

Grant MacEwan Community College Oral History Project

Interviewee: Frank Wilkins

Interviewer: Valla McLean

Date: 2019-05-09

VM: This is an interview for the Grant MacEwan Community College Oral History Project on May 9, 2019, with Frank Wilkins in Calgary, Alberta. This is Valla McLean, university archivist. I'll begin by asking you what did you study at the community college and when?

FW: I studied Law Enforcement and Corrections, and it was 1971 to 1973, and it was a pretty interesting little course. I still remember some of the instructors' names like Dr. Paul Otke, who's living I think in Kamloops right now, and a lawyer by the name of Richard Anthony who used to teach us law. He was really a phenomenal guy because he was a crown prosecutor for the City of Edmonton, and what he'd do is bring in some of the cases that he had during that day, and he would discuss them with us in the class which I thought was pretty interesting.

VM: And why Grant MacEwan Community College? What made you want to go to school there?

FW: I was wondering if you'd be asking that question. It's really funny. I was up in Yellowknife prior to Grant MacEwan, and I was working in a jail, and my brother was going back to NAIT for his second year. And my mother said why don't you go out with him and just take care of him? Because I was the oldest brother. So we went out to Edmonton, got our place, and I'm reading the paper one day – he's going to school, I'm not doing anything. I have no job, no future, nothing, and I'm lying on the carpet, and I'm reading the newspaper, and there's this ad for Grant MacEwan Community College and a phone number. They had some of the courses, and they'd laid them out, and one of

them was Law Enforcement and Corrections, and I said well. I made a phone call, and the receptionist said we'll make an appointment for tomorrow. You can talk to Dr. Otke, and I went and saw Paul, and we hit it off, just automatically because he was a captain in Canadian Intelligence at that time. He was a doctor – industrial psychologist if I remember right – and he was head of the department. I said I was an ex-soldier, I just got out of the army last year. I'd been working up north in a jail, and he said this is the course, this is what we have. He said I'll sign you up right now as an adult student, and that was it. My student number is 734. I graduated in April of 1973. [Laughs].

VM: [Laughs]. And which campus did you attend, and what do you remember about the campus?

FW: I remember Cromdale. That was our head office you might call or head campus, and I was living downtown in Edmonton at the time, so I had to take the trolley because we had trollies - the old 1950s series trollies - up 97 Street to get to Cromdale area. I forget the name of the street up there. I think it was 118 or something like that. It was an old Dominion Store, and it had been renovated into classrooms with a library and a common area and classrooms all around, and I think they were teaching nursing and library science in there as well. It was a lovely, lovely library and a great place. We had elections going in because we were just starting out. It was the first time ever that John Haar had put this together, and he even got the money to put it together, and I got voted in as the President of the Students' Council or the Students' Association. That lasted for a year, and then somebody else took over, and then I was gone the next year and moved on to Drumheller.

VM: What interested you in being the President of the Students' Association? Do you remember what drove you to pursue that?

FW: What I perceived of that?

VM: Yes.

FW: It was a funny year. There was very little going on except— we threw our first party at the convent down the road. I forget the name of the place. We had a great party in there, throwing an icebreaker. It was the first party ever for Grant MacEwan, and everybody showed up, and it was a fantastic time. As for the administration and the duties of a student president, I have no idea. It was going to classes, and it was just starting out. I remember Rick something or other. He's in BC [British Columbia] as well. He was the Chairman of all the campuses. I think there was Cromdale; there was the convent, and I think there was the one way in the west end, but I don't think that had started as yet, so there was just the convent and Cromdale. Strathcona – Scona campus – and he was in there, and we spent nights going over the constitution. Ratifying the constitution, reading every line, and getting it set up for what it is today. I remember those meaningless nights of – it was phenomenal – it was dry, but we got it. We got our constitution, and that's where Grant MacEwan came from—those hours of us spent discussing this.

VM: And what were some of your first impressions of the community college – the faculty, the students. Does anything stand out that you remember?

FW: I think the students that I had in Law Enforcement and Corrections. We all came from different backgrounds. Some had worked. There was one fellow in there who had

a criminal background years ago as a young offender, and he was taking the course. When I ran into him again at Grierson Centre when I transferred up from Drumheller Prison, he was a counsellor up there, the same job that I just applied for. I was quite enthused about that because it was like seeing an old friend. But some of the guys we had in there and the girls – they had an interest in this, and this is what they did. All of us pretty well graduated from what I can understand. It was quite the time. The instructors, there was one fellow that used to wear – he had a completely bald head except for the sides, and he wore these leather boots up to his knees. He was something of a strange duck, and I can't remember his name, and I don't even remember what course he taught, but he was kind of funny – a little bit eccentric, I think.

VM: What about any courses that stand out that you liked during your program?

FW: Yeah, I think the one that stood out was Richard Anthony's course – the law that he had was extremely interesting. And Dr. Otke, talking about his industrial psychology part, which put it into perspective when you're dealing with inmates at the time. I could only remember what I was doing when I was up north in the prison complex in Yellowknife, and I also worked in a bush camp up there. The bush camp was totally different. It was just like go fishing with the boys after supper – minimum security. But yeah, it was quite interesting, the whole course. I don't remember many of the courses except for those two instructors.

VM: Were you quite young when you started the program? Because you talked about how you had previous jobs before you started the program, or did you come as an older adult?

FW: I was 23, I think, 23 or 22 when I started in 1971.

VM: And was that the age group you think a lot of your classmates were?

FW: Funny, you ask. Everybody in there was pretty well the same age group. We even had one Edmonton city police officer, and we had one fellow from Fort Saskatchewan, and he was doing a job as a jail guard up there.

VM: What about any on-campus activities? You talked about a party at the convent, but were there any others that you participated in that stand out from that period?

FW: You know, that time, those two years in there, we spent most of our time studying. There was very little fun time except across the street was called the Cromdale Hotel, and we would go over there and have beers. I remember the first time we walked in there because it was an old hotel in an old area of town and the only people that were in there were these old retired guys. This is what they did for their retirement, they would go there when it opened up, sit down, and have their draft beer and that's it. And then when this pile of students came in there one day, and that was our bar. You never saw the old guys anymore [laughs].

VM: [Laughs]. Even though it's a short program – two years, when you look back on it, what are some of the best experiences that you took away from the program?

FW: I don't keep in touch with anybody over there because I don't know where they are. I think the memorable moments were just taking the courses and slogging through it. Slogging through the first year and going back in the second year was almost like one foot in front of the other. I remember the day that classes finished – it was the last year and classes were finished, and it was almost like a let-down, like what do we do now?

What do I do now? I had some job interviews. I had some people come in from Stony Mountain, and they wanted me at Stony Mountain in Manitoba. I didn't want to go to Manitoba. I remember talking to the fellow at Drumheller, who was in charge of human relations in there, and he said, can you start tomorrow? And I said well I'm not finished my course yet when I've finished my course, I'll let you know. That was it. When I finished the course, I phoned him, and he said you're hired. It was at that time when there was no employment problem in Alberta, especially in that area, and even today, if you look at it, it's a very transient business.

VM: Is there anything when you look back at that time that sort of stands out as one of your proudest achievements?

FW: My proudest achievement? I think starting the Students' Association was probably one of the proudest moments because, at that time, it didn't seem like very much. It seemed like oh, this is just a paper position, and there was nothing involved in it. But when I look back in hindsight, we had set the foundation for the Students' Association. When I went back in 1997 to the reunion or the twenty-five-year celebration, I was almost dumbfounded by the way that the Students' Association had come to the point where it is. They had their own office, and they were a professional organization. They charged dues, and they had the whole works, and I said, wow! I could not believe that we, as a group, had become instrumental in doing that, and it's still alive today. I think that was one of the proudest moments, is getting that off the ground. Even at the time, I didn't realize that it was significant. I didn't think it was. It was just a position; you know what I mean? Okay, all right, so you voted me in, okay fine as long as it doesn't interfere with the courses.

VM: Is there something that I failed to ask you that you would like to share, but I haven't given you the opportunity to?

FW: No, I think you pretty well-covered everything.

VM: I'd like to thank you very much for participating in this project and contributing to the history of MacEwan.

FW: You're most welcome, Valla. It's been a pleasure.

[End of interview]

Transcribed by: Kathy Blasko, 2020-04-17

Reviewed by: Valla McLean, 2020-04-17

Final edit by: Frank Wilkins, 2020-04-24