Virginia Darney

Interviewed by Nancy Taylor

The Evergreen State College oral history project

April 13, 2018

FINAL

Begin Part 1 of 2 of Jin Darney on April 13, 2018

Taylor: This is April 13, 2018 and I'm in Portland with Jin Darney. One of the things I thought we didn't talk about yesterday was women's studies and how important that was to what you did in your teaching, and in terms of what was going on in the college.

Darney: I think one of the really interesting and sometimes puzzling things is that there is no women's studies area as such at the college. My dissertation was in what would be called women's studies, so I certainly integrated that into everything I taught. But my sense is that the people on the main campus who were working on it saw it as a piece of other things they were doing, rather than something that stood on its own. Stephanie's [Coontz] work, for example, offered Women's History within the context of history. Peta's [Henderson] work was in the context of anthropology and history. So, it was always in everything I taught, but it wasn't a specific discipline, if you will. I never quite figured out why that was. In a way, we offered Women's Studies across the curriculum, much as we offered composition in Writing Across the Curriculum.

Taylor: But does that matter? Is that a philosophical difference or . . .?

Darney: I think it's an interesting structural question, and I don't know that it matters. I didn't feel like it mattered enough that I wanted to initiate an area of women's studies. But I think it's part of the college's position, which I strongly support, about interdisciplinary studies, and things are woven all through the curriculum rather than standing out. So I think it makes sense in the context of the college's philosophy. And that was fine with me. I was happy. When I taught film, and when I teach literature, whatever I'm teaching, we put it in there.

That was a reflection partly on just the stuff I was reading that I was interested in, but also a conscious effort to be sure. I took over a one-quarter, one-faculty course in Literary

Modernism, which I really didn't know very much about because it was not my period. I had boned up on it, and when I got to the class the first day, I said to the students, "Tell me about what it is. What's literary modernism?" They told me. "Here's the reading list. Who are other people who are writing and working in that period?" Just so they see the scope of the period. They said, "Oh, and Virginia Woolf." I said, "Oh, Virginia Woolf," who was not on the syllabus. They said, "Oh, yeah"—and they named the faculty member—"doesn't think she quite measures up."

So, I put her in. And I put in films by women as a way of letting them see what else was happening in the period, in the '20s. So I think, because you control the curriculum so much at Evergreen, it's pretty easy to integrate things you want to integrate.

Taylor: But I think there's a longstanding discussion about, do you have ethnic studies departments? Do you have women's studies departments? Do you separate them out, or do you make them part of the mainstream? I think at Evergreen, it was more likely that you integrate them into programs, because, as you say, it was easy, and it was irresponsible not to.

Darney: And it reaches more students, if that's what you're interested in; people who wouldn't take something called women's studies, but they'd do this class and, oh, they bumped into it, the way we tried to do with a whole lot of things. You just build it into the program.

Taylor: It doesn't cheapen it. I think it actually—

Darney: I think what you miss—and I'm willing to miss it—is a sense of this field, and the theory that goes with this field, and the history of this field, and what are the important works. The sense of it as this thing. But that's okay. It's a loss, but it's not a huge loss. It's worth it, I think, to do it the other way.

Taylor: But philosophically, or in educational terms, it seems like groups have to go through a time where they're front and center, like the demand from queer students that there be queer studies.

Darney: Right.

Taylor: And the demand from women students that there be women's studies.

Darney: Yeah, but part of that is the history of the Women's movement, the history of women in America. It came out in such strong opposition to the structure—so, I'll speak about

literature—in literature departments, where you had people like our beloved faculty member saying, "Virginia Woolf doesn't measure up." It's outrageous. So it was an adversarial relationship at the beginning, which it has to be to get it involved.

I was really engaged in that period, in the '80s, in what were called the "canon wars." So, I decided, in a four-credit course that I was teaching in Vancouver, that I was doing to do that. I devised this whole four-credit course called Considering the Canon, where we were going to look at that. And the students said to me, "We don't even know what the canon is." So I thought, oh, all right, and I revised everything completely and I taught the canon, which I couldn't believe I was doing. But you can't talk about oppositions to it if they don't know what it is.

Taylor: Yes.

Darney: It was quite an eye-opener for me, and quite a reminder of not being able to make assumptions of our students. And I think people who become academics are people who are good at school, and they're now working with people who are not necessarily good at school. I think that's a real challenge for faculty.

It brings me to one of the things I wanted to talk about yesterday about the Vancouver program, where I taught from 1978-1990. When I was in Boston teaching at Pine Manor College, they started an evening part-time studies program for older women, and I was one of the first faculty who taught in that program. And they were segregated. They weren't in the daytime. It was like this special curriculum that we had for them.

I brought this experience to TESC-Vancouver, working with adults who had completed the first two years of college, the same kind of students. And it seemed to me that what you don't want to do is separate them into "older students," "mature students," or whatever. I always objected on the Olympia campus when they'd talk about the foundation program or whatever—Ajax for women—the thing that designed especially for middle-aged women. I don't think you do that. I think you say, "This is who we are, this is what we teach and everybody can participate in it."

Now, I probably designed programs in Vancouver with those folks in mind, because we must have had three students who were under 30. But still, it's like this is a curriculum, and

we're here to challenge you, and it doesn't matter how old you are, or how young you are, we can do that. So that work in Pine Manor really made me think about what's the best kind of a curriculum that will reach everybody, and not just isolate the middle-aged ones.

Taylor: Back to the integrated women's studies into things, what are books that you found important to teach?

Darney: I never tried anything twice. It can't be true, I must have taught some books twice.

Taylor: You must have taught Virginia Woolf more than once.

Darney: No. I think some Doris Lessing that I taught in the '90s was really important, particularly *The Fifth Child*. I was less successful—I learned pretty early in my career that I really didn't want to teach the books I absolutely adore, because if the students didn't like them, it crushed me. And if it was a book that I just thought was really good, I didn't have that kind of emotional ownership of it. For example, I never taught *Moby Dick* because I adore *Moby Dick*, and I never taught *Portrait of a Lady* because I adore *Portrait of a Lady*. I taught some other [Henry] James, which I think was important.

One of the most successful things I ever taught was is this very short parable—and I *have* taught that several times—by Kafka called "Give It Up." It's only a few paragraphs long, and you can spend hours discussing this. Students can really see what you can do when you dig into a text, and when you really work with a text and think about the possibilities of it.

Taylor: Did you find some books were more teachable than others?

Darney: Oh, yes.

Taylor: And some books that you really wanted to teach over and over again because . . .

Darney: . . . they taught well?

Taylor: Yes.

Darney: I don't think so.

Taylor: Really? I sure had some of those. You just knew it was a guarantee that it would work. And, since they were new students, they'd never done it.

Darney: Right. But I guess I was more selfish. I wanted to do new things that I hadn't taught before, and experience them in a different way. Louise Erdrich, early on, I think was really important, her earlier works.

When we taught the Islands program, I finally got to teach *Robinson Crusoe*. It's hard to find a program it fits into, but it belongs in the Islands program. Students hated it, which I thought was very interesting. The first half is boring, I admit, but we taught it for different reasons. That was enlightening.

Taylor: So it's more important to teach a book that fits the theme, or solves a problem that you want to address, rather than a book that is a classic or great?

Darney: Yes, but I don't think in those terms. It's not like I think there's this canon of things students ought to know, what they need to know it if they're going to get references. There are a lot of reasons for knowing it,

Taylor: So you don't think of teaching in terms of teaching an English major.

Darney: Right, and I don't think in terms of coverage. I think in terms of learning how to read a text, and how to explore it, and take a lot out of it and put a lot into it, and sort of what you do with it.

I would read a book and I could say, "Oh, this would teach well." And mostly, if it's gripping, it teaches well as a novel. And I guess what I want is for students to leave thinking that novels can be an important part of their life. I thought everybody should know how to read a novel before they graduate from college, but I was less interested in an American lit major, or an English major even.

Taylor: So that actually answers, in part, a question that I had. Were there things that you felt every student should learn, or goals that you had in teaching?

Darney: Yeah, I think helping students be inquisitive, helping students ask a lot of questions, helping students think about questions that they want to ask. I always did this exercise in seminar where, before we started talking about a book, we put their questions up on the board. Then I would divide them into questions that have a specific answer—like "What was the name of So-and-So's grandmother?"—and questions that don't have an answer. We'd get those out of the way right away. We'd answer all their specific questions, and then you'd look at the questions that don't have an answer and that you can really spend time exploring. And I think for some students, that's a revelation that you would have open-ended questions about a text that you don't answer even at the end. You may have new ideas or whatever.

And so I never went into it with "This is what they should know about this text." And I didn't do very much background about "This is the history of the author," or, "This is the context in which it was written," unless I felt like it was really crucial, but mostly I didn't. I just let them work with the text without secondary stuff.

Taylor: I know you lectured some, so when you did lectures, what guided you?

Darney: Especially after I taught with Don, but even before that, it was "Here's what I'm thinking about this text, and here's what interests me about this text."

I taught *Middlemarch* to these students in Vancouver, and I was teaching with an experienced Evergreen faculty member who said, "Oh my god! That's much too hard. You shouldn't teach it." I had already then developed this idea that you just give them stuff that's too hard and let them struggle with it. And they did.

Taylor: That's my favorite all-time book.

Darney: I love it. I don't have to defend it in front of the students, but I really like it a lot and it means a lot to me. I still had a student—a middle-aged gentleman—who said, "You know, I noticed in this book that the milking stools that they use are three-legged, and usually you'd see two-legged milking stools in that period." And I just thought, what do I do with this? [laughter] That's the level of sophistication, if you will, that some of the students brought to trying to read a text.

Taylor: So your teaching goals come out of an English major in the sense that it's not about coverage, it's about learning to read.

Darney: Right.

Taylor: I had a list of things, and we've kind of covered them—best books to teach, most important books to you. How about most important books to you, not to teach?

Darney: Well, *Portrait of a Lady*, because for quite a large period of my life, I believed I was living that book. And there's a new book called *Mrs. Osmond* about what happens after the end of the book.

My friends and I would sit around and say, "Well, what happened at the end of the book?" The favored one was that he would just get run over by a bus [laughter] and be out of the picture. But it's beautiful. We see the wheels that turn to make things happen, but I think

in her eyes, it's fate that's what happens to her. That kind of contraposition is interesting; that what we may think of as just something that happened actually has these causes that we don't know about necessarily.

Taylor: And you never taught *Portrait of a Lady*?

Darney: No, I never taught it.

Taylor: Interesting. So, what's another favorite book?

Darney: Well, *Moby Dick*. And I confess, I pretty much skipped the whaling chapters. I read it for the rest of the text. I don't teach it partly because when I was at Pine Manor, a guy in the American history department taught *Moby Dick* as a way to learn about the New England whaling enterprise, and it made me weep to think of poor students trying to struggle through that because of the whaling. So, I like that.

There's this book by Harriet Beecher Stowe called *Pearl of Orr's Island*, which is the kind of opposition to *Moby Dick*, that is, it's the women at home on the island when the men are off on the whaling vessels. It's a lovely book.

I read a lot of contemporary fiction. I'm reading more now, of course, because I'm not teaching. But occasionally I would bring those into the teaching so they were reading stuff that was new, like *The Fifth Child*. When that came out in 1981 I used it as soon as it came out in paper.

Taylor: But your scholarly work had a lot to do with autobiography and memoir.

Darney: My dissertation didn't. My dissertation was completely American women's history. But my scholarly work at Evergreen had to do with autobiography and memoir, so I put those in. It's been so interesting to see, not just the writing about autobiography and memoir, but the stuff that's published now as memoir. It's so interesting to see the changes that are happening.

I got really into it because of the women's suffrage movement in the 19th Century. They wrote memoirs. So, they were important historical documents, and some of them were good and some of them weren't good, in my opinion, as reading an autobiography or memoir. But the data that was in it was important, so that kind of got me interested in autobiography when I was in graduate school at Emory's Graduate Institute for the Liberal Arts ILA

Taylor: Did you teach memoir writing?

Darney: Yeah, once. It wasn't very successful. I didn't like it. One summer, I taught an autobiography class that used film and written autobiographies, and then they wrote them. That worked because they had a lot of other stuff they were doing besides writing their memoirs. I think it's very hard to write a good memoir, and I don't know how to teach memoir writing, so I didn't. I kind of let them do it.

In film, they're often quite experimental, the ones that are autobiographical memoir. There's this one called *Winnipeg* by Guy Maddin that is just astounding. I taught it two or three times, I've seen it two or three times more. I still don't understand it. I don't know what's going on, which is why I like it. [laughter]

Taylor: For a while at the college, there was a trend to teach autobiography. There were many programs, taught by different people, very different books. But it was offered every quarter for quite a long time. I remember Marilyn Frasca did one, and it was called Fictional Autobiography, and everybody in the class had to choose to be somebody else.

Darney: Oh, interesting.

Taylor: And act for the whole quarter as that other person. It was wild.

Darney: Wow.

Taylor: It was wild, and I think both Marilyn and Craig Carlson acted, and they showed up in costume of other people, and they had the students doing all this sort of thing.

Darney: Right.

Taylor: Were you ever a part of that?

Darney: No.

Taylor: You didn't teach autobiography in that series?

Darney: No, that was before I was on the main campus. I think one of the ways it's natural to use it is in things like women's studies and ethnic studies, because it's people's stories that are part of what you're trying to learn about, that period.

Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* I thought, taught very well. I recommended it to a book group I was in, and it was a flop. I don't know it it's the times or the students or what, but I thought it was a powerful form of autobiography, and really well written.

Taylor: How would you describe your interaction and relationship with students?

Darney: I was seen as the kind of rigid, demanding one. At the end of the 1984 program, when we were all out having a retreat at the end of the program, the students gave the faculty kind of gag gifts that epitomized them. They gave me a piece of barbed wire. So, I'm guessing, that that's how they saw me. [laughing]

Taylor: And that's not how you see yourself.

Darney: No, but it made me really think, if that's how they see me. I was approachable. I often would stop students to inquire about things if I knew that they were having trouble, or that they were doing something, whatever. But I had standards of things they needed to do, like turn in their work; like talk in seminar. I demanded that they talk in seminar. And that was hard for some students.

Taylor: I remember you were always saying that when you taught with Bill [Bruner], Bill was the program mother.

Darney: Right.

Taylor: And you were not the program mother.

Darney: That's right.

Taylor: And that was a matter of principle?

Darney: Well, every program has a mother. And often, of course, the women are roped into doing it, so it was such a pleasure when Bill—they were first-year students, and Bill would say, "Well, if you haven't done your laundry yet, it's week four. You should do your laundry." [laughing] He made jokes of it. But I think you have to care for your students, which I did.

Taylor: But it isn't necessarily a motherly way?

Darney: I had young kids during all of this, and I had plenty of people to mother. I didn't want to mother those students.

Taylor: David Paulsen said the same thing. He was the mother and Linda Kahan was not.

Darney: I bet, yeah, exactly. It's personality.

Taylor: You're right, every program needs to have someone that plays that role.

Darney: Right.

Taylor: That's interesting. Proudest moments? Things that you did that you look back on and say, "Yeah, that was good."

Darney: I'm very proud of the Islands Program. I think it was really, really good. It was a complicated program and it was a complicated idea, and I think it really was successful, so I'm proud of that program.

Taylor: And it was good because it was carefully planned, and it was a creative idea?

Darney: Yes, and it was transformative for the students. I think what makes success at Evergreen for faculty and students is a faculty team that plans things and structures things in such a way that the students then just take off and do it. So, you're not there all the time telling them what to do, but you build it in such a way that they can succeed, but they also have advanced their learning. I think that takes a lot of planning.

For example, my first experience in team teaching was a course on the History of Childood at Pine Manor. Our final exam listed all the books that they'd read in the order that they'd read them. Then the exam question was, "Put these books in a different order, and talk about how the course would have been different." That is a brilliant—and my colleague Vera thought of that—way to think about how you're learning what you're learning, what difference it makes that this book comes after that book instead of before it.

Because I always talked with students about how the books talked to each other in a program, and the fact that you read A before B makes B look different than if you'd read it in the opposite order. So that they see—and I don't know why it was important to me that they understood this, but it really was—that they understand that the program is a construction. It isn't just handed down by god and it has to be this way, but faculty worked together to think about how to put this together, and how to structure it so that you and the students are thinking about the questions you need to be thinking about.

I think the reason it's important is that that is what they need to be doing with their own education is having that same kind of consciousness, stepping outside of it and looking at it, and thinking what they're doing, and what they're putting together and how it works, rather than just, oh, this looks good, I'll take this. We do a bit of that, but you don't want that.

Taylor: This is kind of a leading question, but what does the college do to make that kind of curriculum possible, and as dean, what did you do?

Darney: The college doesn't do much to make that possible, except that it puts people together and says, "You can do whatever you want."

But I think that, for example, the Danforth Fellowships were a way to get at that question, you know. How do you do this? If Sally Cloninger had had a Danforth, and could talk to people about designing projects within their programs, it would have been fabulous. I think those are the kinds of things we learned from each other, and that's why we team teach so that we learn from each other.

As a dean, I really supported the retreats. I supported the design-a-program-in-an-hour kind of thing and helped people work through that. I talked with faculty in my deans' group, but also new faculty about ways to think about designing a program. And I think a lot of people feel constrictions that aren't there.

For example, Sally had done an Islands program before with Phil Harding—maybe just Phil—earlier, and so she had a kind of structure, but she and I did a lot of different things. People would come up to us and say, "My god, that's a wonderful program." And we'd say, "Well, you can do it." And they couldn't or wouldn't.

Now, I know there are family obligations, reasons that people can't go away, but they didn't. And part of what made it work was that we didn't send the students off; we went off ourselves, so that we were doing the kinds of things they were doing—not as their teachers, as people in this program who are doing it.

Taylor: One of the things you talked about yesterday was the joy in the planning. It took a lot of planning.

Darney: Sure.

Taylor: It didn't just happen.

Darney: Right.

Taylor: And I'm afraid that there are a lot of programs with good ideas, and faculty just expect them to happen.

Darney: And they drop it. You've got to go deep into it. At the end of the first quarter, we had a daylong retreat at the organic farmhouse, and students presented their projects—well, we'd already seen them—about what they were going to do on their island.

But we also had this amazing project. I'd gone to Powell's and got a whole lot of old, cheap travel guides, so we gave each group of two or three students one of these books. And we had a lot of art material there and we said, "Make this into an art piece." They could tear it up, they could cut it, they could paint, they could do all this stuff. It was fabulous to think about travel. And they weren't leaving until four weeks into winter quarter, so we knew they were going to be around to do some more work on this. It was a great project. That's Sally coming up with this.

Taylor: And that kind of thinking might be the difference between good programs and not good programs. And also there are a lot of faculty that have a certain amount of knowledge, and they just teach it.

Darney: Yes.

Taylor: And they teach it well, but they don't go out on a limb to do that kind of creative work.

Darney: Right, and something that they aren't comfortable with.

Taylor: Yes. And they feel an obligation to continue to teach what they know.

Darney: Right. But it's not possible to teach everything they know—or know everything to you want to teach.

Taylor: No.

Darney: They're already making choices, so why not make one more choice that allows room for some other kind of work?

Taylor: And it might not be as effective with students anyway. They teach it, but do the students receive it?

Darney: Do they learn it, yes, exactly. So I think, as a dean, it was, again, lots of talking and helping people think about these questions.

I remember talking with a chemist at catalog time who had a program for the catalog, and I said, "Okay, this is a very clear description. What are they learning?" And the faculty member said, "They're learning how to be chemistry majors." And I just despair, because that

is not the point. But the sciences present special opportunities and special problems, and I think, particularly with advanced work, maybe you let some of that go.

But with first-year students, they ought to be doing something like the Water program that was a combination of political and environmental studies, and then science and some math and so on, because that's how they understand how to think in a field.

Taylor: It you had the deans and the Provost around the table, what would you advise them to do to help people, I guess, plan or think or teach the kind of programs that you believe in?

Darney: It's about socialization and socializing. I think you can't say, "We're going to have a party, and come and we'll talk about this." I think you have to kind of force people in some ways by putting them in situations where those things happen.

The retreat is a good example, although there's nothing that makes people go to the retreat. But the people who go really get a lot out of it. One of the things I learned was to stop thinking about the people who don't do the stuff we want them to do, and to really focus on the people who would like to, or who already do, and who have things to offer to each other; and to understand that some people just aren't going to do it. It's too bad, and we can keep trying on them, but it's not going to happen.

Taylor: I don't know if this is possible, but do you have any evidence, in terms of student outcomes or what students get, about whether this kind of program is more effective in the long run than a traditional program, or a traditional school?

Darney: You mean like interdisciplinary studies?

Taylor: Yes, or these creative programs that really do engage students in creative thinking.

Darney: Well, I think we do. I know just through Sally the number of people who are working in media—in the film industry, in animation and all kinds of things. They've come to it with some breadth and then they do that. I think that's the kind of breadth that other schools aim for with gen ed requirements.

Now, whether we want to become a two-year interdisciplinary school and a two-year upper-division narrow school, I don't think so. But that's one possibility, one way to get at it, to say, "These first two years, we're going to have you do all this really broad stuff," if only

because you're going to bump into things that you didn't know you were interested in that we're going to wave by you.

I think there are things you could do [through the curriculum], but it would take a lot of work on the faculty part to get to it and support. It has to be a faculty-led change.

Taylor: Yes, and the pressure now to do vocational programs and do STEM, the pressure from students, from parents, from the economics is not to do that.

Darney: Right.

Taylor: So if you are arguing to Admissions what the college ought to be doing, it's an uphill battle.

Darney: It is, and it's an uphill battle explaining it to parents and to students who think they understand it and don't. I would go out on admissions trips and they'd say, "Do you have a biology major?" And if you said to that person, "What is a biology major?" They have no idea, but they just know it's a thing.

Taylor: And I can do it if I go to X.

Darney: If I go to X. I think it's interesting that I'm now—I guess we'll talk about this later—doing work in an organization, which is just as hard to explain as Evergreen is. I somehow got myself into these two positions where I have to say, "Well, that's not quite how we do it. This is what we do," or, "This is who we are. No, that's not quite it." You know?

And how to emphasize the things that we think are important, and say the things that they want to hear, if they're congruent, and how to make those things work.

So, yes, I think there is pressure, but I think computer science is a really good example. In, I don't know, it must have been the late '80s, there was the beginnings of computer science. So we really ramped it up, and it was really hot for about five years, and then there weren't any students. And now, it's hot again. But you can't design a college based on changing economics. What you have to do is prepare them to be able to go any way they wanted.

It's less true in computers now, but it used to be that anybody could do that—could pick it up and get really good at it—and you didn't have to be trained in computer science. You could come at it from another field, which is typically what happened at the beginning. But that's less true now, I think.

Taylor: If we had followed student desires at the beginning, we would have had 25 psychology faculty hired.

Darney: Right. And now we have 25 business faculty. And because of the way we design curriculum, they keep wafting into the other parts of the curriculum. [laughter]

Taylor: What's the answer to the question about what the college ought to do? Do you stand by your principles? Do you change your principles? Do you respond to outside pressures? What's your advice?

Darney: We did a number of things when I was the curriculum, which is to try to make the curriculum not appear to be something that it wasn't, but try to make it so that people who are looking for something could find it.

They'd say, "I want to be a psychology major." And we could say, "Well, in the index of the catalog, there's psychology in this program and this program and this program. And after you do that, you could do this other psychology, which is more advanced. And when they changed the evaluations to have the credit equivalencies, your evaluation will show that you have credits in that thing. But if what you want is to come to Evergreen and only make movies, then you should go to film school. I think we need to be clear to students about that. "If you want to only do painting, you should go to art school, because we're going to ask you to do some other stuff."

Taylor: So we should hold to that?

Darney: I think so.

Taylor: Because one of the problems now is this huge enrollment crisis. There have been enrollment crises before, and years ago, one of the responses to the enrollment crisis was to start part-time studies to appeal to a different group of people, and to try to make what we teach still compatible with the philosophy of the place.

Darney: Right.

Taylor: I don't know now whether you advise holding your philosophy and standards constant, or whether you think you have to bend.

Darney: Well, I think you have to do one or the other very clearly. I think if you're going to give up on these principles, you have to just give up and become a traditional university.

Taylor: Or something else.

Darney: Right. I still think that the model works, and I still think that it prepares students—in ways that they don't understand until they're out—for whatever they want to do next. But that's a hard sell, and I know that Admissions struggles with this.

Taylor: But what did you do, and what can they do, to educate, acculturate, cajole, train, help faculty believe in it and do it? Because that's one of the problems. It's about faculty development, it's about institutional belief, it's about actually caring and not allowing the values to be compromised because faculty don't support them.

Darney: I think it is about faculty development, and I think you have to work really hard. One of the things you could do is to not put people full-time in a program. You can give the new faculty release time, and have a very structured set of activities that they do in that time that's released.

It could be on a Wednesday or sometime when there's no class. "We expect you here every Wednesday, and we're going to not just talk to you about the college, but we're going to have you experience the things that make the college work." They could do program design, they could do seminars, they could do all these kinds of things, and I think that would make a difference.

The thing that alumni talk about at the college is the faculty. They talk about programs, but not so much. They talk about the faculty, and what they meant to them and how they helped them figure out what they wanted to do or where they wanted to go. I think that anything we do that supports faculty is the way to go.

It would be wonderful if we had a bit more authority over what faculty do and how they do it. But I think we've decided at this point—I mean, I think the college has decided—that it's worth it to have some slop, if you will, of things that aren't going very well to allow other people to do the things they want to do. Now, I don't know what difference a union has, the bargaining contract has, in this, because it does restrict hours and all kinds of things. But I just think you've got to get the faculty together.

I felt so hampered by the founding faculty when I came to the college, who would stand up in meetings and say in a deep voice, "Well, in the beginning, this is what we thought." And it

felt like it was really constricting. Until I broke out of that myself, and let them blather on and do it the way I wanted to do it anyway because they couldn't . . . you know . . . I just felt like the history was oppressive of the college.

Taylor: Mm-hm.

Darney: So you don't want to set that up for new faculty. You don't want to say, "Let me tell you how it is, and here's what you do." But you do want them to experience it, and make it their own. And then it may change, and that's fine. But it shouldn't change just by inattention.

Taylor: There are principles that exist in the college, and so it's not a matter of telling new faculty, "Okay, you're free to do anything you want."

Darney: Exactly. "These are the principles."

Taylor: So the principles have to be held, and they have to be supported, and then faculty have to be encouraged or allowed to figure out how to make them their own.

Darney: Exactly. But they have to experience them.

Taylor: Yeah.

Darney: You could set it up so that you could have the Five Foci, one a week. It's like AA meetings. [laughing] You could have the Five Foci, and let them experience each one, and think about what it means in their own teaching.

End Part 1 of 2 of Jin Darney on April 13, 2018

Begin Part 2 of 2 of Jin Darney on April 13, 2018

Taylor: We're starting again on April 13, 2018. Where were we? We were talking about ways to support the faculty, and what you did.

Darney: Ways to support new faculty, a buddy system really depends on who it is, and there are some people who are fabulous buddies and other people who just let it drop and never see their buddy, which is worse than not doing it at all, you know, if new faculty is expecting some kind of support that's not there.

Taylor: Can you think of—and you can even be specific about the good examples—of really good hires that you were part of, and that you could generalize from that would help people hire successful faculty.

Darney: As we were talking this morning, I don't have any confidence in my ability to hire. I thought that Greg Mullins was a really good hire, and I really supported him. And when he came—I just saw him last weekend and he said, "Oh, I remember you put me up at your house when I first came and was looking for a place." I kind of watched out for him, which is, I think, what somebody needs to do for all new faculty.

One of the nice things about being a dean was that we'd interviewed all the faculty, so that when we had new faculty, we knew them. I kept up with the folks that we hired during the time that I was there, even though I wasn't instrumental in the hiring, but I got to participate in it. I thought that was really important.

I don't know. I guess the theme that I'm going to think about is it's all about personal relationships, and about finding ways to engage people so that they have personal relationships with faculty and with each other and with students. And I don't know how to do that. I know it when I see it, so you could lean on those people, but then they'd end up doing all those kind of socializing stuff.

Taylor: I think that's probably the biggest key to success -- this relationship bit, and it's the hardest one to control. The inclination is to try to make rules and policies and guidelines that get people to do X, Y and Z because then it will be better. And it turns out that doesn't work. The only thing that works really is the personal relationships that build on getting people to choose to be a part of the college.

Darney: Exactly.

Taylor: But being a part of the college [is] the key, not going off on your own but having the creativity to--

Darney: And if we could somehow do that in the process and hiring and orienting new deans, for example, it would be really good. But I think that . . . I don't know . . . is it personality? Is it something you can't really make somebody be-- a friendly, welcoming person-- if they're not?

Taylor: I just wonder in the hiring if there's anything that can clue you in that that person is going to be successful. Because there were some hires that were truly successful, and some, after two years, left. I guess it's the same way with students. There are some students that

come, and they figure the place out, and they throw themselves into it and they have a wonderful experience, and there's others that say, "You know, I just never connected."

Darney: Right. I don't know, because I know we'd say to the students, "This is where you take control of your own education, and you're going to get out of it"—you know, my EST speech. [chuckles] And they say, "Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah." But they don't actually understand it.

I think it's the same with faculty who see what we're doing, and see the engagement and the enthusiasm of the faculty that they meet when they're here hiring, but it's too—I think one of the advantages of the early years was hiring people who were mid-career, or not quite so beginning, sort of early-mid to mid-career, who understood the problems in typical higher ed, and who were really eager to do something else about it, and were far enough out of graduate school that they weren't scared mice anymore about "Am I good enough, and are people going to like me, and are people going to judge me and can I admit I didn't know something?" Because you have to let go of that stuff.

Taylor: It was also the '70s.

Darney: Yes, and people were experimental and not—but I think people come out of graduate school kind of tortured and anxious. I don't blame them, but if people use Evergreen as a steppingstone to get another job, they're going to leave after two years. And I don't know how you can tell that.

And I think that there are some people who think that all this freedom will be just great, and they get there and they don't like it as faculty, and so they should leave. And I don't think we should see that as a failure.

Taylor: Or, they don't feel the support for their scholarly work, and that's really what they want to do.

Darney: Right. And if that's what they want to focus on, then it isn't the right place. And yet, I think our rate of publication, for example, is equal to other universities, because people publish what they really want to. But some people find that they have to do it by taking quarters off. It's not easily accommodated if they're terribly serious about it. But people publish, you know, people get stuff done.

Taylor: Some people feel very hampered by the college and other people thrive. The question is, how do you get the right people?

Darney: I don't think you can if they come under misapprehensions, and they think it's just what they want, and then they realize it isn't. "Oh, I didn't want that after all." I think that's part of what happens with students, although they're not as conscious about it.

Taylor: Now we just want any student that will walk in the door; we used to want students that wanted to come. And now we want to convince a student to come, no matter what.

Darney: Well, but that's always been true. That's not new.

Taylor: That's not new? Okay.

Darney: No, I think we've always had to say, "Yes, you can do that." And their parents don't understand. That's why we have such a high percentage of academic kids, because their parents get it. But I think if you see college as a training school, then it looks weird. It looks weird anyway, you know.

Taylor: And 50 years in, the world is different.

Darney: Very.

Taylor: And I think that's part of it, too. That advice to current deans and advice to Evergreen now. I think you've done as much as you want to about that?

Darney: Yes.

Taylor: I said I was going to ask this question to reflect on. Who are you, and who and what made you who you are?

Darney: I think my friend, Vera, at Pine Manor really turned me around about what I wanted to do and what I wanted to be. I got a lot of support in graduate school. I had a baby; walked in with a three-month-old baby the first day of class. I had three faculty who were very supportive.

And preparatory, this was an interdisciplinary program, and we went to Al Stone in the English Department, who had done a lot of work in autobiography, and we said, "We want a women's autobiography class." This was 1972. He said, "You know, I don't know much about that but I will help you do it." And I was ever grateful to him, and inspired to admit what I don't know as a way to begin an inquiry.

We did the class. We put it together and we taught it. It was a seminar, and he came and he was great. But the idea that "Huh. I don't know about this so let's explore it," rather than I have to be in some field where I'm really confident. That made a big difference to me.

Then I think when I came here, teaching with Bill Bruner was really important. Teaching with Sally Cloninger was obviously really important, as I've talked about. Teaching with Caryn Cline was important. And then, once I moved up to Olympia after 12 years, I felt supportive from the loose women's group.

Barbara [Smith] was certainly important to me, both as a faculty member and as a dean. I think she was so supportive and enthusiastic, and didn't get discouraged. I don't know how she did it. I spent more than one afternoon in her office in tears, and she would help me and figure it out. The fact that when I left, they now have two Curriculum Deans. It was partly because I was doing longer days than 9:00 to 5:00, although Barbara made us come 8:00 to 5:00. But still, it's a lot of pressure, but it was good.

I learned from Karen Wynkoop how to run a good meeting, and I am forever grateful for that. And I realized that when I was running meetings—like figuring out hiring and those very tense things—that I had a higher tolerance for discussion and blather than most people, so when I had had enough, everybody had had enough. And so when I'd had enough, then we'd move on because I knew that everybody else was ready. And I learned some really good skills in leading a meeting from her, which has been very helpful to me in all kinds of situations.

I think the deans' team was a really good one, and very supportive. John Cushing was a real support to me, and he and I would do a lot of stuff together just because of our jobs, but also just because I found him so supportive.

Darney: . The deans actually had responsibility and no authority, so the miracle is that we got as much done as we did by just leaning on people, and appealing to their better nature and trying to get them to step up. It was made much easier, as I said earlier, with the Planning Units, and I could say to the Coordinator, "You've got to have three faculty providing freshman seats," or whatever. And everybody else agreed that they needed to, so everything was in the hole so they all heard everything. That made it much easier because I didn't have to then lean on people individually; the group could say, "Yeah, we agree about that."

This is now off the track, but it was hard for me to learn to say no in a way that was really clear, because my preference is to waffle and not really say no. I hear my mother's voice saying, "This is only a suggestion, but let's not forget who's making it." [laughter] That didn't work. So I had to learn to say upright, "No, we can't do that." And when students would come in with complaints, I would listen, and then I would say, "You're not going to want to hear this, but I can't do that for you," or, "You can't do that."

Taylor: But you had a reputation of being clearheaded and respected, so people would respond to you.

Darney: Evidently

Taylor: That was the kind of leadership that was necessary and worked. That worked. It wasn't that you were a bureaucratic no/yes person, it was "Jin really is pushing me to do this, and it looks like the right thing, so I guess I'll do it."

Darney: Right. And you try to be respectful of them, but also grateful that they'd stepped up to help. It bleeds over with the work I do now in a non-profit that creates community for seniors and offers volunteer services where I'm asking these drivers, "Will you take this person?" When they say, "No, I can't," I always say, "Not to worry. Thank you very much. Thank you for letting me know." I don't ever harp on them for "How come you're not doing this stuff?"

Taylor: But you're in a different world when it's volunteers.

Darney: Well, but there's a lot of ways that the faculty are volunteers. [laughter] They're doing things voluntarily, and you have to then recognize when they do something that steps up and really helps. I try to keep that in mind.

Taylor: And you have to support them.

Darney: The other thing that I thought was important about our deans' team, and I think it's important in general—and it's kind of embarrassing to say it—but it's really important for the deans to have a place that you can just let your hair down and say awful things about people. Because then, it's in that room and it doesn't go out of that room, and you get it off your chest. You just need to vent about something, and that's a really good place to do it, if it doesn't carry outside the room and if it doesn't affect the way other deans react to that person.

And a thing I learned about teaching, but it's true about being a dean, too, is that people that I couldn't really get along with, or students I couldn't get along with, invariably somebody else on the team could. That was helpful to say, "There's certain folks I can work with that you can't, and so I will." But not everybody fits with everybody.

I was at an alumni event in D.C. and somebody came up—and they always come up and say, "Where's So-and-So?"—and it was early grads, and somebody asked about this faculty member who I thought was a terrible teacher, and was a lot of trouble for me and I just really resented him. The student said, "God, he was such a great teacher." So I thought, okay, he's not all bad. He's offering something to that student that was really important, and so it made me back off about being too judgmental.

Taylor: One of the things we haven't talked about at all and I think you were a big part of it—and inevitably, by scale, it's dropped out—and that is faculty evaluation, the whole system. How important was that, and how did you carry it out?

Darney: When I started at Evergreen we were doing them every three years and I just modeled myself on Barbara, who had done it for me as a fact that she was our dean in Vancouver. It's a chance to really talk to a faculty member and to try to be helpful, and to let them vent or [tell you] things they're worried about. It has to be a safe space, and I felt like it really was.

It makes you nervous [that] you're going to be evaluated, but I tried to see it as a development opportunity for faculty, and I think it's really important. I visited classes, and then when it all changed, we didn't do that anymore. I think that was a big loss. Those groups of people sitting around about the thing we don't call tenure, they're a joke. I would always be the one who would have to prompt the group to say something negative about the person, and to just notice holes in what they were doing. Or, 'What about those kind of evaluations?" Or, "What about the fact that you didn't do those evaluations?"

Faculty did not take that responsibility. Well, if there's a dean there who will, then maybe it's okay.

Taylor: Can you tell the history about how that evaluation system changed? Because you came in when there were three-year contracts, and every single faculty had to write a self-evaluation;

the dean met with them and the dean wrote an evaluation back. And I think all of those dean evaluations were public.

Darney: Yes, and it was a wonderful way to learn about the college, by reading the dean's portfolio, because you saw all the things that the dean had said to those people.

Well, a faculty member sued who did not get a second three-year contract. It went to some legal body that said, "You have tenure already." So then we switched to . . . was there something in between? . . . yes, there was. We switched to eight-year contracts? No, because it was tenure.

Taylor: Eight-year contracts was right.

Darney: There were eight-year contracts with spots in between where you evaluated them. And then they went to this panel that gives you tenure.

Taylor: The conversion panel.

Darney: The conversion panels, yeah.

Taylor: Who decided it and how was it implemented?

Darney: I don't know.

Taylor: I remember that it was a three-year conversion, and after that, it was a five-year portfolio that you were supposed to put together. I remember that the conversion panels were done by the deans, and I, as the Faculty Development Dean, was not allowed on any conversion panels because I was to be supportive of the new faculty rather than having a role in whether the faculty should be promoted.

Darney: It was to separate the roles, right.

Taylor: And then I did the five-year plans, the portfolio reviews, which, as you say, sometimes they were very good for good faculty who had a time to reflect, and had a time for their colleagues to say good things.

Darney: And I know there are teams that don't do end-of-year evaluation exchanges. Because I would be on a team and say, "Well, when are we going to do that?" And they'd say, "Oh, we don't do that." It's like, well, yes, we do.

Taylor: But those are the sorts of things that made the college work, and then they have now eroded. How much of that can you let go and still have the college?

Darney: Right. I think until faculty are willing to hold each other responsible—on a team, or whatever they have instead of Planning Units now—it's not going to work. Because faculty have to be willing to just say things to each other that are helpful, but also may be critical.

Taylor: Were you a part of the time that Planning Units got established; that we moved from specialty areas to Planning Units?

Darney: Yes

Taylor: Do you remember the impetus for that, and how that came about?

Darney: There were too many specialty areas. You couldn't design a curriculum because there were all these little satellites everywhere. It was a DTF, but we looked at—I mean, they're roughly divisions—they're not exactly—but then people could choose which one to be in. That was okay for a while.

Then they started fragmenting, and I think that's what prompted the next iteration of how to structure the curriculum. Because, just financially, if you've got a release time for your convener, and instead of having five Planning Unit Coordinators, you've got 10, you don't have a curriculum. There's not enough bodies in it.

Taylor: But the creative tension that happened as a result of having five is that there was pressure to have more.

Darney: Well, it was people who were unhappy with theirs, so they broke off—

Taylor: Now they're called Pathways, and there are probably many.

Darney: Right.

Taylor: And I don't know how the catalog gets created.

Darney: I don't know. The tension is between "I've got to fill in the bodies. I've got to have enough faculty to match the seats in the program so, there's that. But then there's, what does it take to make the curriculum be what you want it to be? And that's the personal relationship part. You've got to be able to do both, and I think that's really tricky.

You and I were in the problematic Humanities Planning Unit, which was a pretty interesting place, but people just did whatever they wanted. There was no sense of coverage. There were attempts, and people just ignored them.

Taylor: But that was integral to who was there, but also into a specialty area that was humanities, and knew that it couldn't do coverage. There was no way you could do coverage, and they didn't even want to.

Darney: Some people did.

Taylor: There wasn't a shared view that there even ought to be basic or elementary or core or beginning things and more advanced work.

Darney: Right.

Taylor: So if somebody wanted to do a program on a photographer, fine.

Darney: They did, right. I think that feels to me like a consequence of what I heard about the early days, which was that the humanities were the glue that held the programs together, so they are serving the function of helping make the connections between other disciplines—teaching writing, doing that kind of stuff—and so then they're not going to think about coverage.

One of the things I think in all of this is—and it came out of the Planning Unit discussions in some accreditation part—that there are some tensions in the college that we acknowledge and we don't want to change. And we want them to stay as tensions.

Taylor: You were one of the first ones that coined those words.

Darney: Right. And I think that that's a really important way to think about almost anything you do—not just Evergreen, but anything you're involved in—that there are inevitably tensions. You have to recognize them and decide if you want to solve them.

Taylor: What are the prevailing tensions that you see in the college over time?

Darney: Between you can do whatever you want and structure, for example; between coverage and breadth; between . . . we had this whole list of them in that accreditation report. When it really clicked for me was to say, "Yes, they're there, and we want them to stay there because we don't like either one, we don't like either pole of the tension."

Taylor: We don't want to solve that problem.

Darney: Exactly. And we think it, in fact, is not solvable, but we also don't want to try. [chuckles] We just want to acknowledge it and work with it. In any relationship, that's there,

those tensions are there. And if you're surprised by them, it means you're not paying attention to the things that are there.

I don't know. I certainly didn't think when I first started going to faculty meetings that they were very productive. But I think that it takes a bit of standing back and looking at what you're doing in your own teaching, and what you're doing in your area, and what you're doing with your students to really understand the college, and to make it work. Folks with their heads down—here's what I'm doing—are not doing that kind of stepping back and reflecting. I think that's why we keep yammering on, and emphasizing reflection—that it's a part of learning, but it's also a part of teaching—it ought to be—because we can't figure out what we're doing if we don't stand back and look at it.

Taylor: It's even a part of administration and faculty.

Darney: Absolutely. It should be a part of what everybody does all over the college. And it's those moments in faculty meetings where people were just blathering on blah blah blah, and Marilyn [Frasca] would stand up and say, "Well . . ." and she'd say one sentence and that was it. It cleared the air. Everybody agreed. We went on to the next thing. [chuckles]

Taylor: That's right.

Darney: But it took her seeing the whole of what that discussion was, stepping back from it and being able to do that.

Taylor: I think one of the inevitable tensions and changes, in the early days, Byron Youtz was Chair of the Faculty. He was the Provost, but he was Chair of the Faculty, and there were people that said, "How can that be?" Because there has to be an adversarial relationship between administration and faculty. It just is. And the college kind of fooled itself in thinking that, no, that wasn't necessary, at least at some point, so they accepted it [because] "Byron's such a good guy, it's fine." But eventually, that came to blows. It was always a tension with the deans and the faculty, and the union has made that even more pronounced.

Darney: Right.

Taylor: I think you always thought of yourself as a member of the faculty that happened to be serving as a dean, which is what I did.

Darney: Which is how it's set up. The deans are there to take care of business for the faculty so they can teach.

Taylor: I think increasingly, that's hard.

Darney: I worked with one dean who clearly was looking for administrative jobs at other schools. I don't want to say that caused that person not be a good dean, but that person wasn't a good dean because he was already thinking administratively? I don't know what it was, but that person did not see himself as "I'm here as a member of the faculty, helping the faculty."

Taylor: But other faculty thought deans were delusional, in the sense that "You're a dean. You're not a member of the faculty, you're a dean, and therefore you are in a power relationship; that means that you have authority"—that we never thought we had, but nevertheless, we did.

Darney: People may have thought that but I sure never felt it from the faculty. I maintained all my faculty contacts. I heard tales at a New Deans meeting about friendships that ended when a faculty became a dean; I would not have stood for dean if it meant severing ties with faculty.

Taylor: That's why the rotation of deans is so valuable, because people come in and become a dean and they say, "Oh!" And it turns out that they don't have [authority], and the only way that have any power or any effectiveness is if they keep their relationships with the faculty.

Darney: Right.

Taylor: That's the way it's set up. I think we're about done, but do you have any parting thoughts about your life and about your legacy—it doesn't have to be legacy, but things that you want recorded about you?

Darney: I just thought it was a wonderful opportunity to be at the college. And if I hadn't been at Evergreen, I wouldn't be in higher ed. I couldn't have been happy in a traditional university.

My dear graduate advisor at Emory, who had a good friend who was in the history department at Portland State, would say to me, "In a couple of years, maybe you could get a job at Portland State." [laughing] And I thought, he doesn't have a clue how much my life is better because of Evergreen. And I would never have gone to Portland State.

I just feel so lucky to have been part of it, and to have been there at the time I was. It was a wonderful experience. Wonderful experience.

Taylor: It's funny. That's the closing statement that everybody makes, because it was a place that let us do important things, and feel . . .

Darney: Right, and not be isolated, and do it with the support of other people.

Taylor: Yes, we were lucky.

Darney: We were lucky, yeah.

End Part 2 of 2 of Jin Darney on April 13, 2018