

Susan Strasser
Interviewed by Frederica Bowcutt
The Evergreen State College oral history project
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FINAL

Begin Part 1 of 2 of Susan Strasser on 12-12-2019

Bowcutt: I want to start with filling in a couple of blanks in the pre-interview phone conversation that we had.

Strasser: And the questionnaire, which I left a lot of blanks in. Fortunately, I had my CV so I could do some of it easily.

Bowcutt: I saw there was some cut and paste. That's fine. This is a little bit of a non sequitur, but I definitely wanted to make sure I got this straight. We were talking about the snake oil project that you've been working on, and I was curious. You said there's a lot of misinformation about American botanical medicine. The AMA didn't shut down herbology in the U.S. The "blank" report in 1911?

Strasser: I'm sure I didn't use the word herbology, let me just say that to you. It's not a word I use.

Bowcutt: That's possible. I was writing fast. Didn't shut down botanical medicine.

Strasser: yes, botanical medicine is fine.

Bowcutt: What was that report?

Strasser: The Flexner Report. It was 1910.

Bowcutt: I'll look it up.

Strasser: You'll find a lot on the Flexner Report. It's a big thing in medical history.

Bowcutt: That's somewhat of a selfish thing, but as you know, I'm interested in that. The other one is more relevant to what we're up to right now is the second one. You said that Jean Mandeberg is the only person that you're still friends with; that you had left in '78, after taking a year of absence.

Strasser: No, no, no. I left permanently in 1988.

Bowcutt: Yeah, I have that. "In 1984, I moved to Seattle and left for good in 1988."

Strasser: That's not right either.

Bowcutt: Uh-oh.

Strasser: Here's the deal. I arrived here in 1975. I taught for three years. I took 1978-79 off. I basically drove around the country, trying to figure out who I was and whether I was going to stay here. I visited all my friends from graduate school as part of what I was doing to try to figure things out. That was '78-'79. When I came back, I moved to Seattle.

Bowcutt: You moved to Seattle in what year?

Strasser: '79.

Bowcutt: I totally got that wrong.

Strasser: I commuted from Seattle from '79 to '84. I spent '84 to '86 in Cambridge. I came back here for two years and lived on the water on Cooper Point (Athens Beach Drive) in the most beautiful place I'll ever live, and I knew it every day. I was on the water with the view of the mountain and it was just like every day I said, "This is the most beautiful place." You're on your way out, but . . .

Bowcutt: . . . savor it.

Strasser: Yeah, and I left permanently in '88.

Bowcutt: The other notes that I had here from our pre-interview phone conversation indicated that you said "I knew when I interviewed that I wouldn't stay at Evergreen. Kirk Thompson was one of my professors at Reed. He and Matt Smith helped me get the job at Evergreen. At a dinner during the interview process, Kirk asked, 'What would your social life be? We all sleep with our students.' He was drunk. I wasn't sure I could stay as a single Jewish woman. I loved the college, but . . . and then I have a blank." You said, "It was important that my first job was at Evergreen. I wasn't a square peg in a round hole, like I was at Delaware, but I never really fit in at Evergreen. Irwin Silber, then the editor of the American radical newspaper *The Guardian*, came to speak sometime during my early years and described Evergreen as "precious," – he meant in the sense of affected or pretentious, and I thought that was true, but at the same time I believed it was precious in the sense of valuable. We can come back to this, but some of the questions that I want to ask come back to the pros and cons of being at Evergreen, and how Evergreen supported your development as an intellectual, but also the things that didn't work.

Strasser: It supported it, but it didn't literally support it. Let me be really clear. I would not be the intellectual that I am had I not been at Evergreen. I really, deeply appreciate the sense in which—had I been trying for tenure in the history department, I couldn't have published my first book with a commercial publisher. At that time, I couldn't have published a book with a lot of pictures. Academic

history books didn't have pictures. And I couldn't have published a book from a commercial publisher, as opposed to an academic press.

Bowcutt: Which is part of why it was reviewed by *The New York Times*, and how that launched you onto a path of being more of a—

Strasser: It was *The New Yorker* more than *The New York Times*. Did I tell you *The New Yorker* story? It's a good story. It was reviewed by *The New York Times*, but it was *The New Yorker* review that was really amazing.

At any rate, I am very aware that I couldn't have had the kind of intellectual freedom that I had anywhere else, but nobody at Evergreen cared if I wrote two words, or was willing to support me about the fact that I was writing words. When I went to Cambridge (MA) for two years and discovered—this was my first job. I was completely naïve. I knew nothing, and I discovered that other people didn't write their books on unpaid leave. [laughing] Other people wrote their books on paid leave!

Bowcutt: Revolutionary.

Strasser: That was like news to me.

Bowcutt: Yeah, how do I get in on that?

Strasser: As I was preparing, thinking about coming here, one of the things that I realized is that the founding faculty, first of all, were all guys, and they were mostly guys in probably their late forties, early fifties. They had some work life left in them, but they had done whatever they wanted to do at conventional colleges and universities, and they came here to play with teaching. They never thought twice, or even once probably, about how to deal with ambitious, young, new faculty who might want to publish a book, let alone publish three books, let alone have a real research and writing career, but who also cared about teaching. I just think it wasn't in their worldview when they were planning the college, or when they were thinking about policy, or anything. People like me didn't enter their minds until we showed up, and there weren't very many people like me.

When I arrived, it was clear to me that I had to finish my dissertation. Jeanne Hahn was hired without her dissertation done, and she never finished her dissertation.

Bowcutt: That's a shame. She's brilliant.

Strasser: She's brilliant—of course she is—it was just a couple of years before me that she was hired—I was smart enough to look at that and realize during my first year—and I was hired ABD—either I'd want

to leave Evergreen, in which case I needed my PhD, or I was going to want to stay at Evergreen, in which case I was going to have to not feel like I was staying because I was trapped here.

My second year, literally, I did nothing but teach and finish my dissertation. I did nothing social. I remember 4th of July. I enjoy fireworks and I didn't go to the fireworks because I had to work on my dissertation. I was getting my dissertation done by September or else. That was my plan, and I did.

It was just like not even in anybody's thinking that there would be anything that they would have regarded as conventional academic ambition. When I look back on it, it wasn't conventional academic ambition. As I said, the book I published was completely different. It was an Evergreen-influenced book.

Bowcutt: It's the work of a public scholar. Certainly, Stephanie Coontz is a part of that.

Strasser: Right.

Bowcutt: And also, to have it be from a feminist perspective I think is also revolutionary, and certainly a huge contribution in terms of the time period, where lots of people had a hunger for that and needed more academic, more scholarly material, rather than relying on people outside of the academy. I think that's great.

That links in with a couple of questions that I had. Maybe we should go there and come back to the more pedestrian questions about the biographical form later.

Strasser: Let me tell you that I think that what I have to contribute to the history of the college is less about my personal story. It is more about two questions. One is this particular issue of, what happens to ambitious, young people who come and join the faculty? The whole other set of questions—I don't know how much you looked at the stuff I sent—but both the 1984 Project and the Marxism: Theory and Practice group contract were substantially student planned. Both the article I wrote for *Radical Teacher* and the article that Matt Smith and Jin Darney and John Cushing and I wrote for that 1984 conference, really speak to that whole question of student involvement in program planning that probably barely exists now. That, I think, was really crucial to the history of the college.

Bowcutt: I think that's why I am delighted that you said yes to being interviewed by me. I also think it's something that the two of us—given our interests and maybe concerns for the institution—align in that way. Because when I went through some of the transcripts for other faculty, there's a lot of the personal, and I had the same take; that maybe that was less relevant to the conversation that would be the best use of your time.

Strasser: I can answer some personal questions. I also want to make clear that as far as I'm concerned, you can leave that part about the party with Kirk in the transcript. I did leave for personal reasons. I felt like I had no possibility of finding a partner living in Olympia, Washington. Then when I moved to Seattle, thinking that might work better, I was already halfway out the door, I think, by that point. I at least had a boyfriend in Seattle. [laughing] He didn't become a partner, but it was possible for me to have a social life in Seattle in a way that was never possible for me to have a sexual social life in Olympia.

Bowcutt: I imported a sexual partner/husband from California. [laughing] Had I been single, I think I would have had some of those same struggles. That's part of what got me further excited was our conversation on the phone in July, because I think some of your experience is an experience that people still have at Evergreen—younger people, ambitious people, creative people who want to find some kind of a balance between their teaching and their creative work, whatever that is, whether it's writing or image-making or community work. There's a culture still at Evergreen where sometimes that's looked down on as somehow you are not throwing your full heart and soul into teaching, and that therefore, you can't be a good educator because you're not running on fumes to do the teaching.

Strasser: Right.

Bowcutt: I would counter that I think I'm a better teacher because I have a creative life, because I do research, because I write.

Strasser: I think so.

Bowcutt: And it's a college.

Strasser: I did a group contract called Foundations of American Enterprise. I did it twice, but one of the times, everybody had to write a paper about an industry, and I wrote a paper during that quarter—one time I taught it as a one-quarter thing and one time as a two-quarter thing, I think. I wrote a paper on the advertising industry, which was my first actual piece of writing toward my second book, *Satisfaction Guaranteed*. Every week we would talk about where we were in the process of writing our papers.

Bowcutt: You were right there.

Strasser: I don't know whatever happened to any of those students, but when I look back on it, I think they were damn lucky. [laughing]

Bowcutt: Oh, yeah.

Strasser: Because I literally would go to the card catalog at the University of Washington Library and watch myself and how I dealt with card catalog, and then I was able to report it to the students. I'd never been so self-conscious about my work. I do think that it makes people better teachers.

Bowcutt: Yeah. I think there are a number of things that are affecting Evergreen as an alternative institution. One of those is a demographic shift in the kinds of students that come to us. In the time that you were teaching, the average age was higher, and that makes a huge difference.

Strasser: Sure.

Bowcutt: I think there are a lot more students now that come not only who are younger, which affects their preparedness to do more advanced work. But some of them aren't prepared, for a variety reasons—whether it's mental health problems, which is a pattern nationally—as well as just not having the academic skills to work at a more advanced level. Some of the older students or some of the better-prepared students that come to us—they throw themselves into the alternative education model and are doing graduate-level work as an undergrad. That's true in the sciences as well as the humanities and other disciplines. That still happens, but simultaneously you have a larger, I believe—I've been at the college for 23 years, so I've seen some of this shift—a larger percentage of students who in some cases can't write a college-level expository essay. So figuring out a way to balance those, continuing to support the needs of the students more like those who were coming in the '70s and '80s, while simultaneously doing the good work of supporting students that are younger and need some better support to get them academically ready to do more rigorous work. And I think some of this history maybe helps us think about how to get there.

Strasser: Ask away.

Bowcutt: Why were you interested in teaching at Evergreen? What drew you to the college? Was it because you had a connection to Matt and Kirk Thompson and other people from Reed, and it was a logical next step?

Strasser: Let's start with the fact that when I was in graduate school, the job market for historians was pretty much like it is now. I wanted a job. Let's start right there. [laughing]

I had gone to graduate school. I'd been there for four years, and then I moved to D.C. to take a fellowship at the Smithsonian. I stayed in D.C. a second year, and during that second year, I was working as a part-time secretary and working on my dissertation. One day I came home and there was a message from Susan Smith—now known as Susan Perry, Matt's wife, then working at the Evergreen Library. We had kind of a Christmas card relationship at that point. I called up and Susan said, "Kirk and

Matt and I think you should apply for this job.” So, I applied for the job. [laughing] It was in the early ‘70s, mid-‘70s. I was excited about everything I heard about Evergreen, and I had done some experimental history teaching in graduate school. I had a particularly innovative professor, who was my thesis advisor, who had a grant from the NEH about teaching history to undergraduates from primary sources, so the idea of teaching innovation was not new to me. I had some ideas from that, and I had worked in it, so I’m sure that helped in my application.

Bowcutt: What was his name?

Strasser: William R. Taylor. But I didn’t apply to anywhere else. I wasn’t ready to apply for anywhere else because I was still working on my dissertation.

Bowcutt: And to be able to be paid while you’re finishing that, there’s not a lot of opportunities to be able to do that.

Strasser: I liked the Northwest, and I had friends here, and the college seemed interesting. Why wouldn’t I apply? [laughing] People call you up and say, “You should apply for this job.” “Yes, I will!”

Bowcutt: It’s usually a good idea to follow up on that.

Strasser: I’m sorry to say, it’s the way most people get most jobs.

Bowcutt: You spoke a little bit about the teaching and your scholarship on alternative pedagogy with the comments about the article in *Radical Teacher*, and the conference where you talked about involving students in planning curriculum.

Strasser: I’m not talking about involving students in planning curriculum. In the Marxism group contract, I didn’t involve students in planning curriculum. A group of students, led by Willi Unsoeld’s son, Regon, came to me and said, “We want to have a group contract in Marxism. Will you be the faculty member for it?” It was student initiated. It’s not a question of my involving. They did it. I ran a lot of interference with them, for them, and I gave them a lot of opinions. Regon was the only one of them who ever asked for my salary. In fact, they knew nothing of the interference that I ran, even though Regon’s father was on the faculty. They knew nothing of what I actually did do for them. But as far as they were concerned, I was just another member of the group. Yes and no. And none of them was so radical as Regon to say, “Okay, you’re getting paid and we’re not. We’re paying!”

Bowcutt: A true Marxist.

Strasser: I admired him for doing it, but I wasn’t about to hand my salary over. But I want to make clear, this is not “involving” students.

Bowcutt: Thank you for clarifying that.

Strasser: This was student initiated. If you read the thing that we wrote for the 1984 conference, you'll see that at the beginning, we planned the first quarter of the 1984 program. As that article says, every Evergreen program, at least in those days, had a revolution by about week nine. People would say, "We don't like what this is. There's too much reading," or, "There's too much writing," or, "We want it to be purple instead of yellow." Or whatever it was.

Bowcutt: But they were exercising their agency.

Strasser: But in this case, we had attracted—the 1984 program, Matt and I started talking about it in about 1978. We realized 1984 was on its way and decided we should make a program. Over the years, we had a variety of different kinds of meetings. We probably involved 20, 30 faculty at various points. We ended up teaching it with John Cushing and Jin Darney.

We attracted the group of students on the Evergreen campus who was most concerned with social control. By about week three, we're congratulating ourselves because we assigned Plato's *Parable of the Cave*. Then there was a film series, and in one of the films, somebody is talking about Plato. It's like we've got a computer scientist, we've got a political scientist, we've got a historian, we've got a literary person. We all contributed our stuff and there were all these connections. The four of us are like "Whoa! Look at us!" By about week three, all those connections are scaring the shit out of these kids, who decide that we are running a social control experiment on them. [laughter] You can't say, "No, we're not."

So, our revolution in that program starts in like week three. That was what the whole first quarter was. And we had a way of communicating, because John set up what was essentially a listserv, although nobody had ever heard of listservs at that point, and we didn't have computers, we had to go to the computer lab to plug into the program. But anybody anytime they wanted to go plug into the program could go to the computer lab and plug into the program.

So, all this revolutionary talk is happening 24/7. It's possible that the computer was even open 24 hours a day. I don't know because I didn't live on campus, but the kids could.

Bowcutt: So they're fomenting dissent.

Strasser: Exactly. This was a three-quarter program, and by the second quarter, it was student planned in a way—again, this is well beyond the concept of "student involvement in planning." That's why I say I've got something to say. I bring that experience in a way that people can't even conceive of now.

Bowcutt: Yeah, and I think for some good reasons. Some students, frankly, are not ready for that responsibility.

Strasser: No, they weren't ready then either. [laughter] I'm not advocating for it.

Bowcutt: But when it works, it's pretty amazing. Right? It can be, maybe?

Strasser: I'm not sure. It empowers students in a very particular kind of way that for the right students can be amazing.

Bowcutt: Life changing. But maybe the majority are not well served by that.

Strasser: I don't know. It would be interesting to talk to those people now. One thing that's interesting is that the 1984 program is still connected. There's a Facebook group with not a lot of people, but some of the people who really feel like it was a central experience for them in their lifetimes. It's now 25 years ago.

Bowcutt: I had a smaller taste of that teaching with Matt and Sam Schragger in the second year I was here in a program called Natural Histories: Botany, Biography and Community. There are some of those students we're still in contact with, and they're in contact with each other. It's dwindled way down. We had so much fun the first time—it was a yearlong program both times—one of the times we taught that, one of the students—I think it might have been the second version—ended up leaving, getting a PhD in botany, and then coming back. She's now a faculty member.

What else made it innovative? It seems like part of it was also your experience as an educator and your relationships with students in terms of being perceived as just another member of their group, or working on your own creative work simultaneously while you're teaching, and being able to infuse your teaching with that experience. Surely that happens. That's more common at conventional colleges and universities.

Strasser: Yeah, but more with graduate students, I think, than with undergraduates.

Bowcutt: Exactly.

Strasser: I think Evergreen faculty have a tendency to underestimate how common it is at other places. Evergreen faculty, at least in the old days, spent a lot of energy on putting down how everybody was teaching with the same old yellowed notes and blah blah blah. I eventually went into quite a conservative history department, that was my first history department, at Delaware at the end of my career. There were two or three of those old guys there who did that, but most faculty work really hard.

Bowcutt: Most of them were actively working, yeah.

Strasser: They worked really hard, and actually were very interested in their teaching. They don't have the opportunity to play with it to the extent that we did, but I really came to see the extent to which Evergreen faculty, when I was there, made themselves feel better or something for how hard they were working by putting down other university faculty. That's just not right, really.

Bowcutt: I agree. Was the term "brand X" used back in those days?

Strasser: Yes.

Bowcutt: It gets back to your comment about the guy at *The Guardian* saying, "Evergreen is precious." I think that sentiment is still out there. Certainly, that's a residue from the conflicts that happened in 2017. I think it affects people's willingness to engage, because sometimes there's a perception there's not adequate, careful self-reflection, and a habit of rarifying what we're doing, without recognizing the opportunities to learn from more conventional colleges and universities. Do you think calling it an alternative college still makes sense?

Strasser: There still aren't grades. There still aren't conventional departments. When I came, there were not even those subject areas or whatever they came to be called.

Bowcutt: Just "member of the faculty."

Strasser: There was nothing. And when I came, no programs were ever repeated. It was new, new, new, all the time.

Bowcutt: Is that really true?

Strasser: Yes, it is.

Bowcutt: I'm wondering in the sciences if that was not the case, because Al Wiedemann and Steve Herman certainly were repeating programs, like E Squared—Evergreen Environment. And I think they were on a pattern of every other year.

Strasser: At the very beginning?

Bowcutt: In the '70s, late '70s.

Strasser: Okay. But I came in '75.

Bowcutt: Even after you left. You overlapped with Al, and certainly with Steve Herman.

Strasser: Yeah.

Bowcutt: I think there are some interesting dynamics between the humanities and the sciences, and I think the history is a little bit different in terms of how they evolved.

Strasser: I'm sure that's true.

Bowcutt: 1984 was obviously a very memorable experience, and there were a couple other memorable experiences. You mentioned another program that was student initiated. What was that called?

Strasser: Marxism: Theory and Practice.

Bowcutt: Was that an SOS?

Strasser: I don't know what an SOS is.

Bowcutt: I was just curious where that term originated. It means Student-Originated Studies.

Strasser: There was no such thing in those days.

Bowcutt: It sounds to me like the term grew out of the kind of experience that the faculty had where students initiate something, come to the faculty and say, "We want this."

Strasser: Probably.

Bowcutt: What about individuals, memorable people, or events that happened beyond the ones that we've talked about already?

Strasser: I don't know how much you know about the stuff that happened my first year there—here. Evergreen was in crisis in probably much the same way that I gather it is right now.

Bowcutt: Financially?

Strasser: It was in big trouble in the Legislature in ways that it probably isn't right now. Merv Cadwallader, who was the founding faculty Dean, I think, was proposing a solution that would involve making the experimental part of Evergreen, making Evergreen as it was, into only a small part of the college.

Bowcutt: Sort of a school within a school?

Strasser: A school within a school. I was in the last big group to be hired. I think there were 16 people hired the year that I was hired. A number of us—me, Joye Hardiman, Jim Stroh, Kaye V. Ladd, I can't remember who else—who had just been hired -- we thought we were coming to teach at this alternative college. We decided we did not like this. The other thing was because we were new, they weren't letting us into these meetings. There were a lot of secret meeting stuff going on.

So, we organized the students. It turns out it's very easy when you're a faculty member to organize the students. [laughing] It's like you can be a really good student organizer when you're the faculty. I don't remember the specifics. This is something that you might learn about from other

people's interviews, or there might be documents, I don't know, but it was an important time in the college, and something that's worth exploring. We kept that from happening, and Merv Cadwallader quit. He left. I don't know where he went. He went somewhere, got a job and left. We felt we were victorious.

Bowcutt: Sounds like it.

Strasser: They didn't do it. It's interesting to me now because I think he was one of the handful of the most influential people on the founding faculty. We were really, in some profound way, announcing ourselves to the old-guy faculty.

Bowcutt: The old guard.

Strasser: The old guard. How long had they been around? [laughter] They were the three-year-old guard and the seven five-year-old guard at the most. We were basically announcing to them that they were not solely in charge anymore, so for that reason, I think it was a profound set of events that is worth exploring. I bet the *Cooper Point Journal* has stuff about it. This all kind of came to a head probably around this time of year, maybe a little earlier—the end of the first quarter and the beginning of the second quarter of 1975-76.

In the same way that I wanted to get stuff from the 1984 program into the Archives, if I had stuff from that, which I don't, I would want to see that be in the Archives, and I would want to see that be something that the Oral History Project explores.

Bowcutt: That is great. I not surprisingly hear you speaking as a historian and thinking about, what are these key points, rather than the personal. The personal was interesting, but I'm with you, I think focusing on the institutional history is very important, because I think we're in a period of time where alternative institutions of higher learning are . . .

Strasser: threatened.

Bowcutt: Exactly, and very fundamentally, and the potential for them to be very radical places of learning for students. I think that would be a shame to lose that. So, that's a memorable event.

Strasser: or time period.

Bowcutt: Did you want to say more about Matt, or any other individuals who were memorable?

Strasser: There were tons of memorable people.

Bowcutt: In terms of identifying key stories that would be important to have down for the record. Maybe not worth the time?

Strasser: I might come up with them. I guess it's not the way I think about history.

Bowcutt: How do you think about history?

Strasser: That's an awfully broad question, but I'm not a person who tells stories about individuals and calls that history. There are people who do that well. I'm not trying to put that down in a wholesale kind of way, but I'm much more interested in historical forces and institutions and culture, and other kinds of stuff than colorful individuals and their stories.

Bowcutt: You can hear the influence of Sam, the oral historian. [laughing]

Strasser: And I should say, I'm not an oral historian either, and I have real questions about oral history as history. I'm really aware of how weak my memory is here.

Bowcutt: I hear you. It's interesting because, like I said, when I was reading through—I love Sam. Sam was so much fun to teach with. I didn't finish my comments at the very beginning that my third paper for my PhD dissertation was oral history conducted—oral history maybe isn't the right word. They were structured interviews with people in northern California around restoration ecology, something that I knew something about in that region. I had worked with state parks, so I had a little bit of training in sociological method to do that, so my background in interview work is that. Then teaching with Sam two years, and then we did a training for this Oral History Project.

We got into a pretty spirited discussion last summer about, what is the purpose of this Oral History Project? I think it was left unresolved. I think that you and I are on the same page in terms of seeing it as an opportunity to create a record of the history of this experimental college.

Coming back to what you just said, and reading some of the transcripts—we got copies of some of the transcripts of other oral histories, so I read the one that Sam did with Larry Eickstaedt, and then I read the one that Anthony Zaragoza did with Angela Gilliam—but the way they've been structured, they start with the personal. I was asking myself, I wonder how helpful this is, as I was reading some of them, because there was a lot of down-in-the-weeds and some personal details of very early childhood. The one with Larry—which was interesting, but in terms of this larger question, why are we doing this?

Strasser: When I saw the questionnaire, I almost didn't answer the question about family heritage. I thought, none of your business.

Bowcutt: This is Sam's influence.

Strasser: Finally, I wrote Ashkenazi Jewish. I just decided to go for the whole thing, be very precise. But I have to say it was with misgivings, like what's my race? Do you want to know that, too? No, huh-uh.

Bowcutt: I think there's some interesting gender politics, too. I haven't thought about it deeply enough. I'm still thinking about it, but I wonder. When you're dealing with a time period when—I was born in 1958, so the possibility of women being a professor, when I was a little girl, wasn't really—

Strasser: Zero when I was a little girl.

Bowcutt: Yeah. My grandmother—who was a western Washingtonian, lived in Bremerton—actually told my mother that she was overeducating us. She was born in the early 1900s. She said, “Girls should not learn words with five or more syllables in them, because they will never get married.” She would send stuff for my hope chest, hoping against hope that I would get married, and my mother morphed it into a PhD hope chest.

So I worry a little bit about focusing on the personal with a generation of women who were some of the earliest professors in the country. In a way, it feels like it undermines their—

Strasser: What kind of personal questions does he want?

Bowcutt: No, no. It's about the focus. I want to come back to your comment about “It's not the way that I think about history, to ask people about stories. Not that that's a bad way to go about it, but I think about historical forces.” On the fly, what do you think the historical forces were in the time period that you were teaching at Evergreen? Obviously I can make some guesses on that, but you're in a much better position to speak to that. How was that intersecting with the approaches to teaching, the relationships that you were having with students, your own shifting sense of what was important to you in that time period?

Strasser: I think that it's hard for people who didn't live then, or weren't grownups then, to have any sense of how thoroughly people were willing to turn the world upside down, and how different so many things were in terms of . . . here's my worry about the comment about Kirk. [chuckles] I watched *The Graduate* on the plane yesterday. I didn't want to watch any of the other movies, and there was *The Graduate*. I had heard someone who was commenting on it on a podcast. I don't know if you've seen it.

Bowcutt: A long, long time ago.

Strasser: I don't think I'd seen it since 1967 when it came out. I saw it once. There was a lot about it that was really superb. The cinematography is unbelievable, and the direction. Both Anne Bancroft and Dustin Hoffman are amazing. I didn't have any problem in the ways in which the Bancroft character—Mrs. Robinson—was made to be a predator. That was fine. I didn't find that offensive.

But I could barely watch the scenes where Ben goes to Berkeley to stalk Elaine. That's what he's doing, he's stalking her. I didn't see that then. We didn't think that way then. It's a matter of deep pleasure and a little confusion to me to watch women now refusing to take things that my generation just assumed that you didn't have any choice but to take.

The fact is that Kirk said this from real caring about me. "What kind of social life are you going to have? Are you going to sleep with the boys?" Well, I tried. As you say, they were older. They weren't 18-year-olds. I was 27.

Bowcutt: You weren't that much younger.

Strasser: Exactly. [laughing] My first seminar, there was this very nice boy. He was 25, and he was attracted to me and I was attracted to him, and I slept with him, and I very quickly realized it was an abuse of power. It was like [snaps her fingers] obvious to me. I also very quickly realized sleeping with him was screwing up my seminar. In every way, it needed to stop. I had to stop. Because I was the powerful one in the situation, in the same way I was able to go like that, it was no problem stopping it. But the thing is that the men—all of the men—slept with students, I'm willing to say, and they didn't regard it as an abuse of power.

Bowcutt: Some of them still don't. Some of the old guard.

Strasser: I actually appreciate that I was here in a situation where I could learn that fast—plus, it was the '70s. Everybody was sleeping with everybody.

Bowcutt: Right.

Strasser: Again, something that I think people who weren't around couldn't really get.

Bowcutt: "Well, you didn't ask for consent." [laughing] That wasn't the way the game was played.

Strasser: Yeah, who knew? We didn't know what consent was. What was consent? I think that there's a whole—and at the same time, the other thing that I came to recognize here, and that I certainly found to be true later on, especially with graduate students, who you can get very close to, is the extent to which the student-teacher relationship is an erotic relationship. We're talking about love.

Bowcutt: Right. That's an interesting way of putting it.

Strasser: It is, and it's love that goes both ways. It's deep and it's important.

Bowcutt: It needs to be tended to in an ethical way.

Strasser: Yeah. I'm glad I had the opportunity to learn that here, but it is still striking to me that the women learned it. I don't think I'm the only woman who tried it and rejected it, realized it's not a good idea—bad idea, bad idea—and the men did not. And the best of them—Tom Rainey, Matt—married the girl. Well, great.

Bowcutt: There are still men my age who did the same thing, and you can't talk to them. They don't see it. It puts that relationship on an unequal footing from the get-go.

Strasser: And it is. The reason that I watched *The Graduate* was that earlier in the flight, I was listening to a podcast—I think it may have been the *New York Times Book Review* podcast—about a new book by a woman who was a 16-year-old who got involved with and ultimately married her 47-year-old teacher. This was the second memoir of this relationship she had written. The first one she had written in her forties, and now she's in her sixties. Even now, she's saying she thinks the marriage was good, and she thinks that one of the really successful things about the marriage was that they were able to negotiate the transition that all of those marriages take from being the young lover to being the caretaker of the sick, old man.

It was stunning how open she was. She read the part from her first memoir that describes how they'd been flirting with each other, the first kiss, and then she described it as she sees it now because the MeToo stuff has turned her around, and she really gets that she was a 16-year-old girl, and that her husband, whom she lived with for decades and loved dearly, had acted utterly inappropriately. It was just fascinating to listen to her. But I think this is a set of changes that makes our experience in the '70s almost incomprehensible now. You almost can't understand. I can't watch *The Graduate* without saying I can't bear to watch the stalking. It's as cute as can be. They're both beautiful. The Berkeley campus looks beautiful in the film.

Bowcutt: It's not okay.

Strasser: No, I don't want to watch this. For me to be trying to go back to my memories of what I did and who I knew, and how they acted and how I acted, it's a different time. It's hard to do. It's really challenging.

Bowcutt: Which is why the primary source material is so important, where you have articles, written documents from that time period.

Strasser: That are what they are.

Bowcutt: Right, and they aren't colored by all the time that's passed.

Strasser: Exactly.

Bowcutt: My other questions kind of come at it from maybe a different angle but asking some of the same questions. We can move on if this doesn't resonate. I had a question about, what were some of the highlight of your time at Evergreen and some of the disappointments? I think we've been talking about that.

I am really curious about the working conditions. From our earlier conversation, and you kind of repeated some of that in your opening comments, you didn't feel really supported literally as an intellectual and as a scholar and a writer. I'm curious if you felt mentored as an educator. Did you feel like you had, in the circle of people that you were working with—Matt, Kirk, and others—did you have the mentoring that you wanted here to shift?

Strasser: Kirk was barely older than me. He'd been my professor at Reed, but he didn't try to mentor me particularly. He was also gone my first year. I lived in Kirk's house the first year I was here. He was on leave. Matt was not a mentor, Matt was my friend. I don't feel like I had mentors here.

Bowcutt: You just figured out how to teach on the fly.

Strasser: It wasn't on the fly. We were all talking about teaching 100 percent of the time, so I would not call it on the fly at all.

Bowcutt: What I mean is just sort of at the moment having that conversation. That can be a really dynamic way of doing it, where you're truly having faculty seminars. That's one of the things I feel has really shifted in the time period that I've been here is I don't feel like there's the same commitment to faculty seminars, and that troubles me deeply.

Strasser: That is troubling.

Bowcutt: I think that it doesn't work, frankly, without the faculty seminar. You're delivering your material in kind of an á la carte fashion without working with each other to bring those disciplines together in some kind of a synthetic way, and learning how to do that with peers while you're doing it, so that you can then support students in making those connections.

Strasser: I had a ton of that. My first program was with Stephanie Coontz, who was also almost brand new—she didn't come in the fall, she had come the previous spring, so she had been here one semester longer than I—and York Wong, who had been hired and had worked in the first couple years, I'm pretty sure, as the head of the Computer Center. Then he transferred to the faculty, and we were his first team.

But with all of my teams, we talked about teaching all the time. But mentors? I don't think I ever had a mentor in my whole life.

Bowcutt: In grad school?

Strasser: No. I went to graduate school to study with my academic grandfather. David Allmendinger, my thesis advisor at Reed, sent me to Stony Brook to study with Bill Taylor, who had been his dissertation advisor at Wisconsin, and Bill had moved from Wisconsin to Stony Brook. Stony Brook was also a quite new university at that point, and there had been a lot of dissension in the Wisconsin history department—which was one of the very top history departments—over the Vietnam War, so Stony Brook hired probably five Wisconsin historians for the new Stony Brook history department.

Bill had moved to Stony Brook while David Allmendinger was at Reed, and I went to Stony Brook to study with Bill. In terms of teaching, Bill was a mentor. But intellectually, he had the incredibly good grace to leave me alone to do what I wanted to do. You laugh, but I think now he must have taken so much shit in the history department in 1969-70-71-72 when he had a student who wanted to do a dissertation about housework. I can't imagine how much crap he took, and he never breathed a word of it to me. I'm super grateful. But he didn't know how to do a dissertation[on housework. He wasn't my mentor.

Bowcutt: Because you were having to break new ground—what were your sources going to be, what were you going to do with those sources?

Strasser: David, my thesis advisor at Reed, he does count as a mentor.

Bowcutt: This was a master's thesis?

Strasser: No, it was a bachelor's thesis. Reed requires everybody to write an undergraduate thesis, and it's serious. My undergraduate thesis is 120 pages long. It's a year-long project. It's a very serious project. David wasn't at Reed for very long. He was fresh out of graduate school.

When I started college, I thought I was going to be a sociology major, and all the history I had ever been subjected to—and I will say “subjected” to—was political and diplomatic history, military history, and I wasn't interested in that stuff, and I had no idea that the questions I was interested in could be dealt with as historical questions. First, I discovered that sociology at Reed at that point wasn't being done in a way that interested me. I knew there was something wrong with it, but I didn't know what. And then this new young guy shows up and he's teaching a course called American social history and I thought I'd take it and I discovered that you could do history that wasn't about kings and

presidents. That was David. He was my mentor. I will give him that title for sure. But no, not after that. Certainly, nobody here. Nobody here tried to be a mentor, I think, to anybody.

Bowcutt: It was more from a philosophical perspective of this was an egalitarian kind of approach.

Strasser: Absolutely, and that's another piece that I think I need to emphasize. The benefit to me of showing up as a 27-year-old ABD girl, and having these guys . . .

Bowcutt: . . . who were taking you seriously?

Strasser: It wasn't about them taking me seriously. It was about the fact that they were ideologically committed to the notion that I was equal to them. I don't think they took me seriously, necessarily. [laughter] But they were ideologically committed to the idea that I was equal to them; that we were all members of the faculty and I was equal. That's a very different experience than showing up in the history department as an assistant professor without tenure. The best of them treated me super respectfully and mentoring me wasn't their job. Their job was to treat me equally.

Bowcutt: Were there limits to that? There's sort of the ideology, and then there's the practice.

Strasser: I just didn't have anything to do with the ones who didn't.

Bowcutt: That makes sense. Why spend your time that way?

Strasser: There were enough people who lived that commitment, so that the people who didn't treat me like I knew anything, or like I had anything to say, I just didn't pay any attention to. And there were those people. But some of those people—for example, economists—I think it was true here and it's true everywhere—economists for the most part think they understand the world and nobody else does. I found that there were scientists who were willing to acknowledge that they might have things to say about an orange that I didn't have to say about it, about the cellular structure or the chemistry of it, or whatever, but they could appreciate that I might have something to say about the history of fruit cultivation in the United States. They got that I had some other take on that topic that they didn't have.

Bowcutt: And that there are multiple legitimate ways of knowing, and that science wasn't in a privileged position.

Strasser: Right.

Bowcutt: That makes sense. It seems like thinking about working conditions, from what I've heard—and I think this still is true in many cases—the programs become so all-consuming that those are your working conditions, whatever group you've chosen to work with.

Strasser: Absolutely.

Bowcutt: And you have obviously a lot of control about that. As a result, you can avoid those folks who are not interesting in terms of the kind of intellectual work that you want to do. Obviously, the gender politics on campus go beyond just people's sexual practices. Can you say a little bit more about the gender politics during the time period that you—

Strasser: Interesting question. Can I?

Bowcutt: I know it's decades ago.

Strasser: It's decades ago, but also, I showed up in 1975. At the same time as the men were oblivious in terms of sexual stuff, they were running scared about the whole picture.

Bowcutt: The feminist movement?

Strasser: Absolutely. I think that's a really central piece of it.

Bowcutt: How do you know that? What kind of evidence could you provide? I don't doubt you, but I'm just curious. I'm sure you're right. [laughing]

Strasser: I guess I think it was true not just here, but true of men in general in that time period. It's a good question, what kind of evidence could I offer? I don't know the answer. I'd have to think about that. Mostly when I think of it, I'm kind of amazed that I was able to show up as a 27-year-old ABD, short woman, and be treated as respectfully as I was, and to be able to develop. Respectfully in the sense that everybody I dealt with pretty much seemed to assume that I was here to do my thing. [laughing]

Bowcutt: That you were competent.

Strasser: Yeah, not to be pushed around or whatever. Obviously, I was feisty, too. Gender politics. It's a really interesting question, the overall gender politics. Part of it was that it was clear that things were changing. We all knew there hadn't been women on the founding faculty. Everybody had a sense that that was outrageous. I'm trying to think, were there any . . . there were women, like Lynn Patterson, now Llyn DeDannen, was the Hiring Dean when I was hired, so there were young women who had basically seized power. [laughing] She would be a really interesting person to interview, I think.

Bowcutt: Who's that?

Strasser: Llyn De Danaan. I'm not sure how she spells that. She was named Llyn Patterson at this point. But she was the Hiring Dean who hired me. She couldn't have been more than five years older than me.

So things were definitely shifting from that group of men. Again, this business that I'm pointing to that happened during my first year here also suggests that shift from that group of men on the founding faculty. I think that was a gender politics shift, but it was a lot bigger shift, too.

Bowcutt: It was Joye Hardiman, Kaye V. Ladd, Jim Stroh. Who else was in that group?

Strasser: Those were the ones I remember as being the key ones.

Bowcutt: They were all in that cohort that you were hired in.

Strasser: We were all hired at the same time.

Bowcutt: Were you all about the same age?

Strasser: We were all about the same age. Kaye V.—she's passed away now—was probably five or six years older than me. I was 10, 20 years younger than the—

Bowcutt: You were about 10, 20 years younger than the 40-to-50 year-olds in your old group. So, partly an age thing? That's one of the things that's a bit of a mystery to me. Some of your experience resonates with my own because Al Weidemann was a really important influence on me in the early years I was here. Even though he was very much known for being a womanizer, but to call him sexist would just not capture it. In terms of the way he treated me as a colleague, I always felt like he was extremely respectful. In fact, he would often tell me, "You're a better botanist than I am," partly because he was trained in agronomy. He came later to life to ecology. It was just an option for people studying at a PhD level. His undergrad background was more agricultural, so he recognized the training that I had was different and valued it.

Similarly with Matt, who, as you know, could be quite challenging, but at the same time, he was one of the best mentors I had here at Evergreen. The commitment to the ideology of equality seemed very strong. Yet, simultaneously, his personal life and the choices he made around Susan Perry to leave her. And there are many other men like him at the college still. It makes me a little uncomfortable. I don't know quite what to do about that, but it's interesting to watch you struggle to articulate, what are the overarching gender politics of the place? Because I think you could easily just dismiss men who leave their first wives for a younger wife. It's a classic maneuver. At the same time, they're more complicated.

Strasser: And the institutional commitment to that kind of equality on the faculty had meaning to all of us in a way that isn't about that. It's interesting to me that there may have been a whole lot more

people screwing colleagues than I knew about, but I don't have memories of colleagues coming on to me.

Bowcutt: It was more the faculty-student?

Strasser: Yeah.

Bowcutt: Some of the stories I heard that were also quite a lot of lesbian trysts going on.

Strasser: The lesbians, that's another story. [laughter] But they were all remaining friends, too. That was very complicated.

Bowcutt: I came into the college when Jane Jervis was the President and Barbara Smith was the Provost, so from my perspective, it's kind of been on a downward trajectory in terms of being emancipatory for women, actually, in many ways in terms of just—I think part of that lines up with the national trends around higher education, and the growth of administrations. Like so many other places in the country, the administration has grown here, and the number of men in that growth has disproportionately increased. I think there's a lot of recognition of that. Fortunately, we're going to be getting some additional female deans in the deanery, but it's been very male. The place has felt very different under Les Purce's leadership and George's Bridges' leadership relative to how it felt when I got here in the '90s when it was Jane.

Strasser: Interesting.

Bowcutt: I don't want to paint things in a black-and-white way or oversimplify. I think Les and George had challenges that Jane didn't have in terms of higher education, politically and economically, the pressures on us, and that we share with many other institutions.

That might be something I want to follow up—we might want to come back to—because it feels like an important topic for the college going forward with the initiatives surrounding inclusivity and equity. It's been not entirely a smooth road around that. Also the national landscape, with Betsy DeVos undermining Title IX and how that affects places like Evergreen, and the tension between the commitment on an institutional level to equity and inclusion simultaneously to the external pressures to reverse some of the advances that were made during the '70s.

We talked a little bit already about balancing research and writing, and it seemed like that was clearly a part of what led you to decide to leave the college.

Strasser: I think there are two things that led me to leave the college. One was personal. I just didn't see myself being a single woman college teacher at a small college in a small town for my entire life. I was 27 when I came here.

I also was ambitious. When I left to go to Cambridge, I had two years of fellowships at Harvard. I had applied to Radcliffe when I applied to college. I did not get in. I'm really glad I didn't get in. I'm really glad that I was 37 and had been at Evergreen when I got there, because I think the class stuff would have destroyed me when I was 17.

But it was a whole other kind of world. [laughing] I had had some success that these people took seriously, and that nobody at Evergreen took seriously or told me that they took seriously. Nobody. Not one person.

Bowcutt: That's really unfortunate.

Strasser: *Never Done* got the lead review in *The New Yorker*. I'm saying there was a *New Yorker* review of it that went on page after page after page. I knew there was going to be a review in *The New Yorker*. I told you I'd tell you this story. I was living in Seattle at this point, and I knew there was going to be a review. I was on vacation and I heard that it had come out, and I called my house and talked to my housemate, Pam Schick, who had taught dance at Evergreen. Put Pam on the list of activists that first year with Kaye V. Ladd and Joye Hardiman and Jim Stroh, because she was hired when I was hired, too. She was a dancer and choreographer. She didn't stay very long because she didn't want to be in Olympia, so she moved to Seattle. When I moved to Seattle, we shared a house. I called Pam and I said, "Read me *The New Yorker* review." She said, "I can't read it to you. It's too long."

Bowcutt: Nice.

Strasser: Okay. I was in Oregon . . .

Bowcutt: That's a coup.

Strasser: I figured if it had come to my house, it had come to the Oregon State Library. I was in Corvallis, so I went to the library and I got it, and I xeroxed it. I sat in the parking lot and read it and I decided to drive to the ocean. I sat on the dunes over the ocean and I read it over and over again until I was tired of reading it over and over again. I don't think anybody at Evergreen ever even mentioned it to me. Maybe they did not subscribe to *The New Yorker*. Maybe they did, maybe they didn't. I don't know. Were they envious of me? I'm sure they were. Then I go to Cambridge where I'm treated as a

person who's achieved something, who's done something important. I started getting invitations to give talks. People were willing to pay my airfare to go give them a talk.

I remember the very first one. I was invited to give a talk at Northern Kentucky University. I flew to Cincinnati and these people picked me up at the airport. The history department at Northern Kentucky University had invited me. They were just the sweetest, smartest, nicest . . . They were stuck in wherever-it-was Kentucky.

Bowcutt: They're importing intellectuals to stimulate the life of the mind.

Strasser: Exactly. It just made me realize Evergreen's not the only place. It's not the only place. Here's this place where the teaching is as conventional as the day is long, but this little history department, they're cool people. What's more, they're treating me nice, and nobody at Evergreen is treating me nice.

Bowcutt: Yeah, when my first book came out, one of the first comments I got from a colleague in the sciences was, "Well, what about that book? I mean, are you making money off of that?" It's published in the University of Washington Press.

Strasser: Right, I'm getting really rich.

Bowcutt: I said, "It's not about the money. If I do assign it, all proceeds will go to conservation work for the plant that the book is about." It was just rather disappointing to have that be the first place where we start.

Strasser: I didn't even get that. People assumed I was getting rich off of it because it was published by a commercial publisher in New York City.

Bowcutt: Maybe a dollar a book.

Strasser: I think it was like 60 cents a book. It's not a matter of how much it was a book. Let's talk about how much it was an hour.

Bowcutt: The time invested. You probably didn't even make minimum wage.

Strasser: I'm sure I didn't make anything near minimum wage. So, I go to Cambridge, and it's Harvard University, and people are impressed with me. I don't even think I was wanting people at Evergreen to be impressed with me so much as I was wanting them to acknowledge me. It became clear I had to leave, especially because I liked it. I wanted to write more books. I had things to say. I had stuff to study. I had work to do, and this was not the place to do it.

I included in the stuff—I don't remember whether I sent it to you or I sent it to the Archives—some of the correspondence between me and the deans and the Provost about my contract. I was the first person to have a two-quarter-a-year contract so that I could do other work. I had to fight them to get benefits. What? They weren't going to give me fucking health insurance? I had forgotten that till I was leafing through this stuff. I had to fight them to get health insurance? I don't mean fight. I had to push them to give me health insurance for the quarters I was on leave. That's terrible.

Bowcutt: Totally. The question is, is that still the environment in which people find themselves at Evergreen? I would say if it is then that's troubling in terms of the kind of future that Evergreen can have if it's not really a supportive environment for creative people.

Strasser: Exactly.

Bowcutt: I was struck by—I don't know if you've seen the most recent alumni magazine—probably not—Lynda Barry just got the MacArthur, which is awesome. I'm so proud. It highlights what's wonderful about Evergreen where someone like her can follow a really unconventional path academically and find a professional life for herself that is rewarding in that way. That's profoundly important for Evergreen, and certainly, from the standpoint of marketing, it's part of our brand. But if you're going to think in those terms of marketing and branding, I think it's really important to ask the question, how does that happen? Are we still creating an environment in which that kind of innovation can happen? I think you could draw a direct line to Marilyn Frasca.

Strasser: And Lynda does, from what I understand.

Bowcutt: Yes, she mentions it. I'm sure they interviewed her for the article, and she mentioned the influence of Marilyn in her work. I had the pleasure of teaching with Marilyn one quarter my first year. She was doing the Progoff Journaling and she orchestrated at the end of the first quarter an exercise to empower the students to have them choose books that they would be using in the winter, which was quite out-of-the-box from my past experience, and it was a pretty random set of books. We read *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. We had a Zen teacher come in and talk. We read *Death of Nature* by Carolyn Merchant. It was a nonsensical mixture of books in some way, but they picked them.

Is that commitment to innovation still something that's being fostered within the community? What's worrisome to me—and I know I'm not alone in this among my peers—is the increasing control over what faculty are doing in the classroom through various mandates, be it the Greener Foundations for first-year students—some of those initiatives are coming out of the recognition that some students are not getting the academic skill-building opportunities that they need—it's pretty much 100 percent

acceptance rate—then we have to be prepared to meet students where they are, and then how do we ensure that students are equally served and that students who are coming to Evergreen disadvantaged—whether it’s class or race or for some other reason—are getting the support that they need. I think some of these initiatives are coming from that legitimate concern, but in what ways does it create a culture of top-down or regimented in a way that runs counter to the older traditions of experimental pedagogy? I feel torn in multiple ways.

That might be another subject that would be worth coming back to after I’ve had more time to look at your papers. I was going to tell you that I’ve been working on a book chapter for a book called *The Cultural History of Plants* for Bloomsbury, which came dropping out of the sky on August 13 randomly when I was asked to write this 10,000-word chapter on a subject that I don’t know a lot about, which is luxury plant foods, and it’s due right now. I’ve been working on that and teaching fulltime. I went through the papers that you sent me, and I very much enjoyed reading your notes from the commencement speech. I really quickly went through things.

Strasser: My notes, like “Slow down”?

Bowcutt: That was hilarious. “Slow down! Go slower!” That was great.

Strasser: I knew I was going to be nervous and just blah blah blah. [laughing]

Bowcutt: I didn’t get a lot of time to look at the papers that you sent to Liza. This is great. This is also the first interview that I’ve done for the oral history project and I’m glad that you felt comfortable to push back on a structure that didn’t feel like it worked, or questions that didn’t seem really that relevant to what needs to be done, so I definitely want to follow up after I’ve had some time to look at your papers, and also think about what we could talk about.

Strasser: Great.

Bowcutt: I’m guessing you’re about 20 years older than me.

Strasser: Seventy-one.

Bowcutt: You’re 10 years older than me. I feel like both of us are in a unique position to contribute to a conversation about what does Evergreen future look like, and how do we change in response to historical forces, like demographic changes and a very different economic landscape for young people? But simultaneously, how do we protect what’s good about Evergreen, the contributions?

Strasser: The other thing that I have to say is that doing history involves a lot of different skills, a lot of different activities, and I can certainly look at other people’s work and say, “That person is a better

researcher than I am,” or, “That person is a better writer than I am.” But the thing that I have been able to do throughout my career, in all three of my books, is that I’ve asked questions that nobody’s ever asked before or asked as academic history questions before.

I can’t say that’s only because I was at Evergreen. I wrote a dissertation on housework in the ‘70s, so it was there before I was hired at Evergreen, but the fact that I was given the space and given the respect and given the milieu in which asking new questions was what we were trying to do—that that was the whole idea—it set me up. Even after I left Evergreen, for the rest of my life, I have carried that beginning with me. When I think of myself at the University of Delaware, a very conventional—not necessarily conservative, there’s liberals and conservatives and radicals of various kinds, but a very conventional institution. When I describe myself as a square peg in a round hole, that’s squareness got really developed at Evergreen. [laughing] I got the opportunity to whittle that shape and I’m really grateful for it, and will always be. In the same way that in some ways, I will always be a Reed person, in some ways I’ll always be an Evergreen person. They’re different, the Reed ways and the Evergreen ways.

Bowcutt: Definitely. I think Reed is very elitist, in terms of class.

Strasser: It’s not a state school, but I was there on a scholarship, and everybody I knew was working and on scholarships. I didn’t know the rich kids, so I don’t think of Reed as elitist. What I think of Reed as is rigorous academically in a way that’s beyond anyplace else I know other maybe Swarthmore or Carleton. There are a very few such places. I learned to think at Reed, and I learned to skim. I was assigned more material to read than anybody could possibly read, and I learned how to deal with all that material and it’s a very useful skill. I don’t think of Reed as an elitist school at all. Maybe it is now. As I say, I was a scholarship kid and so was everybody I knew.

Bowcutt: I think it was a different place in the ‘70s for sure. I say that mainly because my one limited experience with it, and knowing its history, and two, having worked closely with a student for several years who was on scholarship there and left to come to study at Evergreen, and some of the stories she told of her experiences. I definitely also see how Reed had a profound effect on Evergreen in its early years, and I think in some ways, some of what I miss about my own early years at Evergreen is because the influence of Reed has lessened.

Strasser: of Reed, of Oberlin.

Bowcutt: Reed wasn’t the only one.

Strasser: When I came, there was a Reed group, there was an Oberlin group. And then there were various other people. Jeanne Hahn went to Oberlin and may have taught there. Jeanne was connected to Oberlin, I'm not sure how. But there were a bunch of Oberlin people.

Reed people were me, Matt, Kirk, Kaye V., Josie Reed—Hazel Jo went to Reed. Byron Youtz had taught and had been the Vice President of Reed. There were a whole bunch of people, and I think an equivalent number from Oberlin, but I don't know who they were.

Bowcutt: Were there other small liberal arts colleges that were influential?

Strasser: Not that I know of.

Bowcutt: I'm going to take a break, but I thought I would just hand this to you so you can look and see—how are we doing on time?

Strasser: 3:00 p.m.

Bowcutt: Maybe you can take a look at this. A lot of this, we've talked about without going in a chronological order, that list. Maybe you can take a look at that and see if there's anything else we need to tackle.

End Part 1 of 2 of Susan Strasser on 12-12-2019

Begin Part 2 of 2 of Susan Strasser on 12-12-2019

Strasser: Let me say clearly, here's the question. Is there a part of me that regrets the decision to teach at a more conventional college? What were the sacrifices, if any, of leaving? I think you understand why I left.

Bowcutt: Yes, totally.

Strasser: I have no regret about leaving.

Bowcutt: I figured you didn't. It was pretty obvious.

Strasser: I'm not a person who works in terms of regrets, but I've quit two secure jobs, this one and a later one. I was the founding director of the honors program at George Washington University. That was a funny job because I just recycled Evergreen ideas and people thought I was incredibly innovative. [laughter] It was pretty easy. The faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences had wanted to make an honors program, and then all the deans from all the other colleges signed onto it, so there was a lot of support at the dean level all over the university for having an honors program that would be in all the

different schools. I didn't stay long enough to have to deal with the classic things that administrators have to struggle with, which is space and money.

Bowcutt: It was the early visioning phase?

Strasser: Exactly. I was given a small space, but I didn't need a big space, and I had enough money, so I just stayed long enough to set up the program. Meanwhile, I worked on applying for grants for another book. Oh, I should say, when I was hired, I wanted tenure. I had two books, and both the history department and the American studies department would have been glad to have me, and said they would be glad to have me, but the university President was opposed to tenuring anybody who was hired as an administrator, so I didn't get tenure. I said to the Provost—whom I liked a lot—when I was hired, “You know that means I won't stay.” He said, “I'm not surprised to hear it.” Because he had tried to convince the President to tenure me, since I had two books and both history and American studies wanted me.

I started working on my third book, and I applied for fellowships and I had the great pleasure of walking into the Provost's office and saying, “I got a Guggenheim. Goodbye.” [laughter] The look on his face, I felt sorry for him because I knew he had fought for me, but he didn't have any choice, so I was out of there. In this case and that case, I just felt that I didn't have any choice. If I was going to have my own self-respect and do what I felt like I needed to do, I was going to have to leave and figure it out.

I want to say something about tenure. When I did end up in a very conventional history department, I did an end run around the tenure system. I was hired as a full professor. I had three books, I had tons of fancy fellowships. Nobody had any idea I had never gone through the tenure process, and I didn't tell them. But there I was in a history department having to vote on people's tenure, having to chair people's tenure committees. It felt crappy. It felt really horrible—really horrible—because I had this secret. [laughing] Everybody else had gone through this hazing process and I hadn't had to go through it.

Bowcutt: You did in a way. It's learning from prior experience. You had created your own by writing three books.

Strasser: I don't think I was unqualified for tenure. I was qualified for tenure, and that's why I wouldn't have taken the job had they not given me tenure. But it felt bad. It felt really bad.

Bowcutt: You know we have tenure now at Evergreen?

Strasser: No, I didn't know that.

Bowcutt: In the time that I've been there, I definitely can see the creep that is already happening in terms of losing some of the benefits of the alternative vision. There are reasons for it. My understanding was that it was a legal decision that we essentially had it, but we didn't officially have it so it was problematic from that standpoint. Anything else on there?

Strasser: What would need to have been different for you?

Bowcutt: I already know.

Strasser: What were the sacrifices, if any, of leaving, and what were the gains?

Bowcutt: You got to write more and teach less, so that was a pretty big gain.

Strasser: Did I really get to teach less? I don't think I really got to teach less, because I was a committed teacher. When I got to Delaware and they said, "You have to teach the U.S. history survey. Everybody has to teach a survey course, even the full professors." I thought, this is a good thing that the full professors have to teach the survey. But I wasn't about to get a textbook and teach the survey with a bunch of conventional lectures, so I invented this whole thing of primary sources from the Web. Did I teach less? I didn't teach less.

Bowcutt: That's the urban legend. That was what I heard. The urban legend I heard about you was when Susie left, she said, "I want to teach less and write more."

Strasser: I may well have said that. But I just want to emphasize, I created my version of the survey, and what did it mean? It meant when I had serious medical problems, I didn't go on medical leave and I kept teaching because I wasn't teaching the kind of course where I could just say to somebody, "Will you come give your Progressivism lecture?" Nobody could teach my course but me because I was an Evergreen teacher, because I had invented something that was different.

Bowcutt: How did people respond to that? Did they value what you were doing?

Strasser: Some did, some didn't. Most did. They thought it was interesting. Again, that's the thing that Evergreen people tend to discount, that anybody anywhere else ever cared about teaching. Well guess what? There's a lot of people who, faced with students, want to help them learn.

Bowcutt: Absolutely. I went to Davis and they had a center for teaching and learning way before Evergreen ever did, decades before.

Strasser: Is there a part of me that regrets the decision to teach at a more conventional college? If you look at my CV, what happened was after I left Evergreen, I didn't have a teaching job for a long time. I got this administrative job at GW and worked there for two and a half years. I got a Guggenheim and

took some time off regular employment. I worked for the German Historical Institute in Dupont Circle and that was sort of half fellowship, half administrative job in a German kind of way.

Bowcutt: Where was that?

Strasser: In D.C. Then the person who hired me at the German Historical Institute went back to teaching in Germany. A new director came and he didn't like me, and he didn't believe that the kind of history I did was real history. He didn't like a lot of us. He cleaned house and I was just part of the housecleaning. He did single me out, mostly because I didn't speak German; they all spoke very good English, including him.

I had about two years in which I was . . . it wasn't clear where my money was ever going to come from or whether I would ever make a living as a historian again. That was a hard time. I worked on a textbook, I did various things. I was married by then and my husband and I have always had the person who makes less give less to the household and the person who makes more give more to the household. That's how I survived. Then I got a teaching job at the Bard Graduate Center in New York for a year, and then I got my job at Delaware.

There was definitely a hard time after leaving both of these secure jobs, and there really were a couple of years when I despaired of ever making a living as a historian again. But, as I've often said, I followed my bliss to the poorhouse. [laughter] But it all worked out, I'm fine in the end, and the conventional university, as I say, there's things about conventional universities that are not so bad, and there were many things that were bad. The department chair hated me.

Bowcutt: And that's where the departmental politics can make or break your life.

Strasser: Yeah. On the other hand, by that point I was 50 and I was understanding I needed to stash away money for retirement. I got a full professor job at a state university with a union, and I retired with good benefits, and I'm not sorry.

Bowcutt: That was 15 years at Delaware?

Strasser: Yes. You got how I think Evergreen shaped me as the scholar I am today?

Bowcutt: Yeah.

Strasser: Good, because that's pretty important.

Bowcutt: When you were working at George Washington, were you able to bring some of those ideas from the student-initiated program into the work there, or learning communities, or multi-quarter programs, or were those considered too out of the box?

Strasser: Yeah. It was more within a conventional course.

Bowcutt: You could do interdisciplinary education. It sounds like the way you were teaching the survey class where you're not using a textbook is more Evergreen.

Strasser: Right, but the honors program was explicitly interdisciplinary. It was inter-school, so people from arts and sciences, and GW has an international relations school. There was a medical school program that was a BS MD program, and we had some kids from that.

Bowcutt: Did they function as a cohort?

Strasser: I got them functioning. How much that outlasted me, I don't know, but certainly for the first ones, the fact that they were the first, it was very exciting for them.

Bowcutt: That feels like another innovation that—I put quotation marks because that's, again, in terms of the way that we're presenting ourselves as using learning community as part of the innovative teaching that's going on at Evergreen. Yet there are multiple forces that are undermining that; the fact that many students are not willing to stay in a program for three quarters.

Strasser: That was already true when I was here.

Bowcutt: Now it's challenging sometimes to get them to stay for two just in the time that I've been here. I have to make it really clear what the benefits are, and articulate that to them, make the argument why what they have with their peers is just as important in some ways as the relationship they have with the educator.

Strasser: With the faculty, right.

Bowcutt: Yeah. But it feels like that's something I think would be unfortunate if we lost that. It gets back to your comments about the 1984 Program, when they're 20-plus years later still interacting with each other, that tells you a lot about how cohesive that learning community was, and how that can affect a person's entire life in terms of the choices they make.

I realize Evergreen is part of your past, and you live on the other side of the continent, so I'd totally understand if you're not really that engaged or connected with what's been going on since particularly 2017. But if you are, I'm curious, from a distance . . .

Strasser: I heard a little of the 2017 stuff. I think for me, it was so melded with Charlottesville, just with the whole political scene—particularly with the right-wing political scene—that it mostly just made me sad that Evergreen was being affected as well.

Joel [Greene; Jean Mandeberg's husband] sent me the article that was in *The Olympian* the other day. Last week, there was an article about Evergreen, about the buyouts and all of that kind of stuff about the financial issues now.

Bowcutt: The asbestos, or the ones where the individuals that were involved in the conflict were bought out?

Strasser: No, no. I mean about buyouts of faculty contracts, about the college's current struggles with low enrollment and opportunity.

Bowcutt: Right, the golden handshake offers.

Strasser: There was an article about a week ago in *The Olympian* and Joel sent it to me, knowing I was coming here and doing this interview. In a way, it feels like a reprise of that stuff from my first year here. What is going to come out of this? It sounds like there's talk of the college taking different kinds of shapes, but who knows?

Bowcutt: Yeah, and the way in which it is causing a whole group of older people in the community to choose to leave a little earlier than maybe they would have, and what kind of impact is that going to have on the institution?

Strasser: Right, but that's going on everywhere, buying out of old faculty. They're more expensive, and it is standard college administration. They're all doing it, so in a way, that doesn't surprise me. The encouraging people to work part-time is more of a surprise to me. But buying out of old people? Everybody does that.

Bowcutt: I am going to do two leaves without pay in the next two years, so I'm grateful that they're offering part-time. That's partly been also in collaboration with the union, because there's been some test balloons about how to cut down the number of faculty, and the union is very much wanting to protect as many people as possible from cuts, making the argument that many people would voluntarily take leaves, which would be a way for others to retain their jobs. I'm glad that has been adopted by the administration. Hopefully we'll be able to turn around the enrollment fast enough that we're not going to have a lot more losses, but it's still not clear.

Strasser: I just remembered something that I suppose I want on the record about leaving. There was a party for me at Matt's house when I was leaving. I will not say who it was, but another single woman faculty member came up to me at the party—not someone who was a close friend but we were

friends—and she said, “Are you scared?” I said, “Yeah, I am.” She said, “Just remember how scary it would be to stay.” I’ve never forgotten that. It was very kind of her.

Bowcutt: Wow. You don’t have to tell me her name, but is she still around?

Strasser: I’m not going to say who it was.

Bowcutt: That’s really interesting. When I first came here, I had felt so much like Olympia was a backwaters compared to California. My undergraduate was from University of California, Berkeley and I got my master’s and my PhD at UC, Davis. I was born and raised in northern California. Olympia is better now, but it’s funny because there are times—I feel like when I go to Berkeley, it’s like I can actually let my hair down.

Strasser: When I went to Cambridge, one of the things I was struck by was that in Olympia, I was a weirdo. I was an intellectual, I was Jewish, I was not a normal person in Olympia, Washington. My clones were walking the streets of Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was such a pleasure. It was such a pleasure. I’m so glad I was here, and I’m so glad I was here when I was here, both in terms of that time in my life and that time in the college’s history. I feel super grateful for it, but do I regret leaving? [chuckles] No.

Bowcutt: That’s very clear. I didn’t think you did. Partly, I was trying to get at that not tension is the right word, but the trajectory of a life is always interesting to me, these really important decisions that people make.

Strasser: It didn’t feel like a choice, Frederica. It was what I had to do to survive. I loved it here. I loved the mountain, I loved the water, I loved my friends, I loved the college.

Bowcutt: But you would not have found a partner, and you were a weirdo.

Strasser: Yes and I wanted to write books.

Bowcutt: You wanted to write books, and that wasn’t valued.

Strasser: Yes, so I had to leave.

Bowcutt: You had work to do and you went off to do it. You took a gamble, and you had some tough times where you despaired that you would be able to make a living at what you’re good at. But simultaneously, you also got a Guggenheim, and you had some really awesome experiences in some really different environments, and maybe spread a little bit of some of what you learned at Evergreen in places that otherwise might not have been exposed to those ideas.

Strasser: I think that’s true.

Bowcutt: Bravo for you.

Strasser: Thank you.

Bowcutt: I think a lot of people get frozen by security, and it's hard to leave. As you put it, "I left two secure jobs in my life, and there were some consequences."

Strasser: My mother had multiple sclerosis and was sick my entire childhood and died when I was 20.

Bowcutt: That gets your attention.

Strasser: I understood that life is short. I got it. I knew.

Bowcutt: Live it while you're living it, not remorsefully. What is that French singer? She had a song *Je Ne Regrette Rien* [*I don't regret anything*].

Strasser: Edith Piaf.

Bowcutt: Yes!

Strasser: I don't know about *rien* [*anything*], but I don't regret a lot. [laughter]

Bowcutt: Maybe that one cute 25-year-old, but you had a lesson you learned out of that experience.

Strasser: Yeah, and actually, I was here a couple years ago and ran into him. It was just sweet to see him, and he obviously thought it was sweet to see me, too. I don't regret.

Bowcutt: So, are we done for now?

Strasser: Yeah. It says here there's something I'm supposed to sign. We also have to make plans, both for our next talk and also for my talk to your program.

[Not transcribed 00:25:33 to end 00:30:24 because it's just Frederica and Susan coordinating about Susan's guest lecture in Frederica's winter quarter program.]

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