

Gail Martin, VP of Student Affairs
Interviewed by Nancy Koppelman
The Evergreen State College oral history project
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FINAL

Koppelman: Gail, you were going to say something about graduation.

Martin: I was going to say something about Evergreen's first graduation.

Koppelman: Please. What do you remember about it?

Martin: I remember that there was a negotiation late into the night the day before that graduation with a group of students. I can't remember how many, I wasn't part of the negotiation, but it was between them and President Charles McCann because they wanted to protest at graduation, or sit-in, or whatever. And somehow, I don't know how this happened, but the outcome was they dressed in military garb and were on the stage during graduation. So, I still think it's interesting that whoever made that decision, might have been Charlie, I don't know, gave them the opportunity to be the focal point. This was the day after the Tet Offensive started and the students were animated, and afraid, and mournful and showed all of that while they were doing their—I don't even know what the word for it would be—their demonstration. It ended up right at the middle of the first graduation at Evergreen.

Koppelman: And where was the first graduation held?

Martin: It was held in the library lobby.

Koppelman: And do you remember how many people graduated?

Martin: Not very many.

Koppelman: So, did they all fit on the stage, then?

Martin: The graduates were front and center on the floor.

Koppelman: Okay. So, who was on the stage in military garb?

Martin: Students.

Koppelman: Graduating students or just students at the college?

Martin: I couldn't tell.

Koppelman: That gives a good flavor, for me, of the idea that something was very much at stake for people and every step that they took. So, that the first graduation there's a negotiation going on into the night the night before about something.

Martin: And I think the effect was to, it sent the message that what these students are upset about, and caring about enough to disrupt graduation is important that they're speaking their values about this.

Koppelman: So, it sounds like it doesn't surprise you, knowing Charlie for example, that that would have been the outcome of negotiation. Can you say more about Charlie in particular? Or did it surprise you?

Martin: It did. Because the Charlie who was my teacher was a very thoughtful, and traditional academic who had ideas about how we could improve education for students. In having said that, I think one thing Charlie manifested, although he was very strict in many ways in his classroom, it manifested for me his way of doing things that the students' view and work are extremely important to the endeavor. And there's no reason to be there if that's not true. And I think by giving the student responsibility, assigning them the job of educating themselves in a social context, I think that some students felt liberated and others were terrified.

Koppelman: Yeah, I think that's still the case.

Martin: And I'm curious what kind of an Evergreen student I would have been. I wondered about that because I didn't know there was anything wrong with lectures. (laughing) I enjoyed every one of them.

Koppelman: Can you say more about Charlie? Who became a very close friend of yours. Thinking back on those early years of Evergreen where you were when you described yourself in the back of the room listening to what was going on. When you think back on what he was like, and what type of president he was, what do you remember about him? What comes to mind?

Martin: One characteristic he had was listening well and often only responding with silence. By that I don't mean he was secretive, but he felt that his opinions could derail things. And he was hoping that if you take away some of the hierarchical organization of higher education that that would allow room for other people to grow their own opinions and have them feel accepted when they articulate them.

Koppelman: And do you think that happened? What do you remember about relationships between Charlie and the other people in administrative positions, the faculties stumbling along figuring out what their work was?

Martin: Well, Charlie was sitting at the back of the room too, a lot of the time. Dropping in and out and listening to where everybody was really trying hard to pull something together that would be meaningful. And you know the short list of what he was against?

Koppelman: Mmmhhh, no grades, no tenure—

Martin: No departments. That's maybe the most revolutionary thing, and it's also one of the things that some faculty experienced the loss of.

Koppelman: I think that's still the case because eventually everyone comes to teach leaves that structure and comes into this very different structure and then tries to figure out what's my professional life going to be now that I don't have that structure anymore? How does this different structure work?

Martin: I think the question you're asking is hard to answer because more than anyone I think I ever knew in higher ed, Charlie was skilled at keeping his own counsel. He didn't have to be heard about everything.

Koppelman: It sounds like that was something you really respected about him.

Martin: I think it worked, to try harder. You could see after Christmas the planning faculty had taken a deep breath collectively and got moving again.

Koppelman: And this is partly because he had given them that book to read.

Martin: Charlie didn't give it to them. I think it was Mervyn Cadwallader, one of the deans. That was a good thing.

Koppelman: So, can you remember in those first couple years, once the doors opened and the first graduating class happened, any specific issues that came up that you had to solve collectively? Or that you had to solve or saw other people working on that became the college, essentially? Because clearly the college opened, you had faculty and you had students, you had a skeleton crew of services. But then a lot still had to be constructed kind of on the fly. So I'm just wondering if you have any specific memories of a student or faculty member, or some issue that came up that illustrates some of that.

Martin: Well, the one I know the best is the one I was part of and that was creating a career services at Evergreen. And the faculty was nervous, the administration was nervous, the board of trustees was confused.

Koppelman: What were they nervous and confused about?

Martin: They were nervous and confused about how these liberal arts grads were going to be able to convince somebody to hire them. And I was kind of naïve that I didn't expect there to be so much weight placed on what happened to Greeners after graduation. During that time I was running seminars called, "Is there life after Evergreen?" It turns out there was.

Koppelman: Do you remember if that happened right away? That there was this fear that what would happen to graduates and could they get hired anywhere?

Martin: Yeah, I think it was there almost from the beginning. I think the faculty did talk about it. And the students, one of the really enjoyable things in working with the students on the things like career planning and finding a job and all of that was working with the ones who sort of applied their Evergreen pedagogy to finding work. And to go out and visit work places, and try it on for size, and have a

conversation with who's there, and see what you can find out. And put that together with what it felt like to be there, and what the other workers looked like. I don't know about you, but for me it has never been as important to have a right job title that represented success, it's always been the environment, it's always been more important for your own growth and development.

Now, when I started to work in career planning and placement, the first day I came to work, and I got there at eight o'clock, and the administrative vice president was standing by my door. And he said, his name was Dean Clabaugh, and he said to me, "I opposed you being hired for this position. And I want you to know that I told Les Eldridge that I was opposed to him hiring you, and I told Larry Stenberg the same thing." I said, "Well, thanks." What a welcome.

Fast forward by about six and a half months, and we're up in Library 4300, and the place is full of students and employers. I can't remember the exact numbers, but I think we had 10 state agencies represented who all had hiring authority of their own. And so what I did was have a meeting with the students and I said, "I think this is an ideal time to practice your skills about talking to people, where you're exploring work and we'll try and get you divided up by something you're interested in. We won't be able to do that with everybody, but you'll still learn about real life workplaces that are hiring people." I asked Dean Clabaugh to give the opening to this thing and he talked about the college, and thanked them all for coming, and hoped that they would have a productive and useful day. I think the employers had a great time, most of them. And they enjoyed that the students set the agenda and the students asked the questions. So it was like they get a chance to tell the story of their workplace, and they recorded all of these sessions. The reality of it was a really good thing. I had resisted just bringing HR recruiters from various organizations onto campus to interview for specific jobs because I think on the way to getting a career-related job you need to get your feet wet in the workplace.

Koppelman: Absolutely. That was good thinking.

Martin: Well, before I went home that day there was a knock on my door. It was him, it was Dean Clabaugh. And he said, "I was wrong." I said, "Thanks." It was a good day.

Koppelman: I'll bet.

Martin: Because I didn't know if they'd come. That was the year I visited every state agency, and it was exhausting.

Koppelman: I bet. But, your instincts were right, I think, about how to help students. Because there's that intermediate step before you apply for a job you need to know the landscape and how to find that out.

Martin: Yeah, and while you're learning about that questions will come up or dilemmas.

Koppelman: And it's good to be able to ask them when the job itself isn't at stake.

Martin: Very good. They were thrilled not to be asked, "Are you hiring today?"

Koppelman: Can you talk a little bit, if you feel like you'd like to it would be great, what you remember Rudy's contributions being that come to mind right at the top in those first years. I mean I'm sure lots of people can talk about those things, but my guess is that your eyes were wide open in a special way to what was going on there for him between him and everybody else. Just how he became such a leader so quickly, at least it seems like it happened pretty fast. It's obvious he had that in him.

Martin: I think he had probably been a leader every place he was. Definitely there was more at stake. There weren't any bricks—that isn't true, there's red square. I was going to say bricks and mortar, lots of mortar.

Koppelman: Still wet, still in the bags.

Martin: I see Rudy most deeply engaged in, he was part of an informal conversation that people were having about standards. And it was really important to Rudy without being a Luddite slob about it, that students be held to a level of college performance before they're awarded credit. This was a difficult transition for some faculty to maintain a traditional standard like that. They do it with A, B, Cs elsewhere, but you should still be doing it. Sid White wrote a wonderful article that I think it sort of brought that conversation to a close because he had gotten it right. And it was a paper he did on the difference between being authoritarian and authoritative. And that that difference, if you can move from being authoritarian person, the person who knows the most about this, if you can move and open up that space for students. And it's fine to help them fill it up, but not to tell them exactly how it has to be. That giving over was really hard on some faculty. Rudy had, as you know, he had a lot of natural authority. And he changed in his early days at Evergreen around that. He taught himself not to always give the student the answer, but to give them a direction to go and find it. And he enjoyed that. And he told the students what he was doing so it wasn't—

Koppelman: Wasn't mysterious..

Martin: No. "And this is why I'm doing it. I have office hours." Then there was what they were calling at the time multi-cultural education. And when the first draft of all the programs came in for the first year of the college there wasn't any in the curriculum. Rudy was devastated.

Koppelman: Right. I think you told me about this last time.

Martin: So he did what he didn't want to do at Evergreen, and had had to do every place else. *He* had to create, as the only black faculty member, a multi-cultural coordinated studies program. I worried at the time that Rudy might nurse a kind of bitterness about that. But he didn't.

They created this Contemporary American Minorities program where white people were the minority and blacks, Indians, Asians and Hispanics—he hired for the purpose of staffing this program a Hispanic male and a Native American male who is still a close friend. The end of the program was on Hope Island and they created an intentional living community. It was pathetic, and it was hilarious.

Koppelman: Tell me why it was pathetic and hilarious?

Martin: Well, it rained all the time.

Koppelman: So were they living in tents?

Martin: Yeah. I mean some of them wore their good shoes. One person was quite entrepreneurial, she brought cigarettes and sold them one at a time to people. But they made it, they knew each other in different ways than they did before.

Koppelman: Why did they do it? What do you remember about why that's what they wanted to do at the end?

Martin: I think that's what Rudy wanted them to do.

Koppelman: How come?

Martin: To experience exclusion, to experience being a majority.

Koppelman: I mean in the intentional community, who was in the intentional community, the whole program?

Martin: Mmmhh, the whole program with a couple of exceptions for people who couldn't do it physically.

Koppelman: So, who was experiencing exclusion, who was experiencing those things you just described? If everybody was there I'm not quite getting that.

Martin: The white students had been reading and studying things that would tell them what it was like to be a minority, and in interaction. They did seminars but I can't remember how those were organized.

Koppelman: It sounds like what you mean is by leaving campus they got to experience what it was like to be a minority because even though white students might have been a minority in the program, the program existed in this context where whites were a majority on campus.

Martin: Right.

Koppelman: So, by leaving and going to do this intentional, maybe a little utopian community.

Martin: Yeah.

Koppelman: That made it real, what they had been reading about.

Martin: Mmmhhh. And Rudy remained close to many of those students over the years and the students of color and the white students, I mean I don't know numerically, but they stayed in touch with Rudy

after the program was over. I think there have been three reunions of the program. And I think I was at two of them and the other one I was at Antioch and couldn't go.

But I just had a visit with one of the first Evergreen students I ever met. Her mother brought her up here from Chico, California to enroll in Contemporary American Minorities. That's why she came, she wanted to understand. And right before she came she twisted her ankle so she was on crutches. And she came to our house with her mom because her mom was understandably nervous and wanted to check it out, and her mom was a college professor. So, Leslie had bothered to bring a huge bag of sand.

Koppelman: This is the student?

Martin: Uh-huh. She brought a huge bag of sand and she had to somehow lift it with her leg, this was supposed to—

Koppelman: Therapeutic.

Martin: Yeah. I said, "Leslie, didn't you think we had sand in Olympia?" "Oh, I don't know anything," she said." (laughing) She and her Mexican husband were here about a month ago. And she researched and found this wonderful cabin on Budd Bay where they stayed for three nights and hung out with us. It was great to see her.

Koppelman: That's great. So, when you think back to those early years, are there specific incidents that come to mind? Or turning points you remember, whether it was a crisis or you remember something wonderful happening? Or a big surprise, or a moment when people had to come to the table and make it work? Anything come to mind for you about that kind of thing?

Martin: We had a number of the interdisciplinary programs, it was sort of from the beginning, we had one, at the most two, fail. It was kind of like, how was it failing? Well, the students were very unhappy with it. The faculty appeared to have thrown in the towel. And then the effect of that on the deanship, where Rudy was very quickly after he came to Evergreen, and having to reconstitute, it's sort of like— there was a metaphor for it we had, maybe I'll think of it. And then dealing with the students and they had the option of joining other programs, of doing independent study. One of the effects of that was if your program failed, I remember talking with students who felt that they should have done something rather than just be critical.

Koppelman: You mean that it was some way their fault?

Martin: Yeah.

Koppelman: So they felt responsible in some way?

Martin: Yeah.

Koppelman: That's interesting.

Martin: Now, I didn't interview all of them, but I think four or five of them came for appointments trying to figure out how do I put my airplane back together here? This is not good. And a huge ambivalence about leaving Evergreen. Some did, and it's perfectly understandable why you would. So that puts the anti-up on putting together the right team of people. And I guess in a way that's consistent with Evergreen, make the space and give the faculty permission to seek out who they want to teach with, and not have it come from the dean's area. They're to help fill out a team if a faculty member wants to talk about it, but don't do it, don't force it. And that helped.

Koppelman: It's interesting to hear you talk about the early years and digesting problems and understanding what happened. I wonder if you could say a little bit about the circumstances of your promotion to Vice President of Student Affairs, which happened in 1986. Can you talk a little bit about that? You went to graduate school to get your doctorate. You lived in New York for a couple of years to do your coursework and all that, bringing the boys with you, etc.

Martin: Three years.

Koppelman: You lived in Park Slope in Brooklyn.

Martin: The second time. The first time we lived at 99th and West End Avenue.

Koppelman: Sweet.

Martin: In a pre-war. Used to see all of the musicians headed for 32nd Street, running down the street on their way to work. I decided at some point that I wanted to be a Chief Student Affairs Officer, and I thought I had one or two jobs left in me. Becoming the Vice President for Student Affairs was a mixed experience. It required that I displace one of the people who supported me coming to work at the college in the first place, Larry Stenberg. That the consulting team that President Olander had put together involved a major reorganization of Student Affairs, and it organized Larry out into starting a job that would have been interesting, but since he had been the Dean of Students certainly felt like a demotion. But he was offered a job that would startup Alumni Affairs. And President Olander thought that was a good idea because Larry knew so many students.

I had originally applied for a job I thought was a perfect fit for me, half academic and half administrative in the Advising Center, to be the Director of the Advising Center. And when I was offered the VP job, which I didn't even apply for, first thing I asked them was, "What about Larry?" And it was clear that the president had decided for whatever reason, the reports of the consultants that he brought in that they needed to have some new faces and create some new structures in Student Affairs. So, I agonized my way. We were entering a big budget cutting period, too, and I wanted to make sure that

you didn't just create something but that you actually funded it so it could do the work. So I accepted the job. I don't think anyone was more surprised than I was.

Koppelman: So, from that vantage point that you had in that job, how did you see Evergreen differently than you had before? *Did* you see it differently in some ways than before from that perspective?

Another way to ask that question is what did you learn that you didn't know before because you were in that job?

Martin: I think during my work experience at Evergreen, before the Vice President job, I continued to learn about faculty through students. And hardly a day went by that that wasn't extremely useful learning. In terms of advising students to know the faculty well enough to help people connect with the students they want to connect with. One time a faculty member, can't remember who it was, asked me, "Do the students come and tell you all the horrible things about, say, me?" This was in career planning. I said, "Most of the students I talk to, almost all of them have liked, and in a worst case scenario could at least tolerate, their faculty because they wanted to learn the subject that that person knew well. And I didn't lose that connect when I became Vice President, and I worked at it.

Koppelman: So here's a question, this is an unfair question, but I'm going to ask it anyway.

Martin: Another one?

Koppelman: Are these unfair questions I'm asking? When you left Evergreen we threw a party for you, as you're recall, and it was really quite an event. It was a mournful event that you were leaving Evergreen, but it was an amazing event because if you'll remember about 300 came to your party, there were hundreds of people there. You were the kind of leader at the college that was a very rare thing as an administrator, very rare. So the reason why it's an unfair question is I just wonder if you can say why you think you were able to touch so many people? I mean I can certainly say that, but I'm not the one being interviewed, but I have ideas about that. And whether any of the things that you brought to that position were things that you learned from just observing some of the people you've admired. For example, you said about Charlie that he kept his own counsel and he didn't say a lot. Now, you're a much chattier person than Charlie, but I have a feeling that you learned some things from observing him that you brought to your own work. Do you think that's fair to say even though you were different from Charlie? Just in terms of making space for other people to be themselves.

Martin: Mmmhhh. I was never afraid of students. I was comfortable reaching out to them. In terms of, I'm stumbling here because I don't know that I externalized the way that I wanted to be with students.

Koppelman: Most of the people who came to this party were your colleagues, they were staff, faculty and administrators. So those are the people I'm talking about, the people who are doing the daily grind

of keeping the college going and who I think really relied on your leadership and a kind of support they got from you in order to keep themselves going, especially through some of the tough times. So that's what I'm getting at.

Martin: I think one of my goals was to be loyal and forthright with the people who reported to me, and there were a lot of them, but to be there for them. At the same time to help everyone in Student Affairs to understand that that's not why somebody goes to college. We're here to help hold the whole thing together, but the core action is over here in academics. Doesn't mean that students won't learn a lot from each other in the dorms, in their living arrangements off campus, all that will be good. I remember inviting myself on to the salary setting taskforce that the college had, may still have as far as I know.

Koppelman: There are unions now.

Martin: No more administrative exempt employees?

Koppelman: There are, but they are all unionized now, believe it or not, even though they're exempt.

Martin: Well, back before there were unions in student services—let's just take the people in admissions, the counselors on down. The counselors didn't make a living wage. I mean it was unintentional on some level that they were paid so little. I don't know who would think staying at a Motel 6 in Moses Lake overnight while you're meeting with students in their meeting rooms downstairs, it was a neat thing to do and you would enjoy being away from home. And we were so dependent on them to tell the story well, and to tell it with good solid information and with presence, no jokes. Everybody would say, "No grades?" And they'd laugh. So for me I appreciated, I'm focusing on admissions, but that was a critical thing and remains a critical thing everywhere.

Koppelman: It sounds like what you're saying is one of the things you gave to the staff, the manifestation of your devotion to them, to me, was all the people who came to that party for you when you left, but that devotion was you understood their work from the inside because you'd been in Student Affairs and all these other capacities for so long. So you really knew what was going on.

Martin: I did, but I wrote a proposal and took it to the taskforce to increase their salaries and they wouldn't do it. I spent a lot of time helping them be clear about their expectations. And told them that we wouldn't have a chance to try again until the next budget year, and that's like asking people to live on hope.

Koppelman: So, the staff knew you were doing this on their behalf?

Martin: They knew eventually.

Koppelman: That's the kind of thing that really makes a difference to people. They knew you were looking out for them.

Martin: I was trying.

Koppelman: You were. And even if you couldn't convince the taskforce the fact that people knew that you were making the effort makes a *huge* difference to people's moral and sense of commitment when they know you have a commitment to them.

Martin: And having said that, I agree with that but I also understand why someone would say no more. Telling the Evergreen story it takes a while to get your message down and to work your personality into it. This is not to imply that the salary taskforce were bad people or anything like that, they were dealing with budget cuts and keeping jobs funded rather than giving a few people a raise. It's not an easy balance to strike.

Koppelman: Well, we've been talking for a little over an hour. And I'm wondering if there's anything coming to mind that you'd like to talk about? We'll digest and do this maybe one more time.

Martin: It's indicative of the kind of attachment I had to the college, that in all the places that I worked Evergreen is the only one where I have been motivated to donate money, and to still miss it. For me it is all those people.

Koppelman: Well, the situations you describe add up to more than can be captured in an interview.

Martin: It was great good fortune. A lot of people got alienated at Evergreen, disappointed, and it's painful to see that. I want to go say, "Do something to help yourself. Just don't get alienated" because it's a horrible place to go. I just never got alienated. I think some people tried to get me alienated.

Koppelman: Well you got out, also.

Martin: Yeah, I chose my time.

End of Interview