

Grant MacEwan Community College Oral History Project

Interviewee: Rick Lewis

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 Rick Lewis in Edmonton, Alberta. This is Valla McLean, university archivist. The first question I'll ask is, what year did you come to Grant MacEwan Community College, and what made you decide to work at the community college?

**RL:** I started in; I think it was the fall of 1987. Just to give you a little background, I'd finished my Ph.D. in Zoology at the University of Alberta in 1984. I went to the University of Toronto on a postdoctoral fellowship in the fall of 1985 and very quickly - at that point, I was questioning whether I wanted to be at a big university. I enjoyed everything about research, but I always thought that you couldn't do both research and teaching well, at least to my satisfaction. I always thought that you would - from my experience and talking with other colleagues in that field - you did one thing well, which is typically the research and teaching was kind of acceptable, adequate. I didn't feel I could live with that, so I had to make a choice of what I wanted to do. I chose the teaching side without anything to go to. So, I came back to Alberta - I'm from Eastern Canada, but I came back to Edmonton and, without anything in hand, got what was called a senior lab demo. position at the University of Alberta in zoology teaching labs, which I loved. Teaching was what I was looking for. To me, this is a classic case of being in the right place at the right time. I will say right off the bat that I was lucky to end up where I did. It was the perfect job for me and I never ever, ever looked for another job, ever! While I was teaching labs at the U of A one of the labs was Biology 100, an intro. Biology

course, which was part of the Bachelor of Commerce 2 + 2 degree that MacEwan had just started offering that year. They needed to provide an introductory level natural science course with a lab. Commerce decided to offer the biology 100 lab so they phoned the lab coordinator at the U of A and asked if there was somebody there who would be interested in teaching a couple of biology 100 labs to Bcomm. transfer students. She recommended me and so I kept my senior demonstrator position at the U of A but still had time in the fall to teach two labs in the 107th Street Building.

**VM:** Right, Seventh Street Plaza.

**RL:** They had created a biology lab. I think it might have been on the 7th floor or something. So that's what I did in the fall for MacEwan. Even though it was commerce, I was hired through science - at that time, they were called sections, the science section. Bill Mucklow was the chair. He's the person that hired me. They were called service courses then different programs -

**VM:** Why service courses?

**RL:** Because they were providing a service to another area.

**VM:** Okay.

**RL:** It wasn't about the nature of the course. It was who was providing the course to what area at that time Grant MacEwan Community College. I was hired by the science section but teaching in the business area, and to me, that was a nice introduction. I'm sure you've heard this story over and over again about how in those days, people knew others across the institution. You weren't just a biologist you knew people in arts you knew people in business; you knew people in health. At least there's a good chance you

were going to get to know people. Right away, I started getting acquainted with people in the business area as well as the science area. During that time, the science program was going to start the 2 + 2 the next year, and of course, they needed to have equipment for chemistry labs, physics labs, biology labs. I guess they thought enough of me to ask me if I wanted to take on the responsibility of finding out what equipment they needed for all these various science labs and ordering it. In the winter, which would have been January 1988, I did that with MacEwan while still working fulltime at the U of A. During that period; they started advertising for instructors for the science program and the various fields. They were going to hire a full-time biology faculty member. I was interested, so I put my name in. To me, it's a classic case where because you kind of had your foot in the door, and they knew you in a positive way, I guess, [laughter] because it could have gone the other way. They interviewed five people for the job. I knew at least two or three of the others, and I look at and go well what's to separate me from them? I mean, these were good people. I think the essence was that they had familiarity with me and so I got hired as the first full-time biology faculty member in the 2 + 2 transfer program. They did have another biologist on staff at the time, but she was teaching service courses in other areas, not as part of the university transfer. So that was really neat. We literally had one full-time biologist, one full-time chemist, one full-time physics person, one full-time mathematician. It was really neat. We were officed all in the same area, so we knew those people from all these different areas.

**VM:** You taught a lot of different courses I assume over your career. Did you have any that really stand out as your favourite? That you just really enjoyed teaching?

**RL:** [laughter] That's an easy one to answer. That's the Ecuador field course, but that's probably getting ahead of it because we didn't start that until 2002 [laughter]. I probably can't tell you about that one. I've always said the highlight of my career at MacEwan was taking students on a rainforest ecology course to Ecuador.

**VM:** My goodness, how many students did you take?

**RL:** I think I went fourteen years we were averaging –

**VM:** You went fourteen years?

**RL:** We took students fourteen years to Ecuador. There was probably an average of ten to twelve a year. I think there was something like a total of 170 students that I was actually involved in taking.

**VM:** What did they do in Ecuador?

**RL:** We developed a rain forest ecology course. MacEwan had developed a working association with the Universidad San Francisco de Quito in Ecuador. The dean of Arts and Science at the time had gone there and visited with USFQ and heard that they'd had this fabulous field station out in the rainforest of eastern Ecuador. He didn't see it, but he came back and because I knew him, and he knew me - We started at the same time. He was the English guy that started in 1988

**VM:** Who is this?

**RL:** Peter Mitchell. He said Rick, would you be interested in going to Ecuador to check out this field station and see if there might be an opportunity to take MacEwan students there. Peter was really a forward-looking guy. Myself and three other colleagues went there and thought this would be a fabulous opportunity relatively. Nothing is ever risk-free in these endeavours, but we thought it was safe and secure. The next year we

developed a course and took students there. They've been going every year since. I don't think they'll go this year, but there was a group that went last year. That's my highlight, even though it postdates the time frame you are looking at.

**VM:** [laughter] And what about those early years? Anything you would like -

**RL:** I'm not going to give you a course. What I'm going to say is when I started, I was teaching - they had some introductory university biology courses that the U of A had that I taught, but there wasn't necessarily a full load thereof the 2 + 2 program. I taught health awareness type service courses to students from other programs. This wasn't my field of expertise, so it made me search out new information, learn things about - you know I had a basic interest or knowledge of it but not the in-depth to teach a course. It was kind of a double win for me because I learned a lot, and I got to meet students from other areas besides science and biology. I would say it's been nice teaching a range of courses and not just - I am an ecologist by background, so yes I obviously enjoy teaching the principles of ecology course and so on but some of these other courses where you got to meet students from other areas and learn things outside of your so-called field of expertise that to me was the nice thing about MacEwan. Instead of narrowing yourself down into this little field, you are actually broadening who you met as students and faculty and staff.

**VM:** You mentioned that you were at Seventh Street Plaza. Were you at other campuses as well?

**RL:** That's where the biology lab was at the time, but I was hired out of the science section, which was at Mill Woods. I was based on both campuses, and of course, in the

winter that year, when I started looking for the equipment for the science labs, I worked out of Mill Woods campus.

**VM:** What do you remember about those early campuses?

**RL:** We always talk about the portables.

**VM:** The portables?

**RL:** The portables. I don't know whether anybody's mentioned this.

**VM:** No.

**RL:** The UT science program was offered out of Mill Woods. The campus wasn't designed for a science program. They had equipped a nice lab, but they didn't have enough instructor space. So, they brought in portables that were basically out in the parking lot of the campus. That's where the office for the UT science program was and arts. That's where all the instructors were. My office was here [points to spot on the table] next to me was the chemist next to them was the computing science, the mathematician. It was kind of arranged in a circle type thing. On this side, you have all of the science people on the other side were all of the arts people. We always talk about the portables. You got to know people from other areas because you brushed shoulders with them every day.

**VM:** How long were you in the portables?

**RL:** We were there until we moved down here (City Centre Campus) in [19]93.

**VM:** That's a long stretch.

**RL:** Yes. You know, as far as I know, I can't remember anybody complaining about that we were out in the slums of the campus or anything. We all bought into it. All the classes were taught in the main building. It was mostly just the faculty offices and the

program advisors' offices that were out there. It was connected, so you didn't have to go outside.

**VM:** Right.

**RL:** There were two connections. One inside and another outside, there was a back door you could go outside and a shorter route in, but you have to go outside.

**VM:** Seventh Street Plaza was just level upon level.

**RL:** Yes, and I can't remember them all; the labs were on one floor, but I always remember going to Linda Brown's office. She was the student advisor for the Commerce program. I don't think she was on the same floor she might have been. I wasn't really familiar with the whole vertical structure of the building. There was a couple of floors that I basically went on. Again, it was neat coming down to a different area, and meeting different people, teaching students with different backgrounds than science backgrounds.

**VM:** What were some of your first impressions of the student body in those days?

**RL:** Thinking about some of this historically - thinking what are the types of things to talk about - the interesting thing was the first-year science program we started in fall 1988 with just first year - 60 students, there were 60 students in all of science. Then the next year, we added the second-year program, but we only anticipated that 30 students would return. So, in the second year, we had 90 students in the science program 60 in the first-year, 30 in the second year. Of course, in the second year, you have to start offering courses that are more specialized in biology or chemistry or physics. I had a second-year zoology class with four students in it. If two students weren't there on any given day, it was kind of - so you really did get to know the students. Four is obviously

too small for a class that size, but that's just the nature of the way it was, the funding that was available for things. That was obviously a very nice thing at that time - classes, even your first-year class, you might have 30 students in it at the most. You would get to know the students, and they would get to know you. So, it wasn't just teaching in the classroom. It was teaching in your office, learning about students. One incident I always remember was - I was wrong! They did have classes in the portables. They had two sets of portables, one where the faculty were and one where there were classrooms. These were just low-level rooms like this - posts in the middle of it that students might have to see around and of course you couldn't put the projector screen up very high; and then it wasn't a computer projector it was an overhead acetate projector that you were broadcasting onto a screen on the wall. I always remember going into a class on the first day with an intro. zoology class, and I noticed that the screen that had been put up was just put at the top of the blackboard. I think they were whiteboards at the time - which was too low for students to see because they weren't tiered classrooms. Immediately I went to facilities and said, can you raise the screen? There's maybe this much room between the whiteboard or I can't remember if it was a blackboard and the ceiling. It might have been a blackboard at that time or a chalkboard. I said, can you raise the screen up to the ceiling? Up to the highest level? Which they did right away. I always remember getting the student evaluation for the course, and one person said the screen was too low. My thought was, what did you come to one class and never again [laughter]? Little funny things like that that happened. That was the portable experience. The classrooms out there weren't your standard types of classrooms, and you had to deal with it.



**VM:** You've mentioned some of the administrators that you worked within those early years. Is there anyone else that stand out? Or other faculty?

**RL:** That's an easy question to answer for me. One person that I always think about is Bruce Vincent. I can't remember his exact title. There were two - Andi Pallas you've probably heard of - it was Andi, and then Bruce was kind of the second. I don't know what their titles were but obviously upper-level administration in Facilities. Just by coincidence, since I was coming from hockey here [to this interview], at that time, MacEwan had a group that played hockey on Monday afternoons. Faculty and staff had some ice time, and I got involved in that. I always remember walking through the cafeteria at Mill Woods early on. I knew a couple of people because you brush shoulders with them, even in facilities. I forget who it was, Craig Janke, maybe? He was sitting in the cafeteria with Bruce Vincent, who I didn't know at the time. I was talking to this other person in facilities that I had come to know, and right away, Bruce goes, I heard about you because they had talked hockey and stuff. I always thought you know what - I knew that he was upper level in facilities and my thought was my goodness this guy's talking to me who's really - just a little bit of exaggeration but really - could have been a nobody in his mind just a new person but I always thought there's the real MacEwan. Here's a person - he heard something about me wanted to meet me and learn more. As I got to know Bruce because you could - did you ever know Bruce?

**VM:** I just interviewed Bruce and Andi this afternoon.

**RL:** I've always looked up to him. From that time on, we knew each other. As I became a chair of science and so on, I'd have to ask him for certain things. I always remember Bruce's saying, and this represented his philosophy. If you went to him with a request,

his standard answer would be that's something that needs to be done; we will find a way to do it. Most people nowadays kind of go, oh well we can't do that because of this, there's no money, we don't have the people power to do it, we don't have the space blah blah blah. His answer typically was that if it is something that needs to be done, we will find a way to do it. When I received the MacEwan Medallion, I actually mentioned not necessarily that case, but I mentioned him as one of what I would call a mentor.

**VM:** What year did you receive the MacEwan medallion?

**RL:** It was after the 1999 date[laughter].

**VM:** That's okay, [laughter].

**RL:** I'm going to say around 2004.

**VM:** Could you describe some of the staff events you attended or memorable events that you experienced?

**RL:** The skit nights - I didn't really get involved with those. I always heard about them. I can picture where they were. From the science standpoint, we'd always have a Christmas party. I would say another person besides Bruce was Bill Mucklow, who hired me. To this day, Bill and I are good friends. He lives out on the coast, and we get together whenever I am out there. I don't know if I should say this on the record or off the record, but you probably heard it from another person. Bill had a way about him that he could aggravate some other people at the institution. He was a person that if he wanted something, he was going to get it. If you were part of the science program, you wanted a person like that that was going to get you what you needed. But he wasn't afraid to step on toes to get to there. You had to get to know Bill to understand his approach and so on. He was a visionary too. To move the science program from those

60 students to - in the late 1990s, we were probably over a thousand. That was a large part because of his vision. He would be another mentor, as well. I always remember he would always have a Christmas party at his house for all the science people. As the institution grew, we used to have an institutional Christmas party, but it got just too big, and not enough people would go. Another one about Bruce Vincent and this would have probably been in the late 1990s, or so I can't remember, but MacEwan did use to have a formal Christmas party, and then they stopped doing it. So, one year out of the blue unannounced Bruce Vincent decided that we were going to have a Christmas get-together paid for by facilities. He booked the cafeteria that whole area, provided finger foods, and so on. I think somebody in facilities belonged to a band and they brought in a band, and you could buy drinks. That became the Christmas party over the next few years. That was again people showing up; it wasn't an all-night thing. It would start at 4[o'clock] or 5 [o'clock], and you know by 7[o'clock] most of the people had left. By 9 [o'clock], there's still some hangers-on that were there. Those are the things that was great. It was just an off-the-cuff kind of thing, somebody, at the institution saying we've got to do something. Without a lot of planning and formality to it, it became something that people look forward to every Christmas, and again people from all across, at that time, the college, would come. It lasted five or six years or so, and then it just suddenly for some reason I don't know whether it was because Bruce retired or whatever. That was an event that we always looked to every year

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

**RL:** Certainly, feeling fortunate to be there right from the beginning of the UT Science Program, starting with 60 students, and at the end having a full degree. Even before we had a full degree when we were still 2+2 - which I thought was a fabulous concept, I really thought that 2 + 2 was a way to go for students.

**VM:** What is 2+2?

**RL:** Students would do the first two years of their degree here. Then they would finish their degree at the University of Alberta. It was a formalized agreement, government-funded. The government gave MacEwan funding for the first two years, and they gave funding to the U of A to take students in the third and fourth years. As long as students here met the minimum grade requirements to transfer, they were guaranteed transfer over. It wasn't a question, is there space or anything. As you know, the hardest year of university is the first year. That's when they really need support to get them started. Once they get through first year, they understand what the demands are, the study habits, going to class is necessary. At big universities like the University of Alberta, when you're in a class of anywhere from 200 to 500 students or more, you're lost. If you can't survive on your own, you're lost. The attrition rate and the failure are pretty high, whereas our smaller classes, thirty students, or so for the same courses - students had a better learning experience, I would say, or a better opportunity to be successful. And they had faculty that weren't there because they had to teach a course as part of their workload. We were there because this was the career we chose. That was the 2+2. I really thought that was a wonderful, wonderful approach. I've lost what your original question was – [laughter]

**VM:** That's okay, that's alright – just looking at some of your proudest achievements.

**RL:** So, seeing that grow. During this time, there was a lot of leeway given. I would say things were less centralized than they are now. At that time, they were called divisions, the division of Arts and Science, Business division, and so on. They all ran kind of their own outreach type of programs. You could come up with innovative ways of creating space for more students. One idea that Bill Mucklow came up with was that there were a lot of students that maybe didn't get into September, which is the traditional time to start a program. They thought well there are a lot of students that maybe they didn't get around to applying in time for September, or they didn't want to start in September right out of high school. He thought, let's try a January entry for science students. A cost-recovery type program that was in addition to the regular government-funded. So, we started a program like that, and it was very, very successful. It added to the pool of students that were leading into second-year courses eventually. That was one way we increased the number of students. I can't remember why exactly it came about, but somewhere I think in the mid-to-late 1990s where the government just gave us funding to almost double our numbers. We went from a few hundred to pretty much 1000 overnight. We always talk about there was never a year where you stood still. There was constant change or growth. Moving downtown so in many ways that's exciting because you never got bored doing what you were doing but you never really had time to sit back and go okay we did it this way this year is there a way we could improve on what we did last year? You were always moving ahead, which was exciting. There was never a time where I felt all this is getting boring doing the same thing year after year after year. It was always go, go, go, go, go.

**VM:** My last question then - is there something I fail to ask you that you wanted to share I haven't given you the chance to?

**RL:** Again, even though this postdates the 1990s, you asked about what I consider my achievements. I was really honoured to receive - two things I was really honoured to receive. One was the distinguished teaching award.

**VM:** Do you remember what year?

**RL:** Oh, God. I can follow up and tell you.

**VM:** [laughter].

**RL:** Actually, I think I can. Again, it postdates this. It would have been about 2003[4]. It's interesting that year I had put in a nomination for Bill Mucklow for the MacEwan Medallion. I remember sitting in my office - I think it was Karen Freiman that phoned, and she said congratulations. I said, oh Bill got the award, and she said no, you have received the distinguished teaching award. Yes, by the way, Bill did get the medallion, but you were nominated and got the distinguished teaching award -which I had absolutely no idea about. That came completely out of the blue. I remember she said I've never seen so many students' signatures on a nomination form. To me, that meant a lot because it was often felt that the way you got a distinguished teaching award was that it was the chair that often decided that somebody should receive this. They would go around and recruit students to sign the nomination form. I think you needed three students to sign the form. I found out after the fact that it was the students from the first year Ecuador course that had nominated me. Of course, they had faculty colleagues to sign it as well. My colleagues knew about this, and I did not know about it until that day.

That was one of my proudest moments. It wasn't something that I had set out to campaign for or anything.

**VM:** To be fair, you got that long into your career. It shows something that - even though you've been doing it for quite a while, you were still effective.

**RL:** I think I was the first science person. That wasn't a thing in science for the chair to go out and campaign for somebody. Because it was the students that did it, that to me was really special. Obviously, the MacEwan Medallion - I had been on a selection committee for the MacEwan Medallion before. It was the year that Paul Ancel received it. I was really struck by all of the things that Paul had done not just in the institution but outside the institution. This was something that was ingrained in me from day one at MacEwan was that yes, you worked for MacEwan, but we were a community college. We were dedicated to serving the needs of the community, not just in terms of what we offered but in terms of participating—volunteering for things in the community. I got involved in things like the World Partnership Walk, the Environmental Studies Institute. Things like that because they were things I really enjoyed doing, and when I saw what Paul had been doing, I thought okay the essence of the MacEwan Medallion is not just what you do at MacEwan because that's your job you shouldn't receive it just for what you do here. That was a real honour to feel like I was contributing not just to MacEwan but outside MacEwan. So those were kind of the special moments. I was fortunate to have a family that bought into what I was doing. I don't think I ever got out of the graduate student mode of doing things at home at night and working on the weekends. It's just a lifestyle. It wasn't a job. It was a paying position, but it was never viewed as a job. I was in the right place at the right time. Thank God for that.

**VM:** Well, thank you. I would like to thank you very much for participating in this project.

**RL:** You're welcome.

[End of interview]

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