

Stephanie Coontz
Interviewed by Anthony Zaragoza
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FINAL

Zaragoza: We're here with Stephanie Coontz on August 29, 2018. Stephanie, would you just start by giving us an overview of your time at Evergreen? When did you start at Evergreen? What were the three or four major highlights, and then when did you retire?

Coontz: I think it would be easier if I told you, in a little longer detail, how I got hired at Evergreen, because it was kind of a surprise. The background to it was I thought I had given up my academic career. I had been on the fast track. I was a Woodrow Wilson Fellow at the University of Washington. I had my master's degree but I was also very active in the anti-war movement, and after Kent State, Jackson State and the killings there, the national Peace Action Coalition asked me to go on a national speaking tour. They said the ideal thing to say to a just 20-something kid, and that is that you're the only female speaker we have who can do this, and we need you to come and help. There was a lot of fighting in the anti-war movement over whether you should have violence in the street or whether you should keep on demonstrating and trying to win people over. I belonged to the second camp. So, they asked me to go on tour, and I was just starting my Ph.D. I already earned my master's. So I wept a little, but I decided I would do it. I thought I had given up my academic career entirely.

I was the national coordinator of the National Peace Action Coalition; I stopped and was working back East, and my mother applied to Evergreen. She talked to Rudy Martin, and he said, "Well, we don't really have disciplines, but we have so many English people"—which was her field—"we're looking for a historian." She said, "Well, my daughter is a historian." He said, "Oh, the Stephanie Coontz?" [laughing] So all the things that I thought had destroyed my career in academia got me invited to apply. My mom said, "Go ahead," so I did.

I did get hired. I started here in 1975 and I taught with two other first-timers, York Wong and Susie Strasser. No, I take that back. That's the first time I taught was with them, but I came into a program with Chuck Pailthorp. That's how I got to know him. I can see him right now, but this other faculty member had gone off to Australia in the middle of the class. I came into this class and it was, to my mind—my interview at Evergreen was like the best and the worst of Evergreen at one time. I walked

into Tom Rainey's class, and his class was discussing all of these really complicated issues and everybody was involved. And then I walked into another class where they were discussing Sufi poetry, and instead of asking, "What was the historical context of this?" they were just talking about it in the abstract. One professor said, "This poem speaks to me on different levels of multiplicity." I was like, what the hell is a level of multiplicity? [laughing]

So I could see right away there was a really wide range of things here, but I accepted when I was offered the job. I came into this program and the program itself was just everything that these three faculty members had wanted to read—sort of a typical Evergreen—and so I kind of led a little mini-revolt to try to get more coherence in it, and Chuck Pailthorp followed along with me. He and I became best friends and really good colleagues as a result of that.

When that was over, there were two new hires, York Wong and Susie Strasser. I proposed a program called The American Revolution, because it was a 200-year perspective, and they came in with me, and we taught together and it was very exciting, a typical Evergreen thing.

After that I did interdisciplinary programs for several years, and they were great. We'll go back and talk about a few of them that were really exciting. But I also started writing a book. I was asked to write a history of American women, and when I delved into it, it seemed to me like it was just going to be either what's been done to women through the ages or what some women have done in spite of it. So I looked for a place where I could bring men and women into interaction, and finally decided, oh, duh, the family, but that was not yet a respectable academic field. So here I am, without a Ph.D., doing a very, very new and not-yet-respected academic field.

Zaragoza: At a new school that is way out in the Pacific Northwest.

Coontz: But at a new school that allowed me the freedom that I would never have gotten anywhere else. I didn't have to publish or perish. It took me 12 years to write that book, which I now think you could call as pompous as you want to be, because I never used a dime word if I had a dollar one in my pocket. [laughing] But it benefited greatly by the fact that I was able to teach with anthropologists, political scientists, literary people. Colleagues, in at least the early days, were just so supportive. People would come over and have seminars with me as I got to the writing stage, helped me think it through. That book was published called *The Social Origins of Private Life*.

When I looked up from that book and realized that having been teaching and writing now for 12 years and not really doing the social activism that had—I realized that the family was suddenly a really

hot issue. All of these groups that had been—like John Birch Society-type groups had added women to their board and were now talking about the family.

Zaragoza: Right, and this was Focus on the Family time.

Coontz: Yeah, Institute for American Values.

Zaragoza: We're talking mid-to-late '80s.

Coontz: Yes. Then I decided that maybe I should take the research that I'd done—but put in such academic terms because I was anxious about proving myself to other academics—and turn it into a book that used that research to directly engage with these emerging issues, and that's the book that became *The Way We Never Were*. That changed my life and my trajectory at Evergreen because it got me so involved with the family issues. I eventually then helped found the Council on Contemporary Families, which was a group of family researchers; not an advocacy group but a group designed to provide peer-reviewed, good, solid, balanced research to press who are being fed all cherry-picked ideological things.

The result was that increasingly was specializing in ways that my first 10 years here, I did not. Again, Evergreen was very supportive. They allowed me to teach by myself when I needed to, to rely on people like Peta Henderson and Chuck so that I taught many times with the same people. Of course, at the time, I think we were really lucky in those early days. The Legislature didn't like it that we attracted older students who had tried their hand at more traditional education systems, did not like it, and came to Evergreen knowing exactly that this is what they wanted. And so we had just a really exciting bunch of students, not as challenging as later when we started recruiting freshmen, who really sometimes were not suited for the Evergreen experience and tried to jump into the interdisciplinary stuff without having learned to crawl, so to speak, having learned the disciplinary base.

It was a very exciting time, but that's the point at which—in '92 to '94, I would say—that I began to kind of change my orientation and be much more outward. But I've always just really appreciated what Evergreen did for me in those formative years, and continues to do for me.

Zaragoza: Your final decade or so at Evergreen, how would you describe that time? And when did you retire, Stephanie?

Coontz: I retired . . . I'd have to look up the date, but it was about four years ago. I love teaching. I just love it. But increasingly, I think, in those last 10 years, because of the work that I was doing with the Council, with going out and learning, relearning and then extending the learning of how to take work public, I became much more focused on changing my students' writing, helping them to learn to write

more effectively and more persuasively. So a lot of my work was more individual, was less interaction with colleagues than I had in the first 10 years and more interaction with students. By the time I retired, I think, in some ways, I was doing my best teaching ever in terms of the students themselves, but perhaps not my most effective interdisciplinary teaching because I was too focused on what I knew and what I was learning with my students.

Zaragoza: It sounds like that final period was about taking the lessons that you had learned—over a lifetime of both activist work as well as academic and pedagogical work—and passing some of the most important lessons on to students so that they could take those lessons and put them into place themselves.

Coontz: Yes, although one of the interesting ironies is that it was—despite the fact that I remained an activist in many ways—it was increasingly aimed at pulling them away from immediate advocacy and teaching them to do the basics that I think are necessary to persuade people who don't already agree with you, and to stop using the kind of jargon and words and formulations that turn people off if they don't already agree with you. So I spent a lot of time—I developed fairly early what may have been somewhat different at Evergreen—three-hour final exams, forcing them to rewrite papers entirely, having them turn in outlines, critiquing their outlines, having them revise those and write me a letter about how they were going to change it. So I spent a lot of time working on people's writing and their persuasiveness.

Zaragoza: Very, very important work. I want to shift gears quite a lot and back up now, now that we have a good overview of your career at Evergreen, and we'll get into those details. But now, to just back up. If you could talk about where you're from, about your parents, and the impacts of your early life on where you ended up with Evergreen and the work that you were doing.

Coontz: I'm from a pioneer family in this area. My grandfather was a McIntosh. He came from Nova Scotia—my maternal grandfather—and my maternal great-grandmother was born on the way out here in a stockade where they were stopped for a while. They were among one of the first parties right after the Bush-Simmons settlement.

Zaragoza: Oh, wow.

Coontz: Lived in Tumwater, the first white settlement here. My grandpa eventually owned a logging company and he bought this—well, my great-grandfather started buying it, so we would never have been able to afford this if that hadn't started. But he was the kind of guy who passed on sort of the best elements of small-scale capitalism, the kind of guy who, if a logger dropped by with something, he'd

invite him in for lunch. Grandma would kind of complain about the dirty boots and he would say, “Man’s good enough to work for me, he’s good enough to eat with me.”

That affected my mother. When she went to college she became kind of a left-wing radical. She actually ended up marrying a union organizer, which my grandpa did not approve of. [laughing] Then my dad went back to school later on the G.I. Bill. I never went to school in Tumwater or Olympia, but every summer the grandparents—my folks were quite poor for a while, but my grandparents would pay for the kids to come back. I was in the Tumwater house until 1950, when my grandparents built the house out here with this land that they’d been buying. I always came here in the summer, so I really thought of myself as a native Olympian-Tumwateran.

Zaragoza: Where you were growing up?

Coontz: Moved a lot. My dad went back to school when I was about four or five. He went back to school at the University of California. We lived in a housing project in Richmond, an all-black housing project.

Zaragoza: Richmond, California?

Coontz: Richmond, California—which was really good for me to see the difference between the place I lived during the winter, where you would go to the store and people would think you were stealing something, and then you’d come home and you’d walk into a store here and people would say, “Oh, that’s Mac’s granddaughter. Give her a Coke.” So that was a very important lesson for me to see the difference of how people were treated in the context.

My dad went and got his B.A. at UC Berkeley, then a master’s in Pocatello, and then he went to the London School of Economics to get his Ph.D. He first got a temporary job in San Diego and then Syracuse, and then ended up in Salt Lake City, which is where I went to the last year of junior high school and then all through high school, although I graduated from high school a year early and went off.

Zaragoza: Where did you go to college?

Coontz: The University of California at Berkeley.

Zaragoza: Before we get into your college years, were there other pivotal moments, lessons like the contrast between Richmond and here, or turning points that you experienced that you think are notable?

Coontz: Well, I'm not one of the student rebels. My parents were anti-racist activists, anti-war activists. My mother was the executive director of the ACLU. They were very involved in the NAACP. Those were all very important parts of my formation.

If you want to think of pivotal moments, my father never sugarcoated anything. I remember him taking me, when I was about seven—I knew all about racism and how horrible it was—to this movie. I don't know if it was *Cheyenne Autumn*, but it was one where this supposed Indian and white guy were raised as brothers and then had to fight each other. And at the end they both die, but they crawl toward each other and they clasp hands. And I came out weeping, weeping, weeping. And I remember I said to my dad, "You see, Dad? They know how bad it was to the Indians." And he said, "Yeah, well, it's easy to make films about the Indians. You don't see them making films about blacks like that." [laughing] I remember feeling like I'd been kicked in the stomach. But I could see the truth of it; that it was easier to romanticize the Native Americans, and blacks were still seen as more of a threat. So he was kind of somebody who knocked sentiment right out of you whenever he had a chance.

Zaragoza: Some deep truth, though.

Coontz: Yes, it was.

Zaragoza: So you take this suitcases full of generations of experience with you to Berkeley. What was that like? What were some memorable moments from your time at Berkeley? Because we must now be in the early '60s.

Coontz: Yes. It was right after the first demonstrations against the House Un-American Activities Committee had come out, and HUAC had put out a film called *Operation Abolition*, talking about how bad the students were who demonstrated against it. And that's why I went to Berkeley because I wanted to be part of those demonstrations. [laughing]

Zaragoza: It was basically like a commercial for you.

Coontz: Yes, you're right. Okay, I'm going there! So, being young and a funny combination of insecure and confident, I left my other college applications incomplete, only completed the Berkeley one, and thank god, got accepted. When I was there, I was active in peace vigils, and then we started organizing picket lines for desegregation, particularly against the *Oakland Tribune*, which was right in the middle of a black neighborhood but didn't hire any blacks except in janitorial jobs. This was what triggered the Free Speech Movement that Bill Knowles called the Berkeley people and complained, and then they issued a thing saying you couldn't recruit to these demonstrations on campus that year on-campus tables.

We demonstrated against that, and people got suspended for sitting at tables. We all signed petitions saying we sat at tables, too. I remember crying as I did it because I thought I might be kicked out of school, but I did it. And then things developed in the Free Speech Movement, and I was one of the people who got arrested in the sit-in. So those were all very pivotal for me. From there, the anti-war movement developed. When I came to the University of Washington, I came up here partly because my grandmother was here—mostly because of that, I think. And I had the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship.

Zaragoza: I just want to pause really quickly to just see if there's a memory from the Free Speech Movement times that you think is important to share, or that you think captures, in a snapshot, that period in your life.

Coontz: Well, everybody remembers the Jack Weinberg quote: "Don't trust anyone over 30." It was a joke. That's not the way we felt. What I remember most vividly—and I think it really helped me reinforce my sense that you should try to win people over, not try to turn them off—this was a time when you had anti-war protesters lying down in front of troop trains, which I just thought was stupid. I mean, these working-class guys on these trains being drafted off to Vietnam, and the students lying down in front of them spouting anti-war slogans. It didn't sound like they were on the GI's side.

After we were arrested, we were taken to Santa Rita Prison Farm. They kept us there until about 4:00 in the morning—and it's in the middle of nowhere, and there's no public transportation—and then suddenly they said, "Okay, you're released." So we went out. I was a 17-year-old girl, and my girlfriends and I were really worried, you know, how are we going to get home? And there was a line of cars two miles long of people who had heard about it on the radio—older people who were there. They'd set up lines to make sandwiches and hot chocolate, and people were fighting for the honor of driving you home, and would say how grateful they were. That, I think, really gave me a sense of what it can be if you inspire people rather than turn them off.

Zaragoza: That's right. And not only what it can be, but what it's going to take.

Coontz: Yes.

Zaragoza: Because that sounds like a community effort in which various groups are inspiring each other, and helping each other through doing the things that are necessary to make social and economic change.

Coontz: Yes.

Zaragoza: Let's now get to the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship. Tell us a little bit about that, what that is and what it involved.

Coontz: It's a prestigious fellowship that pays for your master's degree, and I went to apply for it. By this time, I was in the Honors Program at Berkeley. I remember, I smoked at the time, and I said, "Can I bring a cigarette?" They said, "You won't have time." The questions were just rapid fire. I tried to answer them, and I think I used the word *Weltanschauung*—worldview—and at the end, I didn't know one thing, and the guy said, "Well, we need to expand your *Weltanschauung*." I have to look up the word that it was, I've forgotten it. Now I don't use such big words [laughing] that other people don't know. But I remember thinking, well, I blew that, since he said that. But I got the thing and I decided to have it at the University of Washington.

Zaragoza: What are you studying?

Coontz: History. I always studied history. When I was in high school, I got the DAR—the Daughters of the American Revolution—award for history, which I would think they would probably have turned over if they actually knew who they were giving it to. [laughter]

Zaragoza: And what you would become on some level, right? So, the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship in history at the University of Washington.

Coontz: Yes.

Zaragoza: Are some of your early interests—academic interests, activist interests—being formed in this period? Can you trace some things back to this time?

Coontz: I always liked history. When I was in school, that's what I excelled at, that and geology. Being a girl in those days, you tended—I had won a math contest when I was 13, but I forgot my math in high school, like so many of us did, so history was the thing that I went into.

Of course, the fact that my parents were so conscious of race and class issues. I remember reading Bertolt Brecht Holmes poem, *A Worker Looks at History*, where he says, "Who built the seven towers of Thebes? The books are filled with names of kings. Was it kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?"

So I was interested in social history, black history, and eventually women's history. All of those things and my activism helped inform my academic interests. But also, one of the things my dad always said was, "If you're going to be a left-winger in this society, you need to be twice as prepared as anybody else. And if you're going to be a female one, you'd better be five times."

Zaragoza: Yeah, I hear that.

Coontz: I took it seriously.

Zaragoza: Yes, and I think still that advice rings quite true. What about your activism? What were you starting to get involved with, and how did this interact with your academic work, or maybe collide with your academic work?

Coontz: It collided several times. I was 16 when I graduated from high school and my high school principal said, “You’re clearly bored. You want to get out of here?” And I did. As soon as I went to Berkeley, I got involved in a group called SLATE that ran candidates for office. I was involved in peace vigils and in the civil rights movement. Then I got involved in the Free Speech Movement, anti-war teach-ins. I didn’t become really a leader of any kind until I got to the University of Washington. There, I don’t quite know how, but I guess it was a smaller anti-war movement so there was less room to let other people do leadership stuff. I ended up doing a lot of public speaking. The press would come to me a lot.

Another formative moment, if you want one, is one of the television commentators, Don McGaffin, a very famous newscaster there, told me one time that when I was on air, they got more hate calls than anybody else, than any of the kind of ultra-left people or anything. And he said he couldn’t figure it out because I always talked so reasonably. Finally, he said, “It’s because you dress just like a sorority girl, and so the people don’t walk out of the room because you don’t look like what they call a ‘crazy.’” That influenced me a lot, too. Why differentiate yourself in any way?

Zaragoza: Yeah, blend and build. Got it.

Coontz: Got me in trouble in the women’s movement, though, because I always wore makeup, and I got censured in one of the women’s groups because I always wore makeup. [laughing]

Zaragoza: How did those dialogs go? What was some of that conversation like? Because it seems that we’re having similar polemical kinds of discussions, where there’s a right way and a wrong way, and almost a superficial assessment of those things.

Coontz: Yes. I think at the time, I just felt very confident saying, “That’s baloney. You prioritize. You can’t win every battle at once.” And you’re right, we do have the same things going on here. I think the fact that we were right in the midst of the civil rights movement and the antiwar movement made it easier to convince people that you need to draw people in where you can. You don’t ask people on a picket line to pass a test of political correctness.

Zaragoza: That's right. Which we've seen quite a bit these days, I think.

Coontz: Yes. So, all those things influenced me a lot, and between them they brought to both my political activism and my teaching the idea that you never assume agreement. You always try to figure out, what would a person's objection be to what I want to say, and how do I explain, how do I answer that objection? So, by the time I got to be a teacher, I would say to my students, "If you cannot explain the theory of a person that you disagree with in words that that person would accept, then I'm not going to accept that you understand it, and I'm not going to accept your criticisms of them until you do that." So, yes, those were all formative things for me.

Zaragoza: We're definitely kindred spirits in that sense, because in some ways it's what movements are rebelling against, they often think that the opposite is the right thing to do. When, in fact, what we're fighting for is choice, not mandates from either side.

Coontz: Right.

Zaragoza: Tell us a little bit more about what brought you to Evergreen. Is it in this period while you were at UW that you apply?

Coontz: Oh, no, no, no. When I was at the UW, as I said, I was planning to go on and do my Ph.D. But then you had the Kent State, Jackson State demonstrations. The result was a very big division in the anti-war movement between a group of people that I think of as ultra-left, people whose own political critiques had evolved to the point that they wanted to say, "This is an imperialist war, the violence that the U.S. is doing in Vietnam." And I understand their point. The only form of life that increased there during the war was tigers who learned to associate the sound of gunfire with the presence of dead or wounded human bodies. So, "That's the violence, and we should be violent, and have every right to be violent, and this is what we should do. And we shouldn't let people who disagree with us speak at rallies. We should just smash windows just to show them that we're against the state."

My reaction to that was, "You're crazy. This is not the way to win people over. You want to start with AR. You may be tired of marching. When the American people are tired of marching is when we'll get the kind of deep social change you want, and not until." That's when the National Peace Action Coalition came to me and said, "We'd like you to go on speaking tour to help the anti-war movement stay massive, legal, central issue and in the streets. Not to be co-opted either by the Democratic Party or by people who want to tack a laundry list of every demand everywhere."

If I'd been older, I would probably had guffawed when they said, "Oh, you're the only female speaker we have who could do this." But fortunately, or unfortunately, I was young enough to say, "Oh, well, in that case, I must do it."

So, I thought I'd given up my academic career. I was on tour for a year for the anti-war movement. I spoke at Salzburg at the Nixon demonstration. After that, I stopped. I worked for a while at Irving Trust Bank. I worked for a while at a magazine. And, as I said, my mother calls me up one day and she's all excited about applying to Evergreen. She calls me back the next week and said, "Well, they don't want me, but they want a historian. Why don't you apply?" So I said, what the heck? And I did.

First, Charlie Teske was in New York for a reason, and he interviewed me—which was the easiest interview you'd ever have because anybody who's met Charlie Teske knows that he talks constantly. All I had to say was "Yes" occasionally and add a sentence. [laughing] But on the basis of his talk with me, I got invited to come out and apply. I was interviewed. I know there was some controversy because some people—some feminists—felt that Rudy had pushed me too hard. But I was hired.

Zaragoza: I think it's Rudy Martin that you're thinking of.

Coontz: Of course.

Zaragoza: What were some of your first impressions and early experiences at Evergreen?

Coontz: I think I mentioned my first impression. I went to two different classes, and one of them was just the most exciting thing I'd ever seen, and then the other was this sort of La-la land as far as I was concerned. [laughing] Different levels of multiplicity, and, oh, yeah. And finally I said, "Has it ever occurred you to ask what the social context of these poems was?" A couple of students really liked that and came running up to me afterwards.

But everybody was very welcoming. We had some of the early political correctness stuff here, too. For example, there were some radical feminists who initially disapproved of me, and changed their minds later, but were hostile to me because, I think, there was a kind of sense that if I was supported by somebody like Rudy Martin, I probably wasn't radical enough. [laughing]

But on the whole, it was very welcoming. People were very interested in ideas, they were interested in teaching. There was that commonality that we all had that we're not in this because we're desperate for a job. We're not in this because we just want to publish something. We're in this because we're just passionate about teaching and learning, and so it was a great atmosphere.

It was also one where a much higher percentage—I grew to really like working with the younger students. I figured, you know, I want to be their first class so I can be the one that teaches them that this is what the discipline is like. [pounds table for emphasis] But it was very invigorating in those first, I'd say, eight or nine years when you got very sophisticated students who'd been elsewhere and were not happy with it, and they were so easy to work with, and exciting, and you learned things from them.

Zaragoza: You've given us some impressions of that mid-'70s period. Offer some stories that may help paint a picture for what Evergreen was like during this period of its history.

Coontz: People wanted to teach with each other. They'd ask you what you did and then they would want to teach with you. Sometimes that would work and sometimes it wouldn't, but even when it didn't, there was a collaborative sense. I remember I met with David Powell. One of the best classes I was ever in was a program called The Social Origins of Art and Ideology. We had a philosopher, Chuck Pailthorp, and a scientist, Janet Ott. At one point in it—I'm forgetting because we taught a similar program twice, but it was just exciting. We were learning all the time.

One of the things we learned very early, I think, in the most successful programs is that you've got to organize your program around a question to which no discipline only has the answer, because otherwise you won't really be doing interdisciplinary stuff. But we would have blowups. David Powell occurs to me because he used to love to be the bad boy, and he was a poet. So he would do this poetry workshop. The other thing was that the students know the faculty so well. They could make fun. They could tell when I was not happy with something that was being said because of the way I jiggled my shoe. They knew us very, very well.

I was sitting on the floor—big workshop—and he's reading a poem from the 17th century. We were focused on the 17th century art and ideology, poetry and philosophy, in the historical context. The question was: Why do people find certain kinds of ideas true in one period and just ridiculous in another? The Gothic cathedral—marvelous to the Northern French, disgusting and barbarous to the Southern French. What is it? What's going on? Obviously, no one right answer, but the sort of things you'd do.

In that context, David reads this poem by John Donne, *Batter My Heart Three-Person God*. At the end of it, he says to the class—in this way that David had of just you could tell that he was going to shock them—he says, "What's he saying here? What's he saying here? He's asking God to fuck him!" [laughter] And I bolted off the floor, I was so indignant at imposing 20th century ideas of sexuality on this poem to God. [laughing] And I had two of my favorite students—one of them who hates conflict—

as soon as David said it, she took one look at me and ran out of the room. The other one, who loved conflict, literally went like this. [slaps her hands together] Okay, I know somebody's going to blow up. [laughter] And that was the kind of atmosphere it was.

Zaragoza: Right. That's such a beautiful story. Thank you for that. In the first several years that you were there—say, the first five—are there changes that you noticed? Do you see things beginning to emerge that will later come to the fore, or that Evergreen will later transform into? How do you understand change in these first five years of your time there?

Coontz: We were all a lot younger. The faculty was much younger than it is now because we'd all been hired in a block of time, so one thing that changed—and this for the better—was that we had had this sort of youthful thing like we were colleagues with them. You would go to parties and you'd get drunk with them, that sort of thing. [laughing] Gradually, you began to realize this is not a good idea. [laughter] Fortunately, most of the women—not all didn't do this—but there were male professors who also had affairs, more than they would today, with their students, something that we did not approve of. I know it was true of at least one female faculty.

Zaragoza: Did that lessen in these first few years?

Coontz: Yes.

Zaragoza: Did the college formulize some kind of policy? Did you have discussions about it? Did it become something that norms were established around?

Coontz: It happened very gradually that the norms were established. There was some resistance. You still had people . . . [laughing] But it was kind of loosey-goosey for a while. Pete Sinclair would bring in an applause meter to faculty meetings, and instead of having a vote on something use the applause meter. And I would always roll my eyes at that sort of stuff. [laughing]

Zaragoza: Yeah, because that becomes a technique to get . . .

Coontz: It just struck me as just crazy. And there was a lot of EST-type talk—you know, follow your feelings. I remember blowing up at poor Rob Knapp one time when he was the Dean because I urgently said something about an issue that seemed very urgent to me at the time, and that I don't recall right now. And he said, "I hear what you're saying." And I started yelling. "I know you hear what I'm saying! I know you're not deaf! What are you going to do about it?" [laughter]

Zaragoza: I want action, not therapy.

Coontz: Right. So there was that, but it was pretty good-humored most of the time, I think. And there was an awful lot of generous collegiality. When I first started getting well known when *The Way We Never Were* came out—the first book, you know, nobody read that—but when *The Way We Never Were* came out, that was the same time that Dan Quayle did his *Murphy Brown* speech. And so I became the media’s darling for the anti-Quayle approach. No, *Leave It To Beaver* was not a documentary type thing.

I think at most universities that I still deal with today—and now I go around and I do media training and I do talk with a lot of universities—and you see this jealousy among faculty that was completely absent in the early Evergreen. People were excited that I was doing it, and happy if I called them up and said, “Can you give me a source?” Or, “What can a poet tell me about this?” Or, asking Rob Knapp, “What kind of analogy can you give me from science that would help me explain that?” People were just so generous about it. It was wonderful.

Zaragoza: More like a family in some ways.

Coontz: Yeah, the family squabbles but also the basic generosity there.

Zaragoza: What happens over time that moves to a different kind of arrangement that is less familial in the stereotypical sense?

Coontz: I really don’t know. Part of it that everybody grew older, and we weren’t bringing in as much new blood, so people then were going off on their own ways. I don’t know. You’re going to have to get a better observer than I because I was so outward-focused by that time that all I noticed was that—all along, I have not liked some things about Evergreen. That is that it’s all very well to have these evaluations, and I think it’s important, but I think that having deans come from the faculty becomes very dangerous at a certain point in terms of quality control. It’s the opposite I would have of my criticisms of most institutions that are too hard on faculty. But when you have faculty writing evaluations where you can’t tell, by reading the evaluations, where the student actually stands—what they’ve learned and what they haven’t learned and where they stand in some sort of relative measure—then deans should have been standing up for that a lot earlier. Instead, there was this sort of idea that was very nice, that we’d just encourage people, but there wasn’t a lot of rigor.

I also think that our complete interdisciplinarity, so that we didn’t have people teaching proper English grammar and expository writing, has always been a problem at Evergreen. And not every faculty member is prepared to do it. Some of us spent lots of time on people’s writing. Some of us would then look at other faculty members who said a great evaluation of a student that came into our class, and that student could hardly write at all.

I think that was always a weakness that wasn't so obvious when we were getting the older students who had been trained somewhere—came in with some skills—and it wasn't so obvious when there was a lot of interdisciplinary interaction; people hadn't yet formed kind of teams that I'm only going to teach with these people. But it's been a problem right from the beginning, and I think it got worse. And then, as people tried to solve it, we didn't really have the right channels to solve it, and it led to a lot of ill feeling. I can say that, I think.

Zaragoza: How much would you say of the changes that you've been outlining have to do with changes in scale at Evergreen, and the growth of Evergreen?

Coontz: Well, a lot. When I had 15 students in a class, I could have a life and do the kind of writing stuff that I do. By the time that I had 23, there was no way that I could do my outside work or research and still be a good teacher, so I would take unpaid leaves as often as possible. And that's the way I handled it. But, yes, I was one of the ones who developed some resentment against teachers that I saw as passing students through.

Zaragoza: Right. Would you talk a little bit about some of your teaching practices, maybe even some experiments that you tried in your pedagogy, insights into inquiry that you made along the way?

Coontz: Well, it kind of evolved. We would have these very stimulating discussions, but especially as we got a younger group of students and a more diverse group of students who didn't all have the same skill level, and came from different class and racial and ethnic backgrounds, you had to give a little more direction, I think, than we traditionally did. One of the ways I would do it is in seminars, some of the times I would insist upon slow reading of something. Like "Let's take this historical sermon and read it. We'll go around the room and we'll read one paragraph, and then we'll discuss it in seminar." Or, we would take a hard book, like *Possessive Individualism*, and read each paragraph. The students were bored to tears at first, and yet learned to love it because they got stuff out of it.

Then I learned that you could mix it up a little bit by assigning small groups to do tasks, and then come back and report on them. For example, one of the most successful ones is sometimes if we were doing something that had to do with history, I would have them take—let's say we're studying Colonial America—I would say, "Okay, this group, you go be a Native American." Or, "You go be a white Irish apprentice who's just been brought in." And "You go be a free black." And "You go be a black slave. And now, tell me a story. Make up a story that is plausible. It can be funny—use your imagination—but it has to be historically plausible." As a teacher, I learned that I had to jump in and tell them when it wasn't. Because at first—

Zaragoza: But when they're verging into stereotype or . . . ?

Coontz: That wasn't usually the problem. They were all of good will, but it was often wishful thinking or projection of values onto the past. The more I taught at Evergreen, the more I realized that you don't have to be the old-fashioned teacher who knows it all, but you have to step in and tell people and challenge them. Often I found, especially in the early days, that if I took a position that I didn't agree with and argued the students very early in class into silence, and then said, "I can't believe you let me do that, because you know that I don't agree with this, surely." Then you'd get them fighting back with you, so you had a nice, good interchange.

But I think what I ended up doing best, and I perfected it over the years, was teaching writing. But it involves giving them an assignment, having them, first, draw and write an outline; then I would give them feedback on the outline; then they would write a draft; and then I would go and hibernate for three, four or five days—whatever it took—to give them a two-page written response of all the things that I thought were weak in the argument, all the examples I thought didn't work, all the things that I thought they needed to integrate. And then—and when I added this it really made a difference—I would have them—first, after I did that, I would have them revise it. But then I learned that they were not really paying a lot of attention to this. So then I'd have them write me a letter, and the letter would say, "This is, point by point, what I'm going to do to handle everything you said. You can say, 'I disagree with it,' but you can't ignore it. So you have to tell me what you're going to do to make me accept the changes you've made." And that little letter, which didn't take me very long to read, was like a qualitative difference in terms of the students' learning. Once I got that letter and could give them feedback on the letter, then they could go ahead and revise their draft.

Zaragoza: Yeah, because now we're in the realm of metacognition and thinking about how that writing will need to be changed.

Coontz: Yes.

Zaragoza: You have to deal with the feedback.

Coontz: Right.

Zaragoza: No, I see. I like that a lot.

Coontz: The other thing I routinely did if it was poorly organized is I'd send them away—I'd have to have an individual meeting with them, but I'd say, "I want you to write me, in one sentence, the most important point—the point, the takeaway point—of this paragraph. So if the paragraph has a lot of

ideas in it, it's going to be a long sentence, but I want all of them in that sentence. And then, we're just going to read those sentences and see if they actually comprise a coherent argument."

Those were the things I developed over the years as a teacher that I did well. And it, I think, points to a dilemma for Evergreen, because the fun part is the interaction with the students, but that's a very time-consuming part, and that's what they needed. As I got better at doing that, I noticed that I got much more picky about who I would work with, because I wanted somebody else who would do that.

Zaragoza: That's right. And so those students were very lucky to have such a dedicated teacher in that way. That's one of the things that makes Evergreen so special are experiences students have like that of a teacher. What about you as a learner, are some of the things you learned about other subjects besides history over your time, that you learned from colleagues, students, or the general milieu of the programs you were teaching?

Coontz: I taught with Peta Henderson quite a bit, an anthropologist, so I learned from her. I taught with Chuck Pailthorp, a philosopher. I learned a lot from him. Some people I taught with, I didn't learn a lot from the personally, but I learned a lot from the books that they were reading or were recommending.

This was the wonderful thing about Evergreen is these incredible programs where you brought together these different disciplines. One of the things about The Social Origins of Art and Ideology is that we had a scientist, a philosopher, an artist, a historian. It really was interesting because the students would invariably say they learned more about science by watching me try to learn it, and they learned more about history by watching the artist try to learn it. That's, I think, one of the real strengths of Evergreen. And there's that dilemma between trying to concentrate on what you know and do well, and that extraordinary exchange of letting the students see you learn things, and be a master learner with them.

Zaragoza: Yeah, I think that kind of modeling is so unique and rare, but is so wonderful.

Coontz: Yeah.

Zaragoza: At Tacoma, we have that opportunity. We teach in pairs, and we're always learning from each other in that way. No, it's one of the most beautiful things for me at Evergreen. Are there particular programs you would like to talk about where some of that took place, or where some of the Evergreen magic happened for you?

Coontz: The one is The Social Origins. We have done that twice, and that was so exciting because we would bring all of those things to bear on a particular issue. In this one, we started with the medieval

period and the transition from the rise of the Capetian kingship in France and the development of—so we'd just get together in a planning meeting and you say, "What's going on in this period? Philosophically this is alchemy and that sort of thing. Architecturally, it's the Gothic cathedrals, and the politics of the Gothic cathedrals, which were very important to the Capetians' claim to kingship, unlike the Romanesques of the Southern." And then, the medieval literature and the history. So we just immersed ourselves in that the first quarter. Our faculty seminars were so exciting. They always segued into dinner and more conversation. We also would have seminars. We had the faculty seminars separate; they weren't all ones that were fishbowl seminars, but we would sometimes have fishbowl seminars. And we had students who were so excited about watching the learning, and when you broke them down into seminars, they would come in with their own theories and their thesis that they wanted to explore.

The second quarter we did 17th century England. We actually ended the quarter by moving to England and looking at the *Canterbury Tales*. Then we went to the 17th century, the revolution and Locke and Hobbes and all of those things. Then we moved to the Victorian Era. It was just so completely interdisciplinary. It was just like a love affair, you were just so excited to go and to come home from the faculty seminars. We were all just tremendously excited. Will would say he'd just never seen anything like it, of the excitement of learning and teaching. So, yeah, those were great.

Zaragoza: Champagne bubbles in the veins.

Coontz: Yeah. [laughing]

Zaragoza: How about, in this time, what were some of the challenges or paradoxes that you experienced during this time?

Coontz: I think paradox is a good word for it. The very things that allow you the freedom to have this kind of experimentation also allowed some people to do really loosey-goosey programs that don't challenge students. And students learned the difference very easily. They'll take the teacher, not the course. So that was one big problem. And again, the freedom to go outside your field also meant that we weren't giving kids sometimes the opportunity to learn the basics of a field, because that was more boring for people to teach. Those kinds of things that we're still seeing, I know. I noticed the last, I think, five or 10 years, I just kept my head down and did what I considered to be good teaching. But I would have students who came in and said, "Well, I took this class and I never got a single piece of feedback on my writing."

Zaragoza: How about governance? What were some of your significant governance . . . ?

Coontz: I served on a provost search committee that we eventually declared dead. The candidates just didn't win any of us over.

Zaragoza: Do you want to talk about that? That's a lot of time and effort and intellectual work that went into that.

Coontz: It was.

Zaragoza: And that's a tough decision. So I'm just curious, if you want to talk about that some more.

Coontz: I don't know that I remember the dynamics. I do know that I raised very early, in one of the dean or provost discussions that I served on, this question of "What counts as affirmative action?" Because I felt that there should be a distinction between people who came from, say, a privileged ethnic group in another country and who provided diversity, but who had no history of marginalization and second-class status in this country. I remember fighting not to give affirmative action points just for diversity alone. That was controversial. We had some healthy discussions about that.

Then there's the sort of thing that got us Joe Olander; that people can come across as charming rather than rigorous. I remember Joe, when Joe came in for this—you probably don't want to put this in it, but I will tell you the story.

Zaragoza: That's totally up to you what goes in or what doesn't go in. There is, in fact, a specific question about this individual.

Coontz: He was a disaster President. I always felt a little bit justified, because the very first meeting he walked into, he walked in the room and he [claps] said, "Hello, nice people." And I remember grumpily thinking, how do you know I'm a nice person? I could be a flaming bitch. Why are you saying this to me? [laughter] And he was sort of that way all the time, and I just couldn't believe that people were charmed by it. And I think that's a weakness of Evergreen is that they're charmed by that glibness, that "Goodness, I can go out in my rubber ducky suit," or whatever it was that he used to do. [laughter]

Zaragoza: I don't know about it. I don't know about the rubber ducky suit.

Coontz: Well, he dressed up as the Easter bunny or something in one of his other roles as another college's dean and passed out stuff and people found that charming, and I didn't particularly think that was one of his stellar qualifications. I wasn't sure what his qualifications were.

Zaragoza: Right. And maybe wearing disguises wasn't the best kind of metaphor [laughter] for a President to be taking on at that point. Got it.

Coontz: He charmed people because he just talked about himself or his feelings, and he was like “Oh, I love doing this” and stuff. But to me, it was an Evergreen problem of not really asking hard, rigorous questions of people and looking for substance.

Zaragoza: I see. What about social justice issues at Evergreen inside, and Evergreen’s relationship to Olympia and the larger community? How do you see that?

Coontz: I think it’s really important that we train our students to look for those things in good ways, and I don’t think we always do. I think one of the conclusions I came to as a faculty member is that I should not be a leader in these social justice things; that it’s not my job to model for my students what they should do as an activist; that they should figure that out for themselves; and that you risk rewarding those people who agree with you, or at least giving the impression of that, and not paying enough attention. I saw this happen with some faculty to the students who did not.

In the early days, some faculty, I think, got more involved in leadership roles than they ought to, not only because I thought sometimes their tactics were not very good, but because that’s not what you do as an older person. You want the young people to choose their own battles. You want to help them formulate those in the best way possible for them to win their strategies, which means that instead of leading the charge somewhere, you should, I think, be asking them to think through what they want to do and why, and getting them to come up with the solutions and the activism.

Zaragoza: Ella Baker style, Myles Horton style.

Coontz: Yes. So I did my social justice thing off campus, and I made myself available to students to talk through things rather than tell them what I thought they should do, far less lead them in what I thought they should do. For better or worse, that’s the choice I made.

Zaragoza: Were there conversations that you had with colleagues about that? Were there strategic and tactical discussions that were had?

Coontz: I tried to model it myself rather than confront people, because it was just too easy in what was already in some ways a polarized situation to if you had a criticism to make it sound like you were criticizing them for the wrong reasons; that you were criticizing their policies. At the same time, I thought that their tactics were not that great.

Perhaps the best example would be when they invited Mumia Abu-Jamal to speak, and the Governor withdrew, so they asked me to do the keynote. I wanted to honor the invitation to Mumia, but also not make that the college decision; to honor the fact that there would be disagreements about

this, and to somehow find a way to proceed forward. So the very first thing I did was to say, “Well, I want you to give the honorarium to a scholarship for minority students.” Because I knew that I would be asked to donate it to Mumia’s fund, which I thought would be the wrong thing to do. But I didn’t want to keep it for myself. So, as soon as I was asked and said that I would do it, I said, “This is where I want it to go.” And then, when I got conflicting demands about what I should do with it, I said, “This is already done.” I constructed a speech very carefully that honored the decision to do it, but that made the point that this is what Evergreen is all about is giving people space to turn their backs, if they want to, and to invite whoever they want. I tried to turn it into an inspiring speech about Evergreen rather than a political speech that would turn people off who didn’t agree with whatever side I was trying to make it political.

Zaragoza: What a tightrope.

Coontz: It was. It was. I worked very hard on that talk. [laughing]

Zaragoza: I bet. One of the things that I hear coming up in this is how, at a college like Evergreen, how feedback is given. I do wonder about whether honest feedback is always possible at Evergreen. And I noticed that in a polarized environment, honesty, nuance, complexity is risky; that feedback is risky. I wonder, from your time at Evergreen, if you have any thoughts about that, advice about that, or ways that—

Coontz: I wish I did. I wish I did. One of the reasons I volunteered to give the media training was because you could see this last train wreck coming, and it was like, you know, I didn’t know what to do. But you could see that it was just a train wreck; that people were not thinking things through and talking things through in the way they should, and that it was just going to escalate out of control on both sides, as it did.

So, I don’t have any advice. I found it very difficult to watch. I understand the anger and the frustration that people feel, but I’m also old-fashioned enough to think, you know, this is just how social change occurs. You can’t turn people around overnight. I remember once seeing a film about the Spanish Civil War where the guy said, “Two qualities a revolutionary needs: patience and irony.” Neither were much in evidence. [laughing]

Zaragoza: Do you want to talk about some of the different lenses that groupings of faculty—however you define them—brought to their approaches to pedagogy, politics, culture, scholarship?

Coontz: Hmm. I’m not sure how to even do that, actually. I loved Angela Gilliam. We never taught together but we had a lot of exchanges about teaching. I loved Chuck Pailthorp, teaching with him.

York Wong. But I think that I haven't thought that through enough to feel comfortable popping off on it. As you can see, I like to pop off on things but [laughing] not when I'm only halfway there.

Zaragoza: Were there other major events, crises, tensions, shifts that you think it's important to talk about?

Coontz: I think we've kind of dealt with most of them.

Zaragoza: Are there other memorable folks—students, faculty, staff?

Coontz: One of the highlights as a teacher was taking a group contract of students to do this multicultural reader on family life. I started with a whole group of students and we were discussing these kinds of issues. Then I took a small group contract with seven of them, who helped me actually select articles, so we just acted like colleagues. We would read the articles, we would discuss them. And this is one of the wonderful things about Evergreen. My husband used to say, "I went to Wisconsin for four years and I was never invited to the home of a faculty member."

They'd come over for dinner once a week and we would talk. Then, when the book came out, they wanted to do an inner page with these names and I fought that the three who'd done the most work needed to be right on the cover and the others could be the "with," because they'd only helped select a few. They didn't stick around to continue the discussions. And I'm still in touch with all of these students. So, yeah, you get relationships that have lasted a lifetime.

I've learned so much from some of my students. For example, I had some students who were really not doing well and I felt that they would do better if I assigned a student to kind of meet with them once a week, and I picked an African-American woman, a single mom, to work with them. She was meeting with one black student and two white students who were having trouble. I'll tell you, she taught me more about toughness than—I'd be a sucker when people would come in. Like she described to me, she said, "Well, last week Brian came in and he said that he hadn't read it because he didn't have the money to Xerox the article. And I said to him, 'That's nonsense, Brian. You know I would have lent you the money to do that!'" [laughing] And just her attitude; she didn't put up with anything. Because she'd been a struggling single mother herself, she had no patience with this. And I always feel that she taught me an awful lot about being clear with students about expectations. She was wonderful. And I know she still follows me on Facebook, so that's nice.

Zaragoza: Are there any others that you want to highlight?

Coontz: There were literally dozens. I could just babble on about them. They're wonderful, wonderful people.

Zaragoza: How about your Evergreen career from this vantage point, looking back? How do you understand your career now?

Coontz: I think that Evergreen was wonderful to me. It gave me so many openings to learn things and so much elbow room to experiment with other things. The administration, I know that it's a tremendous complaint. Gosh, when I hang out with the other board members on the Council on Contemporary Families, I do get jealous sometimes. They have reduced teaching duties, they've got research assistants, they've got all sorts of funding. We never got that from Evergreen. But we got something more important, that is, generous collegiality and the flexibility that when I was going on book tour, the administration did their best to let me take unpaid leaves. So, I'm grateful. And I feel like I gave back to Evergreen because I really love, love, love teaching, and I never neglected my teaching. If I wasn't going to be there full-time and doing the kind of feedback we talked about, then I took an unpaid leave. So I feel good about it.

The last time I taught was a Saturday program, a half-time program. I would come home singing from it every day. And I thought I was going to miss it so, because I really changed some people's lives in this one. You could just tell. And I was so worried that I would just miss it constantly. But when I realized that for a Saturday program, I was working three full days a week during the week in addition to the Saturday to produce those outcomes, and I compared it to what I now do with the Council on Contemporary Families, where I edit other academics' work and help them get it out to the public, I realized that I've moved on to a different kind of pedagogy, and the pedagogical needs get met. The outcome, of course, is a higher proportion. They're not always as fun to work with as some of the students, but they're . . .

Zaragoza: Or, perhaps not as open.

Coontz: Actually, one of the things that I got from Evergreen is the confidence to say, "I'm going to edit you, and I'm not using tracking. You don't like it, that's fine. But we're not going to go back and forth in the ego of whose words got cut. And you don't edit me with any tracking."

That's one of the confidences that I got from Evergreen, I think, is to get away from this idea of whose words are whose. Because I found that when you read something with tracking, then it focuses your attention on what's been lost or what's been changed, instead of focusing your attention on, okay,

what is this now as a new piece of work? I think that's really something that Evergreen gave me, that confidence to do that.

Zaragoza: How about Evergreen as a college, as an experimental college, in retrospect? What's your assessment now?

Coontz: It gave many students the most fabulous education they could ever have, and it was uneven enough so that it hasn't served some students well, whether those are students who come in without the same background that was, unfortunately, on the one hand wonderful, but on the other hand exclusionary in terms of these older students who came back had this kind of preparation and had it in common, whatever other differences they had.

So we haven't served a diverse and more uneven student body in terms of not only their experiences and backgrounds, but their academic preparation. We haven't served them all well. We can. The three students whose lives I feel like I changed last time, one has gone on to become a teacher, and his writing skills when he came in—he was born to a prostitute and was open with that in our class when we were discussing. So you can do it, but it's a one-by-one thing and not everybody gets it. At a traditional university, not everybody gets the highs—they fail to give people the highs that we give people—but I don't think they as often miss out on the bottom 20 percent. Because they do have distribution requirements and much more rigid kinds of things.

Zaragoza: Looking ahead to Evergreen's future, what are some of the prospects and urgencies that you see in the short- and long-term?

Coontz: [Sighs] I don't know how we recapture the dedication that we had among the faculty. I think that we have to maybe have—we've got Vice Presidents coming out of our ears now. That strikes me as not the best decision in the world to multiply your administrative officers instead of your direct services to students.

Zaragoza: Fits right into the national trends.

Coontz: Yeah. So that bothers me. Aside from that, again, I've been so concerned with my other projects that I haven't given this the thought it deserves. It's more like I had this wonderful experience; I wish I could help more. I do what I can, but I don't know how to solve this problem.

Zaragoza: I hear you. What other things are you up to?

Coontz: Mostly it's the work with the Council on Contemporary Families. That involves me seeking other people's work; helping academics find the piece of their work that will be of interest and use to a

public audience; helping them then write it and get it out. We do little two-page briefing papers. I was just working all today on a long piece that a woman gave me that we'd talked about—"here's the takeaway"—but editing it so that it makes it more dramatic so that people can really see where she's getting it from. That's a really big task. I spent a lot of time on that.

But I also have to spend a lot of time, because I'm the public face of CCF, dealing with reporters. People don't understand—I think you might because we talked about this—how much work that is. I had a call from an *Atlantic Monthly* writer two days ago, and I spent eight hours finding her the right people to talk to. I will not be quoted in that article, but she'll come back to me if she needs something that I have. But even more importantly, she will be talking to the right people, the knowledgeable people, because I did the research for her instead of just letting her Google people that she should talk to.

And I make a point of giving them the range of opinion. For example, you'd get a call, for example, about what's the impact of divorce on kids? The point that I can say to a reporter, "Okay, there's a range of views. Connie Ahrens thinks it's practically negligible. Paula Motto is much more concerned. But I can tell you, they're both reputable researchers. Whereas Judy Wallerstein out there who you'll read is just far out in the field. She's got an unrepresentative sample. She makes unjustified generalizations from it." So I spend a lot of time heading reporters off from covering bad research, and a lot of time making sure that I'm really not pushing just one point of view on things that may be controversial. So, it's a really big job.

Evergreen has been really supportive of this, too. Everybody on the Council on Contemporary Families board, which has some of the most prominent sociologists and psychologists in the country, adores Evergreen. Because very frequently, I get the Organic Farm House for retreats—we're doing this in October—so it's a real retreat. It's not like when you go to New York for a conference or something. You're there and you have to really talk. So far the Provost has always provided snacks, and then I will cook a multicourse banquet for everybody, and take them out and show them that you can gather oysters around here. So it's like these academics who teach at these big research universities and make like five times as much money as we do are like "Oh my god! This place is so wonderful!" [laughing] It's fun.

Zaragoza: That's great. Is there anything else that you want to add to the story at any point that we've talked about that you want to be sure that you get in?

Coontz: I don't think so. But I've been, between son's wedding and a broken leg and CCF editing, not thinking. When you go away, I may decide, and in that case, I'll let you know.

Zaragoza: Okay, that would be great.