

Grant MacEwan Community College Oral History Project

Interviewee: Andi Pallas and Bruce Vincent

Interviewer: Valla McLean

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VM: This is an interview for the Grant MacEwan Community College oral history project on February 28th, 2019 with Bruce Vincent and Andi Pallas in Edmonton, Alberta. This is Valla McLean, university archivist. I'd like to begin with asking you what year you came to MacEwan and what made you decide to work at the community college?

BV: You started before I did, so you go ahead.

AP: Okay. I started when the college started about 1970. It wasn't a college. It was just renting space downtown. The reason I started then is I was working for Campus Development at the U of A, and they were sort of closing down at that time, so this was very appropriate.

VM: And you? What year?

BV: I came in [19]74. And like Andi as soon as I got out of university, I came over to Grant MacEwan in [19]74. We were together right until Andy retired in the 90s. I carried on until the 2000s.

VM: What job titles did you hold during your time at the community college? And what were some of your roles and responsibilities with those titles?

AP: You go ahead first.

BV: We were the bricks and sticks [Laughter] the hot, the cold, the dirty, the clean, the parking, the grounds. We had a variety of everything associated with a multi-campus aspect. We had offices downtown in the Canada Trust building. We then had the old

Jasper Place High School, where the existing Grant MacEwan space is that sold to the city. We then had Cromdale, Old Scona, the Equine Centre.

AP: A couple of other little ones.

BV: A couple other little ones. We were involved as well with some of the consortia. Yellowhead consortia.

AP: Yes.

BV: Which had spaces in Hinton, Whitecourt, at that time. So, anything to do with space for teaching, students that was our responsibilities generally, and then maintaining those things.

AP: Yes.

VM: What do you remember about some of those early campuses? Do any of them stand out as being unique or different in the way they were built?

BV: Well, we have to relate a bit back to the presidents at the time. They all had their favourite projects [Laughter]. John Haar, the original founding president, his love was horses.

AP: Riding horses.

BV: Yes, riding horses as well as Dr. MacEwan. I believe his expertise was in animal history or animal husbandry actually. So, the Equine Centre was a very big challenge because it had been run down, and then we took it over as part of that Equine Program for the college. Cromdale was in a little grocery store. Jasper Place High School was a run-down old high school. Old Scona was an old high school that we renovated. Mill

Woods came on stream, and that was our first built to specifications for Grant MacEwan Community College. Under budget and on time. If I recall right.

AP: Yes.

AP: What I was going to mention Valla, Bruce, and I were involved with the operation or acquisition and maintenance and operation of the facilities. We weren't involved with teaching as much.

VM: No.

AP: We did the occasional one. Periodically we were invited in, but we were looking after the buildings and grounds. That's the side we come in.

VM: Yes. So, you have a unique perspective of those various buildings, as you mentioned. Some of them were very run down.

BV: In associations, there was insurance liability for the college, students, and academics. A lot of those associated little things that people don't think about when they walk into a building that has to be there and then, of course, all the codes and all those sorts of things that go along with it.

VM: Were you - you said earlier when you retired - but were you involved in the building of the City Centre campus?

BV: You betcha. Right from putting paint down on the old C.N.R. lands. The president at the time with Gerry Kelly. He wanted an outline. Remember that?

AP: Yes.

BV: We had one of our ground staff take a little machine that was filled with lime and do a whole outline of all of City Center Campus. Right from a 104th Street down to 109th Street.

VM: I think I've seen an aerial of that, and I didn't know what it was.

AP: Yes.

VM: That's great that you filled that in for me.

BV: To scale.

VM: Yes [Laughter].

BV: And then at that time part of 9th street had what they called the rat hole. It was an underground passage under the railroad tracks. If you really go back and I think look at the development of Grant MacEwan College on C.N. lands was the start of the development of [10]4th Avenue although we go back to Rogers Place, I think we were the first original people to see what could develop along [10]4th Avenue. Right down to the Brewery District.

VM: There must have been a lot of excitement about the building in the City Centre Campus.

BV: Oh, sure. We had to move downtown, and we were getting rid of one of our buildings at that time, Cromdale. We rented space in Seventh Street Plaza. We had I forget how many floors, ten floors of space.

AP: Yes.

BV: We renovated and turned into classrooms. Had to put in exterior stairwells because of the code and the occupancy that the students brought into the building. Then we rented space from Sun Life in the building next door because they needed all the space for students. So, our offices we're in Sun Tower there.

VM: You mentioned Seventh Street Plaza is that - you had responsibility for all these various campuses but was there one where you were located out of?

BV: We moved around. Our offices moved from Jasper place to Mill Woods to Seventh Street and then temporarily here while we were building. We had office space here just to be here while the construction was going on. So yes, our offices moved all around.

VM: So that's some travelling during your day.

BV: Yes [Laughter].

BV: We did. We did.

AP: It was interesting.

BV: It was super interesting.

VM: What do you remember about campus life in general when you first came to the community college in those early years.

BV: Well, remembering a bit of the philosophy that went with it. The college was going to go out to the community. The community wasn't going to come into our campuses. That's why it was a community college, and that's why spaces were rented, renovated away from any central campus. And then as times changed and things got going, they wanted to centralize. So, the start of City Center Campus -

VM: The idea -

BV: The idea to come down to a central hub.

VM: Whereas the other campuses were more situated in the community.

BV: In the community.

AP: Yes. That's right.

BV: And the name community college fitted into it.

VM: Yes, fits well for those years.

BV: Yes, fit well for the community.

VM: Can you describe some of the staff events you attended or describe any sort of memorable events you experienced while working at the community college?

BV: Yes, there were numerous events. Any reason for a good get together. And it wasn't only academic or non-academic. It was a group get together. There was skit nights.

AP: Yes.

BV: There was Irish nights on St Patrick's Day.

VM: Okay [laughter].

BV: Green beer and all. Of course, when the president was Irish, which was Gerry Kelly.

AP: Kelly, yes.

BV: There were ski trips.

VM: Ski trips, oh my goodness.

BV: Yes, ski trips. We were into B.C. Every year there was at least one busload of ski trip stuff going on.

AP: Yes, we have to - if you look back at it at Bruce and I were in the administrative end. We looked after things, we didn't teach, but we did the occasional get together. So, we come more from the administrative side, and that's when he says we got together we chartered the ski bus to go to Jasper to do some skiing. That was a few of the odd things that we did.

BV: We were a bit ahead of our time in team building. It didn't just end with administrative. It went into the academic as well. The ski bus sold out in no time. It was a bit of a fundraiser for the Foundation in some cases. They had Mad Hatter's Ball. A lot of social activities like that.

AP: I think they might still have the Mad Hatter's. That's a fundraiser.

VM: Yes, Mad Hatter's is still running.

VM: My understanding is that skit night was a mix of staff.

BV: It was.

VM: It wasn't just for academics or administrators.

BV: With the understanding that you could not get mad if anybody did a skit on you.

VM: [Laughter].

BV: And there was a lot of great skits. A lot of great skits.

VM: And did you participate in skit night?

BV: Oh, yes. Golf tournaments were another one—a lot of golf tournaments. And of course, there again the setting up, taking charge, making sure everything at the golf tournament went well was the facilities responsibility. That's where we jumped in and stuff like that to help out the Foundation and the college in regard to golf tournaments, Mad Hatter's, skit night whatever else, the ski bus. All those sorts of activities.

AP: I think the - I was going to say, not the path we had to cross, but somewhere along the way, we were part of the administrative group. In the operation end, not necessarily teaching but what we did was we integrated into it. Sometimes back in the old days, that didn't work out very well. The instructors wanted to be instructors and administration, administration, and workers the workers. They weren't all blended in, but we did kind of blend it pretty good. I thought it was pretty good. We didn't have too many -

BV: Oh, yes. We helped out the law enforcement program at that time to teach future police officers how to read blueprints, safety codes, violations. This sort of stuff. We did the same with the insurance program.

AP: Yes.

BV: Chuck Lee, over in his insurance programs. We'd teach them how to read blueprints. Physical aspects of buildings. We were a bit involved with that, but in the early years, they weren't professors; they were instructors. As a college of all that sort of changed its way and then you required a degree to teach and different things. We helped quite a bit wherever we could with a lot of those programs.

VM: Very involved in lots of different ways.

AP: Yes, when the college started, it started small. What was our student population - about 2,500?

BV: Something like that. It wasn't very much.

AP: It wasn't very big. Everybody got involved with everything at the time. I don't know what the college student population is now. It's about 10,000?

VM: I think it's more than that.

BV: Yes, I think it was 22[000] or something like that when I left.

AP: When you get bigger like that, you are not as integrated, but that's life.

VM: [Laughter]. In your opinion, what are some of the proudest achievements during your career?

BV: The proudest achievements were the building of the sticks and bricks for the college. Mill Woods campus was a big one to start for us. Jasper Place Campus was a new campus when we built it. There was no period of time when I was with the college that we weren't always planning another expansion someplace. I think our largest and biggest achievement was the City Center Campus at that time when we came on. Those were the Don Getty years as premier, and Gerry Kelly was the president. In achieving – only the two of us that were there - worked hardest on planning and building the bricks and sticks. The foundation stuff that you see now.

AP: The Foundation. They just got going about that time.

BV: Yes, the college Foundation.

AP: The college Foundation. Yes, fundraising. They got going. The biggest problem I think in the early days was mixing academics with administration and working. We were sort of used to all of that because we both worked for the U of A Campus Development before we came to MacEwan, and that was way back [19]67.

BV: Well, when you do a planning facility plan, you want to get the input from the academics as to what they'd like to see within the institution. After all, it's a teaching institution. So, you wanted to know what they would want in the way of facilities within the building. As an example, clocks, whiteboards, chalkboards, chairs. And the size of the classrooms. The integration for facilities management between the academic community and the bricks and sticks it was like a hand in the glove. You had to work together.

VM: And Andi, what about you – greatest, proudest achievement that you can think of during your career?

AP: I would say one of our accomplishments was to be able to get along with the academic side and provide them with the facilities that they needed. It was difficult; I think if you look back. Nowadays, it's probably easier to look at what do they need, and you know you take their word for it or how do you do it because there were no previous examples. That was challenging.

BV: The budgeting process.

AP: Yes. Who was president? Was Kelly the president all the way?

BV: With City Centre, yes. Haar had already gone, and then after Jerry left, of course, Paul Byrne came in.

VM: So the last question - I just want to open it up - if there's anything that I failed to ask you that you wanted to share, but I haven't given you the chance to please feel free to add anything or tell me any stories that you think you might contribute to.

BV: I don't think you have enough time for the stories.

[Laughter]

AP: I think the biggest problem if you look back at it in hindsight is dealing with something where there were no precedents. How do you provide the facilities, and how do you reflect that as part of education? That's when people take over. We ran into some real problems with that when we had multi-campus. We had one campus at Jasper Place, one at Old Scona, one at Cromdale, and our job was to provide the facilities. Not only do we need classrooms, but we needed office space, telephones, all the services, and all over the place and without a precedent. That was difficult, I thought, right?

BV: It was challenging that's for sure

VM: And any story you would like to share?

BV: You'd have to turn that recorder off.

[Laughter].

BV: There was always challenges, and to make light of them and keep them coming without having real conflict, I think that was one of our biggest achievements within facilities. Sometimes people get pretty hard-nosed with what they want and there just isn't enough money to do that so where do you share that? There are only so many

dollars to go around. I can remember one of the stories here on this building - the towers that you see in each building - the architect at that time wanted those another 150 ft taller. And the money that was going to come to do those. The battles that were fought around conference rooms and turning down the architect because architectural freedom is pretty hard to control at times. That was one of the things that we had to control. Then the new technology that came in when we were going like the underground heating and cooling system that we put in here. It was state-of-the-art at the time, and it's still being used today 20 years later. I think those are the kind of challenges that from a bricks and sticks point of view that you pick up from that. Normally those towers would have been a lot taller.

VM: Do you look back at your time at MacEwan favorably? Was it a good experience overall?

BV: I could have never had a better job. The college treated me fairly, and I think I responded by being fair with the college. We never had anything where they wanted to cry foul. I am sure there would have been many opportunities for doing that when you're doing a multi-million dollar project, but no our slates were clean. I can remember sometimes the purchasing department when we were doing something would be after us because of the way we were purchasing, but there was a deadline to get things done. I can remember Andi saying to the purchasing agent we will play the ball game; you keep the score.

[Laughter].

AP: Yes.

BV: Internal politics played a part. It was a wonderful career as far as I'm concerned.

AP: Interesting. It was interesting.

VM: That's all the questions I have for you today. I'd like to thank you both for coming in.

BV: You are super welcome.

VM: And sharing your stories and contributing to the history of the university. Thank you very much.

[End of interview]

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