

Grant MacEwan Community College Oral History Project

Interviewee: Jill Day

Interviewer: Valla McLean

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**VM:** This is an interview for the Grant MacEwan Community College Oral History project on January 24, 2019, with Jill Day in Edmonton, Alberta. This is Valla McLean, University Archivist.

**VM:** Jill, you were a student at the college, and then you came to work for MacEwan. Can you tell me what brought you to the college?

**JD:** I wanted to take the library technician program. I was interested in it. I almost took it at Ryerson in the [19]70s and didn't go and moved to Alberta eventually. When I was in my early 30s, I realized I needed to change what I was doing with my life and do something I wanted to do. I applied. I went and took the intro. to libraries as an evening course. To see if I liked it.

**VM:** And what years were you at-

**JD:** That was 1986. I took the intro. course in the spring. It was at the Cromdale campus, and Lynda Cook was our teacher. She was just an amazing teacher. I loved the course. I don't think I could have had a better introduction to coming back to school as an adult. It was really invigorating because I hadn't been in school in a long time since my early 20s, and it just made me feel like my brain was being used in ways it hadn't been for a long time. I really enjoyed it, and I did very well in the course. Lynda really encouraged me to continue on to take the library program. I applied and was accepted and began it full time in September of 1986.

**VM:** Was that at the Cromdale campus and then you –

**JD:** Yes, the library program was at the Cromdale campus at that time. It moved - by September, they opened Seventh Street Plaza. I think that was the first year at Seventh Street Plaza. It was a very strange place to go to school because it was an office building. The library program, I think it was on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor. We shared the floor with the insurance program and the legal program, and the library program were all on the one floor, so you really only got to know the people on your floor because, unless you went to the cafeteria or the gym, you didn't really leave your floor.

**VM:** What were some of your favourite courses, and why do you think you enjoyed them?

**JD:** Well, I really enjoyed my electives. I took a sociology class that was really super interesting, but I also took a Canadian fiction class. One of the books we read in that was *Handmaid's Tale*, which is so popular now today, which is interesting because I absolutely loved that book at the time. I wrote a major essay. I think I got the highest mark in the class with that because I loved it so much. I remember being obsessed thinking about that book for weeks and my essay, and I loved that, but cataloguing was probably one of my favourites. I know a lot of people, nowadays - you don't catalogue you just get an electronic record, and all that information is attached. But at that time, you had to sleuth out your call number, and you had to learn Dewey Decimal. We had to learn LC [Library of Congress]. We had to learn how to catalog for special libraries. You had to find that perfect subject heading. One of the jobs I had after I graduated was at NAIT. I was a cataloguer, and they still used - and I think they still do, I am not sure - the Dewey Decimal system. I can't even imagine what it is like now because in the [19]80s, even to assign a call number in the 600s [laughter] was about 800 numbers long, right?

[laughter]. That's an exaggeration, but it was just so interesting. I always felt really rewarded when I found the perfect number or the perfect call or the perfect subject heading. I'd go ah, there it is I found it!

**VM:** What were some of your favourite instructors, and what did you like about them?

**JD:** Well, Lynda Cook, of course. She was just an amazing introduction, and my favourite instructor Don Fisher taught the fiction course I took. Tony Fell was the head of the library program and my cataloguing teacher. I can't remember if he taught a few other things too, but I can't imagine learning cataloguing from anyone but Tony. He was so fun to listen to. He always had good stories. He made it really funny and fun and interesting to learn how to catalogue. He was a very dynamic individual. I loved his classes.

**VM:** Which is not something - when you think about when cataloguing.

**JD:** No, not at all. I can't imagine what people who don't have someone like Tony - how boring it must be to learn cataloguing. It was pretty fun.

**VM:** Were there any on-campus activities that you participated in on Seventh Street?

**JD:** There were a few, not a lot. I remember the very first time I ever went to male strippers was because of Seventh Street. They had - I think it was the insurance program put on a fundraiser. All these women we went to Barry T's on the Southside of Edmonton. It was the first time I ever saw a male stripper. I was in my 30s. All I remember saying was I am glad that I am not young and inexperienced because I would be really disappointed [laughter]. But that was funny. There were a few, not very many. Partially because I had two young children. My youngest son turned two the week I

started library school fulltime. I came to school at 8 in the morning, and I left at 4 in the afternoon, whether I had classes or not. I came from 8 to 4. I did all my work before I got home because I had to. I have to say I was the most efficient student I have ever been in my life because I had young children. You never knew. I remember one time it was near the end of one term. I had an exam in the morning, and I had a project due. My youngest son had an ear infection, and I was up all night. I took him to the hospital and went to school the next day and handed in my project, which had been done a week before because I had to be like that. I wrote my exam and did very well in it. It's only because I learned I had to be very prepared at that time, but the other thing about that is my age of being a student was really common at the time at Grant MacEwan Community College, it was adults. It was mostly adults who came back; to me, it seemed. I wasn't at all out of place being in my 30s and being in school.

**VM:** Right.

**JD:** We only had about five younger people. One who had just graduated from high school in our class. The rest was mostly women in their 30s and 40s, one in her 50s. It was an older crowd, and it wasn't just the library program. It was overall a lot of older adults in their 30s and 40s. But that was in the [19]80s when there as an oil bust.

**VM:** Right.

**JD:** The economy was very bad in Alberta. That's when people go to school. We had a lot of people returning to school because they didn't have a job. We were all there [laughter].

**VM:** To wrap up your student experience, can you think of one of the best experiences that you had while you were a student?

**JD:** I am going to tell you the one thing that really stuck out for me was my first year at Grant MacEwan Day, and I don't know I didn't care, right? I wasn't really into anything except getting my work done and going home. I was in the library lab doing my assignments and in walks, Dr. Grant MacEwan, with the head of the president of the students' council and whoever else was in his entourage. He apparently was known not to follow their script. He wanted to see the library people. So, he walked in, and he became one of my heroes forever. I fell in love with him instantly. He was the kind of man when he asked you a question, he looked you in the eye, and he listened to your answer. You maybe only talked to him for 30 to 60 seconds, but you felt like you were important for that 30 to 60 seconds. That made a huge impression on me, and I went to anything after that that Dr. MacEwan would be at whether I was a student, and when I came to work at MacEwan, I went to every event that I knew Dr. MacEwan would be at. I admired him so much.

**VM:** I think that's a common theme. I hear he was quite the man. We're going to shift now and talk about you coming to work for the community college.

**JD:** Yes.

**VM:** Why come work here and what years - you graduated in [19]86?

**JD:** I graduated in [19]88. I think I came to work in 1991 and -

**VM:** You mentioned you went to NAIT.

**JD:** Yes. I worked at NAIT, which helped me get the job here, but at the time, I was working at Alberta College, which wasn't part of MacEwan.

**VM:** Right.

**JD:** I had a good job, a full-time job. I had a student - a MacEwan student - a library student who was working part-time for me at Alberta College. She came to work one day and said, Jill, there - it was the last day of the job posting - she said you know there's this job posted at MacEwan that I think you'd be really good at. I said oh, I'm really happy here. She showed me - I looked at - this was before the Internet - I think she had photocopied the job or taken it off the bulletin board and brought it. She said I think you'd be really good at this job. I looked at the job, and at the time, it was a supervisor's position. I'd only been, I think - three years - let me see [19]88 and maybe out of school, right. I thought, oh wow, this is a really good job. It was more pay, substantially more pay than what I was making. At the very last minute, she was going back to class, I whipped off a resume and a letter, and she took it back and handed it in for me at HR [Human Resources], and I applied. Then I heard from them. I got an interview. I was really thrilled to get an interview. I thought this means my career is on the right track. I'm doing okay. I got an interview. The day of the interview - the night before, I got food poisoning. I was up all night. I was violently ill, and I phoned in sick to the interview. I phone them and said I'm really sorry I can't come. I couldn't come. I thought that would be that. That was a Friday, and they phoned me back that afternoon and said, can you come on Monday? I thought whoa, they must be interested in me because they reconvened five people to interview with me. They reconvened on the Monday to interview me, and I got the job.

**VM:** What was that first job?

**JD:** My same job. I was head of cataloging and acquisitions. I stayed in the same position for twenty-five years – except, I mean, the position changed about every three years.

**VM:** And the campus changed -

**JD:** And the campus changed. We were at Cromdale, the Cataloging and Acquisitions department. I worked at Cromdale for three years before the City Centre opened. But my job title changed here and there but basically it was the same job, but the tasks of the job as you know changed about every three or four years. You completely redo what you do. I worked on a lot of projects in the beginning years because of the fact that we didn't have as many professional librarians at that time. There were only a few, and as a library technician, I was given a lot of opportunities to do jobs that really became librarian jobs later. For me, it was wonderful because I really enjoyed the challenge. I did very well at most of it, and it was really an exciting time to be here.

**VM:** What do you remember about campus life in general when you started to work at the college?

**JD:** When I worked at Cromdale, you knew everybody. You knew the students. You knew the facilities staff. You knew the receptionist. You knew everyone. You'd go to the cafeteria, and you knew everybody. You could go into the kitchen and make your own toast [laughter]. It was a very community relationship. It was wonderful. I mean, you participated in everything because it was all right there. It was a small campus. You know I was on the volleyball team [laughter].

**VM:** To my next question - can you describe some of the significant or memorable events that you experienced while working at the college?

**JD:** Well, I remember doing a volleyball tournament. I never played again because my fingers hurt so much after. I thought I have to use a computer now. We were just starting to have our own computers. We had a Halloween heist. I am sure you've heard this story [laughter]. We were all dressed up in Halloween costumes. The facilities person came barging into our area. She said there's a guy in my office stealing things. We all ran out the door in our Halloween costumes as this guy exited the facilities office and ran out the back door. We all chased him through the streets outside of Cromdale dressed as - one was an alien; we had all of these crazy costumes. We were all running down the street after this poor guy [laughter]. There was a community police office around the corner. One person ran to the community police office. This poor guy he hid behind a garage, and we all stood there and guarded the alley until the police got there [laughter]. I think he was thankful to be arrested [laughter]. That was pretty funny, but there were - it was everything. Even just going and having lunch was a community experience at Cromdale.

**VM:** You mentioned that you went to a lot of the MacEwan Day events while you're working here. Can you think of any others -?

**JD:** There was always in the fall every year - they used to have a welcome back, and Dr. MacEwan would come. It was held at the Jasper Place at the John L Haar. Theatre and then they'd have a reception after. I went to all of those. I went to every event I could that Dr. MacEwan would be at and speaking at - that I would get to be around that



wonderful man. When we moved to the City Centre campus, it changed quite a bit. It was so big, and we didn't know people. It was harder to get to know people. Not as difficult as it is now because then if you had an upgrade to the email system which was new, email was new; all that was new, you had classes where people from all over every department of MacEwan would come to the classes. You would get to meet people. Often, I did a lot of dealings with finance. I would go into finance and talk to people in there all the time. We would know each other and see each other in the halls and that kind of thing. MacEwan was considered - Dr. Kelly was president, and his saying was, we are family. And we were. It was like a little city, and we were one big family. It really was like that. Everyone was approachable. The president's office all the VP's all the executive officers, people that were head of departments they were all very accessible. You knew each other. Whether you didn't know the names, they would recognize you as someone who belonged here. It was a very solid family environment for many years. Then we got big. Dropped the community from the name, which was a big deal at the time to drop the community from the name. Dropped the college. Eventually became a university. We became a big business which it has to. You have to survive. You have to become a big business. It was very much a family.

**VM:** You lose something in the process.

**JD:** Absolutely.

**VM:** What are some of the proudest achievements during your career at MacEwan?

When you look back on all those years?

**JD:** That's a hard question. I think I was a good manager. I think I did really well managing people. I think it was my forte. I think it was my ability to keep calm. Be a

calm person. Be someone that my staff could turn to and talk to. When I started at MacEwan, Pat Lloyd was the chair, and she and Joanne Kemp would alternate. I worked with both of them a lot, and Pat was very much my mentor. I always had the feeling that she had my back. She always had my back. That's a really nice feeling when you are at a job or anywhere. I tried to be that for my staff. I tried to convey that to my staff, like you know, I'll always have your back. You come and talk to me and tell me what's going on and I'll have your back. If I know what's going on sort of like with your kids - don't lie to me because I can't help you if you don't tell me the truth. I tried to have that kind of policy with the staff. Come and tell me if things are wrong, please tell me because I can't do anything about it if I'm oblivious to what's going on. I think that was my accomplishment, establishing a really stable work environment for a lot of people for a really long time.

**VM:** All right.

**JD:** I just thought of something else.

**VM:** No, go ahead.

**JD:** I was involved when we chose our library system. We had an automatic library system when I started at MacEwan. It was an in- house library system. That was really interesting. One of the really interesting projects was when we got our first automated, real automated library system. We bucked the trend and didn't do what do the U of A did and got this very sophisticated system that wasn't available when the U of A had picked their system. We were way ahead. When we became a university, Susan Jones was the one who really worked hard and set up the automated ordering system. I didn't realize that, but nobody else did that. I remember having a sales rep. from one of the big book,

companies come in and tell me that we had the most sophisticated automation system in North America. I thought she was just you know complimenting - like trying to get sales. I thought that was just a silly thing to say. Then I went to quite a few library conferences with our system, and I remember sitting at a round table of mostly American library people, acquisitions people, and we were talking. I mentioned our automated acquisition system, and they all sat there and asked me questions for an hour. Nobody else did this. This is when I realized we did probably have the most sophisticated automated acquisitions system in North America. That's quite a coup.

**VM:** For just MacEwan.

**JD:** Yes, for MacEwan and for the people that worked really hard on it, and that was because of John McGrath and because of Susan Jones. Susan work for John then, and they made it happen because we couldn't have possibly done what we did to become a university without that automated library system. We would have had to have ten times the staff and the space, which wasn't going to happen. And we made it happen. It was a very exciting time we had, were you here then? We had boxes and boxes. You would walk into the tech. services area –

**VM:** It looked like Christmas.

**JD:** You couldn't see – It did. The mail guys would say oh we're bringing up fifty boxes today and everybody from the facilities people, the mail people, everybody worked so hard on that project for MacEwan to become a university. It was pretty exciting to be involved in that and watch the progress of automation that happened in the library at that time. It was pretty cool.

**VM:** Those are good legacies. Is there anything I failed to ask you that you want to share with me or that I haven't had a chance to ask you, any final remarks that you want to -

**JD:** I would just like to say that I'll always be eternally grateful that I got to work at MacEwan for twenty-five years. I think I was very fortunate. When I got hired, it was still hard times in Alberta. I think I was the last full-time continuing position in the library that they hired for seven years. That was luck of timing. I don't know if people realize this, but at one point in the [19]90s, we took a 5% pay cut. We didn't get a raise for seven years. We didn't get back to that 5% for probably ten years. There are always hard times in Alberta, especially because we're an oil place, and these things they come, and they go. But where I started with this is that I'm just so grateful that I got to be here. I had a young family. I had an interesting job. I had compassionate co-workers and bosses. I had benefits. All the things that make a really good life as a worker I got by working at MacEwan. I got it because I was a MacEwan student. I got the education at MacEwan, and that's what led to me to eventually getting a job at MacEwan was that I had the right education. I can't imagine working at a better place than here. I think we're all pretty lucky.

**VM:** I agree. I think that's a fantastic way to end our interview. Thank you very much.

**JD:** You are welcome.

[End of interview]

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