

Grant MacEwan Community College Oral History Project

Interviewee: David Hannis

Interviewer: Valla McLean

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**VM:** This is an interview for or the Grant MacEwan Community College oral history project on March 31st, 2019, with David Hannis in Sooke, British Columbia. This is Valla McLean, university archivist. I will begin by asking you what year did you come to Grant MacEwan Community College, and what made you decide to work at the community college?

**DH:** I came to Grant MacEwan in 1984. I had been working for the provincial government, and we just had I think it was our first or second child I can't remember, and we, being my wife and I - and I had decided to become a house husband. I'd given up my career as a consultant with the Alberta Government, and my wife was working as a letter carrier at the time. She had been a social worker, but she needed a break from that, so she became a letter carrier and enjoyed her job. Whereas I hadn't particularly enjoyed working for the provincial government. Economically it didn't make sense for me to give up the job, but if you like, from a mental health perspective, it was the right thing to do, so I'd quit my job there become a house husband which was an interesting experience in itself. My daughter is 39 now, so this is a few years ago. It's a much more common thing now than it was back then. We actually had celebrity status; then we'd go on open-line radio shows and so forth. I don't think it would happen these days. I was pretty committed to being actively involved in raising my kids, but I also wanted something beyond just being at home looking after kids. I had this opportunity - a friend of mine was working in the Social Work Program at Grant MacEwan, and I said, is there any opportunities to teach there? He said, well, as a matter of fact, yes, there is. We're

looking for someone to teach a course at night a course called Interpersonal Dynamics. I said, oh, okay, well, when does it start? He said in two weeks' time. That's not a lot of prep time, really. Do you have a textbook? No. Do you have any class notes? Yes. So I looked at his notes, and it was like class one, introduction, class two, trust walk, class three - this is a bit thin. I was literally reading the books, everything I can get my hands on five minutes before the class started. It was a very bumpy start to teaching, but I loved it. I realized that that was something I really enjoyed doing - working with people in the evening program, many of whom were working in the field and needed to get some formal qualifications. Back then, the students were older than the students that I was working with towards the end of my career. A lot of the students were almost all women and often in their 30s and 40s. People who didn't have a strong sense of their intellectual competence and so often there was a self-esteem issue to address, which I found very easy to address because a) I was a social worker and b) I'd suffered from the same thing myself. I left school at sixteen feeling a complete failure and ended up going to university and felt that somehow that I didn't deserve to be there. I came across this term called the imposter syndrome from Stephen Brookfield's work. I used to share this with my students when I'd built a relationship with them, I'd say how many of you feel deep down you really shouldn't be here. You are a fraud. You got in because we screwed up the process or something. I looked at the hands that went up, and it was all the A students that were putting their hands up. I thought what is going on here. This is some kind of internalized oppression that people feel that they're incompetent and undeserving of an education. That awareness propelled me through my teaching for the 26 years I was there. I very much saw myself as a mentor—a supporter. As a role

model and as a very approachable educator and the community college really gave me room to do that. I could do pretty well what I wanted in the classroom. I enjoyed the freedom and the informality of it.

**VM:** You talked about one of the courses that you started teaching. Was there other ones that were your favourite to teach?

**DH:** Yes, it's interesting. I've given some thought to that. I think the course that I taught consistently all the 26 years I was there - still got the textbook over there - was called Interpersonal Dynamics. They changed the title to Introduction to Social Work, but it was about basic communications, self-awareness, awareness of others. That's what it was about, and the students that came in loved that course because it gave them a sense to look at who they were, and this was true right the way through - the longer I was with Grant MacEwan, the younger the students became that was partly because I was getting older, but also we started have younger students coming in. In the early days, we didn't encourage too many young students in the Social Work Program, and we did interviews for personal suitability. We weren't allowed to do that later on, so we had the younger students coming in and less well prepared, less life experience, and so forth. This course was their first chance to really look at who they were and what made them who they were and how they related to other people. So that course, they could apply immediately to the daily lives, and that was the easiest course to teach. The most fun course to teach and the most rewarding one for me and the students. I enjoyed teaching that right the way through until I retired. The other courses I taught - a social policy course that was a little bit dry for some of the students. I'd get comments from students saying I'm not interested in politics; I just want to be a social worker. And I'd

say well guess what social work is a political activity. So, we would have some discussions around that, but people still liked it [birds calls from outside]. We talked a lot about the notion of oppression and anti-oppressive practice and manifestations of oppression, sexism, ageism, racism, homophobia, and so forth. That was a good course to teach. I suppose my passion has always been community development. And that goes right back to when I first went into social work when I realized that there was a common denominator among the clients that I was seeing in that many of them were experiencing social isolation. They had no supports at all, and they were consequently having all kinds of mental health and other issues and coming to see a counsellor. I said, you know, if we could do something to build community connectedness, we wouldn't need so many people coming in for counselling. That was the beginning of my insight to the relationship between mental health and a community. I grew up in a strong community as well, so I knew what it was like to have a sense of place. To know your neighbours and so forth. So that began there, and I moved away from counselling and into community development. I ran a Community Development office in Yorkshire before I came over here. When I came to Edmonton, I was a social planner with the City of Edmonton, where I was again doing things in the community and then working at a community college. I wanted to be at a community college. I didn't want to be at some stuffy, bureaucratic academic institution. That wasn't me. It wasn't where I was at. I wanted to be working alongside people and supporting them in their goals and empowering them, and that's exactly what I was doing in Nigeria, too, so that's been the pattern. Now I'm living in an intentional community where I know all the neighbours and we look out for each other, and again I'm in a very strong community. The Community

Development course was my passion, I guess. I liked the field placements. -Supervising people in field placements that was very good. While I was at Grant MacEwan I also had a contract with the University of Victoria. The Social Work Program at Grant MacEwan in those days was only a diploma program. You could only do two years, and then you had to go somewhere else for your degree. They've got a degree program now but that wasn't the case. So, I was connected to the University of Victoria, and I was responsible for placements for all these social work students living in the Edmonton region who were doing their B.S.W. [Bachelor of Social Work] through UVIC [University of Victoria]. They could do all the courses online but, of course, had to do their practicum where they lived. That was a very empowering experience because I saw all the growth in these students from the time when I first saw them come into the program to the time they were out there doing their practice, and that was very, very, rewarding for me. Those were the courses I taught. I did a child development course that wasn't really my bag. I did it because I had to. I taught - we had a selected issues course, which was little vignettes. I taught one on social work and aging, and that was okay. Those are the courses that I taught.

**VM:** Could you tell me a bit about the different campuses that you worked at? Some of the physical facilities and what stood out about those?

**DH:** Well, initially, I started on the Mill Woods campus, which I guess doesn't exist anymore, right what happened to it? Do you know?

**VM:** It was sold back to the city.

**DH:** Okay. But that was almost like state-of-the-art back then. It hadn't been open very long. It was a confusing place to work - just to find your way around there was odd but it was located in the rapidly expanding new suburb of Mill Woods. In those early days, Grant MacEwan was very committed to taking education to the communities, so they had this diversified approach, so they had the Mill Woods campus, which I think was the only purpose-built one back then. Then they had one at Cromdale, which was in an old supermarket, and then they had one at the west end, but they didn't have a downtown presence at all. So, for the first, I think I don't know how many years I was at Grant MacEwan, where I was teaching in Mill Woods, and by the way, that model wasn't very good. It wasn't very practical because people doing social work didn't necessarily live in Mill Woods. Some of them were coming from St. Albert. I don't think it was a good model generally unless you happened to have the good fortune to live close to the campus. I taught there until the new downtown campus opened. Then they moved us down there. I saw an immediate shift when we went there. There was a shift starting to happen just before that when they brought in university transfer programs. That was a major shift that changed the ethos of Grant MacEwan as far as I was concerned. Up until that point, Mill Woods campus was a friendly, informal place. You could engage with your students in the cafeteria again very much this notion of you are a collaborator. You are an inspiration. You got to know your students. You worked with your students. It was much more empowering. And then with a new type of instructor coming in, some of them were newly minted Ph.ds, and so forth they didn't understand where we were coming from and were a little bit critical of our more informal, less intellectual way of teaching. That created a bit of a rift, and then when we went down to CCC [City Centre

Campus], that's when the differences became very apparent. It was very crowded down there. Very formal - started to become very bureaucratic. You didn't know your students as well. You certainly didn't know the other faculty as well. It was a different ethos completely. And as time went on, it also became much more efficient. In the early days, I didn't teach classes till about 9 in the morning, and now suddenly, I had to be there at 8. This was a bit of a shock to the system. And to our students. I mean a lot of - perhaps that's why we didn't get as many older students coming through our program in later years. Because they had family obligations, you've got to get kids to school—this kind of stuff. I don't know if that was true, but certainly, the profile of our students changed a lot over the years I was there, and I suspect some of the older students that I used to work with or people from different cultures - I should say that in those early days; it wasn't very multicultural at Grant MacEwan. You look at the old pictures on the wall of the graduating classes, you might see the occasional person of colour now and again. You might see an aboriginal person, but mostly, it's a sea of white, until probably the 1990s. I don't know exactly. I'm not saying that was a good or bad thing but certainly, a change occurred there, and a lot of the students I think who were from visible minorities tended to go towards Norquest and that was unfortunate from my perspective because I like to teach people from different cultures. So, I taught at Mill Woods and also City Center campus, and then we were turfed out of CCC [City Centre Campus]. We felt we were turfed out, and there were some feelings about that, and we went back to Mill Woods. I didn't mind it down there, but some other people really felt this was a slap in the face. You know that Business courses are a higher priority than other programs, such as Social Work. Social workers are not considered to be critically important, so they can go

back to the Mill Woods campus. I was very happy to go back there and enjoyed being there, but I know some of my colleagues felt disrespected by that. The other thing I also taught on other campuses. Grant MacEwan Social Work Program for many years delivered our two-year diploma program off-campus on a contractual basis to different colleges throughout Alberta. For instance, I taught at Blue Quills First Nations College in St. Paul, AVC (Alberta Vocational College) Grouard, Edson, Hinton, and Slave Lake. And those were, not exclusively, oh the other one was Yellowhead Tribal Council. Most of the students in those were First Nations People, aboriginal, and that in itself was very empowering to be able to take an education out into a rural area. I used to say it's only in the rural areas that people know what colour my pajamas are [Laughter]. They would come over to the motel after I'd gone to bed to hand in a paper [Laughter], and I would open the door, and oh, thank you - whereas you wouldn't know that in the city. So that was basically the different campuses I worked on.

**VM:** What about some of the other instructors and faculty, staff, and administrators that stand out from those early years, are there any in particular?

**DH:** In terms of great inspiration - Gerry Kelly was the president when I was there. He was a very approachable man. I didn't have much to do with him. I was not really into the system if you know what I mean. I was at home in the classroom. I didn't want to be involved in the structure of the college too much. But he seemed a decent guy. The program chair for many years was someone called Kay Feehan, and her daughter-in-law is now the head of the Social Work Program, Kathleen Quinn. Kay Feehan was a force to be reckoned with. She was a very powerful, dynamic matriarch. You didn't cross her unless you absolutely had to. I had a very interesting relationship with her.

Generally, it was one of respect, but we had quite a few arguments along the way. She really put the social work program on the map. She really did. She was tireless and still alive although she's getting fairly elderly now. Gerry Kelly, to some extent Kay Feehan, Sharon Bookhalter. She gave me that little statue, [points to a statue in the room], and it's called the mentor because she knew that I was at that point mentoring staff. You know they had that mentoring program where experienced faculty could be linked up with inexperienced ones to help them to develop the confidence and skills in the classroom. I was involved in that, and when I retired, she gave me that. She was a great person. I was sorry to see her leave. She really had a lot of energy, and was very caring, but she moved on. There were some people I worked with, well John Hutton, the fellow who passed away, was my close friend, and he died unfortunately at a very young age. He was 42 or something when he passed away. In fact, one day, I was complaining I could never get a permanent job there. I had a young family, and I was still on the sessional status, and I had approached Gerry, and he wasn't able to offer me a permanent position. And in frustration I said one day, I am never going to get a permanent job here unless someone dies and I don't see anyone planning to die, and then John Hutton keeled over and had a heart attack, and I got his job. It wasn't something I had intended to happen. Anyways I felt pretty uncomfortable around that. But that brought us together as a team. Have one of your colleagues die unexpectedly - really brought us together. I worked with the same people for 26 years. We went through our life stages together, had kids growing up and leaving home and going to university and all that kind of stuff. My closest friend over there now is Peter Vogels. Do you know Peter? He's retired now, and he's bought a place just down the road here.

And Alan Knowles? Do you know Alan? He started the same day as me exactly the same day, and he went on and did his doctorate and so forth. I think he's finally retired. I don't think he's teaching now. Peter and Allan would be close friends of mine still [birds calling outside]. When I go back to Edmonton, I will go and have a meal or beer or something. And Peter's been here to visit me.

**VM:** You said you didn't really get involved in more of the administration - the politics side, but did you attend any of the staff events? Can you think of any memorable experiences while at the community college?

**DH:** Yes, I did. One of the things I did there, and this is how I got to know Celia Smyth. I've always been very interested in international issues. We started a thing called the U.N. [United Nations] Committee or something like that. We started to acknowledge different significant events defined by the U.N. One of which was U.N. Day and the International Day for Women as a way of raising awareness on campus. I was quite involved in those. I remember one U.N. Day that we established there and basically raised the U.N. flag. Dr. MacEwan happened to be on the campus that day, and he was willing to come and pull the flag up for us. I don't know if you know if they still have the little electric cart that runs around. I can still see this image of this man. He was quite elderly at this time, sitting on this cart as we went to the west end of the building. It was a cold day, and he came out to raise the flag. I believe they still do a U.N. Day there. Celia was releasing doves and so forth. We started that back then. Other faculty events I would go to were faculty parties and things like that.

**VM:** Did those continue when you came from South Campus to City Centre?

**DH:** Well, again they become very impersonal. When we were down at Mill Woods, everyone knew everyone. When we had the bigger campuses, there were more people there. And most of the people didn't know - unless you were from the same area, you didn't know them. One thing that stands out in my mind is my retirement party. Part of who I was there was I was very much focused on the teaching and relating to the students. I was less interested, as I said, in nurturing the bureaucracy. That just wasn't my scene. Someone has to do it, but it wasn't me. At the retirement party, no one from Senior Management came to it except Sharon Bookhalter, Dean of Health and Community Studies. I didn't really have much of a relationship with the senior management but students came, and that was on June the 2nd 2010, which was the celebration of just coincidentally of Queen Elizabeth's coronation. So the whole theme - and I am not a monarchist at all but it was great. And the students came and that was very important to me, the students were there. I didn't want people who didn't know me very well, saying nice things about me. I wanted students to be there. And it was, that was a momentous occasion. I would say for me. The other one I felt really good about was when my daughter Katherine graduated from MacEwan's Social Work Program. My daughter had not had an easy time of it at high school. She had internalized a lot of her sense of not being good enough for higher education. Some guilt around that because I was teaching in that area and so forth. She did our Social Work Program at night. And graduated from it, and I was the program chair when she graduated. I actually have a picture here. It's not a particularly nice picture, but it means a lot to me. This the first time she was really being acknowledged. That's her there [points to picture].

**VM:** Ahh.

**DH:** That's me shaking her hand. Acknowledging her up on the stage at the Winspear, saying you can do it.

**VM:** Ahh.

**DH:** And she went on and did her undergraduate degree, and as I said now, she has her masters. That was a magical moment for me. And I introduced her as my daughter. She walked on, and I was just calling out names, and they give you a card that says Katherine Hannis - my daughter. That was a wonderful, wonderful experience. I will never forget that.

**VM:** When you look back over your career, then what are some of the proudest achievements. You've talked about a lot. It is difficult to pick sort of a few that -

**DH:** Well, that was one for sure.

**VM:** Yes.

**DH:** I always like to be acknowledged. It wasn't important to me to have lots of status, but I liked to be acknowledged. So, the five year, ten year, fifteen year, twenty-year, twenty-five year. I liked those. We had them down at the Empress, not the Empress. What's it called in Edmonton?

**VM:** Oh, The MacDonald Hotel.

**DH:** The MacDonald, yes. The MacDonald Hotel. That was fun. I was extremely pleased to be awarded an Emeritus position because it was coming from peers. Peer and students that's what's important. Not the bureaucracy. Some other things that stood out for me - in 1989, I went to Uganda on a C.I.D.A. [Canadian International

Development Agency] funded project by Grant MacEwan. That was just after Idi Amin had gone, and higher education was in a mess, and we went down there a group of us and worked with experienced adult educators who had basically no upgrading for years. And that was a wonderful experience and humorous experience. Have you come across Karl Homann, does that name ring a bell?

**VM:** No.

**DH:** He's an interesting character. He's retired. He was on that delegation. He's retired now and lives in some exotic place in South America or somewhere. He's still tied in with the retirees. The other thing too I think that was really important to me was the - not the formal graduation ceremonies necessarily. We used to in the early days when the students walked across the formal stage, and they got their binder with no certificate, and we gave them a rose. The faculty would all stand there and give them a rose. That was nixed after a while. It was getting too big. You didn't have time to hug people and give them roses. Just get them through, you know. But we had the student dinners. These are the ones they organized themselves. They were stunning. That's where you would see where your students had come from. You'd meet their families. They could be the first people in their family who had ever gone on to higher education. The families were just so proud. One of the things I used to do when I was teaching I used a lot of humour, and you noticed there are a lot of red noses around here [looks around the room]. I used those as teaching aids. Because I figured humour is so important to the learning process. If people are uptight, they don't learn. If they are laughing, they can. I remember this first class of the year and the students were all uptight. Should I be here? Shouldn't I be here? What's this all about, am I better than that person better that

kind of stuff. I stood up there, and I said, well I am here to - this is who I am - and I just wanted to talk about the importance of red noses. And no smile or anything absolutely dead serious. Who the hell is this guy? And I give them a straight lecture about different types of red noses they could wear. I had three different types. I said there's this big furry one - you wear it like this. They are okay they are not so easy to get a hold of these days. There's this little one. These are like a tennis ball, they really dig in. Not very comfortable. The best one you can get are these foamy ones. They are easy to wash. You put them on, and I would put one on, and the place would break out. And I said now I am not as crazy as I look. Now we are relaxed. Now we can go through the policy manual, and some of it will stick. And you are not worried about should I be here should or should I not be here. The last year I was a program chair, I believe at that time and I was up there, and we were calling out the names of their [graduation] party. The students were coming up, and someone was giving them something, but I couldn't see because I was up on the stage, and I couldn't see and they're coming. I remember there was a Korean fellow. He was so proud that his daughter was graduating. He had traditional Korean clothes on. His English wasn't very good, he was very proud and smiling. At the end of it, Kathleen said, now ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to introduce the graduating class of such and such. They all turned around, and they all had a red nose on [Laughter]. And this Korean guy, is this some kind of Canadian, what is this? [Laughter] I used a lot of humour in my teaching, and it worked well most of the time. We had tragedies and pain. Obviously, when you are in a Social Work Program, people come with their own baggage and experiences of whatever they've experienced. We weren't a therapy group, but sometimes things would come up in the class, and it was

getting in the way of people's learning. So we would spend some time privately talking about that or whatever. One thing I encouraged the students to do was to challenge official sources of education. I said just because it's in a book; it doesn't make it true. I published a book when I was there. It was called *Community Development in Canada*. I used that as a course text. It sold incredibly well. It sold 16,000 copies. In fact, I just heard from Pearson, the publisher this week they want to go to a third edition. My dilemma now is do I really want to write another. I'm a bit past it. I mean, I am still passionate about community, but that's a lot of work. Do I want to retreat into a library somewhere for the next six months to write a book, or do I want to look at this [gestures to view]? It was a no-brainer really [Laughter] at the end of the day, the money isn't that good, and I'm not building a career anymore. But the problem is for me community is so important, and yet there's so few people out there who seem to know how to do it. They talk a lot ...yeah community. It's not rocket science. It really isn't. Too often, we [inaudible] as if people are in silos scared of each other, and that's the norm. Whereas, in fact, the norm is for us to be engaged together and support each other, that's what it was like in Africa; that's what it is like here. Even so here we still have pressure from some people who are almost trying to bring in experts to educate us, and I am saying we don't need experts we know how to live in community. We are doing it. So that was an exciting time for me to be able to write that textbook and to see it being used, and to see the lights going on was wonderful. That was important to me. The other thing when I left - this is one last thing I can talk about. I did complete a second master's degree while I was at Grant MacEwan, and I was very happy to have some funding. I didn't get much leave to do anything like that. I think in the 26 years I was there; I had two six

month sabbaticals. And one of those I wrote the textbook obviously didn't get it completely finished. And the other one I did this Masters in Adult Education which was great because it brought some theory to my practice and I liked that, and the actual thesis that I did in that was looking at a class of aboriginal students being taught - that I'd taught being taught primarily by non-aboriginal people using a non-aboriginal curriculum. The question I asked is -is this assimilation through the back door? That was the question. I interviewed 18 students. And I said, what was that experience like? How do you feel about yourself? All students except one felt very positive about themselves having had this exposure even though it was a mainstream course with very little aboriginal content. All except one fellow very positive about this. Hey how does this relate to the way you view your life? Many of these students were living on reserves. And they said because you gave us permission to learn from each other. I will never forget that. There were wise women. It was mainly women in the classroom. And the younger women, especially the aboriginal people who had never lived on a reserve they would talk to each other. And we would facilitate that. How do you deal with this issue in traditional aboriginal culture? Not the way we deal with it in the city necessarily. That was very empowering, and I really enjoyed these opportunities of working with aboriginal programming. The last comment I think are we on number nine yet?

**VM:** Yes.

**DH:** Okay.

**VM:** What else would you like to share with me?

**DH:** One last thing and that is after I left Grant MacEwan and went to Nigeria, I was able to get out of Grant MacEwan \$18,000 from their Global Education fund to do the work that I was doing in Nigeria, which was primarily - I remember there's a picture somewhere in your archives there of me receiving a cheque from David Anderson and that's what it was for. I went back twice or maybe three times anyhow I got \$18,000 out of them, and I used that money to upgrade a very specific school. I got electricity into the school. I got computers into the school. I got books into the school. I got the place painted. I got water into the school, and I also went on and got water into some other villages, and we started an orphans program. I forgot what they called that now the language is not quite the language I would use but A.I.D.S [Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome] orphans who were not going to school because they were looking after their elderly grandparents and they didn't have the money for the school uniform. We got them back into school. And one kid I can still see him now Lekan his name was. He had a slight curvature of the spine. He was the brightest kid in the class, and I went out there and I gave his grandparents the cash because I wanted them to acknowledge that education was important. No idea where he is now, but that was great to get that money and that appreciation. Grant MacEwan - I don't think they have the Global Ed. fund anymore, but it was a levy, and it was phenomenal. And the name Grant MacEwan, the man and the college is known now in that part of Nigeria. There's one of those agreements between Kwara State University and Grant MacEwan and I had a picture of Grant MacEwan on the wall with the quotes from him. Too bad I don't have the picture to show you. It's around somewhere - picture of when we got the water turned on at this school they didn't have a pump there they actually had taps with a tank

up here and a little electric thing sending it up and I was holding up a Grant MacEwan t-shirt.

**VM:** Ahh [Laughter].

**DH:** And the kids are splashing in the water, and it was great, wonderful. So that's really it in a nutshell my experience with Grant MacEwan.

**VM:** I would like to thank you very much for taking this time, and I think that's a wonderful way to end this interview. So, thank you very, very much.

**DH:** Thank you for coming. I really appreciate you coming down and hearing my story.

[End of interview]

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