

Grant MacEwan Community College Oral History Project

Interviewee: Chuck Day

Interviewer: Valla McLean

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**VM:** This is an interview for the Grant MacEwan Community College Oral History Project on June 22, 2019, with Chuck Day in Kelowna, British Columbia. This is Valla McLean, University Archivist. What year did you come to Grant MacEwan Community College, and what made you decide to work at the community college?

**CD:** Well, I came in May 1971. It wasn't my intent to come to the college. In fact, I'd already accepted a job at Queen's University, [laughs], and the president, John Haar, asked me to come down and talk anyway. He knew that I had accepted the job, and he asked me to come down and just talk about, you know, what he was looking for, and if I would know anybody, or whatever. So I went down and spent an hour with him and at the end of the hour, he said, Chuck, he said, I'll make you a better offer than Queen's, and I know the people at Queen's, and it wouldn't be any trouble for you to get out of that contract and come to the college. Well, now I had a decision to make [laughs]. He said, well think it over, let me know in a week. So we, our family, went through hell that week [laughs] but I'd grown up on the prairies, and I wanted to stay in the west. But on the other hand, not everybody gets an opportunity to go to Queen's with the offer I got and so on, but in the end, I decided to come to the college. I started in May 1971. I think I was about the – I don't know, the third, fourth, fifth person hired. I don't know – something like that.

**VM:** Were they similar roles, like the one that you were offered at Queen's?

**CD:** Well, Queen's was a professorship, a teaching job and this one was of course administration. The job that John had for me was to be the Director of Academic

Services, which meant that my faculty offered all the electives for the programs and all of the pure subject areas like science, chemistry, physics, biology and all those kinds of things. And get a librarian and get that going.

**VM:** [Laughs].

**CD:** [Laughs]. So that was Academic Services.

**VM:** Was there something that John L. Haar said that sort of tipped you to coming to MacEwan? I mean obviously it was a difficult decision.

**CD:** I liked him. Pure and simple [laughs].

**VM:** Yes, that's important. You have to like who you work with.

**CD:** We just seemed to hit it off you know, and we did all throughout the years that he was there.

**VM:** So, what job titles did you hold during your time at the community college and what were some of the roles and responsibilities?

**CD:** Well, like I said, the first one was the Director of Academic Services, and then I moved from there into being the Academic Vice President which meant that I had responsibility for all of the programming, plus the library. So that was much broader in scope, but they were both equally challenging because I had never worked in a college before. The people I hired had never worked in a college before.

**VM:** Yes.

**CD:** So everything was new. Yes. And of course, then I was Acting President for a year [19]87-[19]88. That was a great year for me.

**VM:** And no interest to go on to be the president of the –

**CD:** No. I had lots of opportunities, but I loved what I did, and so I stayed where I was. The year of the acting president was great, but I was just as happy to get back into my old job [laughs].

**VM:** And who do you consider important instructors and staff and administrators during your time at the community college, and what stands out about these people?

**CD:** Oh, gee. To single out any one person would be difficult because I'm sure I'd miss a lot. But if I were to single out one person, it would have to be John himself. He set the tone; you know. He was hiring people who had not worked in a college, but he gave everybody confidence, and he was a giant of a man. When you first met him, he was a big guy, you'd almost feel a little bit threatened by him [laughs], but he was milk toast. Well, he was the right guy for the job. He knew everybody. He knew all the spouses; he knew all our kids. He was always asking about them. Plus, he knew how to build a team. Yes, and he performed a miracle. He came there in, I think it was January, and he was to have this institution up and running in September [Laughs]. Now figure that out. No staff, no buildings, nothing. He had brought two people with him from down east. One fellow, Ron Skelton, his job was to find us facilities. The other was Kay Puil, and she was in charge of the Student Services area, getting that up and running, like the Registrar, registering students and all that kind of stuff. We were late starting in the fall, a little bit, but nevertheless, he did it. He did it – a miracle [laughs]. After I had accepted the job I can remember sitting in my office, it was in the e Confederation Building on Jasper Avenue across from Henry Singers, thinking to myself, what have I gotten myself into [laughs]? I've got to hire all these people, get all of them primed up in the

coursework, and whatnot by September? How am I going to do that? Where am I going to find a librarian [laughs]? Are we going to go online with the library? All that kind of stuff. It was challenging, but he was the leader.

**VM:** You mentioned that people who were hired weren't coming from a background of working in colleges, so were they coming from the community, industry?

**CD:** All over, and certainly the industry because we had applied programs. In my area, I was interested in university graduates with masters or PhDs in psychology, sociology, and those. Yes, people with work experience. We had people that were out of the travel industry come in and work in the travel program. A lot of them had never taught. They didn't know how to put together coursework. But I don't think we ever had the feeling that we couldn't do it. That was John.

**VM:** What about the physical facilities, the campuses. Which ones did you work at, and if you could tell me a bit about what stands out about those?

**CD:** All told, when I was at the college, I had offices in seven different places [laughs]. Like I mentioned, the first one was the Confederation Building on Jasper Avenue. That was when I started. Then we moved over to I think it was the Canada Trust Building, another office building right by the library. From there, I went out to Old Strathcona, which was 84 Avenue there. It was an old school that the School Board wasn't using anymore. I'm not so sure we should have been either [laughs]. I had an office in the basement there, and it was a funny building. It had a small gymnasium on the top floor. I think the building had been condemned at one time [laughter]. From there, I went over to the Assumption Campus. It was a Catholic facility/school. I remember we had the

cafeteria in what was once the chapel. The building there was where the nuns lived. The rest of the building was not too bad. There was a gym there and some classrooms and so on, so forth. From there, I went out to Millwoods. That was the first building that we built as a college, and I had an office there on the second floor. And then, from there, I went downtown to the Seventh Street Plaza building and had an office there for several years and then went down to the City Centre Campus. And from there, I retired. But the facilities we had varied considerably. I felt sorry for the people that were in the sciences because we didn't have good labs. Even with our renovations, they weren't purposefully built facilities. But we struggled through it [laughs].

**VM:** What do you remember about campus life in general at the community college?

**CD:** Campus life? Inclusive. Yes. Everything we did involved everybody. It didn't matter who you were, what you did, what your job was, you were welcome. Yes, so that was what I remember most, I think, and highly spirited. Everybody, I think, had a feeling of a little bit of adventure. What are we doing? This is new. Yes, so that's what I remember about it. And all the things we did. Gosh. We went on ski trips. We had golf tournaments, we had picnics, a day at the races, a day at the theatre, and a lot of that was due to John. And of course, we participated in things like MacEwan Day. They were always very special, and then some other events with the community like the Mad Hatter's Ball. A lot of the staff went to that too.

**VM:** Well, this leads into my next question, and you've already spoken about some of the staff events. Is there one particularly memorable event that stands out from your time at the community college?

**CD:** Oh, gosh, I have so many [laughs]. Yes. I suppose the day I received the MacEwan Medallion from Grant MacEwan himself was pretty special. And probably the year I was acting president with the announcement of our City Centre Campus came, and that was the year we gave David Foster an honorary diploma. We also gave an honorary diploma to a fellow by the name of Harold Baker. He had worked on the Council of Admissions and Transfer. He was a great friend of the college, although he was a former university professor. He and I worked on the Council for many years, and he facilitated a lot of the transfer credit that our students got when transferring to the university. Unfortunately, he had a stroke, and the year I was acting president, I wanted to honour him somehow or other, we gave him an honorary diploma. He'd lost his mobility. He'd lost a lot of his sight, and you know he was such a powerful individual before this happened. But anyway, he agreed to come, but he couldn't walk down the aisle in the procession or anything, so his daughter brought him and had him in the wings. He said to me before; he said Chuck, I don't want to say anything. Okay [laughs]. His daughter brought him, and it was time to give him the honorary diploma, she walked him out on the stage, and we went through the process of giving him the diploma and so on and then he leaned over to me, and he said, I want to say a few words. Well, it was so emotional [laughs]. I still get emotional, and he spoke for I don't know, three or four minutes – most inspiring – that was a highlight.

**VM:** You mentioned the MacEwan Medallion. Do you remember the history around it? Like why did MacEwan start giving out medallions?

**CD:** I can't. I really don't [laughs].

**VM:** [Laughs].

**CD:** I know that MacEwan Day was very special. When he came up to the college, and he'd go into all the classrooms, and we'd have a special barbeque, you know just the whole thing. I think someone, I can't remember who it was, thought this would be a good event to have associated with MacEwan Day. To recognize somebody that MacEwan could be there to present the medallion to was very special. And so, it just happened. Yes, he was quite a guy; I'll say more about him later.

**VM:** So, you've talked about some of the memorable events, things that stand out. What about some of those proudest achievements over the years?

**CD:** Of the college or me?

**VM:** Yes, both. The community college, your time there.

**CD:** Well, I think for the college, the first college Foundation. In fact, the first Foundation, you know modern-day Foundation where they had highly sophisticated boards, purposely hired staff, multimillion-dollar campaigns. Those didn't exist before Terry started the one at MacEwan, and it just grew like topsy. It wasn't long before the other institutions in the Province were doing the same thing. And he really helped out with many of the institutions. He did a major campaign for the University of Alberta; they raised nearly two hundred million dollars. And NAIT (Northern Alberta Institute of Technology). He came here to Kelowna and started a Foundation at the Okanagan College. Yes, so that was a major accomplishment in my mind [laughs]. I was proud of our programming; it was done well, I think. We were the only institution in the Province that had two program related departments. One department was in program development. A whole department was to assist faculty in putting together programs.

The other one was our department of program evaluation, and that's all it did was evaluate students getting jobs, what were the employers saying, all that kind of thing. I was proud of that; we had good staff doing that. It was a little threatening to the faculty [laughs], you know, your program is being under the eye all the time. Did the students get jobs? What did the students think? What did the employers think? What are we going to do to change the program? But I think that was what we had to do. That's what a college is for. You're training people for specific jobs. So, I was proud of that. The other thing I think that it's hard to put your finger on but the camaraderie, and team concept was strong at the college.

**VM:** Okay, so my final question then is - is there something I failed to ask you, but you wanted to share that I haven't given you the chance to do so?

**CD:** Well, I thought maybe you might ask me a little bit about Grant MacEwan himself. [Laughs]. Character, character, character. He wouldn't take a plane. When every time we brought him up from Calgary, he had to come on a bus, wouldn't take a taxi, always stayed at the Y[MCA] — just a couple things. I was often the person that picked him up and took him to the various events, so I got to know Grant really well. There are two incidents I always recall. One was when I picked him up to take him to the Mad Hatter's Ball. He said, come a little early; I want to go over to the library. Fine, sure, I'll do that. So I thought, well we'll take him to the library, he'll come out of the library, we'll take him back and get his tuxedo on, and we'll go to the ball. I picked him up, and we took him over to the library, and he says, I won't be long. I said, don't worry, Grant, I've got lots of time. About a half an hour, out he comes, all dressed in his tuxedo out of the library, so he must have changed in the washroom [laughs]. So there he was, and I don't know



what the people in the library thought [laughs]. I picked him up and off we went to the ball. Linda was with me too. I've told that story so many times, and I laugh every time.

**VM:** [Laughs].

**CD:** The other incident I wasn't involved in personally, but the Chairman of the Board, Ed Stack, and Barry Moore was on the Board - went to see Grant to see if he would let the college use his name.

**VM:** Yes.

**CD:** You've probably heard this one [laughs]. They went, and when they asked him the question, his response was – it's not one of those funny religious things is it?

**VM:** [Laughs].

**CD:** I think he added a lot to the early years of the college because he would come up and be there, and just his presence there meant a lot to people. They could see that he was genuinely interested in what we were doing - he was a very special person. Yes, he was a giant of a man. He was very concerned about the environment. We did eventually get him on an airplane. He wanted to go to Manitoba, he was doing some research for another book, and he was going to take the bus. We finally convinced him, no Grant, we're going to fly you to where you want to go, so we did. Yes, he was very thankful for that. For all the things he gave the college [laughs], he didn't have to thank us for anything.

**VM:** Well, I'd like to thank you very much for contributing to this project and sharing your stories here today.

**CD:** My pleasure.

[End of interview]

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