

Chuck Nisbet
Interviewed by Eric Severn
The Evergreen State College oral history project
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FINAL

Severn: This is Eric Severn, and I am talking with Chuck Nisbet. It is July 26, [2021]. Chuck, you are in Chicago, correct?

Nisbet: I'm actually in Twin Lakes, Wisconsin, today.

Severn: Okay, talking with Chuck from Twin Lakes, Wisconsin. I am in Seattle, Washington. Chuck, to get us rolling, if you want to just give some basic where you are from, early Nisbet life stuff.

Nisbet: I think about somewhere between five and 10 years before Evergreen opened, I'd heard a rumor that there was going to be a new college built in Washington. I believe the rumor came from Mervin Cadwallader because he was teaching at San Jose State at this time, and I was teaching in San Jose Community College. Years went by and one day and Mervin called to say there was going to be a new college. That's when I first became interested in finding out about Evergreen.

Severn: Let me backtrack just a little bit. You were at San Jose State teaching.

Nisbet: No, Mervin was at San Jose State. I was at San Jose Community College.

Severn: And you were teaching there?

Nisbet: Yes.

Severn: Just a little bit of academic background. Prior to that, you had finished your grad work where?

Nisbet: I graduated in '58 from Kalamazoo College. There was a minor recession going on then, so I decided to keep going and applied at Northwestern and at Indiana. Indiana offered me an assistantship in the School of Business, so I went to Indiana.

After getting my MBA at Indiana, I went to California. I was looking for a job and just by chance, I walked into the office of the President at the community college in San Jose. This was about a month before school was going to start, and they just happened to have an opening that they hadn't filled. They practically horse-collared me into the office because it was good for them, and it was good for me.

I went to Berkeley right away and got a teaching credential so I could teach in a community college. I taught there for two years, and after two months of teaching in the community college, I knew I wanted to teach, but not in a community college for my lifetime.

I had to get a PhD, so I applied at the University of Oregon. After receiving my PhD at the University of Oregon, I went to the University of Wisconsin on a visiting professorship. In the meantime, I'd accepted a position at UCLA. After the visiting semester at Wisconsin, I went off to UCLA and I taught there for four years.

In my fourth year, that's when Mervin called me and wanted to know if I was interested in Evergreen. Eric Larson, who is also a faculty member at Evergreen, and his wife, Pat, and my wife, Sandy, were both students of Mervin Cadwallader at San Jose State. I was often at Pat Larson's father's house, which was sort of a meeting place of liberal, radical, Democratic professors from San Jose State, and one of them was Mervin. That's how I got to meet Mervin. Our wives already knew Mervin and the husbands got to know Mervin by sitting around their house and holding these all-night meetings planning Democratic strategy for elections in the state of California.

When Mervin called, we—meaning both Eric and I—would come for a faculty visit at Evergreen at the same time to check out the place. On the way to campus that morning in a borrowed car with bald tires, we had a flat tire just before arriving at Evergreen. [laughter] So, we were a little late for our interview—not too late, a little late. We had a very productive and exciting interview and the result was I told Mervin, "If you want to hire us both, we'll both come. If you don't, neither one of us will come." It was kind of a bluff.

Severn: But it worked.

Nisbet: But it worked.

Severn: I want to go back to these nights that you talk about at Larson's house. But as an economist, how did you come to wanting to be an economist? You have a particular interest in economy that, within the context of Evergreen, you were kind of an outlier. How did that arise for you?

Nisbet: I'm trying to figure out what part of the multifaceted question . . . ?

Severn: How did your interest in economy—

Nisbet: You want to know how I got interested in economics?

Severn: Yeah.

Nisbet: This is a true story. When I was at Kalamazoo, I was taking economics from Sherrill Cleland, who was a young assistant professor from Princeton. He was looking for a babysitter. He kind of announced it to our class, and I raised my hand—I applied. I went over to their house and his wife was a nurse and they had two small children. I would babysit for them once a week.

Over that period of time, I thought they were such a wonderful family, I decided, I'm going to major in economics. Then I could have a life like this. That may sound corny, but that's the truth about why I decided at 19 to major in economics.

Severn: I don't think that sounds corny at all. I think in a lot of ways, we come to our interests by recognizing people that we want to be like and recognizing that their interests could possibly also be our interests. I think that makes sense.

Nisbet: At the same time, I majored in economics and I minored in philosophy, about as far apart as you could get. My minor was with a very elderly man, highly serious, highly professional, who was so interesting. I majored in philosophy because the man was so distinguished and interesting, I thought I couldn't pass up the opportunity to spend time in seminars at his home.

Then I went to Indiana and obtained my MBA. I took a job after my MBA, and within three months, hated it and decided this was not for me. I had no idea what I wanted to do.

I was married, and went to California where my wife was from. [On a lark I took a job making pizzas to pay rent until I could find something better.]¹ One day I walked into the administration building at San Jose Community College and asked if they had any openings. [laughing] They said, "What can you teach?" I said, "I have my MBA from Indiana University." The president came out of his office and hired me on the spot. I taught accounting and economics at the college level.

I'm not sure I answered everything you asked about, but that's the trajectory.

Severn: That's great.

Nisbet: When I decided that I really liked teaching, I'd found something—by the way, as a footnote to that, I have always tried to support the idea with students of trial and error, and never keep doing something they don't like, because that's how I found something I really loved doing by trial and error, and not sticking it out - quitting and starting looking again.

When I decided I needed a PhD, I wanted to go back and get it in economics, so I applied to Oregon. When I went to Oregon, the very first day—I went a summer earlier to make sure I knew where the library was. I took graduate courses in the summer to get ready for fall quarter. The chairman of the department called me in and told me if I shave my beard [laughing]—this is a true story, I thought you might like this—he'd think seriously about offering me a teaching assistantship. [laughter] [This was another older, serious academic who didn't coddle hippie looking young people,] just a different time—1960— so, I shaved the beard, of course, got the assistantship, and ultimately received my PhD.

¹ Bracketed sentences are those inserted by Chuck Nisbet after interview.

At Oregon, I had a summer Ford Foundation scholarship at Stanford. [Then I was awarded a Fulbright to do my dissertation in Chile.]

Severn: When were you in Chile?

Nisbet: Very interesting time. I was there when Salvador Allende was elected President. I was sent back there by the government—this is disjointed maybe—in the spring quarter of 1973, I did a 10-week worldwide lecture tour with the Agency for International Development on agricultural development.

After that was over, they sent me back to Chile, where I'd done my dissertation. What it really amounted to was when I got back to Washington after the Fulbright time, I was asked a lot of questions about Allende. I didn't know there was a coup coming, but it was a month before the coup.

Severn: Wow.

Nisbet: Some of the Evergreen people thought that I was a CIA agent. I wasn't. [laughing]

Severn: Did they really?

Nisbet: Yeah.

Severn: I love that.

Nisbet: The fact that I could leave campus for a quarter and be gone all that time raised suspicions about me.

Severn: I'm sorry, Chuck. Bear with me. I want to get the timeline straight, just so we have some of these plot points nailed down here. You meet Merv when you're teaching at the community college in San Jose.

Nisbet: Correct.

Severn: You have not yet gone to Oregon to get your PhD.

Nisbet: Correct.

Severn: But you decide that you want to teach, so you go to Oregon, you get your PhD. At this point, you're on communication with Merv. Is that right? You have somewhat of a relationship?

Nisbet: Wait. I don't think there was any real communication with Merv because there was this time before Oregon where there was a rumor of a college. I don't remember the timeline in years exactly, but I think I went all the way through Oregon without any contact with Mervin. I actually had my PhD by the time I heard from Mervin.

I was at UCLA teaching when Mervin called and said, "I'm a dean at Evergreen State College." I think I discussed this in my writeup that there were three deans. Mervin Cadwallader for social sciences was a smart man, an exploratory thinker and very organized. Don Humphrey was a low-key science dean who put together a terrific science faculty. Charlie Teske, arts dean was an interesting, talkative

character and talented musician. I think they did a remarkable job of hiring people the first and second years.

It's my impression, or my recollection, that when Charles McCann received the mandate to build this new college, he didn't have a model in his head, other than he didn't want to replicate every other college in Washington. He wanted to do something different. It's my recollection—I could be mistaken, but I think you can probably find this out with other people—it was Mervin who had the rough outline. It was Mervin who was the thinker about the model of the college. Even in our first and second year, Mervin was writing little essays—memos—and sending them out to all the faculty having to do with “What do you think of this idea about Evergreen, doing this and doing that?” He was a real ideas man.

Severn: Do you remember some of the more salient ideas that were being passed around? Is there anything that really stood out for you coming to Evergreen that Mervin was passing around that you were particularly interested in?

Nisbet: By the time I was hired, there had already been a year of planning faculty. The planning faculty and the deans had ended up with the “Evergreen model” by the time I got there. What happened after I was there was not formulating Evergreen, but there were ideas about, should we have multiple colleges? Should we break up into like three different components, or should we stay as one? But by the time we got there, it wasn't like, well, what are we going to do?

Severn: They were already there and doing it.

Nisbet: They already had that figured out. I would assume any founding faculty members that you could interview would verify that, that it was formulated with them and Charles McCann.

I feel like I'm digressing, but there were so many things unique about Evergreen in the early years, and one was Charles McCann. He used to invite faculty—I was never really one of them, I think, not much anyway—but he invited faculty to his office for open-ended discussions in the first couple years. They just sat around and talked about the college.

Beryl Crowe was always one of those faculty members. David Marr, I think, was another. No other President of Evergreen after that ever did that. And he was a listener. He was not a talker. In fact, we wished he'd talk more, but he wanted to participate in all of this discussion and get feedback of how things were going and recommendations for hiring new faculty and every possible issue.

There's something like a disconnect after that. Presidents were administrators but they weren't connected to the heart and soul of what the pedagogy was at the college.

Severn: The way you're talking about these discussions, that is very much what I'm hearing, and that's very much in keeping with the ideal spirit of what Evergreen set out to do. This idea of part of what is being cultivated in an academic program, in a seminar, is this sense of being able to listen to one another, to talk with one another, and listen to ideas, and be receptive to a diverse array of opinions and thoughts.

Nisbet: Yes. Maybe I should start talking about this first page I've got here because otherwise I'm going to repeat myself.

The first section I have is called "traditional education vs The Evergreen State College." I believe that in those early years, almost all the hires had experienced teaching elsewhere before coming to Evergreen, so they knew orthodox education. One of the reasons they came here is because they wanted to do something different from that.

For example, because we came with teaching experience, we knew what being an assistant professor was. We knew the class society of orthodox education. You've had assistant professors, associate professors, full professors. Assistant professors keep their mouths shut. Assistant professors listen to full professors who run the department, who grant tenure. They don't talk, or they talk very carefully. They bide their time. I, for one, didn't like that at UCLA. I wanted to talk. I always wanted to talk, but it was not the right thing to do.

There's a department chairman and he's your boss. At Evergreen, you don't really have a boss. Your department chairman dishes out penalties and favors, so you have to get along with your department chairman. When I say chairman, in 1971, there were no women chairmen [and] not just in my field, economics. In fact, there were no women—period—except token as adjunct professors. They paid them pitifully little. They had no benefits. They had nothing except they could keep the costs down in their department by having this one older woman teach regularly when I was there.

Orthodox education has academic deans who administer. Depending on how big the school is—there could be an academic dean of sciences or social sciences, a different one in the arts faculty. There could be multiple academic deans. Once you become an academic dean, you don't teach anymore. You're a pure administrator.

The academic deans hold enormous power because they have the control over budgets of various departments. They have the power over whether a department will get hires or won't get hires.

For me, and I think for others, when we came to Evergreen, we didn't want to have that kind of structure where there was an academic dean who wasn't a teacher and had that kind of power.

Academic deans were so removed from teaching faculty and their departments, they could make hard decisions. My classic example is Berkeley. They did away with the Geography Department. They just eliminated it. I can't tell you the year this was, but that's a drastic action. You have professors of geography who all of a sudden, after how many years of service, they do away with your department. They could do away with that because they weren't teaching buddies of the geographers. They weren't daily connected to them. There's a reason why traditional education has that kind of separation. When we come around to talk about Evergreen, we'll see what happens over the years when it's just the reverse, and maybe results in unintended consequences.

Creators of the Evergreen model wanted to do away with the class structure in conventional education. One way to do away with that is I was never called "Dr. Nisbet" or "Professor Nisbet," nor was anyone else. I was called Chuck. Eric Larson was called Eric. It would be unheard of at UCLA for anyone to call me by my first name, or at Wisconsin. That generates the classness, the separation. Professor—student. They're not equal, they're different levels.

At Evergreen, we wanted to have students challenge us, and the only way for them to feel comfortable challenging us is for them not to feel so separate. Obviously, we were separate, but not to have that hammered over their head that they're just students and we're the knowledge holders here. It simply worked at Evergreen. You had to be on your toes more at Evergreen than I would have to be at UCLA where students were reluctant to question their professors.

Severn: You had to be ready for pressing questions in the way that you wouldn't have to be in a conventional [structure].

Nisbet: Yes, because Evergreen, like anywhere else, had some really smart students. If you didn't take your job seriously, you're going to get embarrassed. I was not about to get embarrassed. I like that I couldn't just blow something off. I had to be prepared. I think that new faculty/student relationship was something that attracted many liberals to Evergreen.

My good friend and teaching colleague, Alan Nasser, a radical leftist, didn't mind students asking questions because he was so confident in his ideas and himself it's like, go ahead, fire away. So, not just liberals came, but some radical leftist also were interested. But conservatives didn't come. Conservatives—and this is just my opinion—in traditional academia, they like the classness. They like the separation. They would object to be called by their first name. They wanted the prestige and separation of Dr. or Professor. At least that was my point of view.

At Evergreen, the deans were drawn from the faculty. We all liked that. We were for that, I should say. The idea of the administrator right above us was one of us, it seemed they would have a

better understanding of what we're doing at the teaching level. They came from us and they're going back to us after a few years of administration.

However, there was an unintended consequence of that, which was that the kinds of faculty that came into the deanship were generally not type As, but type Bs.

Severn: How do you mean?

Nisbet: [Generally, the faculty picked "Type B's" to serve as dean. That is, low key, soft spoken, sensitive, good listeners, etc.] But one example was "Type A" Ron Woodbury became a dean and he tried to fire Sandra Simon. We'll talk about her later.

Severn: What year was this?

Nisbet: I can't pinpoint exactly the years, but there's a record of when Ron Woodbury was a dean.

Beryl Crowe, who was a very respected academician at the college, was a mentor of Sandra Simon, and he and his friends pushed back on that process that was going after Sandra Simon, and Ron Woodbury had to back down. It ushered in the notion that firing people at Evergreen was going to be a problem. The problem was you were not going to put deans in there who were likely to take painful action against one of their own.

Interestingly enough, Ron Woodbury left Evergreen shortly after that and he spent the rest of his career on the East Coast as an administrator. I think he was made out to be an administrator in the more conventional sense. Ron was a decent Type A guy type. [But he wanted all faculty to follow the rules. If you didn't there should be consequences.] There was nothing strange about him, but he did not really fit well at Evergreen, as everyone else chosen as dean.

Severn: When you say fit, it seems like part of what you're getting at here is just a sense that a kind of hierarchy, where decisions are made from the top—decisions like firing and that sort of thing—where there is a kind of distance from those decisions, like you're talking about deans having distance from departments in a conventional academic setting. You're sort of talking about the general anti-hierarchical structure of Evergreen, in a way.

Nisbet: Yes.

Severn: And how that is baked into the institution itself.

Nisbet: We didn't know that. When you think of any of the conventional schools, the academic deans don't party with the faculty. They party with other administrators. They party with their own. At Evergreen, faculty in those early years, there were lots of parties. How do you have a party when you have some faculty member walk in, who's currently the dean, and he's just fired someone, and here are all the friends of the people that he's going to the party with? Very uncomfortable.

Severn: And this was unexpected for you. Coming to Evergreen, you didn't have a clear sense that it was going to be like that.

Nisbet: No, because it's not possible to think through all the unintended consequences of a very different academic model—even if you were able to think through some of these outcomes, it wouldn't be well received because it's like you're taking the energy away from something that hasn't even been tried yet. They'd argue, "Let's try it, and if it doesn't work, we'll change it." You're caught in a kind of catch-22 here, where you can't go either way.

The enthusiasm was to try our innovative model. We're going to take on administrative responsibilities because we think we can do a better job of protecting teaching and not have it torn apart by someone who doesn't even teach anymore.

By the way, another little footnote here. Bridges is part of the faculty now. It's a conventional safety net. When you appoint someone President, the worst thing that could happen to him or her is teach. Charles McCann went back and taught after he stepped down as President and I taught with him. He was the same person. He was not a talker, and he was not charismatic, but he took the job of teaching seriously and earned the respect of all his colleagues. [I taught with him several times in the Management and Public Interest program.]

I think part of why he did such a good job is because he was the father of this new college. He was part of the birthing process, so even after he wasn't President anymore, it's not like he could just head for Florida. He had to finish off his commitment to the college as best he could as a teacher, and he did just that.

Another thing about why we were excited about coming to Evergreen. When you teach at any university, they couldn't care less what you wanted to teach. Their curriculum is practically set in concrete. It's all these different courses in any department whether history, economics or philosophy. Only occasionally will a new course be proposed. Then it has to go through so many committees, from inside the department to the department, to the academic dean, to the provost and or academic vice president. It could take years to get that done. Years!

What I loved about Evergreen—and I'm sure many others did—you could create a new academic program in the spring and then teach it in the coming fall. When Bill Clinton became President, one of the first things on their agenda was to be healthcare for all Americans. Thus, in spring quarter, I put together a fall quarter program on healthcare with one faculty, myself. Hillary Clinton headed up the formulation of that original healthcare plan. So, fall quarter, we followed daily

everything that was taking place in Washington D.C. on healthcare planning in real time. The students loved it, I loved it. You could never do anything like that at traditional colleges.

Every faculty member at Evergreen could sit around and think about what they wanted to teach? It was exciting to call up other faculty members and three of you sit down and brainstorm about a program you could do maybe not in six months, but maybe in a year from now. [Something that would excite the students and yourself.] You could do this year after year after year. That was a huge attraction, to me and incoming students as Evergreen had a living in real time curriculum.

Severn: It's interesting to hear you talk about it like this because, on the one hand, what you're saying obviously is about this tremendous freedom. But on the other hand, part of what you're implying is also a tremendous responsibility, because you're offering freedom to really investigate and invest in a student's time, and what they want to learn about. But with that comes all these responsibilities and obligations to build these learning communities as they come up, and to make them substantial. That's got to be difficult, too.

Nisbet: Well, yes, but one advantage of the team-teaching approach, in contrast with my one quarter on healthcare, is you're not alone. You can have a team of diverse disciplines, backgrounds and personalities, and as a team, you can draw on different strengths and compensate for any weaknesses. You may have three, four or five faculty members taking the responsibility to deliver what you're talking about. If you're all on the same page, you can deliver a terrific program.

You must have heard of Jeanne Hahn.

Severn: Yeah.

Nisbet: Jeanne Hahn was probably the most dedicated, the hardest working, one of the best professors ever at Evergreen. She gave her life to this place. [She wrote the best student evaluations. She attracted the best students. She put in long hours. She was a terrific colleague.] I'm not suggesting that all faculty should have been Jeanne Hahn. But she's the perfect example of what made Evergreen a first-rate liberal arts college.

Severn: Sure, but she was good at [unintelligible 00:43:51].

Nisbet: She was a terrific hire and a faculty member at the college. I'm going to cover this later, but there were so many bright, dedicated faculty. It was an inspiring place to be. It was a place that raised you to a higher level, in my opinion.

Now, [keep in mind that Evergreen had a normal distribution of faculty and students just like everywhere else]. Evergreen had some not so good students and not so good faculty But the good news

is they didn't have that much of either. They had some, but that was unavoidable. [With our "free market" curriculum the good students and good faculty selected each other and visa versa.]

I think I sent you something today—oh, I have a people at Evergreen list that I sent you, a spreadsheet, that I'm going to talk about. At the end of the people list, I have tried to write down the hires in the sciences, because one of my mantras is that the strongest part of the college from day one was science, even though I'm totally a non-science person and I'm looking at this from the outside. You look at the hires made in science for '70, '71 and '72. Incredible, in my opinion. There was not a single one in the sciences that was problematic or weak.

Severn: You're talking about the people. These are incredible hires. But do you think that the structure of Evergreen in some particular way facilitated something about the sciences that leads to a kind of excellence?

Nisbet: That's a good question. I don't think so. I think that they made it. [chuckles] I never thought about the question you're asking, but I don't think their facilities were unique or special.

Severn: Chuck, the reason I ask is because it seems like you hear discussions about the sciences a lot at Evergreen and how Evergreen, as an institution, does have a kind of anti-hierarchy, just like you're talking about. That is part of Evergreen. But built into the sciences is a kind of hierarchy. There is built-in scaffolding to the sciences. I do wonder if there's something in that relationship between an institution that allows for freedom, and how even within that freedom, the constraints of the sciences can somehow operate in a more creative way because of that context, but at the same time, the scaffolding keeps something coherent and together about it.

Nisbet: I don't know. For example, Evergreen, while I was there, had only two graduate programs. One, the environmental science. Two, public administration. The main reason for the Master's of Public Administration was we were in the State capitol. Public employee of the state, if they came to Evergreen at night and got their master's in public administration could qualify for pay raises.

It was very obvious there was a market there; that if we offered this program, we were going to get students. Not like Grays Harbor. The college opened a campus in Grays Harbor, they didn't attract sufficient students. You might guess why that was going to be the case.

Let me get back to what I was talking about. Because faculty could generate new programs at Evergreen, it didn't have what you saw in traditional education—the students sitting in class, and there's the professor up at the podium, and his notes are yellow and worn. There may be some shes, too, but in the 50's and 60's it was primarily hes, teaching the same thing for so many years that he just kind of

laboriously goes through these notes. You didn't see that at Evergreen because we were constantly teaching new programs. Every time you taught in a team program, you read new material, and you had to create new lectures.

Severn: And you seminar that material with your colleagues, too.

Nisbet: Yes. That's another reason why this college appealed to some people.

Severn: When you came to Evergreen, did you have sense of what that aspect of teaching would be like? Did you come knowing that you, as someone who was going to be team teaching, would actually be seminarizing materials with your colleagues? Or is that something that when you got there, you realized?

Nisbet: I think we had some kind of idea, but not as much as ultimately came forth. We all knew that first year—I knew I wasn't coming to teach introductory economics. We knew we were going to teach with a team, and the team would be made up of—like in my case—Larry Eichstaedt was the coordinator, and he was a marine biologist. Phil Harding was an architect. Caroline Dobbs was an urban planner.

There was an excitement in the air that you were actually going to be working with a group of people that had a totally different expertise and that you could learn something besides what you already knew. But how you were going to do that, you may not have known as much. It wasn't that you knew you could create programs every year, but you knew that there were going to be different programs every year. You didn't know how much you could be a part of this, but it was going to happen. For me, teaching Principles of Economics, or any economics course year after year, was chilling. It was just dreadful.

What kind of people came the first year? I think very confident. Primarily, very confident people. Why? Because they were leaving the comfort of certainty and entering into an arena of uncertainty.

Severn: They had to have a degree of confidence to do it.

Nisbet: Had to have a degree of confidence. If you're going to walk in a room and be subjected to questions by students, and even your colleagues, you'd better have some confidence.

Severn: Also, I would imagine—correct me if I'm wrong—something of a clear sense of mission, too, a kind of orientation toward the school and teaching that has its own sense of why it matters. If you don't have the scaffolding of convention is what I'm saying.

Nisbet: Yes, I would agree with that. There were all kinds of different approaches by different faculty. For example, one of my favorite stories—Steve Herman, science faculty. Students loved this man. They respected him. He had an 8:00 program that he taught by himself.

Severn: At Evergreen? That's unheard of. Eight in the morning?

Nisbet: It turned out he was an early morning person. [laughing] You know what? Steve Herman was a type A guy. He wanted to teach at 8:00. If you wanted to learn anything from him, you could damn well show up at 8:00. You know what he did at 8:00? He locked the door.

Severn: Oh, wow. Also, not quite in keeping with Evergreen.

Nisbet: No, so I'm saying, there were all kinds of different approaches here. He locked the door. I actually saw a student banging on the door one morning. He never let the student in. Guess what happened?

Severn: The student wasn't late again.

Nisbet: They all showed up on time. And they loved and respected Steve Herman. Sometimes a bit of type A authoritarian stuff gets you in trouble, but somehow his delivery of it, how he went about it, students accepted.

I'll tell you another Steve Herman story. In the fall of every year, there were leaves all over the campus, Red Square, and the Maintenance Department, when you walked on campus at 7:30 in the morning—I'm an early morning person, too—there they were with their gas-powered leaf blowers blowing these leaves into big piles and all that. Steve Herman was offended—absolutely offended, so we went out and bought a dozen rakes. Not the morning that he had his class [but] he had his students raked Red Square. They kept doing that for I don't know how long, I don't exactly remember, but he made his point that it was noisy, there was no reason for them to use mechanical equipment. He was very unorthodox, which was true about many of us.

Third story about Steve Herman. Fieldwork was a huge part of his work in the sciences. In the early years—which I'll cover later—budgets were huge. Unbelievable, in retrospect, the budgets we had in the first five or six years. Later, we had little to no money.

When Steve first started taking field trips, there were motor pool cars and vans he could take and charge it to the program budget. When the big program budgets days were a thing of the past, what did Steve do? He bought an old, yellow school bus. When I came on campus in the morning, there was that yellow school bus, the students all lined up with their notebooks, backpacks and whatever, and [they] piled onto that school bus. Steve drove them around to complete their field studies. However, it was not that long—maybe a year, I'm not sure—and then ultimately, they closed him down because of liability concerns. The college wouldn't allow him to use a private vehicle to do that.

I think this paints a picture of a unique faculty member. Steve was also a falconer. He had a falcon cage in his backyard for his pet falcon. He was diversified and a hard worker, but he wouldn't

comply with certain responsibilities that everyone else did. The college had to bend and accept because he was so good at what he did. [Here is where a Type B dean came in handy.]

At Evergreen, there was no tenure, just revolving contracts. But in practice, there was a kind of tenure. After a few years, there came into existence what they called a probationary contract that didn't exist initially. A so-called three-year period of your first contract, you're put on probation. I don't know if there was a single person ever terminated after the first three years. There may have been, especially maybe in the last 29 years, I don't know, but not in the 30 I was there. [When faculty unionized in 2006 (?), I doubt firing was made any easier.]

After your first contract, there was a series of revolving contracts. I think there were three- to five-year contracts. All they did is they just revolved, essentially. The irony was supposedly, this was going to be a no-tenure place, which all of us thought was a great idea—the faculty, some faculty anyway, for me and Jeanne Hahn and others. Why? [People would have to stay involved, stay sharp.] We wouldn't have old deadwood, these old faculty members who are burned out, they're tired, they have no more energy. We liked the idea of no tenure, but it never worked out that way because of these revolving contracts, problematic faculty evaluations and Type "B" deans.

There would be no letter grades, just pass and fail. The narrative evaluation, which I think we all liked because if all you can give a student is a A,B, C or F what does that really mean? When I taught at UCLA, there was a knock at my door, the only time a student ever came to my residence in the four years I was there. When I opened the door, I didn't know who it was. He said, "Professor Nisbet, I'm So-and-So and I'm in your Latin American Economics class." I said, "Oh." He said, "I need a recommendation for graduate school. Could you please write me a letter of recommendation?" What could I write? I went to my gradebook. All I could look up was letter grades from the work he turned in. I knew nothing about this young man.

Narrative evaluations, we thought, were terrific. The thing we underestimated is the time it was going to take to complete them for 18 to 20 students each quarter. Very early on, the faculty separated, where people like Jeanne Hahn and Nancy Taylor—a whole laundry list of others—spent hours and hours, me included, and wrote a full page narrative evaluation of a student. Not just saying, oh, they were a good student or that's a great paper but providing details of what kind of paper they wrote, or what kind of contributions they made in seminar. When somebody would look at that letter, you knew something about the student, not just they were a quote great student. How were they great? What did they do that was great? [What areas of improvement were needed?]

We were excited about narrative evaluations. Not all faculty took those evaluations that seriously. Macro evaluations started to appear over time, where you filled in blanks.

Severn: You mean like a form evaluation kind of?

Nisbet: Yeah, kind of. It was okay, but I just think that some faculty couldn't compete with the likes of Jeanne Hahn in devotion and energy. She was a single woman. If you're a faculty with three children, you didn't have the same kind of hours to put in that she did, so you didn't try to match her. But you could still do a good job. If you had 20 students eventually, how many hours can you spend on each student at the end of the quarter?

I was going to talk about when the college opened. I spent the entire era of the Vietnam War on university campuses—University of Oregon, University of Wisconsin, and UCLA. By the time Evergreen opened in the fall of '71, the public was tired of the war and tired of campus protests.

While it is true that campus protests were instrumental in helping to bring about an end to the war, it came at a cost to higher education in the years ahead that I never anticipated while I was a participating anti-war protestor. The taxpaying public watched years of campus demonstrations, damage to property, and even campus deaths. There was a bombing in Science Building at the University of Wisconsin. It killed one student, one of my fellow students at Kalamazoo College years earlier. You had Kent State shootings.

In the years ahead, after Vietnam, the public asserted its unhappiness with higher education by lessening its financial support. It took decades for the public to come back together with academia because the public, in many ways—or some segment of the public—resented the fact that we college professors and college students were spending our time not in the classroom, but we were out raising hell. So, when the college opened in '71, we opened in Thurston County with a skepticism and a concern from the public who saw faculty looking like hippies and students looking like hippies—

Severn: Can I ask you something about that? You had mentioned that there was this speculation that you were a CIA agent. You had just done this work in Chile. I'm just curious if you could fit that in—your experience with that, why that came up within this cultural context you're talking about, but also specifically Evergreen? What was that about?

Nisbet: The very first year of Evergreen, everybody taught in a team-teaching program and two faculty members took individual contracts. I cannot remember one of the faculty member's names, who didn't stay there very long, if I remember correctly, but the second one, Robinson. I'm forgetting his first name. Peter Robinson! That's it. Peter was here and then he was gone. He was here and then he'd

disappear. I'm telling you, people thought he worked for the CIA because everyone else was here all the time in those early years.

People didn't live in Seattle or Tacoma much in those early years. Everyone was in Olympia and on campus three or four days a week. They were there for faculty meetings, they were there at parties. It was a real community. Peter was invisible, and nobody could find out what he did, what his background [was]. He was a mystery man. The minute he became this mystery man, then [came] these rumors starting about, oh, maybe he works for the CIA, or maybe he's a secret agent. [laughing]

Severn: Were you a mystery man, too, or was there something else?

Nisbet: I don't know about that. I think that . . . well, one of the things that was also a puzzle for me at Evergreen is that there was a bit of a conservative image of me, but I think it had more to do with my being type A—where that came from. Mainly because when I came, I came as an economist, and economists [laughing]—all my years at Evergreen when we had parties and there were community people there, people would want to know “What do you do?”

When I would tell people I was an economist, I got two responses. One was, “Do you know where the bathroom is?” [laughter] Second response was, “I think I need to refill my glass. I'm going back to the bar.” People don't want to talk to you when you tell them you're an economist. Even businesspeople, who you'd think—they don't want to talk to you. They don't want to ask you anything.

At one point in my life, I tried telling people I was a sex therapist, and that worked about as well as an economist. I couldn't pull it off somehow.

The fact that the government was paying me to go for an entire quarter around the world lecturing, and that was in '73 or '74, I've forgotten, that stood out. Nobody else was—how come the government is paying Nisbet to go off all around the world? So, I think that's where some of that—I'm not saying it was pervasive, but it came up.

Severn: Sure. It's hard not to [unintelligible 01:12:07].

Nisbet: I wasn't hippie-looking, but I didn't have a crewcut either. I didn't wear sportscoats. Nobody ever wore a sportscoat at Evergreen.

Another funny story. I loved fall quarter. I loved it. What I loved about fall quarter is going the first day to class. All these new faces, and then looking at these faces and conjuring up in my head who these people all were. One day I walked on campus in the fall quarter and there was this young man with a white Oxford shirt with a button-down collar. I said to myself, when does that shirt get thrown in the “free-box?” Sure enough, in about three weeks, I saw him again and he was entirely different.

That's all I can offer you up about the rumor about the CIA. I don't know.

Severn: You had also mentioned in our initial talks about just some of the papers that David Marr and Rudy would write and send around, and you all would talk about that during those first couple years. What was that like, the sense of discussing and debating these ideas about the college?

Nisbet: It was invigorating. They called them manifestos. The M&M Manifesto 1 and M&M Manifesto 2. I never really got to know David Marr very well. He was very reserved, or I saw him as reserved. He had a very nice wife. Just a decent man. Pensive person, I always thought. I knew Rudy a long time and got to know him.

No one in traditional education asks you what you think about what they're doing. [laughing] Here, they're asking. "What do you think about this idea?" I should say that not all faculty participated in this, but a large number.

Severn: Yeah, and it was available. It was something that you could do.

Nisbet: That's right, so you didn't have to come, you chose to come. You elected to come, and most people elected to come. It was invigorating. It was a way to get to know how someone thinks. It was a way to have a stake in the place. In other words, when David and Rudy put themselves out there, they were not just responding, they were putting themselves out there. Somebody would say, "That's a terrible idea." They were willing to do that.

I hope this isn't going to throw us off base here. Look what happened in 2016-2017. If there was ever an opposite to that, when you have an equity plan that you can't even comment on. When we were talking about my experience and then this happens to my college, it's like, what in the hell? What a difference between then and now.

Severn: I do want for there to be room to talk about the now, but it seems that part of what you're getting at about the then, though—when you showed up—is there was all this room to take what were preconceived ideas and to question them. There was a lot of room for debate, there was a lot of room for different ideas to circulate. That was foundational for those early years.

Nisbet: Yes, it certainly was. After a certain period of time, it was over. There were no more position papers.

Severn: What do you think happened? What do you think caused that shift?

Nisbet: Because these were papers on the big picture, and after a certain period of time, the big picture was there. Then you dealt with micro issues, small pieces of the picture but not the big picture.

Severn: Yeah. I don't want to get you too far off track here, but it sounds like you're saying that there was a question about what Evergreen is in those early years.

Nisbet: Yes.

Severn: That question was ultimately answered.

Nisbet: Yes.

Severn: Fairly early on.

Nisbet: Yes.

Severn: Then after that question was answered, the discussion shifted to stuff within the smaller question within that question.

Nisbet: Yes, or even actions. For example, there was a faculty member—one of the unintended consequences of faculty evaluations was—and is, and there's been no rectifying this in the big picture—that faculty evaluations assume everyone will be honest and direct; that everyone is comfortable being honest and direct with their colleagues. What was overlooked is human nature. That was too much to expect. Jeanne Hahn could do it; I could do it, and a lot of other people could do it, but there was a significant number of people who couldn't bring themselves to do it.

Severn: What do you mean by human nature?

Nisbet: I mean confrontation. Here you are at the end of the quarter, and you've written your self-evaluation and your evaluation of your fellow faculty members, and you're sitting together at a table. If one of your colleagues didn't read the books, didn't show up on time, didn't do a good job writing student evaluations or holding student conferences and you cite this in an evaluation, this is going to be very uncomfortable.

Severn: Right.

Nisbet: It's bad enough that you actually write it down, but you have to look at the person when the person reads it. Human nature, not everyone is comfortable doing that and being there, and you cannot force them to do it because they can't do it.

My best friend couldn't do it. I didn't know until it actually happened at Evergreen. He couldn't do it. The only thing he could do is search for some positive things to say. When you talked about the good parts and you just left off all the problems, and that went to the dean, you couldn't fire anybody and maybe more important you couldn't lay out details for self-improvement. It was a real dilemma.

Severn: Yeah, I see what you're saying.

Nisbet: It was hard enough to do with students. You had the same situation. You should see a student's face when they read some of this stuff. It's not that they don't know it's true. They just didn't think you were going to write it. [laughter] Or they were hoping when they walked in, oh, maybe he'll just go easy on me. In most cases, the students didn't like it, but they knew it was true, so they couldn't

wait to get it over and get out of your office. That was an unintended consequence, and a serious problem, but no one ever found a way to change it, improve it, get around it.

Because of that, one quarter there was a faculty member—Paul Marsh—that the college wanted to get rid of, and they never had enough solid evidence to get rid of him. What did they do? They put him in Political Economy with Tom Rainey and Chuck Nisbet, knowing that we would write honest and direct evaluations containing enough deficiencies to fire him. That's exactly what happened.

Severn: Wow.

Nisbet: That's not a good outcome. That's not a good way to rectify the system, and I don't know of any other case like that because I think that if you suspected that faculty were being set up to fire someone, they would not be happy about that.

[Here is another change that took place over time. In the late 80's if you had written a poor evaluation of a female student, you left the door open while the student was in your office for the end of the quarter conference and in some cases you also had a program secretary sit outside your office to listen in so there couldn't be a he-said, she-said compliant filed by the student because you had a witness.]

Severn: A lot of what you're saying seems to be pointing toward how both these great ideals about Evergreen have led to some really wonderful stuff, but built in, too, are some difficult conflicts that can arise under the same ideals.

Nisbet: Yes, we've identified two of them right away so far. One is that the deans coming from the faculty [and returning to the faculty will find it difficult to make hard decisions on their fellow colleagues]. [The same outcome comes through on faculty evaluations. Some faculty won't give the deans honest information about the fellow colleague that could lead to his or her termination.]

Should I talk about the very beginning, Pack Forest?

Severn: Yeah, let's do that, and we've been recording for about an hour and a half, almost two hours. Why don't you give me a little bit more and then we can wrap up the first session and we'll just jump right back in where you leave off?

Nisbet: Okay. I don't know whose idea it was, but there was going to be like 60 of us, the planning faculty and the first-year hires. They took us to Mount Rainier National Forest for a retreat.

The idea was team building and trusting, I suppose, getting to know each other, because it was kind of awkward for all these people to all of a sudden be plopped down in the middle of the forest. We didn't know anybody. But my friend, Eric Larson, was there, so I had one person I knew.

One of the first things that happened that never happened ever again at Evergreen, we academics played touch football in the afternoon..

Severn: That's hilarious.

Nisbet: You know what? It was a hugely successful thing. Dick Nichols was the communications director. I'll give you his full title, I don't know what it was. He was a local sports announcer, and everybody in the community knew Dick Nichols, so he was a good guy for the college, a good buffer. I think it was Dick Nichols who said we ought to do this.

There was a large amount of the males that wanted to do this. Of course, the first year, there were mostly males by a big margin. I threw two touchdown passes to Fred Tabbutt, and we probably had limited contact for 30 years after that. But we all remembered that day, Fred and I, and we would make reference to it now and again. What a distinguished person and faculty member was Fred Tabbutt.

The second thing that happened at Pack Forest that was good was directed by Willi Unsoeld. I don't even remember how this happened, but we had a lot of free time at meals where people sat together and introduced themselves. Little groups of people met each other, and probably made friends there for a day. You know who Willi Unsoeld is, right?

Severn: Yeah.

Nisbet: All of a sudden, he's marching us all off into the woods. We stop in this one spot, and he hauls out this long rope, and he says, "Okay, we're going to rappel over the edge." I knew nothing about any of this. I think we were all kind of standing around looking. I think Pete Sinclair, probably, who is a climber, and a couple people must have volunteered. They could see them rappelling off the edge. I don't think it was terribly long. Willi held the rope while you were—and there was no safety [belt? 01:28:55]. It was just one big rope.

The funniest thing about that whole thing was Charlie Teske. Willi didn't say, "Get dressed for outdoors," and Charlie Teske had some nice pants and Oxford shoes. [laughter] Here's Charlie Teske, who was not particularly athletic, had his shoes on the edge. It just was a total non-picture of what someone should be looking like rappelling. It was just crazy. I'm sure there were some people who didn't do it, for good reason. But Willi had a lot of command, and if he said we were going to do this, I said to myself, I'm going to do this. I think it was a good thing because again it was a trusting Willi and team building.

Pack Forest was a wonderful first beginning, as opposed to just showing up on campus to your team and start teaching.

Severn: Also, kind of emblematic, too, just this notion all these different faculty and deans and everybody going off the edge.

Nisbet: Yeah. We never did that again. We never rappelled and we didn't play touch football. Never again.

Severn: Let's end this one right here and then we can pick up where we left off.

Nisbet: Okay, sure.