” Lorri and I had been after him anyhow because she needed some help over in that office because of the way that things were developing. Again, there were still a lot of faculty at that point.

Fiksdal: We never hired enough staff.

McNeil: Yeah, so he finally agreed that I could work over there for a year in the position that assisted her, because we were doing all the timesheets. Along with this other stuff, we were doing student timesheets. At that point, it was just at the point we were starting to computerize the timesheets and all of that, but there was still a lot of paper.

Fiksdal: I remember those days, because we hired students in our Language Lab and I had to turn in those sheets. It was manual.

McNeil: Yeah, every day they worked, and approved it. It was a lot of paper-pushing, so I worked over there for the last year with Lorri. That was great being able to work with her, too.

Fiksdal: You were the same age as Earle, so did you have to work after he retired?

McNeil: Oh, yeah.

Fiksdal: That’s annoying. [laughing]

McNeil: Yes and no. He retired early because of his hearing. It was getting too difficult for him to hear. The fact that I was working, we had health insurance coverage and all of that. He retired in 1999 and I retired in 2008. He didn’t do all the housework, but he did a lot of the housework, and he’d have dinner ready for me when I came home.

Fiksdal: Oh, how nice. That’s what we all wanted. [laughter]

McNeil: That’s right, so I had no complaints, so it worked out well.

Fiksdal: And you liked your job it sounds like.

McNeil: I did. I really did.

Fiksdal: And you worked with really good people.

McNeil: I did, yes. The science techs, the art techs, all of them were really great. I felt really lucky because you never knew what was coming that day.

Fiksdal: I think it would be fun to know some of the stories. Were there some stories that stood out, some people that stood out, some catastrophes that stood out?

McNeil: When I started, there was a couch in our office. It was in the basement of Lab I. I think Donna, she worked so hard that she wanted to be able to lay down you her lunch hour, so there was a couch in there. As time went on and I got to know more of the people—the faculty and the grounds people,

different people, maintenance people—they would come and have a chat. They'd either stand at the door or come and sit down on the couch and have a chat, and a lot of the faculty did, too. I thought, this is sort of weird, but I guess I listened well a lot of the time, so I could hear all these stories.

It wasn't like it was necessarily gossip, but some of the faculty would talk about—I don't know. Did their wives not ever listen to them? [laughter] So, my couch became an integral part of the office also.

Fiksdal: That's very interesting. Just having a couch might have done the trick.

McNeil: Yeah. As a matter of fact, when Michelle took over my job, she said she wanted the couch out. [laughter]

Fiksdal: "I need to do my work."

McNeil: But I really enjoyed that part of it, and still, it provided a service for people to let down a little bit and talk. Sometimes we'd talk about Evergreen, sometimes the world situation, whatever.

Fiksdal: But I remember Evergreen being like that, Sue.

McNeil: Yes.

Fiksdal: I talked to everybody. You'd poke your head inside when someone's door was open, so you'd chat for a moment. We knew the staff pretty much. I didn't know you very well, but I knew you because you were in, like you say, in the science area. Well, [My office] was in Lab II for a while.

But we would talk to people because it was a face-to-face kind of place, and you never knew what you needed when, and you couldn't somehow—I don't know why—I guess because we didn't have computers for so long—you had to go see the person and get things taken care of, so we had to know people.

McNeil: Right. Maintenance people would stop by because they were going through the building, and grounds people would stop by.

The other thing, I would try to make my rounds at least once a day or every couple of days, because, being in Purchasing, back when I first started, we had to type all this stuff out, then take it over to Purchasing, and the purchasing agent would have to approve it.

As it turns out, the purchasing agent was Vern Quinton, and Vern and his wife had a daughter that was the same age as Kerri, and they played soccer. Vern coached soccer, and back in those days, I was coaching the six-year-old soccer team and so there was that added extra that could take time to talk about, and it made that connection. Sometimes things happened a little bit faster with our purchase orders, I think, than maybe others. [laughing] Going around, and going to the cashiers and all of that kind of stuff.

Fiksdal: Chocolate helped a lot, too. I would often take chocolate. [laughter] Things got done a little faster. I think Evergreen was that kind of place for a long time.

McNeil: Yeah.

Fiksdal: You don't remember any huge catastrophes? Everything was taken care of pretty well? There wasn't anything that happened that suddenly you had to fix?

McNeil: No. There were different things that I've probably blocked out. I think guess the catastrophe that I'm thinking of was a physical one. I had the window off the basement of Lab I. There's an office there and it had a big window. I was sitting there eating my lunch and all of a sudden, this gusher of water comes down.

It was coming so fast that I called Maintenance right away. As it turned out, a pipe had broken up at the top of the hill. But the water was coming—I thought it was going to come over the back loading dock area, we had it so fast. But Maintenance got on it as fast as they could as soon as they found out.

Fiksdal: It was outside, not in your office?

McNeil: It was outside, but the water had started to come in. We hurried up and put towels or anything we could think of up at the door to keep the water out, but it actually came up on the loading dock. Oh, my gosh! It was so fast, I couldn't believe. That was the biggest catastrophe, I guess.

The other thing that I remember is when the earthquake hit. Shane, who was a science technician, and I were in the office. He was giving me an order or something. The building started to move and shake, and so, like you're not supposed to do, we run out. As we were running up the driveway, it was rumbling. The whole thing was moving as we stood there with our mouths open.

Fiksdal: We ran out, too. I was in the deans' area. Betty McGovern said, "You should stand in a doorway," and I wasn't about to do that because that area is undercut where the deans were. There were just posts under there, and it was built a long time ago. My husband is a geologist and there's no way I was staying there.

McNeil: That's right. On the loading dock, we had all the gas cylinders, because it was where we stored all the gas. We had liquid nitrogen for the machines and everything. If those cylinders had tipped over.

Fiksdal: So, the knowledge that you had also propelled you in the other direction.

McNeil: We didn't stop and think about that. [laughter] We were more concerned about the building so we didn't stay on the loading dock. I feel we got off because the loading dock was down.

Fiksdal: We didn't have any big damage from that, I don't think, at the college. Did we?

McNeil: I don't think so. I think there were some cracks that happened along Red Square and that.

Fiksdal: I don't remember any structural damage. It was so traumatic, though.

When you first got to Evergreen, you got your job, and you were in the financial end of things. But you did have your daughter, who was mixed race, half African American. How did that go for you in Olympia at that time? Did you have to stand up for her? Were you trying to smooth her pathway, or did things seem to be okay? I'm thinking work and home here.

McNeil: We were very cognizant of the whole race thing, but we were so involved in Evergreen, and we had quite a few friends that were minorities of different backgrounds. Le Roi [Smith] had a little, young boy that was Kerri's age, so we tended to socialize with the Evergreen people. The fact that Kerri had two brothers ahead of her, they knew us.

Fiksdal: That helped a lot.

McNeil: It did to some degree, but Kerri also had a very loud voice, and I think the thing that we probably interceded more than once was that she would get in trouble because there may be a bunch of kids talking or whatever, maybe when they were not supposed to, but the fact that her voice carried, she's the one that always got noticed, so we had to go talk to teachers about that a couple of different times.

As far the racial thing, there were two other girls, Nancy Dolliver and Kier, who were in her grade level. That was about all those [who were] black around on the Westside. She did have an African American teacher, Mrs. Harrison, [who] stayed over in third and fourth grade at Garfield, which was really quite unique. Other than that, I guess the racial issues were not the same as what they are now. We knew that she was very isolated as far as identifying with her culture, but we raised her like we raised our kids.

Fiksdal: Does she feel any lack from her childhood, or is she fine?

McNeil: She had her moments when she was going through puberty. I know a couple of times I remember her saying, "They think that I'm just a white person in a black skin." When she got to know and start interacting with more of the black culture, although there wasn't much in Olympia.

Fiksdal: Yeah, that sense of belonging must have been hard.

McNeil: Yeah. I think there was a time when she would test us as far as, okay, I'm going to do this. Are you going to stick by me? I don't know how much that was because of the minority thing, or being adopted? There were two different issues involved there and it was hard to separate those. But we stuck by her, and we made it through some difficult times. She's come out on the other side and she's so protective of us now. She said that she really cherished the family. She expresses that more than the boys do, but then, she's a girl.

Now we have a granddaughter, and she's 20 --- even though Kerri, our daughter, is a single parent, she has raised this daughter to be a glorious young woman. She's actually much darker than Kerri, so they go back and forth on that every once in a while, just out of jest.

I think that we talk about race probably openly with both Alexis, our granddaughter, and Kerri. We make jokes. We talk about what it is. Caution about being—the whole bit. We have learned a lot from Kerri, as well as giving her the support growing up.

Fiksdal: It sounds, too, that you were so fortunate to be able to interact with people of color at Evergreen.

McNeil: Yes.

Fiksdal: Because on the staff, there weren't that many people of color in the early years, as I recall. There were a few in the academic area. Now that I say that I can think of a bunch of people. [laughter]

McNeil: But it wasn't—well, I shouldn't say it wasn't that big of a deal to the minorities and some of the students, I think, coming, they did feel that there was not enough color on campus.

Fiksdal: Exactly.

McNeil: A lot of the faculty of color felt that there was not enough color for representation.

Fiksdal: No, because they had to deal with every person of color there. They became counselors for everyone. It was horrible.

McNeil: I think that that's what Kerri had found, too. If anything came up about anything different about culture or race, they would turn to her. "What's your experience?" And I think that may have happened with the faculty, too.

Fiksdal: It's a burden.

McNeil: It is.

Fiksdal: You don't want to be a representative of your race.

McNeil: For me, it was just . . . having grown up in a farm community, I think I didn't even know what a black person was until I got to junior college. To make that switch has been so gigantic for me.

Fiksdal: Yeah, it's been huge. What about for your parents?

McNeil: My parents are quite a bit older. They had three children and then there was a seven-year gap, and then I and my younger brother came along. So, when we got ready to adopt Kerri, they didn't think it was a good idea, but we had decided that we were going to do it anyhow. Unfortunately, my mother passed away before we even got Kerri. She had a massive heart attack in '69 and we didn't get Kerri until September of '70.

My family accepted it fine. We probably didn't interact with them as much because they were definitely racist because of my dad working in the shipyards. That's another whole story. My brothers and sisters are very accepting, but we have chosen not to do a lot of family gatherings because of extended relatives and conversations that go on.

Fiksdal: Yeah, you want to be protective.

McNeil: Yeah.

Fiksdal: You were at Evergreen as buildings were being built and things were really changing. That must have been quite an exciting time. I think before we started the interview, you talked a little bit about the way staff interacted with faculty, and how some of them maybe were a little worried about interacting with faculty but you weren't. I wonder if you could talk a bit about that.

McNeil: I had the feeling that a lot of the staff held the faculty at a different level. In general, Evergreen seemed to be all inclusive, and there wasn't that hierarchy. At least that was my experience. I don't know how the other staff did that were not faculty wives. I think the fact that being a faculty wife, I looked at people as people.

But I know that there were certain staff that would say, "Oh, we can't do that," or, "We can't say that." And I would say, "Why not?" [laughing] I just felt more comfortable because I had been around a lot of the faculty prior to starting work there.

Fiksdal: In fact, that probably was useful for the other staff you worked around to hear that, yes, you can talk to them. Yes, you can say no.

McNeil: Right. As all people in all groups, you get somebody that's not very nice to you, you don't necessarily want to do what they want you to do right away. So, the staff had a lot more control that the faculty never ever realized.

Fiksdal: Hence, my chocolate.

McNeil: That's right. [laughing]

Fiksdal: I actually did know that because I was the same. You don't want to do things for people who aren't nice to you. It takes you a little longer to answer their questions.

Did the Tacoma Campus impact your work at all? Maybe they had someone else doing that. I don't really know.

McNeil: Maxine [Mimms] started the Tacoma Campus. I don't know that we had that much, other than for the faculty that did go up there if they were going to conferences or something.

Fiksdal: We built the campus there, so that wasn't part—

McNeil: No, I think Dee may have had [a hand] in the planning of that, and I think Walter probably did, too, because Walter would manage a lot of the stuff that happened in the buildings. But as far as my job, that wasn't part of it because they were pretty self-contained. Willie Parson taught science up there, and if he needed something, I may have ordered that for him, but he would pick it up on campus and take it there.

Fiksdal: Were there any other memorable people besides the people you've talked about already that affected you or helped you? You had a good mentor. You had Walter. You had Donna and Dee.

McNeil: And Lorri. Lorri was in the Payroll Office before she went up. I was going to say, "went upstairs." [laughing]

Fiksdal: She did literally go upstairs, that's true.

McNeil: She was there at Evergreen at the very beginning, and she knew whatever.

Fiksdal: Yeah, she knew everyone.

McNeil: So, she was a good help all the way through. I enjoyed the science techs. All of them were really fun to work with, and the art technicians.

Fiksdal: Did you ever get to sit in on any classes, or did you want to?

McNeil: Actually, when was that? I can't remember if it was before I was working there. It must have been after I was working there. Dumi and Bill Brown taught a class on Africa, the history of Africa. I took that as an audit. That was really a lot of fun, learning about Africa and the whole bit.

We had a traditional African goat roast in our backyard. Dumi [Maraire] went out and got a goat someplace out in Boston Harbor and brought it over. All the students in the program came over. One of Dumi's wives went out into our garden and picked pumpkin blossoms. She cooked an African dinner. They had goat stew and the students got to do that.

The other class I audited from Tom Rainey about Russia.

Fiksdal: So, you took history classes.

McNeil: Yeah, but it was just for—

Fiksdal: But that was when anybody could do it.

McNeil: Yeah, as long as the faculty—and you could either take part—I don't know that I did the papers and that that they required but I sat in on the lectures.

Fiksdal: That's terrific. I'm glad you had that opportunity.

McNeil: Yeah, that was very good.

Fiksdal: I think that was a special thing that Evergreen offered. I have no idea about other colleges, but the fact that you could take classes for credit, if you wanted. I knew a number of staff that got their degrees that way, which was major. That really helped them in their careers and in their lives.

McNeil: Right, and the staff that were getting their degree that way—I already had mine, I didn't need that—they could get release time from their job to go and partake.

Fiksdal: Yeah, because their classes were during the day. [laughing] That's right. That's really an important feature.

McNeil: As a matter of fact, I think John Carmichael, who is now the President of the college, went through Evergreen, as I recall. I think he was an early Evergreen student, as I recall. Don't necessarily quote me on that.

Fiksdal: Yeah, that very well could be.

McNeil: Then I think he came back after he got—

Fiksdal: Then he was staff. Yeah, I worked with him when I was a dean. I can't remember what he did.

McNeil: He was in the Provost's office, and then he went up to the President's office.

Fiksdal: Then he worked up and went up and went up. He got his PhD in the meantime, which helped, I'm sure.

McNeil: Right.

Fiksdal: He's especially an interesting case because he was staff and then worked up to be President, which is highly unusual.

Then you retired, so I'd like to know a little bit about your life after retirement. What has been occupying you? Of course, grandchildren and your children. Your garden, which is magnificent.

McNeil: And I do quilting even though I wasn't quilting when I was growing up. And the sewing—having three kids on one salary, and Evergreen faculty were not getting paid that much back in those days.

[laughing]

Fiksdal: No, it was a terrible salary.

McNeil: I made Earle's shirts and I made all of our boys' shirts.

Fiksdal: Oh, my gosh! You made shirts. That's hard.

McNeil: And Carrie's clothes. So, I did a lot of sewing. But after I retired, no more sewing. I just do quilting, and I really enjoy the quilting. That's another thing that's occupies my time.

We've been fortunate to be able to travel. Earle would even manage to do some things when I was still working where we'd go away for a week. We've traveled a lot to the South Pacific area. We went to Australia and New Zealand one time because Earle's sister lives in New Zealand.

To top it off, the last trip we took was to Vietnam and Cambodia. We went down the Mekong River on a riverboat. It was a guided tour, but it was 10 days on the river, going to see all the temples, and all the culture.

Fiksdal: Did you go into the delta area, too?

McNeil: We didn't get into the delta, but we stopped and did all of the usual sightseeing. We saw so many temples.

Fiksdal: Yes, I've been to Vietnam, not on a tour, but I really did enjoy it so much. And Cambodia, you went to Angkor Wat?

McNeil: Yes, to Angkor Wat. When I was working with the kids, and even the translators, "You need to go to Cambodia. You need to go to Angkor Wat." Angkor Wat was so special for them.

To be honest, they were redoing Angkor Wat or working on it while we were there, but some of the others, the smaller temples, are so much more elaborate and so much more meaningful.

Fiksdal: It's true. You need to go a little further out. There are a lot of different places. That's a huge area. We found the same, a much prettier site, I can't remember the name of it.

McNeil: We went out from Siem Reap and went into some of them.

Fiksdal: Right, we did, too.

McNeil: Unfortunately, I was not feeling well when they went into Phnom Penh and I stayed on the boat but Earle went to that.

The ones with bicycles, and all the different kinds of things that they had. It was Viking tour, and it was top-notch. All of the meals were on the boat, except when we were in Ho Chi Minh City. We started out in Ho Chi Minh City. We didn't know what had changed because we'd never been there before, but to see how it was totally built up, and then Hanoi, and how modern. I have never been in a hotel as fancy as the one in Hanoi.

We only got to spend one day—it was a long day—in Hanoi. It was a night and a day. I wish it had been longer. As it turned out, there were little taxis—it wasn't a taxi . . .

Fiksdal: Were they tuk-tuks then?

McNeil: Yeah, it may have been a tuk-tuk. It would take six people, I think, and it just happened that we happened to be in the one that the tour director was on, who was Vietnamese. They went all around the city in about a two-hour tour.

Fiksdal: Oh, that's much better.

McNeil: We heard a lot more of the history. Weddings were happening out in the streets. That happened to be a Sunday, I think. Then we went to where John McCain's memorial [was]. That was really meaningful. I think I got us off track.

Fiksdal: No, no, it's good. You've traveled and you're not stuck here in Olympia. That's important.

McNeil: No, we've been to Guatemala and to Costa Rica and Mexico. Belize. We had a timeshare in Belize for a while. So, we've been very fortunate, all the way through.

Fiksdal: It sounds like you have good memories of Evergreen, both through the friends that you made and your own work life.

McNeil: Oh, yes, definitely. Evergreen is really what made life fantastic for us. I don't know how much time you want, but Super Saturday. I think maybe Earle talked about that. That was such a wonderful experience. I'm trying to think. I don't think there were very many faculty involved at that point. But it was a whole cross-section of staff at Evergreen that put it on. Larry Stenberg was the headmaster of all of that, but the staff all chipped in and did it as volunteers for the first few years.

Fiksdal: I remember that. I remember it was mostly staff. I know I didn't help. I knew I should help but I didn't help.

McNeil: It was always just before graduation. The faculty were so busy doing evaluations. They didn't have time to do things like that.

Fiksdal: Reading all those papers. But I loved Super Saturday. I would take my kids. It was a wonderful event.

McNeil: Seeing the transition of Evergreen from the beginning to what it turned out—well, as I think it's turned out—the transitions of it over the years, and it seemed to me it was not the same Evergreen when I retired. It was becoming more of a place to work rather than an ideal. Evergreen, for so many years, was a philosophy that everybody—

Fiksdal: It was. We all had to work together to make it even happen. Plus, we were figuring it out. Everyone was—staff, faculty, everybody—trying to figure out what we were doing, because it was a different philosophy.

McNeil: When I stopped working in 2007, it seemed like a lot of the faculty were—because it was a job, it wasn't necessarily an ideal thing that a lot of the early days were. I don't know if that was really true, but that's what my perception was.

Fiksdal: That's interesting. You were friends with so many faculty, so that might be how you knew about the philosophy. I was wondering how many staff were invested in the philosophy of helping students find their voices, making it student-centered? I don't know how much they understood that.

McNeil: In the early days of Evergreen, I think the staff really did. I think they were really into making it work. The student wasn't necessarily the traditional student either.

Fiksdal: No, they weren't. They were older.

McNeil: They were older, and I think they were more involved in what was going on, rather than saying, "Okay, I'm going to go sit in this class and listen for an hour, and then I'm going to go socialize." Not to say that there weren't a lot of parties going on at Evergreen for the students, too, but the fact that so many of the faculty, I think, had potlucks, and would have the students to their houses, or they would go to a park and have potlucks and seminars, I think the students felt more involved, and the staff was supportive of that. They wanted to make sure that the students had a good experience.

Fiksdal: It's true. So many students, they would have transferred not once but multiple times. This was their last chance. Then they would get to Evergreen and sometimes be quite disappointed because it wasn't quite the Mecca that they had expected. It wasn't Utopia. I would say, "No, we're working on it. You've got to help." [laughter]

McNeil: I think it's fascinating that so many of them, when they graduated, stayed in Olympia. Olympia was so conservative and so anti-Evergreen at the beginning. Now, I think Olympia is probably run by Evergreen graduates. [laughter]

Fiksdal: It's true. So many businesses got started and so many wonderful ideas happened because of those students. Olympia needed their help. Olympia was a little Podunk place. As you say, it was very conservative. I grew up here, so I knew that.

McNeil: Even though it's the capital.

I think Evergreen, being "Oh, you don't want to go out there with all those hippies and everything." And yet, when some of the kids that were in high school, their mothers started going out there—because they had been fulltime mothers or whatever—and getting their degrees or taking classes, then it was "Oh, maybe Evergreen is not so bad." I think a lot more of the Olympia high school kids would go to Evergreen also, which is a very big change.

Fiksdal: That's a good point.

McNeil: Going through the days when the Legislature wanted to close Evergreen every two years or something that there was something about that challenge, I think, that made the faculty and the staff [say], "They're not going to do this to us."

Fiksdal: That was the 1980s. That was a really tough time. There were some representatives or senators from Eastern Washington that thought it was ridiculous, for whatever reason, because of the

philosophy, because the students—well, there were antics. Some students did stand on senators' desks at one point. There were things that happened, but we don't have that happening now at least.

McNeil: It was a typical hippie college, whatever the definition of hippies was back then. If it hadn't been for Dan Evans coming in to be President, and calling some of his chits due, so to speak, he was a huge savior of Evergreen.

Fiksdal: I agree. He had a lot of stature as a former Governor, and he had been in the State Legislature. I think. People knew him.

McNeil: He was the Governor for a long time. I shouldn't get into politics now, but he was a Republican governor.

Fiksdal: Yeah, he was, but he wasn't the kind of Republican we have now.

McNeil: No, that's for sure. I think everybody liked him.

Fiksdal: He was a moderate Republican. He was fine.

We kind of talked about this. Evergreen's strengths and shortcomings as a college in retrospect. Do you have anything more to add to that?

McNeil: For the strengths, I think it gave a lot of people a higher education perhaps—if you consider that you had to have degrees back then—that couldn't make it in a regular school. And yet, they turned out to be fantastic, productive people that would have been left by the wayside to who knows what, if it hadn't been for Evergreen. I think that is one of Evergreen's big successes.

Fiksdal: And weaknesses?

McNeil: That it didn't last. [laughter]

Fiksdal: The vision didn't last.

McNeil: Yeah. I think both Earle and I were so pleased to be able to share the experience that I don't know if you can recognize the weaknesses. I just know that there are a lot of the students that we interacted with that took his classes and the kinds of things would not have made it, and even self-direction.

Fiksdal: I agree. Thank you, Sue. This has been wonderful. It's good to hear from you and understand more. I think you might be our only husband and wife team on the oral history circuit, and I'll have to ask Sam Schragger about that.

McNeil: I don't know that there were that many of faculty wives that were working. There were some of the faculty wives that were teaching, but not necessarily working as staff. I think Kathy and Jeff Kelly. Kathy was working there when I started.

Fiksdal: Lorri Moore did marry Paul Sparks.

McNeil: Right, but that was quite a bit later. I don't know as far as in the staff positions. There probably were.

This is great. It was interesting, because when you were interviewing Earle, it brought back so many memories that were long gone. It's been very enjoyable to share that with you because some of the people, we'd completely forgotten about and experiences we'd forgotten about. It's been nice reminiscing for us.

Fiksdal: That's good. Always, when I'm doing this, I remember more stories about my own experience as well.

McNeil: Which could be good or bad. [laughing]

Fiksdal: For me, it's been very positive. I had a very positive experience at Evergreen. I feel like I grew in many, many ways. Intellectually, for sure, and in many other ways, because Evergreen allowed that. I did become a dean for a while and that was a completely different kind of experience. Really, you could do what you wanted there. You could change your life.

McNeil: Yes.

Fiksdal: And grow in different ways. I think that's not always possible.

McNeil: That's definitely for me. I could still be on the farm out in Ridgefield, Washington. [laughing]

Fiksdal: A 70-acre farm. That is really big. I really admire your parents for being able to do that.

McNeil: Just to have enough money to go to junior college at that point, I don't know how.

Fiksdal: Did all your siblings go to college?

McNeil: No.

Fiksdal: That's a choice.

McNeil: Yeah, it is a choice. My younger brother went for a couple of quarters, but then he married somebody that was completely anti-education. Not anti-education, but she was not somebody that would go—

Fiksdal: It costs money, and it takes time.

McNeil: I was very fortunate that my folks did make that sacrifice. What a change.

Fiksdal: It's a huge change.