

Nancy Allen
Interviewed by Nancy Taylor
The Evergreen State College oral history project
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FINAL

Taylor: it's Wednesday, March 29, 2017, and Nancy Allen and I are here to do a first interview. The first thing is to talk a little bit about your family, your upbringing, your childhood; any stories that you want to tell that might signal or point to why you made the choices you did in your life.

Allen: Okay. This is the story I always tell about this, and it's very clear. When I was little, when I was, I don't know . . . because supposedly you only start really remembering things when you're maybe four or something? So this all must have happened around the time I was four. I really loved my dad—he was definitely my favorite parent—and sometimes I would get up late at night, later, after my bedtime—to go to the bathroom. Then I would go into the living room and I would see my dad, and he'd be sitting in a chair, and he'd have a book in front of him. He'd be looking at this book. He wouldn't be saying anything, he'd just be looking at this book. And he seemed to love to do that. He really seemed to love to look at books, and turn the pages.

Taylor: And you can remember from age four?

Allen: Yes, I can remember seeing him do this, and thinking that he really loved it. So I just wanted to learn to read. I wanted to learn to read so bad, and I begged my parents to teach me to read. My mom was the one to do it, because she was the one who spent most of the day with me. But she didn't want to teach me to read. I think she was scared that she wouldn't do it right, and then I wouldn't read right, or something.

But what she did do was—I was born right on the line to go either way when I got into school. I could get into kindergarten when I was four and a half. Or, if I waited till the normal age that they thought I should be, I wouldn't get into kindergarten until I was five and a half. I wanted to learn to read so much, and I wasn't even going to get to learn to read in kindergarten. I wasn't going to get to learn to read until first grade, so I had to go into kindergarten at four and a half. And my mom pushed all the people at the school to let me into kindergarten at four and a half. So they did. So then, I was able to

learn to read when I went into first grade, and I just learned to read—I can't even remember it being hard. I just learned to read immediately.

Then, I just loved reading. That was my main thing. I would have huge fights with my mother about reading too much, like reading when she thought I should be socializing, and doing domestic chores.

Taylor: “Why don't you go out and play?”

Allen: Yes, exactly. But my dad supported me in liking to read, because he liked to read. My mom certainly was literate, but she never read for pleasure. She subscribed to *McCall's* magazine, and *Ladies Home Journal*, and she would sort of leaf through them and look at the pictures.

But my dad would take me to the library, and let me borrow books. Then when I had gone through all the kids' books, he told the people at the library—when I was eight or something—he said, “Okay, now she can have adult books. She can take any book out in this library that she wants.”

So, I was just hooked on reading, and then school. I thought school was a much preferable place to my family. I could do what they wanted me to do in school. I got lots of positive reinforcement at school. So, school was what I wanted to do. And I never, ever had another job in mind besides being in school, and being a teacher.

I remember when I was in third grade in school, we had rotating lunch monitors; kids would go and be lunch monitors for the grade underneath them. So when I was in third grade, I was lunch monitor a few times for the second-graders. I would find myself thinking of activities that we were going to do during lunch and stuff. And I said, “Oh, so now I can see that I want to be a teacher. I think I want to teach second grade.” And then, when I was in fourth grade, I would say, “Oh, I think I want to teach fourth grade, or third grade.”

Taylor: I always wanted to teach fourth grade. That was my favorite grade for some reason.

Allen: With me, the grade I wanted to teach just went up the older I got. It was always the grade I happened to be in. When I was in college, I wanted to teach college. [laughing] And that's what I did.

But there were other positive things that happened on the way. I don't think it would have been as easy for me if it weren't for other things, besides just my family background. It was just totally clear to me that I did not want to be like my mother. I did not want to be a housewife. I did not want to be cooking and cleaning all day. My parents didn't have much money, and they only had one car. My dad drove the car to work, so my mom had no car, and no mobility at all during the day. And I did not have any interest in that lifestyle, so I was going to do the thing that I saw that gave me an alternative to that.

Taylor: Usually, one of the things that is really common is that girls want to be teachers, and girls do well in school. Were you aware of that at the time? That girls were sort of channeled into a direction, and that girls always do better in school?

Allen: No, I was not aware of that at all. I thought it was all my choice.

Taylor: So, high school? And how you chose where you were going to go to college, and college years? Are there stories there? Or, is there more that you want to talk about, about your parents?

Allen: Probably sometime, I want to talk a lot more about my parents, but not necessarily right now. I went to Glendale High School, which is right next to Hollywood, and Pasadena, where the Rose Parade is and all that stuff. But Hollywood was the key factor. Girls in my high school wanted to be in the movies. They wanted to dress like movie stars. My mom was like this, too. We actually had a starlet in our class afterwards, after we graduated.

But I didn't have any of that interest. I had three good friends. There was this little band of four of us who were interested in school. We wanted to study, and get good grades. We wanted to do well in school. We didn't care so much about football games, and cheerleaders, and all that stuff. Although we went to the football games, and we went to Bob's Big Boy to get burgers after the football games. [laughing] But we went as a group of four brains. I guess now we would be geeks or nerds or something like that, but I think we thought of ourselves as brains. But we all went around together, and so we didn't feel like we were out of it, in terms of social life. None of us had any dates. None of us. But we felt like we were socially acceptable, because we saw the football games and we went to Bob's.

An interesting story. When I was thinking about choosing colleges, everybody encouraged me to apply to several colleges, but they didn't have any doubt that I would get in. They thought I was a shoo-in for college because my grades were so good. I ended up applying to Stanford and Berkeley and Occidental. I really wanted to go to Stanford, because it had this beautiful campus, I thought, which I had seen in some pictures, I guess. I'd never seen it in person. And it had the most prestige of these. Of course, Berkeley was a state school, and somehow I thought I should sneer at that, because the state school was my third choice, really.

A couple of my teachers said that I really should go to Occidental, because if I went to Occidental, I would find more personal attention. But I didn't care. I wanted to go to Stanford. So when I got my letters back from the application process, I didn't get into Stanford. I got into Occidental and Berkeley, but not into Stanford. My dad knew somebody who had graduated from

Stanford, and thought he could pull strings. He said, “Oh, honey, don’t worry about it. I can get you into Stanford.”

I said, “No, Dad. I’m not getting in because anybody pulls any strings for me. I’m not getting in because you know somebody. I’m getting in on my own merits. So, if I didn’t get into Stanford, I can’t go to Stanford. That’s that. I’m going to Occidental.”

Actually, I think that was a very good thing. Because a really key factor for me was having a woman teacher.

Taylor: In high school?

Allen: No, in college. A woman who would—actually, I got a lot of mentoring from men, too, in the literature classes I took. There were only two women on the Occidental faculty. One was in art, and one was Gabrielle Benton, who was in the Spanish department. She was the only teacher in the Spanish department, really, except for a few people who taught the first year and second year. She was a Viennese-Austrian woman, and she had a really thick German accent in her Spanish, so it really wasn’t the greatest model for me to have of Spanish-speaking.

But she took a real big interest in me. She said, “Look, you are really good. You can go anywhere.” And she gave me all this advice about graduate school.

I was smart enough that I didn’t major in Spanish, because majoring in Spanish meant that you just had this one teacher. So I majored in comparative literature, which meant that I had about three or four other teachers, and I got to include Spanish in that.

Taylor: What brought on Spanish? Did you just like this teacher?

Allen: No, no. I just did really well in Spanish. In junior high, I started Spanish. I guess that’s characteristic of Southern California or something. It wasn’t that they were really great about getting onto teaching Spanish, but when I was in junior high, I had that option. Oh, I know what it was. You had to take a language, I think, but the only choices were Spanish and Latin. Everybody thought the Latin teacher was terrible, and really hard. I didn’t want to take this terrible Latin teacher, so I took Spanish. And then, I was just super good. I think any of the reading and writing parts of languages, I’m quite good at. And memorizing grammar rules and verbal conjugations.

Taylor: You just had a facility for language.

Allen: Yeah, I had a facility for language, which fit nicely into being a comp lit major. I also love to read, and I love to read literature.

Taylor: Did you do another language besides Spanish?

Allen: Yes, French. I never spent enough time in French to really speak French well, but I can still read French. I got up to third-year French at Occidental.

Taylor: Because in comparative literature, by definition, you have to read two languages.

Allen: Yeah, you have to have two languages. You take almost the entire English curriculum, and two languages.

Taylor: Do you want to go back and talk about your parents more, at this point, or do you want to go on to talk more about college, and stories of success? And then you went on to graduate school at Columbia, and the difference between Occidental and Columbia.

Allen: The thing about my parents is my parents had a great deal of impact on my teaching, I think. I just got done rereading almost all my self-evaluations, and I was constantly talking about my family, and my growing up, and how it influenced the way I was teaching. I think it will be when we get further into Evergreen that I'll talk some more about my parents.

Also, they kept having this whole drama that was developing that I needed to take care of, because they were very old. I guess the key thing about my parents is they had me when they were 33. That was old compared to most people. They had my brother when they were 40, so I got the aging parents thing. My parents were aging, and having all kinds of old people's problems when I was relatively young, compared to the other people around me. That impacted my teaching, too, but I don't want to talk about that right now.

Taylor: Let's go back to college. Occidental and Columbia.

Allen: Okay, because of Gabrielle, because of this mentor I had, I chose Columbia. When I applied to graduate schools, I got in everywhere. I got into Harvard, Columbia and Brown. I probably really should have gone to Brown, because Brown gave me a full, complete scholarship for my entire work toward my doctorate.

Taylor: The program was comparative literature, or Spanish?

Allen: It was Spanish. I was applying to Spanish departments. I didn't have any idea, except for what Gabrielle told me, about what Spanish departments were like, or anything. She was convinced that the most famous Spanish scholar in all of human history was teaching at Columbia. His name was Angel del Rio. He was teaching at Columbia, and so therefore, I should go to Columbia.

I think I looked up and read some stuff about who was teaching at Harvard, because part of me said, my god, you are crazy to turn down Harvard. Who would not go to Harvard? You know? But she said the person at Harvard was just not really up to snuff compared to Angel del Rio. So, I ended up going to Columbia.

I'm not sure how much this is true of other universities, but I'm sure that it's true of Columbia. When you are in graduate school, you are just a student of your department. There's no college. There's no institution. There's just your department. It's a row of offices on a few corridors in maybe one building, and that's what you're going to school. And the Spanish department happened to be in terrible shape.

Taylor: Physically, or do you mean the people?

Allen: The building was okay. They were all sort of old, clunky buildings, but the building was okay. No, the people were terrible. The teachers were terrible. They were terrible, because they were refugees from the Spanish Civil War. They had left—this is the early '60s—and so these are people who had left Spain in the '30s. They were kind of liberal, intellectual people from liberal, intellectual families, who, if they had stayed in Spain, would have had professional careers of some kind, but they didn't necessarily even want to be university professors.

Taylor: Do you think Gabrielle Benton knew that?

Allen: [Sighs] I don't know to what extent. I think she probably did know it. I don't know to what extent she didn't just take it for granted, that this is how the world was. Anybody who took Spanish around the time that I was taking Spanish would be dealing with refugees from the civil war.

Taylor: They would be at Brown as well?

Allen: Maybe so, or Harvard. I have no idea what the background was of the people at those other places. All I know is that the department was full of these Spaniards, and they had all been there for about 30 years now, and they were getting ready to retire. And Angel del Rio had retired. [laughter] I think he retired the year before I got there.

So, I am left with all these tottering old Spanish refugees. And all of them—every single one of my teachers—had pre-prepared lectures. I think each class was like a two-hour session per week. You only had three or four classes, so you didn't have much class time. But the class time would always be this guy reading his old lecture notes. [chuckles] It was just awful.

Taylor: Were there other graduate students that you could . . .

Allen: No.

Taylor: Was there any energy?

Allen: No, there was no energy. [sighs] Well, no. I had some friends who I met in International House. I stayed in International House my first year of living in New York. The thing I'm getting to, the wonderful thing, was New York.

Taylor: That was one of the things I was going to ask you.

Allen: Being in New York was the whole payoff from this experience. But there was no energy in the department. A lot of the other graduate students were from the local community. They were people training to be Spanish teachers in the schools, and they weren't particularly interesting, I didn't think.

I also managed to distinguish myself on the very first day of my master's program. I managed to get in a fight with the chairman of the department. Because the chairman of the department had us all—all the new master's students were sitting around a table. There were maybe 10 of us. On the very first day of class, he went around the table, and he asked us what we were going to write our master's essays on. He absolutely thought we should have had this figured out before we ever came to the department.

He called on me first, because my name is at the beginning of the alphabet. Oh, god. This was so terrible. I said, "Well, sir, I have no idea what I want to write my master's essay on. I don't think we should be starting, on the very first day of our master's efforts, already knowing what we want to do. I thought that I would have at least a week or two to figure out what I think I want to do." He just said, "All right. If you don't want to do this . . ."

He went around the rest of the table, and everybody else could cough up something. [chuckles] He had given me a lot of trouble about it, so everybody else came up with something that they wanted to do for their master's essay. I don't know to what extent that turned out to be what they finally did. So when he got to the end, he said, "We'll see what we have to do with you, because you just obviously are not where the program is." [laughing]

Then, the next time we had class, he told me that he would not sponsor my master's essay; that my master's essay would be sponsored by this man named Gonzales Sobejano, who was their new hire in their department. Who was my only savior!

Taylor: Sounds like a blessing.

Allen: Oh! He was a young Spanish professor, from Spain, and smart. The head of the department was an Irishman named James Shearer.

Taylor: He was a little old and tired, huh?

Allen: Well, he wasn't smart. I don't know where he had learned his Spanish, or how brilliant he may have been at some point, but he hadn't written anything, and he knew only the most standard names, dates and facts. And he had no interesting analyses of literature to talk about.

I thought it was hopeless, and I considered—I pursued—the idea of going back to Comparative Literature. Dropping the idea of being a Spanish teacher; going back to comp lit, and going to Yale. Because Yale was the Comp Lit program at the moment. I think I made a few phone calls, trying to figure out what would happen to me if I did that. They said I would lose the entire academic year. I couldn't get in, even if they took me, and even if I could get money. Because I did have a scholarship at Columbia. Just for my first year, but I had a scholarship, and there was no guarantee that I would get that at Yale. I would have to, I guess, give back my scholarship, and do nothing for a year. I didn't want to face that, so I stayed where I was.

Taylor: The irony is that the other graduate students were interested in teaching Spanish. You were interested in getting a Ph.D. in Spanish literature. That's very different.

Allen: Yes.

Taylor: They were the ones who were coughing up things to do. You were the one who wanted to take some time to think about it.

Allen: Yeah. I had some intellectual ambition. But they may have, too, and they may have only decided that, look, you had to say some standard thing, because that's how it was going to be, just from watching my example going up against Shearer. I don't know. I wouldn't say they were all . . .

Taylor: Have you kept track of these people?

Allen: No. I never knew any of them.

Taylor: Even though you were there three years?

Allen: No, I was there taking classes for two years.

Taylor: And you pretty much made no friends in the department?

Allen: Yes, I made no friends in the department. I made friends outside the department, through my living situation. I had a friend who was in international political science. I can't remember what the other person was in. I had apartment mates who were my friends.

Taylor: If you had it to do over again, would you have done anything different, do you think?

Allen: [Sighs] Well, not given that I stayed at Columbia. If I had it to do over again, I would have gone to either Harvard or Brown. I always tell myself I should have gone to Brown, because I didn't finish my Ph.D. Basically, I didn't have enough money to pay me for the year when I would have been writing my dissertation. I had to start working.

Taylor: Yeah, and Brown would have given you more money.

Allen: Brown would have given me money for four years, all the way through the Ph.D. I think I should have done that. Who knows? That would have been a whole different situation. I think I made an unfortunate choice of dissertation topic. That, in large part, happened because of my thesis advisor, who was the young guy. [sighs] But he was concerned about what my Ph.D. was going to be, and not what my master's was going to be. He wanted my Ph.D. to be something that would really contribute to the field.

And in his understanding of where the field was, there needed to be a book about the poetry of this man named Manuel Machado. Manuel Machado was the brother of Antonio Machado, who was the most famous Spanish twentieth-century poet. This family was famous because these two brothers had ended up on different sides of the Spanish Civil War. Antonio, of course, had been on [laughing] the good side. But Manuel Machado—his brother, and also a poet—had been on Franco's side, and had written propaganda poetry for Franco.

And I was getting all leftist political, so some part of me just didn't want—I just didn't think that I should be writing about this right-wing poet. That kept undermining my work [laughing] the whole way. I did a lot of work on it.

Taylor: That was going to be your Ph.D. thesis?

Allen: Yeah, but first, I did my master's essay.

Taylor: Your master's essay wasn't on that?

Allen: No. My master's essay was on the idea of honor (a man killing his wife if he suspected her infidelity) in the 17th Century Spanish theater. My master's essay won the award in the department for the best master's essay in the department that year. So, I obviously was able to write at graduate level, able to put a dissertation together, but I had the wrong topic, and I didn't know how to get out of that.

I wish that I'd had the courage to say to my dissertation advisor, "Look, I know that Manuel"—I mean, his point was that a new biography had just been published about Manuel Machado. So here is all this new information we have, and so somebody has to take this and put this together. Also, poetry wasn't really my first choice.

Taylor: But you didn't feel like you had the . . .

Allen: No, I didn't. I did not feel like I had the guts, especially since he was great. He was my savior in the department, and especially since he was the one who was telling me I should do this, it was really hard not to just follow what he said. But that got me in trouble when I needed energy. I needed to think it was significant, and I didn't.

Taylor: And you needed money.

Allen: Yeah. If I had had money, and then if I had gone to Brown, I probably never would have gotten into this Machado thing, because that was probably Sobejano's obsession. I don't know.

Taylor: Was there any talk at that time about feminism, and about anything that was either preventing you, or encouraging you? Or, it just wasn't even a topic?

Allen: No, not in my head.

Taylor: Probably not in Columbia in 1965.

Allen: No.

Taylor: There was racial—

Allen: Yeah. The '60s [laughing]—my first experience of a sort of '60s student action was at Occidental. It was so, so silly. But it was what a bunch of white, middle-class kids in California could think when something really moving was going on in the South, which was the sit-in movement. At Occidental, a bunch of kids got together and decided that we should take action to support the students in the sit-in movement in the South. What we did was we stood up at dinnertime. We had dinner in the dining hall, and it was served as usual, and we stood up while we ate. One time. [laughter] That's what we did. That's pretty lame. It's really, really pretty lame.

I have always seen myself as not a political organizer. I will follow political organizers, if there are any. But that's not a skill I have.

Taylor: No, but it was also the times. You and I are the same age. We're a little bit old. Five years later, we might have acted.

Allen: Yeah, I think so. Five years later, I was in Spain. That was '68-'69. That was the hot year, and I was in Spain on the Fulbright that I had, so I missed—and Columbia was a hotbed. In '68-'69, they took over the administration building, and held it for a long time.

Taylor: That's when I was in Berkeley. Let's go back and finish. What happened when you left? You must have left Columbia to get a job?

Allen: Yeah. I left, but I still had a few classes. I left to teach at Rutgers, in New Brunswick, which was 50 miles down the freeway from New York City.

Taylor: That was still a private school at that point?

Allen: No, it was a state university.

Taylor: It's now a state university, but I didn't know when that happened.

Allen: No, it was always a state university. It was a state university, and it had a women's branch and a men's branch. The women's branch was called Douglass, and the men's branch was Rutgers University. I taught at Rutgers. I lived in a big high-rise apartment building, right near the Douglass campus. There was a cross-town bus system to take people from Douglass to Rutgers, so I rode that bus all the time. I didn't need to have a car. But I was right on the road, the main highway into New York City. So I just needed to go downstairs and take a bus, and I could be in New York in about an hour.

I still took a couple of different classes when I was teaching at Rutgers, because I'd go into the evening classes. I was still enrolled at Columbia, but I wasn't living there, and I wasn't going there very often. And I still had to take my orals. I had written my master's essay, but I still had to take my orals. I took my orals on my way out of town, to go on the Fulbright.

Taylor: How did it happen that you got the Fulbright? That wasn't a part of your Ph.D. Or was it?

Allen: Yes, it was. It was to continue my Ph.D. research. Because I taught at Rutgers for three years, and I didn't make any progress on this Ph.D. I would get it out dutifully, and I would work on it in the summertime, but I wasn't really making any progress. There were things I thought I needed to be in Spain to do, like go to his birthplace, and go to his house.

So, I applied to the Fulbright to do that, and I got it. I'm really lucky that the Fulbright gave me that, I think, given that I hadn't been making any progress on my Ph.D. for all these years. [laughing]

Taylor: Somebody had faith in you.

Allen: Yeah, yeah. Virginia Wesleyan had faith in me, Evergreen had faith in me. Because I had a really hot-looking resume I think, in some ways, even though I was bogged down on getting the Ph.D.

Really, Rutgers—I guess one of the things I wrote in one of the self-evaluations, those people in the Eastern intellectual places didn't do me any good. They didn't have any authority with me. I didn't care, I didn't believe them, I didn't like them. Except for Sobejanu. He was the only one. Except for him, I could have done without all of them. And that had never happened to me before in my academic life.

Taylor: So the Spanish department at Rutgers was no more inspirational?

Allen: No. Oh, no. Well, I was teaching undergrads, I was teaching freshmen all day.

Taylor: You were teaching Spanish language?

Allen: Yeah. I was teaching beginning language classes.

Taylor: But you didn't have any connection with the Spanish department as an intellectual base.

Allen: No. But I doubt that it was, to tell you the truth.

Taylor: What happened in Spain?

Allen: Well, in Spain, I got involved with a guy. That's one thing that happened.

Taylor: You were in Madrid?

Allen: I was in Madrid. I spent an entire year living in Madrid, and traveling around, to some degree, to see these Manuel Machado places. They were both born in southern Spain. I saw the house where they grew up. Then, when he was old, and he was writing propaganda poetry for Franco, he lived in Burgos. Burgos was in the north. There's a big cathedral there, and Burgos was the center of the fascism of Franco. I went there, and I spent, I think, three weeks in Burgos, living in a little hostel. There was a Manuel Machado library there, which had all of his works, all the books he had when he died, and all these documents to look at. I went there, and studied that.

Then, while I was in Spain I was hired at Virginia Wesleyan.

Taylor: So you were there a year, and at that point, you decided you weren't going to be a full-time student and finish. You weren't going to finish your Ph.D.

Allen: No, I didn't know.

Taylor: But you decided that?

Allen: No. But all that needed to be done—I'd passed my orals, I'd done my master's essay, I'd done all my major research. I was all done, except for finishing my dissertation.

Taylor: You'd done the writing?

Allen: Yeah, some of it. I think I had done half the writing, I think. I didn't decide, until I came to Evergreen, not to finish.

Taylor: Was it a decision not to finish?

Allen: Yeah, it was a decision. But I guess I decided that I should just have—there was like a . . . I don't even know what you call it . . . a job search office at Columbia. You just had to contact them, and they would send all of your stuff.

Taylor: A placement office.

Allen: Yeah, a placement office. They would send all your stuff to whatever place you wanted. Somehow, I heard about this job at Virginia Wesleyan. God, we didn't have computers then. What did we do? I don't know where I would have seen this job announcement, but maybe I called the placement office at Columbia and asked them.

But anyway, they sent my credentials to this place in Virginia. The place in Virginia was run by a person who's still a really good friend of mine, who had just been hired as dean, to do all these innovative things at this brand-new little college in Virginia.

Taylor: And you were making all these arrangements from Spain?

Allen: Yeah. So I have a phone call with him in my apartment. [laughter] Well, no. Out in the hallway. Because I lived in a hostel, and it was a bedroom, and then a bathroom down the hall, and a dining room where we all ate meals together. I think there were two phones in the whole place. One was in the back hallway, and one was in the living room. They were in like wood cabinets.

I was inside this wood cabinet in the living room of this place in Madrid when I get this call from Garry Hays, who is the dean who is hiring all these people at Virginia Wesleyan College. We just liked each other right away, and he just gave me the job. But I was the only person with anywhere near a resume like mine. Garry had just hired the other person in the Spanish department when he was about to call me up. The other person in the Spanish department, and Garry, had looked at my resume and said, "Oh, yeah. She looks really hot."

We found out, from him looking at my resume, that we had the same birthday. The exact same birthday. The same year, too. So we felt like we were astral twins or something. He said, "Oh, yeah, get this woman in here."

Garry called me, and Garry and I really hit it off, and he offered me the job over the phone. I was going to make \$10,000, which seemed like a huge, huge amount. I think at Rutgers, I had been making, at the highest level of my earnings, I had been earning something like \$6,500 or something.

Taylor: This was 1968, '69 maybe?

Allen: Let's see. I was at Virginia Wesleyan '69 to '71. Two years. Yeah, so I got this great salary. I was so impressed with the salary. And I got my first car, because I didn't live that close to campus. I had to have a car. That was fun. Do you want to hear more about Virginia Wesleyan?

Taylor: Yes, I think we need to hear about Virginia Wesleyan. Is it the time?

Allen: Sure, I guess so.

Taylor: We should talk about your experience at Virginia Wesleyan.

Allen: Well, it was abundantly mixed, let's put it that way.

Taylor: When you were hired, did they have departments?

Allen: Yes, it was an old-fashioned, I mean, it had a regular organization of a regular college, with departments. This friend of mine, who's now my friend, Ed Flynn, was the one with the same birthday

as me. We were the only people in the Spanish department. We both were working on our PhDs, and hadn't quite finished our dissertations.

He was Irish from upstate New York, and quite the little rabble-rouser. He was a person with some political organizing ability. But the first year we're there, what we're doing is we are organizing the Spanish department the way we want it to be, and we are teaching Spanish, and we are deciding what the whole Spanish curriculum is.

Taylor: How big is Virginia Wesleyan?

Allen: Virginia Wesleyan was very small, because it was very new. It had only been in existence for maybe five years. When they originally started it, it was really teeny. I think they had 10 faculty, or something like that.

Taylor: Religious?

Allen: Methodist. Private, but religious affiliation. The year that they hired Garry—because they wanted a way to show they were different from other colleges in the local community so they could get students, because it wasn't that clear what the reason for them was, I think—somebody in the administration got the idea that, well, we could do innovative things. It is the late '60s, you know. We could get some hotshot dean in here, and he could make the place a lot more innovative, and that would be how we attract students. So, they hired him.

When he was hired, he said, "I don't know if it's a problem for you that I'm not a Christian." And they said, "Oh, no, it's no problem that you're not a Christian. Of course not. What we want from you is all your educational ideas, and those are really hot. And, no, we don't care if you're a Christian or not." He said, "Okay, then." And so he came, and he was dean.

He hired a whole bunch of us. He hired me and Flynn, who had the same birthday, and he hired maybe 12 or 15 other young faculty about the same age. Some of them were a little bit older than we were, but around the same age and tendencies. So we really bonded as a group, and we really liked each other. We would have parties constantly. Every weekend, we would be having a party at somebody's house.

Taylor: Were these all humanities people?

Allen: No. Well, it's mostly a humanities college.

Taylor: But they weren't all in Spanish.

Allen: No, no, no. No, they weren't at all. Like history, and sociology, and political science and drama—I remember the drama guy—and English. I think we probably only had two languages, Spanish and French.

Taylor: And other women?

Allen: Yeah, a lot of women. Well, not 50-50, by any means. But I think at least 25-75, something like that. So I thought it was great. It was my ideal situation, actually. The only thing was that it was very quickly over. Because at the end of that school year, it was necessary for the school to become accredited, and the accreditation team was coming to campus. When the accreditation team came to campus, they chose to get very, very, very rigorous with the school about the fact that it was a Methodist college, and where was the Methodism? Where was the chapel? Where were the religious faculty members?

Taylor: So the accreditation was not by a regional accreditation board, it was by a religious board?

Allen: No, it was by a regional accreditation board. But the college's statement of purpose was about Methodism. So the accreditation board said, "Okay, all this innovation stuff, this is really cool. But how does it fit in with your Methodism?"

That was very uncomfortable for the president, whose name was Lambuth Clarke. He, I think, was a Presbyterian minister. But we, the Young Turks among us, thought that he had made a deal with the president that the college would only be accredited if they got rid of this un-Christian dean they had.

Taylor: Who made the deal?

Allen: The president of the college and the accreditation team. Of course, they couldn't make that deal publicly, but we think they made it behind the scenes with the president. So, the president then promptly fired the dean who had hired all of us. This is at the end of the first year that we're all working together.

Taylor: This was Garry?

Allen: Garry Hays, who went on to make—well, his next job is interesting. So, Garry was fired. He still had time left on his contract—they had to buy out his contract—which meant that he got an entire free year, with no teaching. He didn't have to teach, because he was getting paid.

He went back to Minnesota, where he had been before. He was originally from Kansas, but he had been living in Minnesota. He went back to Minnesota, and at the end of his free year, when he didn't have to teach—he was doing his job search, and he was doing research—he was Chancellor of

Higher Education in the whole state of Minnesota, so he apparently was quite a good college administrator. But we were abandoned. We didn't have any protection anymore.

But we were ready to carry on. I thought things were fine. I had a whole bunch of friends. The students really liked me; I really liked them. I got to teach whatever I wanted, because I designed my own curriculum.

Taylor: And you had enough students.

Allen: Yeah. But Garry said to us—we were Garry's disciples, basically that summer after he had just been fired, and we had many parties that summer.

He sat us all down and he said, "Now, many of you are not going to feel comfortable staying, because I'm going to be gone, and you're not going to like it here. I would recommend—I know about this place called The Evergreen State College. It's in Olympia, Washington. There's a bunch of planning faculty up there right now, planning a school. Some of you are going to want to go there."

I said, "Okay, I believe you, Garry." And I sent off my credentials the same week he said that to us, the same summer.

Taylor: The summer of '69?

Allen: Yeah. No, wait. No, the summer of '70. So then we start the year. The year is going along, and right before Christmastime—I'm going to fly home to see my parents in California—it must have been the Friday, right at the beginning of Christmas vacation—I get a call early in the morning. I'm going into classes, but I get a call from the president's secretary, and she asked, would I stop by and see the president before I go to class?

So all the way to school, driving to school in the car, I'm thinking, hmm, wonder what the president wants to see me about? I bet he wants to ask me to chair a committee. I get there, and he tells me he doesn't want me to work there anymore. He wants me to resign. He wants me to finish out that school year, but then he wants me not to go for another contract.

Taylor: Completely out of the blue?

Allen: Yeah, completely out of the blue. Nothing. I have done nothing. I have gotten no evil evaluations. I have done nothing.

Taylor: And you don't know this man very well.

Allen: No, he didn't ever associate with us. He says, "We've decided that we need a really big-time Spanish scholar in this department. We don't really have the money for a big-time Spanish scholar, but

if we get rid of both of the people in the Spanish department, then we'll have twice as much money, and then we can try to get a really important Spanish scholar in here to run the department. That's what we've decided to do, and I would advise you to resign, because it's going to look much better on your record."

I stood up and I said to him, "Lambuth, I consider it an honor to be fired by you." And I turned around and walked out the door, and slammed the door really hard.

Taylor: It was your first action of defiance.

Allen: Yes, it was! I think it probably was. Then, I went and found out that Flynn, my colleague, had been fired right before me, so everybody knew. We had told all our friends, and there was already a party planned that night. I think it was at the Hayes's house.

Taylor: Garry Hays was still there?

Allen: No, there were two sets of Hayses. There was Garry Hays and there was Larry Hayes. Larry Hayes and his wife, Barbara, were both on the faculty. Larry was the football coach, and Barbara was the history teacher, I think.

Anyway, there was already this party, and so we go. And the students know, and the students start rebelling. The students are really mad that we've been fired. They print up T-shirts, and they start doing all this stuff. They start cutting class, and striking and stuff. This is all very interesting. That's what happened in the succeeding days, but that very same night, I'm at the party. [laughing] This is probably my best story of the whole thing, because it's so incredible, actually.

I'd been fired that morning, and then I'm at this party. I get a phone call in the middle of the party, and they say, "Nancy, it's from some college out west." It was from one of the secretaries.

Taylor: Claire Hess?

Allen: It was from Claire Hess, yes. She is asking me can I come to my first interview for Evergreen. It's the one with Merv in New York. She's asking me can I go to that interview. I don't what she's going to say to me, but I know she's from Evergreen. And I'm drunk! I'm like, Nancy, think a minute here. You must not tell this person that you have just been fired today. [laughing] It would not be wise for you to tell her that you have just been fired, and that you are at your firing party. Shut up, Nancy Allen! I know you're a very open person, but do not say this.

So, I go, and I have a talk with her, and we set up the time for the initial interview in New York, when I'm on my way flying home for Christmas. And that's that. So my first contact with Evergreen

happened the very same day that I got fired. I think it's because of AAUP rules. The AAUP would say that you have to be fired by a certain date if it's going to be normal process. You have to be fired by a certain date, so that you have time to find a job. Evergreen would also know this is the time when people are going to become available, if they're available.

Taylor: I think the firing probably is true, but I think the Evergreen hiring was much more random. Because what I remember is that there were something like 9000 applications, and they were just frantic.

Allen: That's interesting. Or maybe they just already thought, okay, the Christmas season is a good time to interview people.

Taylor: That's what MLA is, so you probably interviewed at the MLA meeting in New York.

Allen: No, I didn't.

Taylor: Because that would have been a common thing, to interview between Christmas and New Year's.

Allen: Right. And I never was part of it. I never did that.

Taylor: But I wonder, if Merv was in New York, maybe MLA was in New York at that time.

Allen: Yeah, and he was interviewing there, too.

Taylor: He was interviewing, but he had nothing to do with MLA. That could have been.

Allen: Yeah.

Taylor: But what a coincidence.

Allen: I know.

Taylor: And in your mind, you say, oh, that's okay, about the firing. I got this other opportunity right here.

Allen: Yeah, I just thought it was like my fairy godmother. It was just like, okay, I had no job. I had only applied to two places. One was Evergreen, and one was this other college called Richard Stockton State College in New Jersey.

Taylor: I've heard of it.

Allen: It also was an innovative state college that was starting at the same time.

Taylor: Did all of the people at Virginia Wesleyan leave?

Allen: No, they didn't.

Taylor: Just you two?

Allen: Well, I didn't keep in touch with them that well, which is kind of a failing of mine, except for Garry. I kept in touch with Garry. I think, I have a hunch, that they started peeling off, in later years. But the first couple of years, they were all still there.

Taylor: And Garry never applied to Evergreen? I wonder what—

Allen: He did. He did apply to Evergreen, but he applied to Evergreen way later. He applied to Evergreen when we got Jane Jervis as president.

Taylor: That was like 10 or 15 years later.

Allen: Yeah. But he had done something different in the meantime. He had been chancellor in Minnesota for a number of years. And then, he had decided, I think—I don't know why, because I never talked to him about this, but I think he just wanted more money—he had decided to get involved with student loans, and to work for the banking industry, pursuing student loans for students. He did that for a number of years, at least five or six.

He didn't have much credibility as a presidential candidate at that point, because he had been working in the student loan industry. I actually wrote him a letter of recommendation, and I said, "Look, you have to look at this guy, and you have to look back through his record. Because he was a really hotshot administrator, and he has his heart in innovative studies, and he's the exact person that you should hire for this place," is what I said.

Taylor: But he wanted teach, or wasn't he in an administrative post?

Allen: The president. He wanted to be president.

Taylor: Oh, he tried for president?

Allen: Yeah, along Jane Jervis.

Taylor: Oh, okay.

Allen: And they didn't even give him an interview.

Taylor: Yeah. I was on that committee, too. I chaired that committee.

Allen: Yeah, well, Jane—

Taylor: Of course, I don't remember the name, but . . .

Allen: That was a sad story, because he would have been a great president for Evergreen. But he waited too long. And, I think, partly, it's jumping from being a dean at a tiny little school in Tidewater, Virginia, and then going already, in one leap, going to chancellor of an entire state education system.

Taylor: But that meant they saw something in him, I guess.

Allen: Yeah, they did. Sure. But, I mean, him having—now, he’s at this level, way up here, he’s not at Evergreen’s level anymore. He’s like . . .

Taylor: Yeah.

Allen: And then, he even leaves academia, and becomes a banker. Then, he applies to Evergreen. He decides now he wants to be a college president. But probably if he had applied to be a historian or something, he might have gotten a job. But you know how quirky Evergreen openings are.

Taylor: Well, that’s true.

Allen: They don’t come up with any regularity, and they’re not in any definable thing.

Taylor: Yeah. The funny thing about Jane is, when you were there were 12 people on the committee, and we were divided, and had about 350—a lot of applications. We were divided into reading groups. Lila Girvin, who was on the Board of Trustees, was reading applications in her little group, and she came into me and she says, “I found her. I found our president.” That was in the first reading of the first reading group, and she said, “I found her.” She was so excited.

Allen: And it was true.

Taylor: It was true. But it was just one of those lucky things.