

Grant MacEwan Community College Oral History Project

Interviewee: Brenda Heffernan

Interviewer: Valla McLean

Date: 2019-03-28

**VM:** This is an interview for the Grant MacEwan Community College oral history project on March 28th, 2019, with Brenda Heffernan in Edmonton, Alberta. This is Valla McLean, university archivist. I'd like to start by asking you what made you decide to come to Grant MacEwan MacEwan Community College?

**BH:** I was working in healthcare, and we went through the Klein reorganization in healthcare, and I was bounced out of jobs three or four times. I got used to saying I'm surprised I wasn't a size 0. I had been downsized so many times [Laughter]. This job came available to educate therapist assistants. I'd heard about it through working with someone who was the editor of the provincial newsletter, and so I applied to teach, which I hadn't done, but I had also just taken some public speaking courses, and I really wanted some practice in public speaking so I thought if I went and taught at MacEwan, I would get that practice.

**VM:** And what courses did you teach while at the community college?

**BH:** I taught quite a few different courses, and we reorganized the program a couple of times, so those courses changed, but all the courses I taught were for therapist assistants, both for physical and occupational therapist assistants, so they were related to anatomy and pathology, physiotherapy, occupational therapy.

**VM:** Was there a favourite course you enjoyed teaching over the years?

**BH:** I enjoyed field placements. I organized field placements for students, and that took up a significant amount of time. Each student had three field placements, and so I tried to organize a variety of experiences for them.

**VM:** From what I understand, field placements for faculty are a lot of work. What was it specifically that you liked about doing that?

**BH:** We used an online platform where students answered questions about their professionalism, and they talked about what sort of things they're doing. It was great for me to kind of stay in contact with the fields of physical and occupational therapy through virtually, I guess, by reading about what the students were doing. It kept the program aligned in terms of if new things that were coming on board and that was expected of students. I could add them to the program. It really helped me keep my finger on the pulse of where the rehab. fields were going.

**VM:** Yes, that connection with the community and the practitioners out in the community.

**VM:** Which campus or campuses did you work at?

**BH:** City centre. I started in building seven and when the Robbins opened, our program moved to the Robbins.

**VM:** And what year did you start at the -

**BH:** In 1998.

**VM:** Can you describe some of the physical features of the campus - so same campus but different buildings for sure when you moved to the Robbins.

**BH:** So, describe building seven?

**VM:** We can talk more about the Robbins centre and how different that was from where you had been at the city centre.

**BH:** The Robbins had excellent labs for our students. Really nice learning spaces. There was one that you felt like you were in a physio. clinic, and then the use of the nursing labs provided us to have that kind of hospital type of experience for our students.

**VM:** When the Robbins opened, was it a more purpose-built space for those programs? Is that what made it stand out?

**BH:** Yes, the labs were designed by Collette Foisey-Doll. She did a nice job of combining what was needed for a number of different programs. Everything was a shared lab space, but it could be organized to suit different purposes.

**VM:** Because that building is primarily health and community studies and nursing, so that's a lot of departments or professions trying to fit into that space.

**VM:** When you started at the community college, what were some of your first impressions of the student body and the students that you worked with?

**BH:** Well, teaching was completely new to me when I first started, so I had a blank slate. I had no expectations [Laughter], but I was pleasantly surprised. The students who applied to my program the therapist assistant program were always just nice young women and occasionally men who wanted to be helpful to other people. I was pleasantly surprised by how dedicated already they were in terms of professionalism and wanting to be helpful. I didn't have to stir up a lot of sentiment. It was basically there. It was a really nice student body that I had contact with.

**VM:** Did you see - because you taught at MacEwan for quite a while - did you see a shift or a change in the type of students that came into the program over the years, or was it always young women coming in?

**BH:** It was typically young women coming in who had somehow been motivated either by a parent or a relative or a school counsellor or someone because they were interested in quite often the physical activity - they were a bit on the athletic side and also wanted to be helpful.

**VM:** What do you remember about campus life in general when you first came to the community college?

**BH:** I was impressed by how the college organized itself. It seemed to be almost an organic process as to how classes got set up, and spaces could be shared. There was a spirit of helpfulness - that people wanted to help these programs roll out. Ours was a brand-new program, and so we parachuted in on spaces that were already in use, but people were very welcoming in sharing the facility.

**VM:** Who did you consider some of the important faculty and administrative leaders when you first came on campus?

**BH:** I had Shirley Galenza give me a fairly hefty dose of help getting started and chairing because when I started, I started by chairing the program, and even though I hadn't taught. It was a steep learning curve, and Shirley was very helpful and then also Gerri Nakonechny was the Dean of Health and Community studies. She was a key leader from my perspective.

**VM:** Yes, and that department is a pretty small department. I imagine not a lot of faculty compared to some of the others Arts and Science and things like that.

**BH:** Yes. I was the only full-time.

**VM:** This is why you end up being a chair, as well.

**VM:** What were some of the significant or memorable events that stand out when you look back at that time?

**BH:** I remember the open house as being a great opportunity for prospective students to come in and have a look at the programs. I thought it was again another one of those organic things that people would give talks about their program and just provide a lot of information to students who were trying to kind of decide the course of the rest of their lives. It was an important day for students.

**VM:** And what about staff events do any stand out that you remember from that time?

**BH:** I always went to the faculty barbecue in the fall, and they were a nice opportunity to get to know people around the college.

**VM:** Is there a particular moment that stands out in your teaching career that you will always remember?

**BH:** I think - this is much later in my career - it was my retirement. I had a lot of students come back for my retirement, and I was really touched by the number of students who showed up after work hours and came to wish me well.

**VM:** It shows the impact that you had on their lives.

**BH:** Yes, I was very touched by that.

**VM:** What about some of your proudest achievements during your time at MacEwan?

**BH:** I sat on a national body - I was instrumental in bringing in the accreditation process into being for the therapist assistant programs across the country, and there are about 30 programs or so across Canada. I was proud of being able to bring so many disparate points of view into the development of a process that suited us all. I actually received the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists - award - I was thinking of the word prize [Laughter] but it wasn't a prize - an award, and so I was one of the recipients of an award for having done that because it was a difficult process.

**VM:** I've asked a number of questions today, but is there anything that I've failed to ask you that you were really hoping to share as part of this interview?

**BH:** No. Not really.

**VM:** I was effective.

**BH:** You hit the highlights [Laughter].

**VM:** I'd like to thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this project.

**BH:** Thank-you.

[End of interview]

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