

Grant MacEwan Community College Oral History Project

Interviewee: Merle Harris

Interviewer: Valla McLean

Date: 2019-04-10

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

MH: Library Information, and 1983 - [19]88 I think, I'm not sure of the year I started, [Laughter] but I know I graduated in [19]88.

VM: And what made you want to attend Grant MacEwan Community College?

MH: It was strange. I had worked with a librarian at Hamilton School and got really interested in it. I got hired here and decided if I was going to do it, I had to do it the right way, so I started with mainly at a night school.

VM: Okay, and which campus did you attend?

MH: I started off in the old Safeway building [Laughter], which was an experience in itself in winter. You wore coats the whole time. [Laughter] My fondest memories of the building, though, were the custodian security guards. They were phenomenal, and it was great. It was cold [Laughter], and it was smelly [Laughter], but it was terrific. Then I did a couple of courses at the orange building and a couple at Mill Woods until we moved to 107 -

VM: Seventh Street Plaza.

MH: Yes, yes.

VM: So, you have quite a bit of experience at the various campuses then. And do you have a favourite one that stands out from that time?

MH: The best experience really was that I decided it was going to take me too long to do everything by night and I worked a whole summer at the school I worked at so that I could get off for two mornings a week.

VM: Oh, my goodness.

MH: And after the first course, my principal said I couldn't. I spoke to Tony and a friend of mine, Sharon Trottier, taped all Tony's -

VM: Is this Tony Fell?

MH: Tony Fell's lessons for me, and I was going to night school as well, so I would go that night and take the tape. I did two courses by tape recorder. After I'd done the first course, Tony said I could do the second course the same way, and it was fun because I'd say to Tony I'd send my transcripts in. It was very boring. [Laughter] Could you tell me what tie you're wearing, and things like that. He would stop in the middle and say okay, Merle's falling asleep. It was really interesting. I wouldn't recommend it [Laughter], but it served its purpose.

VM: What were some of your favourite courses, and why?

MH: I loved the research-type thing, looking things up. This was naturally pre-everything day. They had a thing called runarounds, and you had all these questions, and you had to know which books to go to and how to find the answers and that. I really loved that. I liked the course on censorship because that's something close to my heart and

children's literature. I got in right at the very beginning of the whole technology thing, and it would take us forever to log on, and then it would click out on you and stuff like that. But mainly the research and the children's lit.

VM: Now you mentioned Tony, but were there other instructors that you that were some of your favourites?

MH: Linda Cook, Indira [inaudible] whose father I had worked within the ANC in South Africa, so that was interesting. Pat Hall was in the beginning. Pat and I crossed swords a lot. Those were the main people. Linda Cook was terrific, and Tony was -

VM: What makes them stand out as instructors that you remember?

MH: Linda was fun, but she was very focused. She updated her material the whole time. Tony could make the most boring subject interesting with the way he put it over. I think with both Linda and Tony, in particular, if you disagreed with marking or the way they looked at something, you could talk to them, and you could change their minds if you could back up where you were coming from. I found that from a teaching point of view, remarkable. You could go in and say I have a problem with this, and if you could support your claim, he or Linda would let you get the mark. But then someone would say oh but I – and Tony would say well you didn't prove your point, Merle did. So, they both really listened. Tony, in particular, was a rare breed [Laughter].

VM: Did you participate in any on-campus activities during that time?

MH: Not really, other than Grant MacEwan Days.

VM: Okay, and what do you remember about Grant MacEwan Days?

MH: Him. He was just the most phenomenally quiet man. He loved libraries and books, so if you were in that course, he would spend ages talking to you. He just used to come, like you'd never - looking at him, say who he was. And they used to have chili cookoffs and so they had to do a vegetarian one because Grant was vegetarian. I remember those days with great fondness.

VM: When you look back on your time as a student, what are some of your proudest achievements?

MH: I think getting through [Laughter] and knowing I'd made the right decision, that it was something worth working for and working to get. I suppose my proudest was – Linda got really upset with people's misuse of apostrophes and one of our tests, she said to us there's going to be a whole page, and you're going to have to put in all the apostrophes in it. It counted for fifty percent of the marks, and I aced it [Laughs]. It was one of my irritants as well, so to me, that was a little gift.

VM: After you graduate, you come back to Grant MacEwan Community College to teach, so what year was that, and what made you come back?

MH: Tony asked me to come. In 1998 I came back to teach the Children's Literature and Storytelling, and I came back again in 1999 to do it, but also in 1999, the week before school started, I got a call from Tony, and he said could I come and co-teach Library Information? The person they had hired had just quit that day, and he had got someone who could do it half time, and I said oh Tony. I'm not up on technology and things like that, and he said well, the guy that you'll be teaching with is. So, I came back, and it was a very, very good experience. I learned a lot. It was right at the beginning of

the Internet becoming somewhere to search. But I wouldn't do the Children's Lit. and Storytelling again because of the way they didn't give you time. When you're teaching something like that, so much of it is one on one; you're watching someone doing stuff and that. And they didn't give you time for that. I went and protested, and I did get extra money, but I knew that it wasn't going to be something that was going to continue.

VM: Had the community college changed much since you were a student because this was a bit of a gap?

MH: Yes, because I came here -

VM: To the City Centre campus.

MH: Yes, and I remember there were lots of complaints about this wonderful building because the library was inaccessible to the Library Information students. It was disastrous, to begin with.

VM: Was the program not located here?

MH: It was where it was, but you couldn't get books from here to there.

VM: Right.

MH: Simply, easily. Oh, Tony had smoke coming out his ears [Laughs]. But it was so much more modern; there was room to do displays and things. There was a little at 107th but not so much. And from pre-technology to post, by the time I came back, computers were the thing. And this building was wonderful, coming here, especially after Safeway, or whatever [Laughter] the building over there was.

VM: I think that was the Cromdale Campus.

MH: Cromdale, yes, yes.

VM: I'd like to thank you very much for participating in this project, but if there's something that I failed to ask you or a memory you'd like to share, I'm happy to -

MH: One thing is I was 2003 distinguished alumnus, and that was very, very special that Tony would think that so.

VM: That's a lovely achievement.

MH: That was a good thing. But no, very good years here, and I'm so thrilled that you're doing this. I think it's such an important – that personal –

VM: Yes, thank you very much.

[End of interview]

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