

Grant MacEwan Community College Oral History Project

Interviewee: Sharon Schnell

Interviewer: Valla McLean

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**VM:** This is an interview for the Grant MacEwan Community College oral history project on March 2, 2019, with Sharon Schnell in Edmonton, Alberta. This is Valla McLean, university archivist. My first question for you is, what year did you start at Grant MacEwan Community College, and what brought you to the community college?

**SS:** I started August the 5th 1971, and what brought me was I had heard about MacEwan starting up. I was living in Halifax at the time, and I thought this is an important institution, and it's timely because we had U of A in Edmonton, and we also had NAIT. We needed something in between. I was standing on the street one day, and I saw a friend, and I thought I think I'm going to go there and apply.

**VM:** So, you really wanted to be a part of that then, that meant something to you.

**SS:** Yes, it meant something to me in terms of another opportunity for students. But I didn't appreciate the scope or the depth of what it was. I just thought it was a very important institution to fill in a gap.

**VM:** What positions or job titles have you held over the years?

**SS:** Many because when it's a growing institution, there are many opportunities for you as an individual to grow with it. If that's what you want to do, I started as secretary to the Director of Academic Division, Dr, Chuck Day, and from there, I moved to Campus Services Supervisor at Assumption Campus. Then I moved to Admin. Assistant for Academic Council and Staff development. From there, I went to Campus Services Supervisor at Cromdale and the Communication Arts Division. Then I moved to, for a

short time, at Jasper Place when Paul Byrne moved over to be the dean with the director at the time, Director of the Business Division.

Then we went to Seventh Street campus in 1986, and in 1993 we moved here to the main campus on 104th Avenue, the downtown campus, and in that position, with the School of Business, I probably was there for about 22 years until I retired. So, from [19]86 to 2009, I was the Manager of the Administration for the School of Business.

**VM:** What were some of your - that's a lot of different positions over time and all the campuses. What were some of your responsibilities that you remember from that time? It's difficult to say because you had various job opportunities. But what were some of the things you were responsible for?

**SS:** Well, in secretarial positions, it is the normal responsibilities. I think what you have to appreciate at that time is that there were no systems set up in anyone's office. So everything had to be designed and created and planned. There was no filing. Yes, you had to keep records. You had to use your own administrative imagination on how to do that. I knew we had to keep records but how we kept them or what we did. Before I was married, I did work in a library.

**VM:** So, you brought that skill set to your -

**SS:** Yes. I think I just had a natural affinity for organizing information. Some of the things in Academic Council, for example, I said I would never do it, but then I was asked to do it – it just seemed like an amoeba with heated debates. Everyone was so excited I think about being part of a new institution. So there was certainly freedom of expression amongst the people on Academic Council, and things seemed to be so confused, so I

just devised ways to keep it organized. And then, in faculty development, that was fun because I worked for a faculty committee, and we offered all the faculty development activities during professional development days as well as an orientation for new faculty. And I found all of that very interesting and stimulating and you got to be a little bit creative. Now, this was all before computers it was all electric typewriters. We didn't have the creative skills that are now available on normal word processing packages.

**VM:** You mentioned that you worked...sorry you wanted to say something...

**SS:** Well, in a campus services capacity at that time, the director was not only director of an academic unit; he was also responsible for a campus. And that was the general idea at that point in time, so you had to work with facilities in terms of what was going on at the campus. And concerns from students and employees. The main thing is working with an academic division at that capacity you had to look after or be responsible for training new support staff, making sure you've got support staff for their appointments and the appointments of faculty - not the appointments but the review of their resumes, etc. and budgeting.

**VM:** You mentioned that you worked at a number of campuses. Could you describe the differences or the physical features of the different campuses that you remember?

**SS:** Well, the first one I was at was Old Scona. That was a beautiful old brick building. Our office was in the basement with huge windows. We were in there with the Chair of the English, the Chair of Humanities. We had one dear faculty member who had a bit of a heart condition, so he was allowed to walk through the boiler room to the other side to the washrooms. The rest of us had to climb the stairs. We also had at that time the

Equine Studies program and the custodial staff would get very upset because the students would come in with a lot of horse stuff [laughter] on their shoes and dirty bones and stuff like that and they were on the top floor which when it was a school was sort of a gym, but that was made into classrooms. That was a fun campus. Cromdale campus was interesting because it was an old grocery store. There was a lot of camaraderie at Cromdale. It was a smaller campus, and faculty and staff worked hard, and we played hard. It was fun. Assumption Campus was interesting because we had the main section where the classes were, but the attachment for faculty offices was formerly a hotel. Each office had its own little sink and little cloakroom. It just made it really interesting. There were stories about a ghost being around, so that added to the flavour. Jasper Place Campus was one of our newer ones at the time, and I was there only for a short period of time. At that time, it was called the big banana or something. There was a marketing campaign called the banana. I never could understand the connection [Laughter]. Although I went to Mill Woods campus a lot, I never actually had an office there. These other places I did have an office. Seventh Street that was fun because it was a high-rise. It was downtown, and that was exciting. Then when we moved to this campus that was very exciting to be moving into a brand-new place. It was a massive move. At the time, we still had JP and Mill Woods campuses. What I did learn - I appreciate it now, but at the time, I wondered why we always - and I remember the director of facilities saying as you soon as you build a building, then you have to renovate it. So, it seemed like as we grew, we were constantly renovating for or within Seventh Street and building 5. That was fun to work with facilities. I really enjoyed that part.

**VM:** And who did you consider some of the important administrators or staff or faculty when you started here at the community college? Do you remember some of the names that stand out from that time?

**SS:** Definitely. Dr. T. Charles Day, Chuck Day, was, for me, one of the most inspirational people I've ever worked for. I liked his style of thoughtfulness even though I was probably what you'd call not an outstanding student at college; he was the first one that expressed to me that I could do more. That was the first time I'd ever received positive feedback about my work or about being a student. That just made me motivated to do more. It was amazing. It wasn't probably anything that he thought was maybe inspirational on his part, but it certainly was on mine. Dr. Terry Flanagan was another inspirational person because he was an action man - let's get on with it, let's do it, let's give it a try. I learned a great deal from him in terms of action and making connections. Faculty members that I enjoyed working with probably were in the School of Business. I enjoyed their dedication to students and dedication to teaching and learning. I was always impressed with several things that we had at MacEwan number one was that we had community people who served on our advisory committees. I took minutes at many, many advisory committees. I was always impressed with how they brought the community in and how they listened to those advisory members. In terms of an outstanding faculty member. I am not sure. The one who helped me the most in terms of my job was definitely Chris Hancock. At the time, you know computers were new, and it really took me a while to understand the concepts.

**VM:** You may have alluded to this earlier in the interview - could you describe some of the staff events you attended or any sort of memorable events that you experienced while working at the community college?

**SS:** Well, in the early days when you're young, we used to have great Christmas parties. There would be some faculty members myself and some other staff members - we would plan these, and we were small then so it was easier to organize. Those were always fun. The other thing that we used to do for fun was the skit nights. I thought it was very accepting on the part of the upper administration to allow staff and faculty to make, to take humour and apply it to our everyday life. It didn't mean that we didn't take what we did seriously, but we could laugh at ourselves. As you grow, you naturally can't always do those things, or it becomes more focussed on the individual unit. Other events that we had that were fun - well certainly our MacEwan Days. I was always impressed with Dr. MacEwan, and in the early years, he was inspirational for students. When I was in Faculty Development, I suggested we bring in Dr. MacEwan to speak to the faculty, which we did. I remember I had an old 1975 Duster, and Dr. MacEwan was known for taking public transport, which was fun. So, I picked him up in my old 1975 Duster at the YMCA. He was a very generous man. Generous because for his stature in society, he really had an appreciation for human beings. A rare, rare human being. First-person I ever knew that ever wrote a creed for himself. Yes, very inspirational.

**VM:** In your opinion, when you look back at your career, what are some of your proudest achievements during that time?

**SS:** Several things, I was very honoured along the way. I remember in the early years, I was made an honorary member of the Faculty Association, and that was when I was

working in Faculty Development. I received an honorary certificate from the Students' Association in the early years, which was very nice. Of course, the highest honour for me was receiving the MacEwan medallion in 1992. Then in 2012, I was given emeritus status. So, I've been honoured very well, and I really appreciate those things. The other thing that in terms of working with my staff, they were very generous to me, and I appreciated their support.

**VM:** This is the last question...

**SS:** Sorry, what was that question again?

**VM:** Absolutely - just some of your proudest achievements during your time...

**SS:** Proudest achievements during my time - I guess I won't say it's an achievement, but I really appreciated the opportunities to do new things and to learn from them. I don't have an accounting or finance background, but I was doing a lot of that in the School of Business in my position, and I really thrived on it. Looking back at where I am now because I've continued working in some short capacity since retirement, all those skills and knowledge that I learned at MacEwan, I find it interesting that I still apply.

**VM:** This is the last question. This is just to ask you whether or not I failed to ask you anything that you wanted to share, but you haven't had the opportunity to. This is just the opportunity for you to tell any story, anything that you would like.

**SS:** I think it's a rare opportunity to be part of a new institution. I am very thankful that I was there for that time. It's different than coming into an institution that's established. Yes, that's exciting, and you come into a new job, and you grow. But to be part of a post-secondary institution from its beginning was very exhilarating for me. We were the

new kid on the block. We had to prove ourselves and which everybody helped to do that. The evolution from community college to college and then university was phenomenal when you consider that in just 38 years, 40 years. I think that in itself - the people were interested in moving forward. The other thing that I appreciate now since I retired is that there was a climate for individuals to collectively debate. Some might say complain but to debate issues in the institution. I think that was healthy, and from those debates, I learned so much. I really did.

**VM:** I'd like to thank you very much for participating in this interview and contributing to the history of the institution. Thank you.

[End of interview]

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