

Ed Kormondy
Interviewed by Oscar Soule
The Evergreen State College oral history project
October 4, 2017
FINAL

Soule: Today is Wednesday, October 4 [2017]. I'm interviewing Ed Kormondy in his home in Los Angeles for the 50th Anniversary Oral History Project at the Evergreen State College, in terms of early participants in the history of the school. I've known Ed for 46 years.

Kormondy: That's amazing.

Soule: And we taught together in Political Ecology in 1971 and '72. The following year, I became an academic dean—although they called me an associate dean, which always hurt my feelings—but I was an academic dean. And then, I guess, a little later in that year, you became an academic dean, and then you became the Provost. I have actually—and I'm going to leave with you, because, well, no reason—your last self-evaluation.

Kormondy: Oh, really? [laughing]

Soule: Oh, you're going to love that.

Kormondy: Oh my gosh!

Soule: And then, your letter of resignation to Byron Youtz.

Kormondy: Oh! Oh my heavens!

Soule: So, those are going to be my departing gifts. But in there, you talk about a lot of things. And I'll let you read those, and then we can talk about that later. I'd like to get started by having you tell me something about your youth, and your family. The only thing that I'm really interested in is, what was kind of the basis for you becoming the Ed Kormondy that you are today? It would start with your family, and your early schooling—possibly, maybe not.

Kormondy: I had a very close family. My father and mother ran a grocery store. And, as we used to say, we grew up behind the store. My brother, three years older than I, we were, well, as brothers typically are, we were sort of close in one way and in another way, not. He was very athletic. I was not. I was more brainy, I guess, is the right word. But he set a good example. He went to college at the University of Arkansas.

Then the war broke out—the Second World War broke out—so when I graduated from high school in 1946, I went into the U.S. Navy and served till—no, 1944, sorry—and served till 1946. And

then, went to Tusculum College in Greeneville, Tennessee. So, I went from New York to Tennessee. Graduated in 1950. Graduated in the morning, and married Peggy Virginia Hedrick in the afternoon. [laughing]

Soule: Getting things done, right?

Kormondy: And we immediately left for the University of Michigan.

Soule: Now, by that time, you were in the sciences, because you had a B.S. from Tusculum. How did you drift into the sciences? Was it something that had always grabbed you, or was your Navy experience important in that?

Kormondy: No, mostly it was a faculty member at Tusculum, Professor Mike Wright, was the biology professor—the biology professor—small college—at that time. It's still a small college, but not as small as it was then. He was the major influence on my career. It was he who persuaded me to go on to the University of Michigan, which I did, as I said. I graduated from Michigan in 19 . . . let me get my years straight here . . . 1950.

Soule: '51.

Kormondy: '50. Is that right? Yeah.

Soule: Okay.

Kormondy: Yeah, 1950. There's a lot of blank spaces in here.

Soule: Oh, yeah. Well, as I look at your resume, I can fill in those blank spaces. As I look at them, they're kind of standard for somebody like you, or like me, who gets a degree, and then there's always post-graduate work. You were a teaching fellow at Michigan, and instructor at Michigan, a curator of insects at Michigan. And then you went to—so that was kind of the after-your-degree, but before you found a real job, which seemed to have been at Oberlin.

Kormondy: Oh.

Soule: That you went from Michigan—you graduated from Michigan, and then you were there for a couple of years. And you did the kind of things like I did, and then I came to Evergreen, but you went to Oberlin from 1957 to 1963.

Kormondy: Oh.

Soule: Do you remember anything about Oberlin?

Kormondy: Not very much, except that it was a very nice place to work. Small college. It's still a small college—well, smallish college, not really small-small, but a small institution—and very intimate.

Everybody knew everybody, whether you were in biology or art or physics or whatever, it was a small

institution, so everybody knew everybody. We had a nice little house in Oberlin. Gosh, that was a long time. [laughter]

Soule: Yeah! I think that's where you met **Linda Kahan** even. I don't know if she was a faculty—I think she mentions that. But it sounds like, in Oberlin, did it have a tradition, as you remember, a traditional curriculum? You mentioned that you knew the people in the arts and literature, because the school was small . . .

Kormondy: Yeah.

Soule: . . . and everybody was in close proximity. But, as I remember, Oberlin had kind of an innovative or liberal or progressive way, maybe it was a way teaching as compared to curriculum—

Kormondy: Not particularly. It had a Conservatory of Music, which was very well known, better known than the college itself. The Conservatory was better known at that time than the college itself. But, over the years, Oberlin College built a very strong reputation, not just in the sciences, but in many fields. It was a good experience.

Soule: After Oberlin, you went to, I guess, was it D.C., with CUEBS.

Kormondy: Oh, yeah. Commission on Undergraduate Education in the Biological Sciences.

Soule: Don't tell me your memory is fading. That's exactly right.

Kormondy: Wow. [laughing] That was a national project. I headed that for a couple years, as I remember.

Soule: That was a shift away from research and classroom teaching to go to, not administration, but education reform, education development.

Kormondy: Yeah.

Soule: Was that planned, or did it just kind of fall into your hands? Do you remember?

Kormondy: I don't remember.

Soule: But it was from CUEBS that you came to Evergreen, because you were at CUEBS from '68 to '71, and you and I taught together in 1971.

Kormondy: That sounds . . . I don't honestly remember what those dates were, but that seems to fit.

Soule: Do you have any recollection of how you heard about Evergreen?

Kormondy: Probably because of that work, which was a national project, I learned about institutions that were doing innovative teaching, innovative instruction, whatever. And I guess that's what attracted me.

Soule: I'm a little reluctant to ask this question, since it involves me, but do you have any memories of our first year teaching together? It was called Political Ecology, and it was designed by Bob Sluss. But

then Bob didn't teach it. He went off to teach something else, and they made you in charge, they made you the coordinator.

Kormondy: Those were the titles that were used, yeah.

Soule: And, as you may remember, **Fred Tabbutt**, **Richard Anderson**, **Dave Milne**, Ed Kormondy and Oscar Soule. Do you have any recollection of what it was like to—in a way, you put it together, because you were the only one of us—well, no, that's not true. But in terms of the sciences, you were the only person who had any real background. Do you have any recall of that?

Kormondy: No, not really.

Soule: Okay. Because then, in terms of what happened next, was in the second year of the school, there were some problems—administrative problems—and they needed more deans, and they selected—I guess there was a vote or something like that—no, there was a vote, and I got picked as the fourth dean. And then you came in soon after that, and then took over for Dave Barry as the Provost. Does that ring a bell?

Kormondy: No, no. Complete blank.

Soule: Total?

Kormondy: Complete blank.

Soule: Wow. Okay. Do you have any other recollections of your early days, or your days? Because you only taught one year at Evergreen, but you were an administrator for about four.

Kormondy: Not really. That's terrible, I know.

Soule: Well, it is what it is. It's not terrible at all.

Kormondy: No. Nothing. Nothing.

Soule: Well, let me see if I read you some stuff. Because in your self-evaluation, you talk about—and this is very specific—you mentioned Dave Carnahan and **John Moss**. Do you remember that situation at all?

Kormondy: Carnahan was in the Library, I think.

Soule: I can't remember.

Kormondy: Does that sound right?

Soule: Now, wait. See, this is why I have to look things up. It's not Dave Carnahan, it was **Dean Clabaugh**.

Kormondy: Dean Clabaugh?

Soule: Yeah.

Kormondy: He was the business, yeah.

Soule: And John Moss. You said, “All this is background to what I will regard as one of the most serious breaches of institutional policy Evergreen has experienced to date. After the agony of the Moss-Clabaugh situation, and the many agonizing hours spent by me in the selection of exempt officers . . .” Does that trigger anything?

Kormondy: No, it must have been so bad that I—no, it doesn’t, Oscar.

Soule: Okay, that’s not a problem. I’m going to leave this with you, and I’d like you to look through it.

Kormondy: Okay.

Soule: And see if it triggers any memories, and I can come back tomorrow or the next day and we can pick up on some of those. But that doesn’t mean we’re done. It just means that now I’m off script.
[laughter]

What are your feelings about Evergreen, as you think back? Just in general, not specific this, that or the other. I’ll give you a context. You worked at CUEBS, you spent decades after you went to the campus on the Big Island, was it?

Kormondy: Yeah.

Soule: You found **Jan Kido** for us, who now, her niece is married to our son. So we’re *ohana*.

Kormondy: Oh!

Soule: We’re family. You then have traveled since you retired from that. You’ve been involved with evaluating maybe tens, if not hundreds, of schools over the years. As you reflect on that, what are your thoughts about Evergreen, as you put it in your life experience?

Kormondy: As I say, it’s largely a complete blank.

Soule: Really.

Kormondy: Which is hard to realize, I mean, hard to say. The prods that you have given me really helped me to think about some things, but basically, my life is a blank, so I can’t come up with things.

Soule: Well, as you look back . . .

Kormondy: My kids were very happy at Evergreen. [long pause] It’s terrible.

Soule: No, no, no. As I read your self-evaluation, you were painfully honest in it in terms of some, oh, I guess one could say critical comments involving both yourself and **Charlie McCann**, and even, to a little extent, **Dan Evans**. But they were appropriate in the sense that they were in context, and they were not personal. It was about certain decisions that people made, or stylistic things and the like. I’ll bring up an example. In your evaluation, you were very upset with the appointment of Dan Evans as the President, to the point that you tendered your letter of resignation.

Kormondy: Yeah.

Soule: But you later, in the same document, indicate that Dan Evans was probably the right choice for the job, but he wasn't appointed in the proper way; that they had short-circuited the process, in your mind.

Kormondy: Yeah.

Soule: And, as you said, if they had done it the right way, he probably would have been the choice anyway, and he was the right choice.

Kormondy: Choice anyway, yeah.

Soule: Does that help you bring that story back to mind, where you could tell it instead of me telling it?

Kormondy: I think you summarized that very well. All I can recall is that initially, I thought the way in which he was appointed was not consistent with Evergreen policies and procedures. Don't ask me what those policies and procedures were, but that the Board just didn't follow its own guidelines in appointing Dan. But, as it turned out, I think he turned out to be a quite good President. It was just that he was appointed in the wrong way. They could easily have—whatever the right way was, I don't remember now, the Board just bypassed its own procedures in appointing him President.

Soule: And I agree that he probably saved the college . . .

Kormondy: Yes, yes.

Soule: . . . given what Dixie Lee Ray was trying to do, subsequent to him. Another point you raised in your self-evaluation, again, taken out of context, could be read as critical of Charlie McCann, but I think one could say, having been there, that Charlie agreed with you in what you found as a criticism. If you remember, in one of Charlie's talks to the faculty, he said, "I have a mouth in which it is very easy to insert my foot." [laughter] And as the Provost, what you were talking about in your self-evaluation, was his inability to let misfits go, or to terminate misfits. And by misfit, I just mean somebody who might be very good at what they do, might be a fine person, but they were not well fit for Evergreen and what it was trying to do. But Charlie had trouble letting those people go, or asking those people to leave.

And historically—this is now my comment, not yours—I think that's something that has plagued the college over its lifetime, is not being hard-minded enough to do that. But do you remember any of that, why you said that about Charlie?

Kormondy: No. As I said, it's just all blank.

Soule: Okay. I'm trying to think. I guess, are there any—you know, we're both on the downhill slide. There's less left than there has passed. Do you have any words—this is an oral history project. You're one of the founding members of the—and I'm shining you up now, because this is going to be transcribed. But not only were you an early faculty member—I was an early faculty member—not only

were you an early administrator—I was an early administrator—you played important roles in being the first effective Provost that the college had. Dave Barry helped get the college started. I'm not denigrating anything he did. But clearly, you set the college academically, and gave it a sound footing, as the Provost.

Now, at this point in time, your memory isn't perfect, so I'm not asking you to go back and recount that. But just from where you sit now, do you have any advice for the college? It's now going to be turning 50 years old. Any advice for it, from your perspective of today, for the future?

Kormondy: No, because I have not been keeping up with it. Frankly, I don't know whether it's doing well, or not doing well, or whatever.

Soule: I'm not asking you to give an evaluation, like you would when you would go to a campus and say, "You're doing this very well, and you should be improving that." But just any words about what any good school should be doing as it looks ahead taking care of its mission. It may have changed a bit from when you were there, and you don't know exactly what it is now. That's fine. But do you have any kind of pearls, just good advice that you would give somebody?

Kormondy: No, because I've been away from it for X number of years, and I don't know whether it's—I assume it's been quote "successful" unquote. I'm not sure how to define that successful, but . . . no, I really don't . . . I won't want to say anything that might detract from what it's doing well by commenting, when I don't know what it's doing well, or not doing well, in my judgment.

Soule: Okay.

Kormondy: Because I really haven't been that close to it for many, many, many years. So, no, I just draw a blank.

Soule: It's not a blank, I think it's an honest Ed Kormondy statement, which is, you'd want more information before you would give advice. And I think that says a lot about you as a person.

Kormondy: Yeah, you're right.

Soule: So I'll accept that. Should we say that we're closing it for today, but we might pick it up a day or two?

Kormondy: Yeah. [chuckles]

Soule: Okay, thank you very much.

Kormondy: All right.