

Dee Van Brunt
Interviewed by Nancy Allen
The Evergreen State College oral history project
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FINAL

Allen: Now we are recording. We decided that we were going to talk about Jose Gomez, because we both really knew him well and think that he was an important person at the college. Unfortunately, he died before this project was ever conceived, so we are just going to talk about him and tell what we know about him.

Van Brunt: I think that's a wonderful idea. I worked in the deans' area, I forget for how many years. But I was there when Jose was hired. I was not on the hiring committee, though. I'm not sure why I wasn't.

Anyway, he arrived at the college and was given an inside office in the deans' area. No window to the outdoors. It was in this little office. There was no description for the job that Jose had. Nobody knew what he was supposed to be doing. Now, maybe Patrick Hill did, but even the deans didn't truly know what Jose would be doing. But it slowly evolved, and we realized.

Allen: Well, he had a title.

Van Brunt: I don't even remember his title.

Allen: Dean of International Studies, or Students? I'm not sure.

Van Brunt: Maybe it was Students.

Allen: And we didn't have any international students. [laughing]

Van Brunt: We didn't have very many international students, but when we did, when a student was admitted to Evergreen, there was a lot of paperwork. A lot of stuff with the Feds and the State and so forth to be taken care of, and Jose was to be responsible for that. Somebody probably knew what he was supposed to be doing, but most of us were a little bewildered.

The other deans—the four deans in the area—weren't particularly outgoing or very receptive of Jose. In the beginning, his close friends became the rest of the staff in the deans' area, mostly a bunch of girls, women. We just learned to love this man. He was extremely bright, he was caring, and he was not afraid to ask about things that he didn't understand or didn't know how it would work there at the college. We all just grew to love him very much.

Not long after he came, maybe within six months, I was moved upstairs near the Provost's Office, so my contact with him right there on campus wasn't a whole lot. But I got to know Jose better at various social gatherings, and we invited him over here several times for dinner. He would just stop on his way home. And in later years, he would just stop uninvited. We loved seeing him, and somehow dinner for two always became dinner for three. It worked out just fine.

Then we, Norman and I, started taking Jose down to Michael Beug's vineyard at harvest time each year. There were a group of regulars that just started going down and helped harvest grapes. We drank a lot of wine, got very filthy dirty, tired. Ate lots of good food. Everybody would bring good food with them. Jose always rode with Norman and I. We did a lot of visiting up and back. We'd take different routes so Jose could see more of Western Washington, Southwestern Washington. I came across a picture the other day of Norman just standing on the shore of a lake buried in the forests south of Morton. It reminded me of those times.

I'm trying to think. I taught him how to gut a salmon. I'm wondering, I can't remember where we got the salmon. But I have pictures of us out in our utility room, and he was learning how to clean out a salmon so we could cook it for dinner. I don't know where that salmon came from.

Allen: Do you think he actually ever did that again?

Van Brunt: I doubt it. [laughing] I doubt it. I didn't go to Jose's home much, but one time he was going to host some sort of faculty gathering. I don't remember if it was a new faculty or somebody we were trying to woo, but I remember there was a gathering at his home and he asked me if I would come and help him. He was impeccably neat and tidy and exacting in his home. It was always just perfect.

Allen: Yes, it was. But he also didn't do much there, as far as I could tell. [laughing]

Van Brunt: No, he didn't, but it was sparkling and lovely. He let me make guacamole in the kitchen. I'd start to do it my way, and then he would show me his way, so I would adapt. [laughter] Anyway, he just became a very treasured person in my life, and he grew to be much loved at Evergreen by a lot of people. It took a while.

Then, when he rotated into teaching, he was an amazing—I did not take any classes from him, but my husband took American Indian Native Law class from him and just was blown away by Jose's ability as a faculty member, and his knowledge of the subject, and how he worked with students. Norman went to school way back in traditional times at the University of Washington, and Evergreen was different to begin with. He loved that class a lot.

But Jose at work, he just became one of the girls at work. [laughter] He was funny. I remember

Paula Butchko, she had pretty raunchy humor.

Allen: I remember that! [laughing]

Van Brunt: And terrible today. It was probably unacceptable then, it was, but Jose would join in the fun. I don't know, he was just a unique, special, very caring, caring man. Then he had that battle with cancer. He handled it amazingly well. He was so positive. And that he died was just a crazy, sad thing, because the cancer was gone. I think he went in for some sort of repair work.

Allen: Hmm, I don't know. What he told me was that the doctor said, "Well, it's all gone, except there's this one little tiny thing that we still have to get," or something. At the time, I thought, I bet whatever's left there is not life-threatening, and I bet you could just wait and watch it. I connected it with how impeccable he was, and how he thought of it as a foreign body or something dirty.

Van Brunt: Yes.

Allen: And he just needed to get rid of it. That's what I thought, because he did go through a decision-making process about it.

Van Brunt: Yeah. It was strange, just because I thought the cancer was cured. But then he aspirated.

Allen: It was like 98 percent. That's what he told me.

Van Brunt: Whatever it was, it was supposed to be short and not dangerous.

Allen: Right.

Van Brunt: And he was going to come home happier, and cleaner, if that's what it was to him. I would talk to him almost every day and he wouldn't let me come up to see him. I just couldn't understand that, but that was the last week or two that he wouldn't let me come up. He had aspirated something. Somebody had given him some food improperly or something.

Allen: That's how he got an infection in his lungs. Then I guess he had not very good immune response because of all the chemotherapy or something.

Van Brunt: Mm-hm. It did, it weakened his immune system tremendously. Anyway, I miss him.

Allen: Oh, I miss him very much.

Van Brunt: He was one of the special folks at Evergreen.

Allen: I think he's the only great person I ever knew, and it's because of all his work with Cesar Chavez and stuff.

Van Brunt: His history was amazing. He wrote the first gay-lesbian laws when he was at Harvard Law

School, or after he graduated, or maybe while he was still there. I don't quite know. He did amazing things in his life. He worked for Chavez there in California. He was his right-hand man for several years. Everything he did was for the betterment of human beings and our world. Anyway, we lost a very special person.

He also loved community. We were talking the other day about community at Evergreen and how much of a caring community it once was. Over the years, as old-timers retired, new administrators came in, often not understanding the nature of the college and of the community that was there. Over time, it just sort of was diminished. You didn't see or hear of people looking after each other like they once did. You saw more in the hallways conversation. There was a person there who had no use for Jewish people, and she would voice it in the hallway talking up on the third floor.

Allen: Really?

Van Brunt: Not faculty. She was a staff member. But nobody corrected her or told her that was inappropriate and stopped it, but one time we would have done that.

Allen: Yeah.

Van Brunt: This person was associated with the President's Office and so it was really awful. And then, just plain, old caring. We had Bonnie Ward. Bonnie was a custodian at Evergreen.

Allen: Oh, Bonnie, of course.

Van Brunt: She was developmentally disabled.

Allen: I still see Bonnie a lot.

Van Brunt: I've seen her once or twice when I'm on the west side, but not much lately. Of course, I'm not out and about as much as I used to be. But Bonnie, she would do anything in the world for you. Somehow her parents brought her up to be self-sufficient, out in the dominant community. She wasn't over protected. She worked at Evergreen for over 30 years.

Allen: Describe Bonnie a little bit.

Van Brunt: It's hard to describe Bonnie. You knew obviously there was some developmental disability, but she was friendly, she wanted to do anything to please you, to help you. To earn extra money, she walked along the roads from the college to home every day, picked up debris, picked up cans and bottles and so forth.

Allen: And I think she walks a little funny, or she did. She seemed a little crippled.

Van Brunt: Yes, she had sort of a shuffle, and a little jerky walk. Yeah, she did. But she managed to hold

down that job, and she worked hard.

Allen: Yeah, I know.

Van Brunt: I was just amazed. But the community cared about her.

Allen: Yes, everybody really loved her.

Van Brunt: They had respect for her. They treated her just like everybody else. But later years, she suffered.

Allen: How do you know that she suffered?

Van Brunt: Jane Jervis told me after I left. I left before it totally disintegrated, because I didn't like what happened. I retired probably three or four years too soon, but I just didn't want to be there anymore.

Allen: What year was that that you retired?

Van Brunt: I retired in August of '96. Then I came back and worked a day a week the '96-'97 school year. Lorri Moore, the person who was going to do my job, who was hired to replace me, had a youngster who was in his last year of preschool before kindergarten, and she wanted to be home with him a day a week, and so I did that. It worked well for both of us. It was sort of a nice transition for me.

After that I was gone from Evergreen for a while. Then I got a phone call from Bill Bruner. Jacinta McCoy had died of a horrible asthma attack in the process of moving from one home to another one night. Jacinta was in the Communications Building. She was the assistant over there who worked with the manager, and the manager of the building was fired. I don't really know exactly why he was fired. I wasn't there then. But I understand he was somewhat un-adept. I don't know what that was all about, but Bill Bruner said, "There's nobody there to run the building. We're not ready to hire anybody. A lot of healing needs to happen between faculty, and faculty and staff. I need you to come back."

So, I came back for 18 months. I think I always had the respect of most of the faculty. There were some newer faculty there. Walter [Grauman? 00:18:40] and Ariel Goldberger.

Allen: Goldberger or something.

Van Brunt: Anyway, there was a lot of jealousy among them because one of the faculty sort of . . . I don't know how to put it . . . crossed over into the other faculty's area of teaching. There was just all sorts of stuff going on. Staff members were not being treated properly by the new faculty.

Allen: I didn't know that that was part of the change.

Van Brunt: Oh, a lot. People didn't trust each other over there. It was horrible. And it was during that time—

Allen: This was all theater and arts people?

Van Brunt: Theater and arts people. Mm-hm.

Allen: Because I was still teaching then.

Van Brunt: Theater and arts people and animators. We had two animation faculty, one of them was rather new. The other animation person was a staff member who could teach. That person had been there almost since Evergreen started was treated badly. It was just an unhealthy thing. So, I did the best I can.

I was just an accounting person, but I went over there and I hired a student assistant, who was very smart, willing to learn from me. She took on difficult situations. She learned to find solutions. She took a lot of burden off of me at certain points while she was there, and in the later months that I was there. Things did get somewhat better. People started talking to each other. They were able to sit in meetings and treat each other respectfully. I felt like I did an all right job.

Allen: Of course you did an all right job!

Van Brunt: Well, a lot of it was out of my expertise, but I like people.

Allen: What part of it was out of your expertise?

Van Brunt: Remember, I was just a lowly staff person. These were faculty I was dealing with, and some of them were rather arrogant.

Allen: Of course they were, but it was about running the building.

Van Brunt: And then I had Peter Randlette all the time wanting more, more, more of everything. I had him the first month I was at Evergreen. He was a student. He was wanting something [chuckles] and he never stopped. But he also was very supportive of me. Doranne Crable died during that time.

Allen: I kind of remember that, yeah.

Van Brunt: I loved what I was doing. It was a challenge. I cared about most of the people there. I'd known them for many, many, many years. It was just some new people that just . . . and I don't know what went on with the old manager. I don't know why he was really let go. All these things happened during his tenure there, all this stress and behavior.

So, I went home and then I was called back one more—oh, and Bill Bruner had said to me, “I don't want to hear anything about that building unless it's something you absolutely just no way possible could deal with. I need to be free of that worry.”

Allen: Wow.

Van Brunt: He was a special guy. Bill Bruner was a special person. He'd been the Dean of the Library at one time. How did he come over? Was he an acting Dean of Academics? I don't remember why he was the Dean of Academics.

Allen: No, I don't either.

Van Brunt: Maybe when he rotated back into faculty, maybe then he rotated out again. I do not know. Maybe he was subbing for some dean, or maybe it was in between deans. I do not remember because I had been gone a long time.

Allen: I don't remember what dean had left, but I was surprised, too, because I think he wasn't in the right field, or what I thought was the right field for that position, or something. I don't know what it was.

Van Brunt: Because it was the Budget Dean, and that was the one dean that did not normally rotate out of faculty.

Allen: That's right.

Van Brunt: That was the one dean that was usually hired specifically as the Budget Dean.

Allen: That makes sense.

Van Brunt: Yeah. A lot of things have faded, Nancy. It's been a long time. It's been . . . '96 . . . it's been 22 years.

Allen: You retired exactly 10 years before I retired. I wasn't as influenced by this period that you were talking about, I don't think.

Van Brunt: Well, you weren't based in the building.

Allen: I was in the humanities. I was based in a completely different area.

Van Brunt: Right. It was pretty traumatic over there.

Allen: But I think that the college lost its sense of what its innovation was. I mean, I applied to Evergreen because it was going to be innovative, and because it was a new place that was just starting up.

Van Brunt: Right, and it was to be interdisciplinary. That was the other wonderful new thing for colleges in Washington.

Allen: Yes. And I remember when I came, the Planning Faculty had just recently fully decided to go with coordinated studies. Because they had been having a big debate about I guess they knew they wanted to be interdisciplinary, but they didn't exactly know how to go about it. I think Merv Cadwallader was

the one who knew somebody who had helped develop the idea of coordinated studies, so he sold it. Actually, I think I remember hearing him say, "Maybe I over-sold it. Maybe we shouldn't base the entire college around this. Maybe I'm trying to go too far with this idea, especially in a place that's supposed to be experimental. Maybe we should relax and be more experimental about the curriculum."

But everybody also thought, well, if you don't set up an alternative plan, then everybody will just creep back into their old ways. And all the faculty came from departmentalized institutions. Nobody except me and a very few others had done a little bit of interdisciplinary work, but nobody was really experienced at it. So that was . . . that was just a great success.

Van Brunt: It was beautiful.

Allen: That's the reason I loved the college, because I learned so much. I would have been just—

Van Brunt: Of other disciplines, as you were teaching in your language arts.

Allen: Yeah.

Van Brunt: This is it. Teachers became learners as well as teachers, all the way through with interdisciplinary studies.

Allen: I know.

Van Brunt: It's a beautiful concept. I still think it is today, but I understand that there's less and less of it at Evergreen today, and I'm sad about that because I think it's a wonderful way to learn.

Allen: I think that's one reason the college isn't as good as it used to be, and one reason people say there's no spirit of community, because, in fact, we used to all work together. We used to all work very closely together and rotate around, so there was kind of a sense of community that we built up.

Van Brunt: Just within your individual programs.

Allen: Also, when we first started, there was an enormous amount of zeal. Like we just were all fed up with our old jobs and we wanted to establish something new, and we wanted to be creative, and we wanted to work our asses off in this new system. And we did.

Van Brunt: And we worked hard.

Allen: And it was very, very hard.

Van Brunt: Yes. I took two years of two-quarter interdisciplinary programs, and I know how hard the faculty worked. I know how hard we worked [laughing] the students.

One thing I wanted to say about Jose, too. Totally going back to Jose. He was one of the first

faculty, if not the first faculty, to use the Internet.

Allen: He was really a technoid, he was.

Van Brunt: Yeah, but I mean, for teaching. He taught sometimes in the summer, there were classes over the computer. I'm not saying this properly. There's a word for it. Anyway, that was very new, and it may be that he started that at Evergreen.

Allen: I mean, I know he did it. I don't know if he started it because he wanted the college to do more of it or something. Maybe he just started it because that was an easy way to do summer school. I mean, I know he started it in summer school.

Van Brunt: Yes, he did, and it was something new and innovative.

Allen: Yes, it definitely was, and Evergreen should be really set up well to do that because we had a great Computer Sciences Department, I thought anyway.

Van Brunt: We did.

Allen: And we involved computers as much as possible.

Van Brunt: Anyway, there was the thing about the community or lack of community changing. The college was going through a series of slow but very definite changes. I remember when I was back on campus for that 18 months, Jane—I can't say her last name—she's a woman that worked in the Library as long as I've known her. She was deaf.

Allen: Oh, I know who you're talking about. I can't remember her last name.

Van Brunt: Anyway, one day I ran into her during that 18-month time in the Communications Building and she said how good it was to see me and everything. She says, "You know, it's not like it was when you were here. People don't talk to each other anymore. They're not kind of each other. It's so changed."

Allen: That was around the middle of the '90s, late '90s.

Van Brunt: It was late '90s because I left in '96 and I didn't come back for that job, I don't know how many years later it was. Maybe it was right around 2000, 2001, somewhere in there. It's just a different place. We used to have, for no reason at all except we needed a party. Four or five or six of us would get together and decide it was time to have an all-campus party. We'd take over the fourth floor kitchens.

Allen: Yeah, I remember that.

Van Brunt: I remember Steve Hunter and Walter and Jeannie Chandler and I, we pulled off a huge big party one year. Well, they're still doing that. As people died—this was a community that was

established in '70-'71 and it was still going on, well, in the mid-to-late '90s is when we had these parties.

And then we also lost several younger staff people to cancer, who lived in the Library Building. We once in a while had a memorial service for faculty, but now we started to have memorial services for staff. I remember Paula, and Mary Hansen, the secretary in the Library. I remember those. I hated speaking in front of the public. I never, ever got comfortable with it. I remember Paula had asked me before she died if I would speak at her memorial service. And I did do that, and I was so glad that I did it, but it was about the hardest thing I ever did at Evergreen. I never understood that about myself. I can yack yack yack all day, but getting up in front of a large group was hard for me.

Allen: It's hard for me, too.

Van Brunt: I don't know what else, Nancy.

Allen: I feel like I want to say one tiny thing about Jose, which has to do with his memorial service, too. I think Jose was really different between women and men. [sighs] I want to say something like he was more himself with women.

Van Brunt: I think he was.

Allen: He didn't mind—

Van Brunt: He was at ease with us. He was a gay man, and I don't know whether that had anything to do with it or not. But he was, he was always comfortable.

Allen: When you said he was one of the girls, that's very much—

Van Brunt: He chimed in with us, and he never—he just seemed at home with us. And some of that may come from he had Bonita, Jenny . . . I can't say that . . . Aurelia . . . the sister, I can't say her name. He had five sisters, so he lived in a household of women growing up. That could be a piece of it. He was just comfortable. He was very close to his mom. He liked and respected women.

Allen: Yeah. And so I thought that I knew a lot about him because he and I had been friends for a really long time. I can't remember exactly how long it was after he was hired, but he got a grant from, I think, the National Endowment for the Humanities, to take a group of people, a group of faculty people—to Chile.

Van Brunt: I remember that.

Allen: And I didn't know about it. I didn't know about this possible trip to Chile. I don't think it was very broadly broadcast among the faculty. But he knew [laughing] very clearly that he did not want Jorge Gilbert to go on the trip to Chile.

Van Brunt: Yes! [laughing]

Allen: And he knew that Jorge would try to go on the trip to Chile. And Jorge, being from Chile, had no reason to learn about Chile, and would just be doing it so he'd get a free trip down there, and then he'd take off and do whatever he wanted.

Van Brunt: I believe that, Nancy.

Allen: So for that reason, Jose contacted me and said, "I don't know this person, but she has to speak Spanish because she teaches Spanish, so I'm going to see if she wants to go." So he called me into his office and said, "I think you should take a trip to Chile this summer." [laughing] He even intimidated a little bit about how he didn't want Jorge to go, even the first time we met. My mother had just died. I couldn't have done it if my mother hadn't died, I think, because I couldn't have taken that much time off.

Van Brunt: Because you were looking after her.

Allen: But I was just kind of ready for a trip, so I just went. He went, too, and he and I got to know each other on that trip. He was such an important figure of comic relief on the trip. It was really great. But that's how I got to know him.

Van Brunt: I see. I didn't realize that.

Allen: And then, when he started to teach—he rotated onto the faculty—I'm the first person he taught with. I actually taught him a lot of stuff about teaching. [laughing] Because he was so scared to lecture. He would just over-prepare and tear his hair and work for hours and hours and hours. Then he'd be so full of nerves that he couldn't do it right. It was hard.

Van Brunt: Well, he finally learned, because Norman is a highly critical person, and when he took the class from Jose, he was blown away.

Allen: Yeah. That was Jose's field, too, the law.

Van Brunt: Yes, I realize that, so I don't know if it was just unfamiliar territory as far as the discipline you were teaching in or what.

Allen: He didn't know—

Van Brunt: And, you know, I don't know. I always thought Evergreen was sort of wonderful because they didn't care what gender or whether you were gay or lesbian or bi or whatever. We all learned just to accept each other and care about each other. We didn't think about that much, but I wonder for Jose, there were always many more women who were gay than me in our—

Allen: Yes, absolutely. I think he was the only gay man there for quite a long time.

Van Brunt: Yeah, and so that might have been hard for him. I don't know how the male faculty approached him, or what his relationship was. Some of the faculty, many of them could be very arrogant and self-serving. I could even name two or three, but I'm not going to do that.

Allen: [Laughing]

Van Brunt: Because some day, somebody's going to read this stuff.

Allen: Yes, and you get to take out whatever you want, too. [laughter]

Van Brunt: Well, Mark Levinsky. He was a wonderful teacher. Alan Nasser. Those people, they thought they were, if there is a god, god's gift to the world. I just wonder how he was welcomed or not by the male faculty.

Allen: Hmm.

Van Brunt: I don't know whether I should have said any of that, but I was concerned for him off and on looking for friendships and so forth. But he found them. He found the people, good people, who loved him and cared about him.

Allen: Was he good friends with John Perkins?

Van Brunt: John was in the deans' area. He was the Budget Dean, I think maybe, when Jose was hired. I was still downstairs and John was the last dean that I worked directly for downstairs. I think that's when Jose came, when John was there. I don't know. I'd have to ask somebody. I don't know how we'd find that out. We'd have to get into the personnel records or something, unless there's somebody who would remember. Maybe someone who was dean around that time would remember that, but I'm pretty sure it was John.

Allen: I think that Jose also had a problem getting started because of the way he was hired.

Van Brunt: Yes.

Allen: Because Patrick did something kind of irrational and completely off the wall, without consulting anybody. He was the Provost and so all the deans—well, the faculty—were very confused.

Van Brunt: Maybe he didn't consult with the deans or faculty enough.

Allen: No, he didn't. He didn't. So we didn't know . . .

Van Brunt: . . . what his role was to be, really.

Allen: No, we didn't know, and I think a lot of deans—I'm not sure about this actually, now that I think about it. But sometimes brand-new deans were asked to teach on the faculty first, and then they

became deans after they actually saw what the place was like.