

Chuck Nisbet
Interviewed by Eric Severn
The Evergreen State College oral history project
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FINAL

Severn: This is Eric Severn with Chuck Nisbet. Chuck, you're in Chicago. Correct?

Nisbet: Correct.

Severn: It is July 30, [2021], and we are picking up where we left off. We were in Pack Forest and we're picking up there with a story from Chuck right away. Let's hear what you've got.

Nisbet: I'm jumping ahead to the mid- '80s. Today we're going to start with 1971, but I wanted to tell this story because I'll probably forget it.

In the mid- '80s, I think it was, I came down with a case of shingles that was around my waist. It was very painful. Tom Rainey, who I'd taught with several times in the earlier years—who was a Navy medic or had some kind of medical experience with the Navy—he came in and told me, “You drink too much coffee, Chuck. You've got to cut back on the coffee.”

I did more than cut back. I stopped drinking coffee. Guess what? My shingles went away. From that day forward to the present, I've never touched coffee. I thank Tom Rainey for his great medical insight.

Severn: It's good that this is on the record because you never know when Tom Rainey's going to need a little boost. [laughter]

Chuck, we left off with the Pack Forest retreat.

Nisbet: That's correct. I'm going to start fall quarter of 1971. We walked on the campus with mud all over the place. It had rained, the quarter was opening, and what I'm calling the Seminar Building, does that ring a bell to you? I think it's now called Dan Evans Library Building.

Severn: Yes.

Nisbet: The main building I believe at that time we called the Seminar Building. When I use that term, that's now the Dan Evans Library Building. There were no buildings finished to my recollection, so when we walked to the Seminar Building, it was almost finished but not quite.

Severn: There was just like a bunch of trailers around, right?

Nisbet: There were a lot of trailers around. What that meant was that the programs for fall quarter in '71 had to take refuge anywhere they could with 70 people, including the faculty roughly, with four

faculty members. I can't remember where all the other places were. They were in churches. They were anywhere they could get in.

Our program, Environmental Design, which Larry Eickstaedt was the coordinator, and it included Carolyn Dobbs, Phil Harding, and me. We went to Camp Robbinswold, which is a Girl Scout camp up the peninsula in the forest, in the trees. I'll talk more about that in a minute. When the first-year faculty arrived, and I'm using the figure 45—it can't be off by too much—they arrived on campus and they knew it was a different campus, but they were just trying to figure out what different meant, and the college was trying to start explaining to them what it meant.

We had terms like "innovative." At UCLA, they didn't talk about innovative, or the University of Wisconsin. That was a term that needed explanation or comment. Finally, there was the term "book seminar." I had only a vague idea what that term meant.

Over the course of that first quarter, and even, I think, the first year, various faculty members—and the one I think I remember the best was Dick Jones, who was a psychologist—gave workshops on running a book seminar. A major effort that first year was making everyone comfortable with what a book seminar was, and not just comfortable but productive, so they could run a seminar properly to get the most out of it.

There was excitement in the air that first year. The idea that we walked through the rain and the mud with backpacks. No one was complaining about the weather we're walking in. They were too focused on—as the students were—that this was something brand new for all of us.

Severn: Can I stop you for a second? I have a question. This idea that you come to Evergreen and you're unfamiliar with a book seminar and what that is supposed to look like. Do you remember how it was presented to you as an incoming faculty? What was the model like that you were handed?

Nisbet: In traditional education, professors talk, students listen. What they were trying to drive home was now we want students to talk and professors to do more listening. By the way, as a capstone to Evergreen, one thing that the Evergreen model did a remarkable job is its students, by and large—the vast majority of them—when they graduated after four years from Evergreen, they could talk. They were not shy, or they weren't as shy. They were articulate. They were confident.

Too often, in traditional education, you can spend four years in classes of 100 to 400, and all you do is take notes and pass tests and take exams. You can graduate and you're da-da-da-da. You're tongue-tied. That's something that I think is known, but needs to be emphasized, that that was a real byproduct of [an Evergreen education].

The second thought on that is that team-teaching with different faculty taught the faculty and the students how to work in groups. Here's what happens when people graduate. By and large, or in many cases, they don't just graduate as an individual, go to a job and work as an individual. They have to work with other people. That gave students an advantage over, I think, others' conventional education. They had some experience with working with others, particularly others that are different than them, different in academic background.

And at Evergreen, as the college became more diverse, you had to learn how to work with people that weren't exactly like you—didn't look like you, didn't have a background like you. That was the second, I think, unbelievable strength of the value of Evergreen education.

The third is writing. There was nowhere except on an individual contract where you could escape writing. The book seminars had writing, sometimes writing every single week. There were papers that students wrote, so they did a lot of writing. That's the third strength, as I see Evergreen, all the years I was there, and I presume it probably is still there.

Severn: Even just the whole idea of a seminar paper, coming to seminar with a paper that can be anywhere from an outline or your notes to a more thesis-driven essay.

Nisbet: Yes. Now, back to your question. There were various people that helped about running a seminar, so I can't speak for everyone. I'm sure there were differences. But the one difference was that in a seminar, you weren't supposed to lecture. [laughing] You assigned a book, and then the real expertise of seminar leader was to instigate a discussion and keep it going, or stop it when it's not going anywhere, without offending a student or making someone feel bad. That's a real skill.

Let me stop just a second because I'm thinking of something else. One of the things that I did way late in my career at Evergreen, which is pretty simple, but I should have done it years ago. You come into the seminar and what I experienced is that it was rare that all 18 students read the book carefully, or even read the book. I was always offended by that and put off by that, and you could tell.

You had to be creative as a seminar leader. Some students at the very beginning would bring up something that was in the first 10 pages of the book and were silent the whole rest of the seminar. They were trying to fake you out that, oh, yeah, they read the book.

What I developed was a 10-question quiz. The questions were programmed over the course of the book. They were real simple questions, like "What was the setting of the novel?" Or "Where did it take place?" I mean, stupid, simple questions. "Who was the main character?" Questions that you could easily get if you read the book.

It took only 10 minutes class time to complete. It had a penalty to it, mainly, you knew when you came that there was going to be a quiz. You knew every week. And the same kind every time. The students who were good students and did their work, they weren't one bit concerned about doing this because every time, they'd get 10 questions right. But if you didn't read the book, you knew that you could guess at some things, but it showed up. They maybe answered two out of 10 correctly.

I'm sure some people—faculty—wouldn't have agreed to this, but I found it very useful to just provide more incentive—it could be negative incentive—to do more preparation at least, and not just some.

Back to the seminar. The key thing was to try to get students to start talking. One of the questions that I tried early on was “Why did the author write this book?” I had to stop asking that question because too often, one or two students said, “To make money.” [laughing] That didn't exactly further the discussion.

Severn: To an economist, no less.

Nisbet: Yeah. [laughing] It wasn't helpful to promote a discussion, so I had to stop doing that. You had to think of something that kicked the discussion off.

Severn: I want to keep some sense of this linear trajectory that you're on here, while also maintaining this discussion about seminars, just because I think the two are interesting together. It's fall quarter. You're out in the woods at this camp place with your students, and you all are learning how to seminar. You're doing that. You're figuring that out. You don't really have a classroom to do it in.

Nisbet: Yeah, that's a very interesting question. Fall quarter was completely unique to my time at Evergreen. There isn't anything close to it. Some days, we were sitting outside. Some days, we were in a cabin. It was raining outside and damp. You're sitting on the floor. I'm not sure the pedagogy was advanced in that fall quarter. I'm not so sure.

That was more of a quarter where—actually, we got along. I'll tell you. You can delete this if you want, but at the end of the fall quarter, something happened that never happened again. The students organized it. They brought in a live band and a keg of beer. The four faculty and the students drank beer, danced, partied together. I was given the nickname “Dancing Bear” at this final—they called it a celebration, and it was, that somehow, we'd got to know each other, we had developed an enthusiasm and an interest in this new college. But in terms of learning, I think the learning was in second place to coping with the total unusualness of the setting.

Severn: Yeah, that's interesting, Chuck. It makes sense what you're saying, but I also do find myself wondering, we're talking about this as if the two are easy to separate. Some of the things that you're

saying about that communal atmosphere that developed, it seems like that, in its own right, has become embedded in the Evergreen pedagogy, in a certain sense. Do you know what I mean?

Nisbet: I'm not sure because I'm going to develop this as we go along here. If there ever was the sense of community, it was that first year. All this talk about community thereafter was not like what happened that first year. There was no tension. In some sense, you didn't know everyone well enough to complain about each other. [laughter] We were unknown, so it was totally different, totally unique.

I don't mean to say there wasn't learning because I'm sure there was, but I have no data to establish anything one way or another. I'm just guessing that we had to cope with stuff, and so we were interrupted, or it was segmented, the teaching we were doing. I really suspect that some of the faculty had to be quite innovative in what they had to try to do to keep things going because of the difficulty.

Severn: Right, so that all changed after that first year is what you're saying. There was a sense that the community that was established that first year shifted quickly the second year? Is that what you're getting at?

Nisbet: All I can say is that after that first year, then things started to diminish or to—I don't know what it did—it wasn't as powerful as we are all in this together sense of community. There started to be complaining. Not a lot, but I can say very definitively that this atmosphere only lasted somewhere between three to five years, that first half of the 1970s.

This is jumping ahead, but I should say this. I think it was in the very second year—and there's data on this you've got to know—there was a call to have a racism workshop. I don't know who called it. I don't remember that.

Severn: This is your second year, so we're talking about '72-ish?

Nisbet: Exactly, 1972. I don't know whose idea it was, but the idea was—keep in mind, we had money then. In those early years, we had very ample budgets. In addition to our academic budgets, the college funding—there was just more money around the college in its entirety.

The idea was to bring in an outside firm to run a workshop on racism. The only thing I really remember about this is it was awful. There were two practitioners or whatever you want to call them that came on campus. The whole faculty was together, and by then, instead of 45, we were like 90. The first two years were big hires.

It was an awful experience, and it was a strange experience. What was awful about it, first of all, you have a liberal faculty. You don't have a diverse faculty of conservatives, far left, and the middle. It was basically a center-liberal group of people. They came in and lectured the hell out of us at this session. When we took a break that first morning, there were very unhappy people. Harsh. It was

harsh. It was domineering. The idea would have been to enlighten us about something about racism that we—for example, institutional racism would have been easier to talk about because we were a brand- new place. That was something that, from that day forward, anything that had to do with race got more and more tense at Evergreen. We were sort of gun shy.

I guess I might as well bring this up while we're talking. I'm going to use names and you can delete them. We're totally able to do this without names, but I want to say names.

Severn: Go ahead.

Nisbet: Someone can look at what I had to say, and if they disagree, they can disagree. After that outside racism workshop, the very next racism workshop (in 1973 or 1974) was run by faculty member Maxine Mimms. Maxine Mimms is one of three faculty—black women who were hired over time—that all had one thing in common. They were what some people would call “street smart.” I came from a little town in Wisconsin and I sure as hell wasn't street smart. I knew nothing about cities.

Maxine had this workshop, and we all went up to Fort Worden or someplace. It wasn't on campus. It was up the Peninsula. Again, I remember very little about this workshop except I was called on by Maxine to come to the middle of the room. She proceeded to humiliate me. She proceeded to tear me to shreds as a white, liberal male. A type A male. Type A males at Evergreen were out of favor in preference to Type B males.

Type B males—and a primary example in my opinion is Don Bantz. That doesn't mean there's anything wrong with Don Bantz at all. It just means he is nonthreatening, soft spoken, sensitive, good listener, etc.

I never forgave Maxine for that awful experience, because she exploited me to drive home her point of the workshop. That was completely foreign to this idea that we were a community that came the first year. Nobody was embarrassing or humiliating anybody that first year. I'm going to come back to this, I think, a little later, but that's a kind of breakdown of—actually, you know what? Let me take a break from this and go back to my outline, and then I'll come back to it. We were talking just about fall quarter.

One other disjointed thing that I think is important. The first two faculties, the first two 80 or 90 people, I think they really felt they were the creators and builders of the Evergreen model. Maybe it included the first three years, I don't know, but very soon, the model—what we did—was done. We weren't trying new things. There was the format: the evaluations, the three options that you had were in place.

As we moved into the late '70s, the job market for academics got really tough.

Severn: Yeah, for faculty.

Nisbet: Yeah, really. What I felt I don't think I ever talked about it explicitly, but I certainly felt, is that some of the hires that came later—clearly, I'm going to talk about terrific hires that came all along my 30 years—some of those hires were people that weren't joining Evergreen faculty because they'd heard about the idea, and they liked the idea. They were desperate for a job, and they took it anywhere they could get it.

Those first 90 people—it was like their college, they created it—or the first 100, a certain critical mass. They were all on the same page in terms of putting forth effort. Working. As the college progressed, the faculty as a group changed. Now there were, in my opinion, lazy faculty.

By the way, let me say something about lazy. When we first were hired at Evergreen, everyone negotiated a contract with the deans. I negotiated a contract that was pretty favorable because I had other job offers. Some people hadn't ever negotiated or didn't know about or didn't know how to negotiate, and some people arrived and discovered that they were being paid way less than others. It was very early on—maybe in the third or fourth year—that this was a source of tension, a friction, that why were some people getting this amount and other people that amount when we were all doing the same thing? And presumedly, all working as hard as anybody else.

They changed that, and they froze, for example, my salary and others' that were high, and then they raised the lower ones up until we were all at the same pay scale with a year of service difference. In other words, the more years of service you had, you were in a grid, so when you had more time served, you got an increase. That was the equality. If you'd been teaching there for 10 years, you had the same salary as somebody else.

When they did that, that was the end of meritocracy. Almost everywhere, differentials in salaries presumably are based on outcomes. Betty Kutter was a very well-known scientist, and if she was someplace else, it wouldn't be unusual at all if she was paid more money than somebody else who didn't have a national reputation.

With the end of meritocracy—for me—it meant everybody oaring the boat. I think I was a hardliner on that. It offended me when most people were working hard, doing a great job, and some people, maybe not many, damn near doing nothing.

In the fall quarter, no one thought about what someone else was making and whether they were working hard or not. Very early, there were these factors that changed things—the introduction of racism, the hiring of more faculty, some of which—while I'm pointing out some of them might have just taken the job just to have a job, clearly there were plenty who were different.

People who came later may not have been creators, but they could have been protectors. Do you follow what I'm saying? In other words, they were interested in seeing that this model stayed viable, healthy. I'm not trying to say that the builders were the only important people here—the creators. People who came later down the line were very important to help things stay together.

Because there were so many factors going on during the '70s, all during the '70s, the college was under terrific threat of closure. Every time the State Legislature met, primarily the legislators from Eastern—the Cascades divide Washington into east and west. In the east, they were conservative people. The whole idea of Evergreen was so foreign to them, they just thought it was crazy.

Furthermore, there was a competition for where to locate this new college. There was no competition about whether one should exist or not, and the fact that it never got located in Eastern Washington was a sore spot. Some of this crying about Evergreen was because the minute they didn't get it in Spokane or wherever, they were not happy. But we were under tremendous pressure those early years to avoid being closed down. I'll come back to that.

I'm trying to build this mosaic of tension, problems, worries. If I remember this right, we had faculty meetings at the beginning of the year [where] they were basically asking the faculty to recruit students to help build enrollment. That's what a lot of the criticism was that we weren't getting any freshman students from Thurston County. We didn't the first couple years, but then gradually, we started to get students from the local high schools, and gradually, we started to protect ourselves. By the time—I don't know exactly what year it was, but I would say sometime maybe in the early '80s—there wasn't any more talk of closing the college.

Severn: Right. It was there.

Nisbet: [Unintelligible 00:34:22]. By that time, we had graduates, like Denny Heck, who went on to be a Congressman, and Dennis Karras who was in local government—I'll come back to him—[as] the Director of Human Services. Very nice man. He was an Evergreen graduate and a good friend of mine, actually, because he was one of the neighbors. Anyway, we had graduates that went into the community. That helped solidify Evergreen in the eyes of local Olympians.

The faculty that came later were protectors, maintainers, tweekers. I'm sure I'm totally unaware of many faculty who came in the 80's and 90's. There were things that were done by an individual faculty member later on that became part of Evergreen, part of what went on.

Fall quarter. Here's a story for you. I was baking bread. Those first years, we were doing it all. I baked bread fall quarter and never baked bread in my life after that. [laughing] I was baking sourdough bread. I called Governor Dan Evans's office and I got his secretary or staff person. I introduced myself

and said, "I want to invite the Governor to come to Evergreen for lunch from 12:00 to 1:00 to speak to our program, Environmental Design. We have a lounge. If he will come, I will tell no one that he's coming so he could come on campus, no one will know he's there, and in an hour, he'll leave." Furthermore, I said, "I will fix his lunch. I bake bread and I'll make a sandwich for him and bring a soft drink." She said to me, "I'll have to speak to the Governor. We'll call you back." She called me back and said, "He can come on such-and-such a date." I said, "Perfect."

On that day, I was at the doors that look out on Red Square towards the little circle where cars drive up. I was there ahead of time. He showed up about five minutes to 12:00. He was driven up by a driver. Door opened. Dan Evans starts walking across the Red Square towards the building.

Just at that time, President Charles McCann came by and said hello to me and "How are things going?" He looked out and he said, "What! What is he doing here?" [laughter] I said, "He's just coming to a short visit and then he's leaving." Apparently, Charles was going someplace with purpose, so he just walked away.

Dan Evans came on the campus. I introduced myself. The Environmental Design was right on that first floor of the Seminar Building. We walked back. The students were waiting. He came in and sat down in a chair and I gave him his brown bag with his sandwich. He proceeded to open it because students were eating at the same time. He just proceeded to talk and eat his sandwich. I don't even remember what he talked about, but the students were very attentive. He thanked me at about 10 minutes to 1:00. I escorted him to the front door. His driver was waiting for him out in the circle, and he went away.

Severn: That's wild.

Nisbet: That was just one of the little things that we could do then. Of course, I'm sure you're aware that when his term was up as Governor, he became President of Evergreen. I'll come back to that.

Severn: It's interesting, Chuck, just that there are so many tensions that arise within a community being established. I think oftentimes the trajectory is establishing the community is a time of coherence and reciprocity and people working together. But then, once the community is established, you get a lot of the tensions that you're talking about.

I think it's easy to overlook that. That was such a process, a foundational process, for Evergreen, and not so much—you've got like a conventional institution where you're not trying to define all this stuff. You're not trying to establish this sense of community around what it even is, around an idea. The particular sets of conflicts that you're talking about, it seems like it's so much part of establishing any community, in a certain sense. Do you know what I mean?

Nisbet: Yes, of course.

Severn: It's interesting.

Nisbet: In that first year—no, I'm still on fall quarter. The first end of the first quarter, the faculty all got together to discuss evaluations of students as a group. We're sitting there at this table, the four of us, and Carolyn passes out a piece of paper with very few with very few lines on it for us to read. I read it, and it was a poem. I said to Carolyn, "Carolyn, this is not a self-evaluation. This is just poetry."

I don't know if you ever knew Carolyn Dobbs, but Carolyn was small in stature, she was soft of speaking, but she had a terribly strong inner self. She looked at me and she said, "Chuck, there's more than one way to write an evaluation." That was the end of it.

I told this story at her memorial, and after I finished the line about "Chuck, there's more than one way to write a self-evaluation," I said, "And we never taught together again." Everybody laughed because they knew the difference between the two of us. They were laughing because they were probably saying, "The two of you teaching together has to be really crazy," because we're so different. The irony of that is that Russ Fox, Carolyn Dobbs, Sandy Nisbet, my ex-wife, and myself were very good friends.

That was another example of learning at Evergreen; that my concept of a self-evaluation was a strict narrative. You had to understand that in our model, there's going to be all kinds of different ways of doing things—running a seminar differently—so I had to adjust to that. I had to learn to expand my own view of how things were done. That learning is something that took place very early on, or if there was learning, it was early on.

Severn: And yet, there have to be limits. Right? It can't be a free-for-all.

Nisbet: No, of course not. I think what we're really saying is that almost all the students wrote the same kind of self-evaluation. Some spent more time in it than others, some were more analytical than others. But there were still outliers of how you could do it, and poetry wasn't a form of how 20 percent of the evaluations were going. It also showed you the openness of the faculty. Faculty had to be ready for something coming at them that was a little unusual.

Severn: While we're on this theme, we're talking about differences in pedagogical approaches, and how there must be room for adjustment in your learning experiences as you adjusted your own idea of what is an important pedagogical approach.

What about your discipline, your background as an economist? You came in with a particular background, a fairly conventional one, as an economist. Did you face challenges on that front, too? What kind of things did you learn on that front, just in regard to your discipline?

Nisbet: Boy, I don't know quite how to answer that, except what's interesting is that when you study as an undergraduate, you're exposed to different perspectives—theories—of explaining whatever it is, and you learn a pedagogy of attacking problems.

Severn: Yes.

Nisbet: What's interesting is that at Evergreen, I discovered that the easiest way for me to deal with a curriculum is for the curriculum to be centered on a problem, or around problems, because there's almost no problems that can't use economics, or that if you don't know economics, you're at a disadvantage, because it's embedded in the problems. Not only is that true about economics, it's true for almost all disciplines.

Severn: The discipline you're talking about.

Nisbet: The discipline. I don't care what your discipline is, take communication—Virginia Ingersoll, her degree was from the Communications School at the University of Pennsylvania. She had no problem inserting her specialty into a program with problems. That's the main way that I was able to take my discipline—and it taught students that when they left Evergreen I need to know how to work with others.

For example, it could be an academic problem. They took a job at another college or university, and universities deal with fundraising, or dealing with how to attract students. That's a problem. How do we increase enrollment? Well, how do we address that problem? There's no one specialty that deals with that. I obviously was different. When you teach economics, you have to start with principles and then you take intermediate theory, and then you start going into different specialties—money and banking or public finance or labor economics or whatever.

For example, you might have some economists that came whose field was labor economics. That person would probably like to end up dealing with problems that had something to do with humans as workers, whether union or non-union. I think when you learned about what Evergreen was about, if you were willing to make that opening in your head about, what validity does your background have to play here?

Severn: Yeah, yeah. Right.

Nisbet: Then you can do it. But if you come thinking, oh, well, you can't do anything about this problem until you've had four courses in economics, this is the wrong place.

Severn: That's right.

Nisbet: If a student just learned about the simplest principles of economics, which is how markets operate—supply and demand—when it came to recruiting black PhDs, if you didn't understand that

problem—which many people did not, such a simple problem as that—then you get all messed up about why we’re not hiring more PhDs. Because the fundamental problem is lack of supply. There’s very few black men or women in America who are currently enrolled in a PhD program in economics. There’s a lot more today than there ever was in 1971. We could never, in my 30 years in Evergreen, ever get a black PhD to even apply, let alone be considered. What was that? It was a supply and demand problem.

When I was teaching at UCLA, only one student that I had in over four years was black and received his PhD. When he was finished with his PhD at UCLA, he had multiple offers. Multiple. If you add to that income, if you’re in short supply of anything, you command a higher price. Evergreen was not bidding for anybody. Because we had this fixed grid of salary, they were basically offering the same money. That meant if you were a person of color from a prestigious university, or even a good university, Evergreen couldn’t possibly compete with price for you.

The result was we had a very hard time finding people of color. We did find some, but they were few and far between. Then you have a quality issue. No one wants to talk about this, but it’s just straightforward that if you’re a person of color and you are not high quality, you may find it difficult to land a good job in corporate America, and you will not be able to land one in top tier academic institutions. But if you keep looking and you come down in quality of institution, you will eventually find someplace that will hire you. That kind of discussion, we never had that at Evergreen because then you get people who won’t understand that or won’t accept it. They’re saying, “You’re just not trying. You’re not doing your job. You’re not out there really looking really hard.”

That’s the answer that always got the credence. And it’s still true to this day in many fields. English literature has an oversupply of PhDs. Therefore, it’s very difficult to find a job. My first teaching job was in a community college. There are plenty PhDs in literature teaching at community colleges today. Not four-year. Not even at a low-quality four-year. They’re teaching in community colleges.

Severn: Yeah, right. It’s interesting what you’re saying about disciplines. I do think that the way that you are describing . . . it’s almost as if . . . and correct me if you see it in a different way, but it’s almost as if part of what you’re getting at is that Evergreen—your experience coming these first couple of years, there was this idea that disciplines didn’t offer themselves as the only way to attack a certain problem, but more as a certain set of tools that can work along with other sets of tools to look at different sides of any particular problem. That was one of the foundational views.

Nisbet: Yes, and to Evergreen’s credit, there are a lot more institutions today that adopt that interdisciplinary approach today.

Severn: Right. I think it's the kind of thing where it's like we're kind of at a place now where that almost seems obvious. Interdisciplinary studies, that's accepted. But it seems like part of what you're really getting at here is that there was no blueprint for this kind of—there were, there were some pedagogical ideas in the air, for sure, that pointed towards these kinds of things. But the real practice of it, you all were trying to do that. You were trying to figure out what it would look like to actually have an approach where disciplines were given to students as tools to solve problems that worked together. That was a really radical thing at the time.

Nisbet: Yes, it was. Now, the end of the first year, we had a graduation like no other graduation ever. [laughing] I'm sure there's video of it. If you could see some prints of what it looked like. When you come into the Seminar Building, there's a big, flat area, and then there's stairs that go up on the left. If you come in the building, to your left there are stairs that go up, and there's a flat area on the stairs at the top, then you turn the corner and there are more stairs up to the second floor.

On that flat little area of the first stairs is where Charles McCann and different faculty members stood. Phil Harding was dressed in some gawd awful gown with a crazy hat or something on his head. It was almost like—what's the Brazilian festival? Not like New Orleans—it wasn't quite that bad—but everyone was dressed in funky things. It was a very small graduating class, so they could do everything in this raised area, and all the audience were in chairs on the main floor.

Because we had students who obviously dropped out of other colleges just shy of graduating, they came for their final year here and then graduated. I only mention it because you have to see a picture to see how unusual it was. It's hard to describe something that never happened again.

I think that's the end of the first year. Now I want to shift to talking about the early '70s. I think I mentioned the Chile Symposium last time, so I don't want to go over the whole thing again. But there was one thing about the Chile Symposium I don't think I told you. The floor of the Library Building was packed with people. We only had one corporate person that was willing to come and speak. All the rest were academics, half of them friends of mine from previous places.

When the corporate guy got up to speak, he wasn't five minutes into his presentation, and some people from the audience—they could have been students, but they could not have been, there were so many outside people here—jumped up and started shouting and screaming to disrupt his talk as a capitalist pig or whatever. Tom Rainey jumped out of his seat, raised his arms, and screamed "Provocateur! Provocateur!" Tom Rainey's such a big guy, it was really imposing.

Guess what? Silence. Those people shut up and never said a word again. That was a wonderful thing about Tom. Everybody knows Tom. It was a perfect moment for him to do something like that.

Severn: Explain that a little bit. Why was the moment so perfect for that?

Nisbet: Because Tom was an example of myself and others at Evergreen that where we're a part of an institution that allows so much freedom, then one of the freedoms is freedom of thought, and freedom of listening to different people. Not that we were the only faculty wanting to hear a range of views. There were all kinds of faculty who ascribed to that.

Since he was one of the tallest, and he could speak really loudly if he needed to, he was the right person to shut down the hecklers. If it had been someone else, they may have not been listened. He was not only physically the right person, but he was showing that Latin America was not his field, Russia was his field—the Far East—that you could bring someone from another discipline to support other people's disciplines from having the freedom of thought and the freedom of ideas.

Actually, the guy's speech was not bad. I think at the time I was impressed that he gave a very low-key explanation of dealing with the coup and American business abroad. It was valuable for students to have all that. That's the end of the one piece that I didn't talk about the Chile Symposium.

Severn: That's interesting, though.

Nisbet: During those early '70s, there were really unusual things once I looked back on the 30 years there. Here's one for you. Don Chan. Have you ever heard anybody mention Don Chan, the faculty member?

Severn: Not off the top of my head, no.

Nisbet: Don Chan was one of the first people of color—Asian—he may have been the very first. His field was music. He was in the Arts faculty. I had no contact with this man. I was off in my little program. I was never in an Arts program or Arts faculty. He put together a pop orchestra. It was an orchestra that consisted of anyone who cared to come and audition. You play, and he decides if you can play well enough.

Severn: Tryouts?

Nisbet: Yeah, tryouts. Anyone could come tryout. He had this orchestra that had faculty—Alan Nasser, Charlie Teske, Will Humphreys, and I'm sorry to say, I bet I've forgotten a couple of others. In other words, part of his orchestra was faculty. He had some students that turned out that came to Evergreen who were very good musicians. They came and tried out. They were included. He had community people. He had this incredible, diverse group of musicians.

He wrote a lot of the music that they played, which was varied music. It was in the floor of the Seminar Building, the bottom, the entryway lobby. People were around the upstairs. They played at

night. I don't know how many concerts he did, but they were only occasional. People loved it. They were really good.

There's something I should mention now about Don Chan. You can Google Don Chan. It's really easy. He's so much older now that I can recognize him, his face. He's had a storied career, an incredible, wonderful career.

He's the example of two faculty of color at Evergreen that we lost after a very short period of time. I would say that he couldn't have been here for more than three, four years. Why did we lose him? Because he was so good. He could command money, and he could command prestigious offers. It all makes sense. This ties into my telling you about recruitment problems of people of color. Retention then was another thing.

There's another faculty of color whose last name, I believe, is [Jake?] Romero. He's Hispanic. I cannot remember his first name. He was in the sciences. He only lasted here about three or four years. Boeing got bid away from us. I'm sure Boeing multiplied his Evergreen salary many times over.

Back then, there was a problem of diversity. Not as hot as it is today, but it was there. We lost two really terrific persons of color because we cannot compete with the rest of the world. If you're independently wealthy—some Evergreen faculty were—you could ignore that, and love Evergreen and stay here.

Malcolm Stilson in the '70s. He was I don't know if they called it the Dean of the Library, but he was the head of the Library then. His son [Randy] later—I can't remember his first name—was also head of the Library. Malcolm Stilson wrote musicals from scratch. The musicals incorporated faculty and staff. They had to sing. Once a year in the spring, it had a funny name—oh, he wrote the *Gooney Duck Song*, Malcolm did. Every spring there was this celebration at night. People mobbed to it to laugh and have fun with the participants of faculty and staff singing and doing funny dancing. Malcolm was very talented.

I'm citing these things as bonding, as cementing the community. It was so healthy for the community because of—I should jump into this right away. The Evergreen staff was critical to the success of Evergreen. The staff didn't always know or understand what they were supporting (academically) because their job was staff, like running the bookstore, the library, security or in the Finance Department. But the faculty—for example, too many faculty thought they could park anywhere they wanted to on campus because they were faculty. There were signs up all over the place. "No parking." Some faculty were outraged when they were fined for illegal parking.

The faculty were a bit elitist with the staff . Maybe I should say special, not elitist. They didn't turn their work on time to program secretaries, and that made life difficult for the secretaries. They had to do all this work quickly. They were running around asking for more money. Do you know about the supply room?

Severn: No.

Nisbet: Okay. In the basement of the Seminar Building was the supply room. That was the room that held all the supplies that you dealt with—pencil and paper, notebooks, anything that you needed.

There was one guy down there forever. He was down there by himself. He was a quiet guy, and I'm sorry to say, I can't remember his name. You had faculty running through there all the time. "Oh, I'm out of this, my students need this!" He didn't say, "I'll get them for you two weeks from now." He gave them to you now.

Staff bent over backwards to help us. The bookstore. Perfect example. You're supposed to get your bookstore order for books at a certain time so they can order them. Some faculty were consistently tardy. But the staff graciously put up with it. The woman who ran that bookstore in the '70s—again, I'm sorry, I don't remember her name—did an incredible job under difficult circumstances.

It must be said somewhere in our history that the staff in its entirety was instrumental in our success. We couldn't have done as well as we did without all their support.

The Library. There's an array of people who worked in the library—many of them women, who I can't remember their names—that I worked with the library and my students. I had the Library put on workshops for my students. It was an honor to be with these people.

Severn: That's great.

Nisbet: Even at the very beginning, Dean Claybaugh is a figure. He was the very first Vice President for Finance. His secretary was terrific. Charles McCann had a long-time secretary (Rita?) who was honored by the Board of Trustees when she retired. These were just amazing people, in my view. They just can't be thanked enough.

We're going forward with the '70s. We're still in the '70s. All kinds of things happened unique in the '70s. For example, Carolyn Dobbs and the Organic Farm. She was the one that got the Organic Farm started, and it started our first year here. Guess what? It's still going, and it's bigger than ever, as far as I can tell.

Phil Harding, who was one of the four in Environmental Design, was an architect. He had students build a treehouse. It shouldn't be called a treehouse because it sounds too trite. He had

students design and build and use a mammoth structure, in the trees. The project went on for several years.

Severn: What came of that?

Nisbet: It didn't last more than a decade as the college had it torn down because they felt it was a liability. It wasn't done to code. Didn't have inspections like a regular structure, so it's gone. No one in the '90s or today knows it ever happened.

Can you imagine telling a group of students, "You can design this, and we have the money to get the supplies for you to build it." That's what Phil Harding could do because there was money in those early years. He didn't design it; he just oversaw it. If a student had a structural design that he felt wasn't going to work, he would tell them to go back and do it different, make it stronger. The students loved that.

Severn: That's kind of the ideal learning experience.

Nisbet: Exactly!

Severn: You're exploring, but you have a guide to keep you from getting too off the rails.

Nisbet: That's exactly right. As an architect, he loved that. He wasn't trying to create career architects. It's the enthusiasm and confidence that someone can say, "I can do this" when it's all finished. And "If I can do this, maybe I can do something else not even related to architecture."

Another thing that happened the first year. Somebody—I can't remember who—rented a kayak mold from the University of Washington for 24 hours. It came as a flat fee. I think it was \$500. Evergreen was on a large plot of land with various old structures. The campus itself is only a small square footage of the total acreage that they have here, so there were other buildings on the Evergreen campus, a couple of them right down in the water.

There was this tiny, little garage-shaped building with nothing in it, and whoever got these molds went into this building. It had very poor ventilation and you're dealing with fiberglass.

They announced to the faculty "We're going to rent this kayak mold. Anyone who wants to build a kayak, get in your, I don't know, \$100 deposit or something," and then they would schedule your time. They had more than enough faculty, staff to agree, and they booked the place full for 24 hours, cranking out these kayaks. I was one of them that got a kayak. It was also an interesting experience doing this. However, it wasn't very healthy because we were sniffing in all these fumes in this tiny, little building with poor ventilation. That happened once only in 1971. Never again did that ever happen.

Another thing the first year. Some men, faculty and staff, discovered a basketball hoop in the steam plant. I never saw it, but Phil Harding did. Apparently, the staff of the maintenance people put

this basket up there, so some of these men—faculty and staff—started regularly playing basketball at night in the steam plant as a faculty-staff getting together, knowing each other, playing together. That went on. That was also stopped in the '70s because it was supposed to be locked up and somehow, they found a way to get in the building at night.

Severn: Chuck, I don't want to cut these stories off of the first year, but you were kind of moving into the '70s and it seemed like you were going to get at some of the changes that were happening after those first couple years. I just wanted to make sure that we do get to some of those.

Nisbet: Okay, here's another one. This is mid- '70s or late '70s. A student knocked on my door. It was a young woman that I recognized from a previous program in the early '70s, and this was mid- '70s, late '70s.

She walked in and she said, "Chuck, I'm going to apply to law school. I'd like to have you write me a letter of recommendation." I said to her, "I can't do that." She said, "Why?" "I can't write it because you were not a good student, and if I point out why you were not a good student, this is not going to help you get into law school." She turned around and bolted from my office.

In about 1980, there was a knock at the door. I said, "Come in." She came in, walked up to my desk, and she said, "See this?" It was her law degree. It's one of the happiest stories that I had at Evergreen because even negative incentives can work. That woman walked out of there and said, "That sonofabitch, I'm going to show him." And she did.

It's where you tell someone the truth and they do something about it. We all have the capacity to do a lot more than we think we can if we just put forth the effort and work at it. To me, that's all she did, and I was damn proud of her. That's a great story.

Severn: In your experience, do you think that Evergreen facilitates the ability for faculty to do that more than other institutions?

Nisbet: No, not necessarily, because in some sense, you establish much more rapport with students at Evergreen than you do elsewhere. There's something about that rapport that means you won't be mean to them; you won't be as hard on them. There's something about that.

Severn: Yeah, there's something about that teacher-student hierarchy that breaks down a little bit and it might make it a little harder to . . .

Nisbet: Yes. There's got to be all kinds of variations of that. I had another case very similar with a graduating senior—a man—who was showing me his application, again for a law school, and it was filled with spelling mistakes and grammatical mistakes. I looked at it and what I said to myself was, you've

been here four years and you don't even know how to write properly. I said, "I can't write a letter for you." I never heard from him again.

I think all these faculty that I've talked about with you previously, like Jeanne Hahn, they would be perfectly honest with the students, but there was a minority of faculty at Evergreen who were not, and the students that couldn't write worked with some of them. If you're not honest with them and you're just trying to get along with them, be buddies, be friendly, you are doing students disfavor.

Now, we're going to turn this on its head. Over time at Evergreen—my last decade at Evergreen—if I had a woman who I was writing a critical evaluation of, I kept the door open and had a program secretary sit outside the room in the hallway. Why? Because the whole gender war was so hot then that if I had written a bad evaluation of a student, they could turn around and write a bad evaluation of me, and even accuse me of being sexist or whatever. Why was the program secretary sitting outside my office? So she could hear the conversation, and if there was a discrepancy later about what the young female student would say, it wouldn't be he said/she said.

Things changed a lot over the years about tension, and about leverage. The leverage came from gender, and it came from race. After I left, it didn't get better. It just escalated.

Severn: Do you think, Chuck, that . . . how do I say this? . . . if these are tensions that to you feel like they're salient, do you think there's something about the Evergreen model that exacerbates them?

Nisbet: Oh, absolutely.

Severn: What is that?

Nisbet: It's not complicated at all. It's something I didn't understand when I came there. I wasn't even thinking of this. I was thinking of us all in the same boat. We're all thinking the same. I'll tell you exactly what I think. Over my three decades, the college hired smart, strong, street smart black women; Maxine Mimms, Angela Gilliam, and Naima Lowe. [All soon discovered they could exploit "white guilt" of the left learning liberal faculty to their advantage. The first step was getting women behind them or at least not openly disagree. It proved relatively easy to silence Type A white males and Type B white males were never a problem.]¹

At the beginning, we were all individualists. The men stayed unorganized to the very end. They weren't part of a group. There was no men's group or men faculty meetings or men gatherings. There were friends of men who got together, but there was no community of men. That made it easier for these three women to pursue their agendas.

¹ Bracketed sentences are those inserted by Chuck Nisbet after interview.

White men, like myself and others, we harbor liberal guilt. I consider it a failure of my generation of white males. I will be 85 soon. We failed our children, our country, to deal with racism substantially. It's definitely improved but it's not enough. It's not anywhere close. So, we carried guilt that we haven't done what we should have done or could have done. Therefore, when you carry that guilt with you, when someone suggests or accuses you of being racist, you just collapse. You fold up. And you shut up. That's the first thing that happened.

The second thing that happened at Evergreen is when the college was trying to increase the number of women at Evergreen—because it was small, zero in the founding faculty, and it was small all over the country—it took time. As it took more time, the energy to do something got stronger. The woman faculty did something the male faculty didn't do. They started to coalesce. They started to meet. There's nothing wrong with this. This was no conspiracy. I think women faculty academically had always been token for too long. They were the ones who couldn't talk, not because they were told not to talk. Because they were not encouraged to talk in departments loaded with white males.

When they got to Evergreen, I think there was an interest to be an equal partner, not be a minor partner. If you were one of these female Evergreen faculty members who came from a background where you didn't speak up, all of a sudden, you're in a background where you were encouraged to speak up and encouraged to talk. But rather than speak as individuals, the women met and discussed ideas and reached a kind of consensus among themselves about positions. I don't mean all the time or 100 percent, but they came up with a critical mass of what was acceptable to all of them.

So, when we held a faculty meeting, one or two women would present something and three or four more would second it. In the room, you could feel it that the women are for this. One guy standing up and saying he's against this, it was weak.

[My 30 years at Evergreen seem a stark contrast to the troubling years of 2015-2017 when students tried to block a convocation speaker's lecture to open the school year, when] no discussion or feedback was solicited or allowed on the equity plan written by a few faculty that had their own self-interests in mind, when students & faculty publicly demanded a faculty member be fired for speaking up and to the "wrong" people. How far we've come from the birthing model of the college in the '70s when the meetings were open, when discussion was encouraged, when no one was excluded. Have we progressed as an institution of higher education with an innovative model, or regressed into a post-modern place of identity politics where self-interest and control was not challenged because of white liberal guilt that allowed itself to be pressured into submission for fear of being called a racist? If you're a white liberal, the worst thing that can happen to you is to be called a racist, or even to be implied. Not even to be called, but to be hinted that you're a racist. In a contemporary scene now, it's not just being called a racist, but how about a white supremacist?

That was the Achilles heel of the model; that we attracted white liberals and white liberals weren't willing to stand up early on to things that should not have happened in the area of sex and race.

A footnote to this. Rudy Martin was a very important black faculty at Evergreen. In my opinion, he did the best he could to work with white faculty and black faculty. He didn't take sides. He was trying to build bridges. He was trying to do the best that he could.

One of the hypotheses that I have is that over all these years, you will not find male of color that ever took on the role of the three black women. In other words, assertive, tactical, getting liberal white faculty in line to follow their agendas.

I'm not suggesting that Maxine didn't make a positive contribution at Evergreen. [She was responsible for creating and administering the Tacoma Campus. But oversight was almost non-existent.] She took in faculty like Richard Brian—a mathematician who was sick and tired of teaching math—and she protected him the whole rest of his career. She surrounded herself with a team of people that did Maxine's bidding and she in turn protected them..

There have been student protests at Evergreen throughout its existence. Many of them encourage and or lead by Peter Bohmer. He was a rather mild-mannered guy, but single-minded. Peter was always supporting protests, but his protests were generally about national policy and national outcomes. They weren't directed internally. [One of his protests took students to the state capital and it didn't end well for Evergreen. The Daily Olympian displayed a front-page picture of Peter standing on the desk of a state legislator. It took some time for us at Evergreen to heal that wound.]

Severn: Oh, wow.

Nisbet. To my knowledge, there was no one on the faculty in my 30 years that would have turned students lose on campus to threaten another faculty member. When I saw video of May 2017, it was a George Floyd moment! You don't have to know a great deal—just look at the video and hear the audio—and you're seeing things on that campus that were never close to happening in the 70's, 80's and 90's. It made me incredibly sad, unbelievably sad, to see what happened to my/our college.

Anyway, I'm getting a little carried away, but the question you asked, did the model contribute to that? The answer is yes. It's called unintended consequences. I don't think there should have been, but if [we had been stronger and willing to speak up and not evolve into that "silent" community, it might not have ended with the very existence of Evergreen being threaten. Maybe it wouldn't have

ended that way if we were more of a heterogeneous community. But we were pretty homogeneous in our feelings, in our politics, in our empathy, and therefore, we were too vulnerable.

That's why I'm trying to talk about the college in a period that was so robust, was so healthy, even though it was under siege from outside in the 70's. I still think despite all these problems that the college still produces a product, a good product. I'll give you one example.

I came back to the college—I can't tell you the year exactly, but I'd say it was seven years ago, something like that—and it was the end of the year. Arts students had a gallery opening of their products for the year and Jean Mandeberg took me to the campus to see it. I was stunned by the quality of what I saw. Unbelievable to me.

And what I mentioned earlier, about Evergreen teaches students to talk, the whole gallery was manned by the students themselves. They took turns keeping gallery hours. They were there to talk about their work, and they were so clear, so articulate, so full of confidence and satisfaction in their yearlong projects. It was the best thing in art I've ever seen. It was far better than anything I ever saw in 30 years.

I'm saying somehow, despite all the things that have been happening, there still has been something very good going on at that college to produce a product, and the product, in this case, was better.

To cap it off, Jean took us over to the Lab Building to show the new facilities that somehow, she and others had been able to get money to do. We met a couple of other students working there. It was just a thrilling day for me.

Severn: That's great, Chuck, and I think this is a really good place to draw this session to a close. You're highlighting a really positive note about Evergreen, and also making, I think, relevant criticisms. I think that's great. You leave us with a nuanced moment of where Evergreen is now which I appreciate.