

Grant MacEwan Community College Oral History Project

Interviewee:

Interviewer: Valla McLean

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VM: This is an interview for the Grant MacEwan Community College Oral History Project on April 10, 2019, with Trevor Beck in Edmonton, Alberta. This is Valla McLean, University Archivist. I'll begin with by asking you what did you study at Grant MacEwan Community College and when?

TB: Advertising and Public Relations, 1987 through [19]89. Program Chair was Wally West. There's a name that a lot of people will recognize.

VM: And why attend Grant MacEwan Community College? What brought you here?

TB: I already had a degree from the University of Alberta. I took a year off because basically there were no jobs in psychology or Theatre, which is my double major. When you start talking public relations and advertising, they combine psychology as well as performing, depending on what you're doing, like public speaking. So, I thought that would be a good fit. I'd run into somebody at a restaurant that I worked at that had just finished the program and sounded really cool. She'd gone out to Cromdale? Was that the old Safeway store?

VM: It was. Yes.

TB: Yes, I'd gone to Cromdale and talked to Wally at the time and a couple of other people about it, and then the next year enrolled and was here.

VM: What campus did you attend? Can you describe that campus?

TB: 107 Street Campus. I can't remember if it was the first year or second year, but I mean basically, it's just a tall business building, and there were two towers. We had one tower for MacEwan at the time. Fourteen floors. When I was in Advertising and Public Relations, we were on the ninth floor, the cafeteria was on the seventh floor, and then do you want me to talk about - we'll stick with talking about students, and I can go back later.

VM: Sure.

TB: Yes, because after a while, I moved to the fourteenth floor.

VM: And what were some of your favourite courses, and why did you enjoy those?

TB: Umm [laughs]. We had some marketing courses, and part of that had to do with the psychology aspect of it. And it was funny, I was a first year, and we had our second years and the second years were all, have you had Wally yet? Wally was this big boogie man demon kind of guy, and we didn't get him until the second week of the term. So we'd already been in there for our first week, and we went to a course called Media Relations I think it was or marketing the media, something like that, and it was ten minutes to nine and Wally walks in. Wally was a bit of a pompous guy. He had a blazer on and an ascot, and he had a big logo emblem on this thing. And he walked in like that, like you know I am God's gift. Big man. He walked in, and everyone stopped talking except Trevor. I just kept on talking, and everyone's like shh shh shh, and I'm like no-no, it's ten to nine, his class starts at nine, this is my time. Wally gets up there, and he writes on the board these four or five different markets, everything from filthy rich person to well off to double income no kids to the individual with no money or whatever else. He

asked the group, where do you guys think I fit in? And everyone says, we think you're the rich guy, and he goes; no, I think I figure in about this one, which is the really well-off person. I stuck my hand up and said, according to so and so in a document they'd published in 1986; most people tend to put themselves in an audience or market higher than what they actually are. And every eyes on me, and the jaws are dropping, and oh my God, you actually talked back to this God, right? Wally just looks at me and goes touché. And we had a great experience after that. He was a really tough guy. He failed people. We had fifty people in the first term, and twenty of them failed by the end of the first term. He was the one, I'm sure you've heard since then, but he was one of the first persons whoever said, look to your left, look to your right, one of you won't be here by the end of the term. And he was right; he just washed out so many people.

VM: Did you participate in any on campus activities during your time as a student?

TB: Yes, I was part of the student council. Every program had a representative who would go to the council, so I would do part of that. The Advertising and Public Relations program at that particular time had a heavy, heavy influence on writing, and they had just gone through a program evaluation where everyone said graduates need to learn to write. So, it was extremely intense; there was hardly any downtime. Even our A students were popping wake up pills and stuff like that at night until finally, I think after the second term we just said, you know you're killing us. If your star child there is popping wake up pills, then you know it's just too hard. So, I really didn't get a lot else to do other than that.

VM: And can you describe some of your best experiences when you look back at – some of the things you're maybe the proudest of during your time at the community college?

TB: As a student? [Laughs].

VM: Yes [laughs].

TB: I'll tell you a funny story – it's funny to me. Wally's thing when he said is you treat it like a job. When you go out, we're not going to baby you here, because when you go out, it's like a job. So, we're going to treat you like a job. If you have a contract that says you have to have this done by such and such a time at nine o'clock on Monday morning, then that's going to be done at nine o'clock on Monday morning. All your assignments have to be done on time; there are no excuses. If you get three lates or three missed assignments, you fail the course. If you fail three courses or so many assignments, you're out of the program. It was really intense, and that's why I said you didn't have much downtime. The number of assignments on a Monday morning was something like fifteen assignments, some of them were three hundred words, some of them would be eighteen hundred words, and there would be a number of those that you had to get done. I remember one morning we're coming in; the class started at eight o'clock. It was 7:45. I had one assignment left, and the assignment was, why do we need advertising rules? Why do we need rules in advertising? I wrote down according to such and so and so and this book because of course, you have to have one source, you need rules to protect advertisers which answered the question, but the assignment was you had to do it in 300 words. So, I answered the question, I copy and pasted for three pages that one same paragraph. When the assignment actually came back to me, I

think it was nine out of ten, but there was a typo in the paragraph, so it ended up being six out of ten, but you know he accepted the assignment because like I said to him, I did everything you asked, there's three pages, and I answered the questions, and there's my source and stuff. I mean, it was playing the game, but for me with Wally, it's one of those things you had to do. So, I kind of enjoyed that aspect of the education part of it.

VM: And then you graduate, and you come to work for – is there a gap? Or when do you come to work for the community college?

TB: Yes. My last term I was doing work for a radio station doing an on-air guy on the street kind of thing, special events. I did that, and then I worked for four months, I believe it was at Catholic Schools, and I then had four months off. So, January through April, which was dead, nobody hires and everyone's laying people off. And then on April 15, 1990, which is now twenty-nine years almost to the day, I applied for a job here at MacEwan. I had actually gone to an advertising agency in town, and I said, look, I know you're not hiring, but my brain is turning to mush. I need to do something, so I need some experience. I will come to work for you for free; I don't care. They'd actually got to the point of setting up an honorarium for me and were going to hire me that way. Then I got this interview to come to MacEwan, and that was for a Marketing Communications consultant; they're now called managers, but back in the day, we called them consultant for Performing and Visual Communication Arts at the Jasper Place Campus. I came out there, did the interview, got the job, turned down the other guys, and was working here by the fifteenth.

VM: So why choose Grant MacEwan Community College to work at?

TB: Well, it was a job. The job itself was a couple of things, the psychology and the marketing and the Advertising and Public Relations stuff which I had a background in. I also had a background in Theatre. I performed; I took Theatre as a degree at the University of Alberta. I was with Theatre Sports when we first started here in Edmonton, and so I had a lot of that background. The job at the time was looking after PV and CA, also doing all the marketing promotion for –

VM: PV and CA?

TB: Yes, Performing, Visual, and Communication Arts.

VM: Thank you.

TB: Sorry. I did the marketing for all the programs as well as the marketing promotion for all the events, so all the music events, all the theatre events, the dance – we used to have a Dance program back then. We used to have a Fine Art and Fibre program, so there was a Fibre program that was all about weaving and knitting and stuff like that. It was the weirdest thing, but it was one of those programs. Kind of like the equestrian program we used to have here, like really? So, it kind of combined my background and all that kind of stuff that I was knowledgeable in and had connections in.

VM: And so which positions or jobs have you held over your time? You're still here, so both at the community college and into the university days? What were some of your responsibilities?

TB: Marketing Consultant, Performing, Visual and Communication Arts, Marketing Consultant for Health and Community Studies. Actually, there were two separate areas. There was Community Studies and Health, and I was looking after Community Studies

part-time, and then they combined it together as Health and Community Studies. Then I was looking after Health and Community Studies as a kind of my full-time position. I was basically the first webmaster in 1995. I remember Tim Crisall had put up a web page and said, here look after it. So that's what I did for a number of years. I was also the voice of the phone hold for about ten years. I would actually produce the telephone hold messages with music background and do all that. Then, I can't remember how many years ago it was, at one point in time they decided as I was told that the website was not a marketing tool and so they were transferring me to the Registrar's Office. And I remember shaking my head and said, what do you mean the website's not a marketing tool and they said, well yes, someone had come in and made this decision, some old boy who really didn't know what he was talking about. I said, can I stay here in a different position, and they said no. Out of the blue, no warning. My marketing manager at the time knew about this for weeks, other people knew about it. I had no clue. Yes, this is where you're going, which is fine because I went to the Registrar's Office. Stephanie Ivan was the Registrar at the time. Wonderful person to work with. Probably one of my favourite people to work with back in those days. I think that's still part of the college days, no, we were probably a university by then. Are we just focusing on college?

TB: Yes, yes.

TB: Okay, so that's probably as far as we want to go with that.

VM: Which campuses did you work on while at the community college?

TB: I worked at 107 Street. I had an office at the Jasper Place Campus. In 107 Street, we were here. I was telling people; we've talked about how many people have moved around to different offices. Someone once said we should get a tour shirt on the back, and I said I think I'd need a cape because I've been to so many locations and sometimes different offices in different buildings. But as far as the community college it was 107 Street down at the front entrance across from where the welcome desk is now – I can't remember who's in there now, I think International might be in there now – that was our original offices when we moved into the campus.

VM: What do you remember about campus life in general during the community college days?

TB: 107 Street was interesting. We were a college. We were smaller then; we weren't a degree. People knew each other a lot more then because it was a smaller community. You had one cafeteria to go to; you didn't have a choice of cafeterias to go to. The other thing that was really apparent is that there was one tower with three elevators, so you met everybody at the elevators. Everyone got in around the same time, so you're meeting the same bunch of people. At that time, when I started with the Communications group, I was on the fourteenth floor, which is the top floor. So I'm sitting in the elevator talking to everyone as I'm getting up to where my office is. That's one of the things when we moved over here; suddenly, you didn't see anybody anymore. You could go weeks without seeing anyone, and then you'd go, oh that person has been gone for a year, and I didn't know that. You never had that feeling when you were at the community college. It was a family. You've probably heard other people say that a lot because it was more personal. It wasn't so much – not to pooh-

pooh the way things have turned out, but as a degree-granting institution where the focus is on degree, and like any other degree-granting institution there's certain requirements that are needed, whether it's publishing, doing experiments, all that kind of stuff. The University of Alberta is big on research, that's their priority, teaching's kind of secondary. When you're a community college, you're pulling people out because of the letters behind their name, but because of their field experience. When I was being taught AD & PR, these were people who worked in ad agencies, so when they said, this is what the book says, and it's correct up to here, but the reality check is this here. And the community college was a lot like that. When you're talking with people, they weren't putting airs on, they weren't trying to make themselves – well, except for Wally – but they had practical experience to bring to the plate. Like I said, it was the three elevators, and stuff like that was a big thing. One of the challenges of being in a building like that is when you're trying to get to the fourteenth floor, and a student or a staff member gets on and just goes up one floor because it takes so much time if everyone does that. It's even worse when you're coming down, and a student stops at the second floor, and you're thinking, ok, you're eighteen, you can walk down one flight of stairs. Or else they would do it from the third to the second – and it's like really? You know, those are the kind of frustrations. The other fun memory about that was fire alarms. You ended up coming down, so it takes a long time to go down, and because the wait could be twenty minutes before you could get up to the fourteenth floor, a lot of us would just walk up the fourteen floors.

VM: What about the staff events or memorable events you experienced while working at the community college?

TB: Before I go to that, I have one other item I just want to talk about.

VM: Yes, absolutely.

TB: One of the big things back then was people smoked in their offices. When I started, you could walk into someone's office, and they'd be sitting there chain-smoking and stuff. And then the health kick came in; you have to be healthy; you can't smoke in your office anymore. Well, where can we smoke? Well, you can smoke outside, or you can smoke in the cafeteria, and I remember because I wasn't a smoker, and I didn't always spend a lot of time in the cafeteria because the smoke – you could go in there and there was a haze. It was just ridiculous. I remember going down there one time, I'd just grab my food and go back up, I remember grabbing a carton of milk, and I was going upstairs, and I was drinking my carton of milk, and I was thinking, this tastes so sour. What it was was the nicotine that had coated the carton of milk that I was smelling as I was drinking it. I was like, oh my god. So, the progression of that next was, oh, we can't do that anymore. We're going to create a smoking room, a special room where you can go in, a glass room like at the airports, and we're going to have air conditioning and stuff like that. Where are we going to do this? Well, it needs to be at the cafeteria so people can do their smoking while they eat. What space do we have available? Well, there's that fitness room there. Let's yank out the fitness room where people go to get health and throw in a smoking room, so that was kind of one of the ironies that I remember of 107 Street.

VM: [Laughs].

TB: Jasper Place Campus, let's talk about that for a bit, was so different. First of all, it's multilevel, and when you come in, you're not coming in on the ground floor you're coming in on the second floor, so the first floor is down a level. It's really difficult as a new person to remember which side of it you go on because when you come through the main entrance, there's stairwells to the left, there's stairwells to the right, so to go to the Theatre, I believe it was to the left. If you went to the right, that took you to the Music areas. That took four to six months before that finally set in, actually to be able to go to someplace, and there were nooks and crannies and stuff. But the students were what really made that campus, and I haven't seen that here quite the way it was. You'd have students walking down the hall, not only playing their guitars but you'd get the theatre guys. They'd be going, mi mi mi mi la la la down the hallway and it was just a really cool vibe because the theatre people and the music people and the dance people – they were artsy, and they would play off each other, and they had respect for each other. They were tightly bound, but they – it was just a cool vibe. The xylophone in the stairwells was really the coolest thing because everyone's looking for a place to practice, and they had the soundproof wangers that you could go into, but the xylophone guys loved to go into the stairwell. At one point, I had an office at the top of the stairwell, and down a little bit, so you could hear the sound just reverberate through there and make its way down. Interesting story, when I first started as I mentioned it was April 15. The end of April is when the shows go on for the performing arts and all the crafts and all the stuff like that. So here I am, I'm only two weeks into the thing, and I get a phone call from one of the media asking questions about the flying penises. I said I'll have to get back to you on that; I haven't heard about this yet. Go down to Jasper

Place, and one of the students had an art exhibit that basically was penises hung from the ceiling in the cafeteria. There were papier mâché penises all over the place, and it was such a weird and cool welcoming to this is what life is like in the fine arts campus at MacEwan University. It was just one of those cool things. It wasn't the first-time media would call up and go, so I understand there's a really weird exhibition or whatever down there. Can we come get more information about it? Those were the kind of cool things about it that I really liked. That was Jasper Place.

VM: Okay.

TB: Oh, I'm going to tell one negative thing, is that alright?

VM: Absolutely.

TB: All right. While we were there, there was a year when a student was killed there, and I don't know if that's historically relevant or not. There were windows off to the side that would mechanically open and close, and they were on a timer. The windows were open; the student was outside, had crawled into the vent window, was waving at one of the custodians when the timer hit, and then the windows closed and crushed her. After that, the windows were locked down; they were never opened up again. It was such a profound – I don't want to call it an event, but a thing to happen because again, understanding how that whole audience, that whole group of people are – expressive, it was just a really emotional time for something like that to happen on campus. I mean, usually, you don't hear about stuff like that right, it's usually somewhere else. But anyway, that was Jasper Place.

VM: Okay. To the question about staff events or memorable events that you experienced while working at the community college.

TB: Back in the day, there was more money available for staff events, and of course, it was a smaller staff then. Student Services was a smaller area. Probably, I don't know, a hundred people may be, so we actually would have barbeques. We'd go out to Shakers Acres. I remember doing that quite a few times, and you could ask Tim about that. Christmas parties used to go out there, and Tim used to play Santa and give out presents and stuff, and it was a lot of fun. Again, it's like a family, they go out, they're having this barbeque, and there were drinks involved. Somebody brought a wineskin full of Sambuca. I have no idea who that was, but it was good. There were a lot of those kinds of smaller events that you could do that. Faculty music performances were always great. I remember, because I was promoting these and my record claim to fame was at one of the performances, I actually got our president and all the vice presidents to attend, which had never happened before.

VM: And who was president at this time?

TB: Gerry Kelly was president at the time, and there were three vice presidents. It had never happened before, but we finally got them all out to attend a performance. And they would have the student band performances, and they would have the faculty performance. The faculty performance was great, not only because obviously they had more experience, and it was just a higher level of quality, but they often would invite alumni who were there to come back to play with them so the music you would get would be amazing stuff. It was just awesome to listen to, and just like they do now, it's all different styles. It was just a cool kind of thing to go to those kinds of events. We

used to have skit night, where basically was a chance for everyone to say anything or do anything about anyone that you wanted, like celebrity roasts, so Gerry Kelly often got roasted. It was all in good fun, so that was one of the cool things. Those are one of the traditional stuff. At some point, I want to talk about the ground-breaking ceremony with Dr. MacEwan. I don't know if you want that for later or right now.

VM: No, go ahead.

TB: There were probably eight of us in Marketing at the time, and we were sitting around trying to decide how we would do the ground-breaking. CN had sold the land to MacEwan for a dollar, and if you remember back then, there used to be railroad tracks and pit runs, which are big rocks and stuff like that. And we're trying to talk about doing something unique because golden shovels had been done to death and backhoes and stuff like that, and we were trying to figure out something different. We started talking, what are the roots, well what's the root of Dr. MacEwan? Well, Cathy Dool, who was in the department at the time - cowgirl, hardcore cowgirl – she comes up with the idea, let's get a horse and plow. And we're like, oh my god, that is brilliant. The day of the ground-breaking comes up, Dr. MacEwan comes from Calgary, and one of the cool things about Dr. MacEwan is he always took the Greyhound. We offered; we'll send you a limo. No, no, I'm taking the Greyhound, and that's what he did. He'd take the Greyhound. He's notorious for being – they consider it cheap, but he's not, he's just thrifty. But he'd take the Greyhound; he'd stay at the WMCA. He did that for years. And so, he came up to the ground-breaking, and it was Gerry Kelly and Ralph Klein, and I can't remember who the mayor was at the time, and Dr. MacEwan and the idea was you had two horses, a plow, and they were just going to do a little plow, break the thing.

They all get lined up there, they go about two or three feet, and they stop. The politicians are all shaking their hands, and Dr. MacEwan says, is that it? Is that all we're going to do? So handshaking, picture taking, etcetera, etcetera, they all leave. Kathy goes up to Dr. MacEwan and says, do you want to spend some more time with the horses? He says, yes. Takes off his jacket, rolls up his sleeves. He spent forty-five minutes to an hour going through pit run – like I said it's not dirt, it's dirt with boulders in it, so he's got to lift up the hoe and then put it back down, but he was so happy back then. It was such a cool experience; there were probably five of us watching him just go up and down. He was probably in his eighties at the time. He comes back, and he says, you know I grew up behind a horse, and he just loved it. You could see how much joy it brought to him. Years later, he would go through MacEwan – he couldn't walk for long distances. The guys who bring the little dollies around, they had a special dolly made up for him. It had an arch on it – Dr. MacEwan. They had a chair they would screw down with a seatbelt. He would sit backward, and they would drive through the halls, and he'd go, stop! Stop! And they'd pull the kids over, and he'd start talking to these kids.

Growing up, coming through college, I never got to know who Dr. MacEwan was. MacEwan Day was something you did, but we were so busy we never bothered doing it. But watching him with students, and then you could see the students, wow, this is a really cool guy, he's old as dust, but he's a really cool guy. When the campus itself actually opened up, we had an opening ceremony probably in November, and it was cold out. It was wintery, snowy, blowing, whatever else. And so the idea at the time was we had these big ribbons with a big bow and twelve-foot ribbon tale on it. It would be done at the front door, but it was cold and miserable out, so what they had was an

artist's rendering of the front entrance done up twelve feet by six feet high to pretend that's the thing. They put a ribbon on top of that with the tail. Dr. MacEwan and the Students' Association President was on one side, whoever the president was at the time, and someone else was on the other side, and they each have a pair of scissors. The Students' Association President is about to cut into the tale of this ribbon, in the middle of it, right, so it's ten feet long attached to the bow on the ground, he's about to cut in the middle, and Dr. MacEwan grabs his hand and says, no, no, no, cut it up here by the bow, maybe we can make use of the tale later on.

VM: [Laughs].

TB: And that was just the kind of thrifty kind of guy Dr. MacEwan was. It wasn't that he was cheap, but he was a farmer. They had to make do with very little and improvise and stuff, but that was just the way he was. He was such a cool guy. I guess you just can't say enough about him. So, I'll stop.

VM: [Laughs]. Looking back at your career at MacEwan, what are some of your proudest achievements?

TB: Marketing and Communications is an area that is often overlooked for the work that they do, even now. The problem is if you're a carpenter, build me a house. If you're in advertising/marketing, build me marketing. I can't hand you anything, but I can tell you that you got this many people showed up, this many people watched your ad, or nowadays we can actually track how many people clicked on your ad. That's tougher to sell to people. Marketing and Communications was often told, you're not doing anything, what do you do, etcetera, etcetera. And because we couldn't do that, that was really

tough to do. But we did a lot of work. In the early days, we did the event planning. I remember times I served alcohol. I was the bartender while someone else did coat check, in addition to hosting, organizing, name tags, the whole works. I mean, we did it all. You know I've got to say, those are the kinds of things as the team I'm proud of what we did. We did a lot of stuff that never got recognized. And that's fine, but I mean it's different when someone says, what do you do, you don't do anything versus we know you do stuff, we just don't know what it is. As far as that goes, there's not really one thing for the team. One of the things I was really happy about at the time was we had a childbirth conference with our Health and Community Studies Outreach Department, and the guest speaker was from Australia. As the media guy, I worked with him, and I had booked interviews on different radio shows, and back then, we even had a local television show in Edmonton. I think it was called – was it Edmonton AM, or is that the news item? No, it wasn't Edmonton AM, it was something else. There was a morning talk show like Ellen, but it was for Edmonton. So, I took two days and with this guy we went around to all the radio stations, all the television stations. I tracked all the airtime that we got, all the print time we got, and at the time, I think I calculated if I remember correctly something like thirty thousand dollars in free advertising. And that's twenty-five years ago. That's a lot of money. A lot of work, but it was one of those things where I finally could say, here, this is what marketing and advertising and public relations look like. This is the result of what we did. So that was for me one in the marketing days anyway, or college days, that was one of my favourite things.

VM: Okay, my last question is just to ask if there's something I failed to ask you that you wanted to share, but I just haven't given you the opportunity?

TB: No, I think I've been talking a lot.

VM: [Laughs]. Well, I'd like to thank you very much for participating.

TB: No problem. I appreciate it.

[End of interview]

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