RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT W. SNYDER

FOR THE

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Professor Robert W. Snyder on February 13, 2013 in New Brunswick, New Jersey with Shaun Illingworth.

Paul Clemens: Paul Clemens.

SI: And.

Katelyn Foley: Katelyn Foley.

SI: Okay, and Dr. Snyder, thank you very much for joining us. To begin, we wanted to pick up with I think another experience from your days at Livingston dealing with a faculty member. Would you mind sharing that with us?

RS: Sure. I think back on my time at Livingston College with great pride and great affection, but I wouldn't want to convey that our students and our faculty were sort of an island of saints and scholars in Piscataway. There are complicated things that can go on among students and faculty that I reflect on now, as a college professor, that sort of astonish me. I think I've said it before; I was amazed at the amount of alcohol that we were encouraged to consume at events organized with students and at events with students and faculty. Students were not always the most eager students. There were students who were slackers. There were students who were serious. Relations between faculty and students could be complicated. My first inkling that there was something odd about this occurred when I was a freshman, when I realized that one of my fellow students was somehow cozy with her TA. TAs were a rarity at Livingston, and students getting involved with a TA--at least there was every sign of that--seemed to be odd. Over the years, friends would talk about professors who became intimately involved with students or tried to become intimately involved with students. It happened on more than one case. It happened to me and it's important to think about because I think it helps us understand both the tenor of the times, the individuals involved and the complicated ways that students and professors could interact with each other.

PC: Rob, just for the record. Tell the years again that you're talking about are 1970.

RS: This would be 1973 to 1977.

PC: Okay.

RS: I think back on the enormously influential and the enormously beneficial career of Carey McWilliams, who was a professor that I had at Livingston, who was easily one of the most important intellectual influences on me as an undergraduate and in many respects the rest of my life. I met him at freshman orientation. I saw myself as a political science major. He helped me through the registration process and I don't remember too many specifics except one. He said, "Well, you want to take a history course?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, take one with John Gillis. Anything you take with John Gillis is going to be good," and he was right. I took a course with John. John was a tremendously good influence on me.

Carey was famous for a course in military and politics that was known to be very, very tough, very, very demanding. The political science department had a reputation for being very rigorous. I think they also sort of promoted themselves well and ran lots of functions for students as well and encouraged students to come out to faculty functions and take poli-sci courses. So, in the fall semester of my sophomore year, I took Carey's course in military and politics and there were forty odd students in it. I would say it was a very tough course. We read a lot of very sophisticated books. He was a very demanding teacher. He was definitely in charge of the room. He was up front, basically lecturing most of the time, entertaining questions whenever you wanted to ask a question. A demanding, but inspiring teacher in the sense that he held you to a very high standard.

I remember taking my midterm and I threw in a line about Clausewitz in the beginning of one of my answers and I said, "Clausewitz is the first modern strategist to discuss X, Y, and Z." Then, he writes next to that, "Hardly, but of course that depends upon how you define the term modern." On another exam, he said, "You know, some of you write your essays in a language which leads me to believe that English is not your mother tongue," and everybody panics. [Editor's Note: Carl von Clausewitz was a Prussian general who lived from 1780 to 1831. His work, *On War*, has influenced military strategy.]

At the end of the day, I got an A in that course and it meant an enormous amount to me. I felt, for the first time, that not only had I found a home for myself in the world of ideas, proven that I could work with ideas at a substantial level, but that this was going to somehow be my future, and I said that because Carey, as a political scientist also wrote for not mass circulation magazines, but magazines that were read beyond the academic world. He wrote for *Commonweal*. [Editor's Note: *Commonweal* magazine was founded in 1924. It covers various topics and current events.] He wrote for a magazine called *Worldview* which looked at foreign affairs from the perspectives of religion and ethics and there was a famous Livingston internship at *Worldview*. A number of my friends did it. Livingston students always went to intern at *The Nation*, which at the time was edited by Carey's father. [Editor's Note: *The Nation* is a weekly magazine that covers various topics and current events. It was founded in 1865.] I vividly remember a piece that he wrote, he looked at the two candidates, Democratic and Republican who were squaring off against each other, and said, "Both candidates would have to be promoted to become second rate and the Democrat should realize that for the good of his party, he should step down and let a stronger candidate take his place." So, I was very attentive to Carey's writing, very aware of his work and I admired his work very much. When I looked at the work that he did, I thought, "Well, that's the kind of thing I'd like to do some day too."

Carey also had a reputation of making advances towards his students, men and women. It was a rumor. You always knew it was in the background. I was always skeptical about rumors. I've always been skeptical about rumors. I don't really believe rumors until I'm actually confronted with the evidence which suggests that it's more than hearsay, but one night, I guess it would have been around about '76, I went to a political science reception.

Mind you, I had been in touch with Carey since he had been my professor in my sophomore year in Military and Politics. He had written a recommendation for me for a study abroad program.

He wasn't one of the professors I was closest to, I had moved my major from political science to history, but he's certainly one of the people whose advice and mentorship I valued.

Poli-sci receptions can include a lot of drinking at that time. Again, I look back on it and I'm sort of astonished at the amount of booze. The night's winding on. Things are beginning to get to an end and I'm sitting there with a friend of mine and basically, Carey turns to me--I'm there, my friend's there, and there are a couple of other people still in the room--and he makes a sexual proposition to me. I was quite surprised, shaken, and sort of shook my head, swallowed my drink, said, "I'm out of here." I was really bothered by it. It upset me a lot because of the way he phrased it. He said, "Yes, you'd really enjoy this too." I thought, "Who are you to assume what I enjoy? Who are you?"

It bothered me because he had a reputation, and I heard students say this, "McWilliams is brilliant because he grades you not just as a student, but as a whole person." I'd think, "How does a professor grade you as a whole person? They know your paperwork. They don't know your life." I used to think in the back of my mind, "This guy doesn't know my whole life." In fact, if he had more respect for me as a student, he wouldn't have said that in front of anybody.

My friend, I think, was slightly put out that he was looking at me and not him when he said it, but that's another story. [laughter] I didn't have anything to do with Carey for a number of years after that. I didn't want to talk to him. I didn't want to speak to him. Mentioned it to a couple of friends who were kind of not surprised that he had done that because the rumor had always been in the air, but always then tried to place themselves, "Well, he never did that to me." I said, "Right, well yes, that's what he did to me. It bothers me." So, I didn't have much to do with him.

I remember being worried about him because I saw him drinking once in the pub with students and he was really drunk. He had been drunk in class that night too. One of my buddies says, "Well, it's okay. So, and so is going to follow him home when he drives home."

I said, "Follow him home when he drives home? What good will that possibly do? He's drunk behind the wheel. The other car is twenty feet behind him. What will he possibly be do if he starts to head towards a tree?" I was really angry at this. It struck me as the height of stupidity, but at the end of the day the student followed Carey home. Carey got home safe.

I didn't have anything to say with him for a number of years. I then saw him at the wedding of a fellow student. We were friendly, but formal, and I didn't say anything really at any length. One friend of mine who did keep up with him always said, "Carey always asks after your work. How are you doing? He'd seen that your book came out. Where are you teaching? What are you up to?" I thought, "That's nice."

Over the years, his work still remained very important to me. He wrote a book called, *The Idea of Fraternity in America*. It came out when I was early in my years at Livingston. It was an interpretation of American political life through the idea of fraternity. I read it again, and again, and again, in my life. Each time I read it I learned something new and I thought, "My gosh, I'm actually getting somewhere in this life. I can read this book which utterly confounded me when I was a freshman in college or a sophomore in college and now that I'm finishing up grad school I

understand a little more. Now, that I'm a history lecturer at Princeton, I understand a little more and I keep reading the book and I'd keep turning back to it. I'd also turn back to it because I admired some of the writing in it very much and this sort of coexisted uneasily in my mind alongside this episode that it upset me so much.

So, more years passed. In, and I guess it was the run-up to the election of 2000, I was working as the editor of *Media Studies Journal*. We were going to do an issue on the election, anticipating the election: what could journalists and election analysts do and look at? What did we need to tell them about in advance?

I sat down with the woman who edited the magazine with me and I said, "Look, I think we should think about inviting this political scientist, Carey McWilliams to write for us. We had already had Ross Baker write for us and he had done a great job, a wonderful job, in an issue we did about journalism in the Congress. "Maybe we can bring in Carey to do this?" Then, I hesitated for a long time and I said, "Look, I'm going to tell you why I hesitate." I explained the story to her.

She then in turn said to me, "Rob, I have to tell you. The same kind of thing happened to me in college. I was a language student. I was hit on by one of my most revered professors and it shook me for the rest of my life because I always, after that, thought, 'Well, is he doing this because he just wants to sleep with me or is he giving me A's just to butter me up? What's going on here?'" She said it undermined her own sense of confidence as a student.

Carey didn't undermine my sense of confidence as a student, but it did shake my sense of him as a person and what he could be counted on for and what he could not be counted on for. So, we talked a long time and she said to me, "Fine." I'll never forget this. "Look Rob, it seems to me that you're through the experience pretty well. He's a great writer. He'd be a great contributor. At the end of the day, you just have to talk to him on the phone. Why not give it a shot?" So, we asked him to write.

He did a wonderful piece as I would have expected. I mean, first class writing, crisp, smart, unusual, insightful. I was thrilled to run it. Then, after the issue came out, Saint Peter's College in Jersey City invited me to be on a symposium panel about the upcoming election of 2000. By that time I had just started my job at Rutgers-Newark. So, I agreed and I said, "What's it going to be like when I see Carey after all these years?"

He showed up for the symposium. There's two things: warm, friendly, greetings, bear hug, slaps on the back and I'm sitting there on the panel talking, and then, Carey has his say and there's back and forth and there's a part of me thinking, "Son of a gun, this guy is still the damn smartest guy in the room. I've come a long way, but he stills plays the game at a really high level." At certain points I knew, there was a point of disagreement about the First Amendment and leaks. I said, "I'm not going to undo the guy's interpretation. It's clear to me. I'm just going to state my own and let people sort of gauge the difference between our perspectives." So, I was very glad to see him and the whole thing seemed quite settled as well; settled as anything that's awkward in your life could be settled.

Then, I found out that he died. I thought to myself, "I'll go to his funeral," because at the end of the day, whatever you want to say about Carey McWilliams, he is one of a relative handful of teachers who made my life dramatically richer than it would have otherwise been and I thought it was important to go. The funeral was going to be in Flemington. I rented a car, drove out from New York City, expecting "Well, it'll be small." I knew he had two daughters.

I show up at the funeral. There are hundreds of people at the wake and the line is extending out of the funeral home into the parking lot. I get inside. I get on line along with everybody else. As I walk into the funeral home, I see two things. One are all these tremendous quotes from different scholars and writers that had mattered to him. It might have been some of his own work, but I'm not sure. There were things that he had written as a young man about the death of Franklin Roosevelt. Things from his years in the military, other things he'd written, but also big quotes from people like DuBois and others up on the wall. [Editor's Note: W.E.B. DuBois was a leading African American author, scholar and activist. His life and scholarship continue to influence various disciplines, including history, philosophy and sociology. He lived from 1868 to 1963.] I was touched by that and one great quote from DuBois about the difference that learning had made in his life and I think that through Carey, learning made a big difference in lots of other people's lives.

As I'm on this line, snaking into the funeral home, towards where his wife and daughter are sitting, I see this little table and on it are books and articles that he had written. There in the selection of books is the issue of *Media Studies Journal* that he wrote for and I was tremendously proud. I was tremendously proud.

All I could say when I got up to his wife and daughter is to sort of grab their hands with both hands and shake their hands as hard as I could and say, "I just want to tell you, your father and husband made a tremendous difference in my life, made a huge difference in my life, for the better, and I can't exaggerate that." What amazed me that night was to watch hundreds of people basically go past him and do the same thing. You could hear the comments as you got nearer and nearer, right. Everybody was saying the same thing.

I could not make it to the memorial service for him. My friend did. He said his wife said, "Carey was not a saint, would not want to be remembered as a saint." I thought, "Right, he was not a saint." It's important to recognize that. There were times when Carey would almost be beatified by former students, when I always wanted to say, "Stop, there was more to him than that." He himself, I think, would have recognized that all of us are mixes of strengths and weaknesses, better traits and lesser traits and I think it's important to understand him in the context of both his better traits and his lesser traits, and how in the end, in my life, and I think in the lives of many, many other students, his better traits vastly enriched our experiences at Livingston College and the many, many years that came after that.

PC: Okay, just for chit chat. I collaborated with him on a piece on William Paterson, a source actually. He helped get it to publication, wrote I think, an introduction for it or something. I did the editing of it. I got to know him pretty well for a period, about a year. I mean, we knew each other on and off for years. [Editor's Note: William Paterson lived from 1745 to 1806. He

served as a delegate for the Constitutional Convention, senator, governor and as associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.]

RS: Yes.

PC: But got to know him pretty well for about a year. Let me go back, just ask you one question.

RS: Sure.

PC: I know the answer to it. I think I do anyway, but I think it's worth asking. When he was drunk and he propositioned you.

RS: Yes.

PC: Any sense on your part that this was something that ought to be reported back then?

RS: No, no.

PC: No, okay.

RS: No, the idea that I would go to a university figure on this and report it was simply beyond my imagining.

PC: Yes.

RS: No.

PC: Yes.

RS: There was another student there. It's funny, I never thought, I didn't think, "Oh, my gosh Mark's a witness, I can go to somebody." It never occurred to me.

PC: Yes.

RS: I didn't keep quiet about it among my friends. I raised it carefully and cautiously among the few friends I knew. This is a guy with an enormous reputation. I also felt that, I mean, again, one of my friends had said, "McWilliams grades you as a whole person." Like, I started shaking my head, "Nobody can grade you as a whole person. They don't know you as a whole person."

It's just my way to talk through things that have been difficult. So, I looked for a few friends to talk through about it, but I've never discussed this with anybody outside my student peers before and my wife. I talked to my wife a long time about it last night, about what I would do today. It would have never occurred to me to go to an administrator, not because I thought no one would believe me and it would be turned back on me. They just weren't part of our lives. They were no presence at all, hardly.

PC: In all fairness, you couldn't have done anything about it. We had a long line of stories I could tell about the history department. Some of them were protested, but they weren't illegal. I mean, they may have been immoral or unethical, but not illegal at that time.

RS: Yes. I had one friend; one of her professors asked her out on a date. I had another friend who looked up at this guy as a mentor enormously. The guy used to come over his house. Sometimes my friend wouldn't be there, but his girlfriend would be there. It begins to dawn on my friend that the professor is actually romancing his girlfriend. Things like that. Things like that happened. This troubled me because I felt that it was a statement that was one improper and two, grounded in some sense in his authority as a professor. We weren't out chumming around. We were at a political science department event drinking bourbon in significant quantities.

PC: That's the other question I wanted to ask you out of this. You were an undergraduate.

RS: Yes, I was an undergraduate.

PC: The scene you described happened all the time in my department same time, a little later than that, but with graduate students. So, undergraduates were socializing on a regular basis at Livingston, with their professors, that was part of the life then?

RS: Department by department, I was only aware of the political science department doing this.

PC: Yes.

RS: I don't remember the history department doing it. I don't remember the communications department doing it. It's significant that I had a double major in communications and history. I'd started out a political science major and I shifted over to history, but I always had a good chunk of political science courses. I took a course with Carey on military and politics, took a course on presidential politics with Vicki Semel. I took Gerry Pomper's course in congressional politics. Within the history major, you're required to take some courses in another social science and the natural for me was poli-sci. I think the political science was unique in sort of promoting itself and trying to create a kind of atmosphere of distinction and collegial bonhomie around itself.

I don't remember many other social events outside the poli-sci department where faculty socialized with students. There were jazz concerts frequently on campus, mostly attended by students. There were midday concerts and free periods once a week, again, students and faculty would stop in, but there was very little interaction between the world of the faculty and the world of the students.

I remember when the dean, Dean Mesthene, visited our dorms in the quads once. He wanted a drink of water and he said, "Where's the water fountain?" People looked at him and said, "There is no water fountain."

He said, "Well, how do you drink?" Students said, "Well, you walk over to the sink in the lounge and you cup your hands."

It's like you're on a backpacking trip, right. You put your hand under the waterfall and slurp. Mesthene just was apparently, just revolted that we didn't even have water fountains. It fascinated me that he was the dean and he didn't know that we lacked water fountains. There was very little understanding of what student life was in the aggregate. I think individual students might be close to faculty for sure, but overall the administration was not a presence in our lives and students lived in one world and faculty lived in another, and they rarely ever intersected.

PC: As might as we're on it, you mentioned the dean. He was not a dean who in the public image, was a great favor of the undergraduates, but from your point of view as an undergraduate, was he a dean who stood out in some ways as a person?

RS: Dean Mesthene?

PC: Yes.

RS: Yes, he struck me as a complicated man who had been handed a very difficult job, and then, didn't do it very well. He came under a cloud because he worked at the RAND Corporation. [Editor's Note: RAND Corporation is a non-profit research and development think tank that focuses on public policy and national security. It was formed in 1948.]

PC: Yes.

RS: The scuttlebutt was that he was the third choice of the search committee. Surely, when he arrived at Livingston--and this I figured out later in doing some research on Al Blumberg for my book--he came to Livingston at a time when there was a huge cloud over it, a much worse cloud than I realized at the time. He saw himself as having the job of bringing different factions on the campus together, formalizing and firming up academic procedures, and basically, I think, improving the college. To us students, he seemed to be giving too much credence to Livingston's most severe critics and we wanted somebody who seemed unquestionably on our side. When he talked about the perception that Livingston was a failure, he didn't sort of challenge that vigorously, we thought. We were very worried about it, so he was not much liked by the students.

When the takeover took place in the spring of '75 that I described, there was a sense that he did not handle it well. A previous acting dean had handled a takeover very well by basically ordering pizza for the students and talking with them. Dean Mesthene didn't have that touch. A lot of the faculty really disliked him as far as I could tell. The only thing that I heard, and this was by way of rumor, was that he said that if the police were brought onto campus he would resign. The police did come on campus. I have trouble remembering whether they were campus patrol or local police to arrest students in the takeover put on by the Livingston 50.

I always thought that our strongest act of the *Livingston Medium* when I worked there, which was a real newspaper at the time, was to call for his resignation. I confess that we called for his resignation a second time the following semester; it was a bit repetitive and probably

unnecessary. We just didn't see him as a guy who was fighting for Livingston. I think that was the strongest problem we had with him.

Robert Jenkins on the other hand, on the biology faculty, became the dean at Livingston, had a reputation as a guy who was a good professor and very much an advocate for Livingston. Dean Mesthene didn't have that identity among the students that I knew. When he left it was not a surprise that he left. He was on the podium when I gave the address as student speaker at graduation. He wrote a note to me. It was sort of odd. I mean, it says, "Well, at least you can congratulate yourself that you've done the last bit of burning the midnight oil to graduate from college." It didn't say anything like, "Nice speech." If he said it, that's not what I remember. What I remember: "Oh, you burnt the last bit of midnight oil." Well, yes, I worked hard on it. That's why I think people cheered for me.

It was a good speech, but I didn't say all hail the greatest dean, all hail the greatest campus. I said this is a great school with a lot of problems. We need to fix them. Perhaps he didn't enjoy hearing that. Everybody else liked it, including the outside speaker brought in who said I accomplished in five minutes what she was going to take a half hour to say. So, I felt very good about my speech. I'm not sure he did.

SI: Do you have more questions about Livingston?

PC: Well, I have one then.

RS: Sure.

PC: Are we moving on to something else?

SI: No, go ahead.

RS: No, continue, that's fine.

PC: We talked last time about the student newspaper and you just mentioned doing the editorial. When the paper put out an editorial back then, how was it decided upon? What were the internal workings of the newspaper?

RS: Basically, the staff would meet. I remember doing these on a number of editorials. In the editorial over Mesthene's resignation, I would have been a very young staffer. I would have been in my sophomore year. I remember very vividly, that it was like the older students on the paper who were seniors who were sort of taking a lead. Warren Deschenaux, Jaki Kalansky. I dimly remember others in the background, but Warren and Jaki in particular were very active in this. We talked about it a lot. We talked about things a lot and we reached decisions among ourselves. There was no separate editorial board, but rather the editor would sort of pull the other editors into the office and say, "Look, I want to write an editorial. What do we think?" There was an editorial page editor sometimes, I think. I was never that.

PC: You would have been part of a conversation about whether or not to write an editorial calling for the dean's resignation?

RS: Yes, yes, we would have. Yes, we would have discussed that among ourselves.

PC: Yes.

RS: I would have been a junior partner in that conversation as a sophomore. I much more vividly remember an editorial that we did later on, probably in my junior year, about amnesty for guys who evaded the draft in the Vietnam War and a long, vigorous discussion and I remember who should get amnesty, who shouldn't get amnesty and I remember one of my friends, Bob Carroll, arguing vigorously that the only guys who shouldn't get amnesty are guys who sort of deserted in action. He felt that anybody who sort of abandoned other guys in combat didn't deserve special consideration. Otherwise, it's a bad war and I think that position pretty much won the day.

I also remember that when I was a senior the editor of the paper was my friend, Mike Guta, who was a tremendous editor, a philosophy major. He more or less kept his own counsel. I know he would have talked to people about editorials. I can't remember big meetings with Mike the way I remember that big meeting about the Mesthene resignation, but I remember long discussions with him about the argument that an editorial would make, the position it would take, how to best frame it. What would be most persuasive and what would be less persuasive. To my experience, I mean, Mike, as a college newspaper editor was a great editor and an editor of, I thought, really unimpeachable integrity and a real model. The guy was a pleasure to work with.

PC: Were you aware, later in your life, at the point where *The Medium* stopped being a newspaper?

RS: Yes. I was always very disgusted by it. I was always very disgusted. I know I was always disgusted by what *The Medium* became. I felt that it was a bad test case for the First Amendment. I mean I basically believe, still, as I did then, that student newspapers should be independent. They should edit and publish on their own. People can criticize all they want, but that's their job to edit and publish, but certain kinds of papers will strain that argument. *The Medium* certainly strains that argument for me. I just don't think it was a very serious paper after a while and I looked at it and I was embarrassed. It's not that our paper was so great. I can look back, I think of mistakes that I made. I think of things I could have written differently, think of the kind of stories I should have pursued, but we really did take our obligations very, very seriously.

I remember having long conversations with students who I thought wanted to use the paper for their own personal ends, to meet girls for example. I said, "I don't care about your lonely hearts issues. This is a newspaper edited for the whole campus, not you. Take your ad to see a girl and post it somewhere else. Write something that's a real review for the arts page next week. I don't want to see your crap." We took our obligations seriously. It doesn't mean we always fulfilled them perfectly, but what *The Medium* became whenever I looked at it was kind of a sad joke.

SI: Okay, alright. Well, we would like to jump forward now to your graduate studies at NYU. Just for the record, can you just tell us when you started at NYU and when you completed your doctorate?

RS: Yes, I started NYU in the fall of 1979. I defended my dissertation in about December of '85 and I formally got my degree in the spring of 1986.

SI: Okay. Now last time we talked about the work you did on your master's thesis, which focused on a socialist Yiddish choir group, if I am remembering correctly?

RS: Yes, the Paterson Jewish Folk Chorus.

SI: Yes. Your doctoral dissertation went in a different direction, can you tell us about your topic and how you got into that?

RS: Yes, yes. I knew one thing. I wasn't going to learn Yiddish. I just didn't see it as a language that was going to take me where I wanted to go. So, I didn't see a dissertation on the Paterson Jewish Folk Chorus and the world of Yiddish.

PC: Alright, I got to stop. I don't get it. How did you write it in the first place, at all, if you didn't know Yiddish?

RS: I did two things. The chorus members that I interviewed were all either people who were native born Americans or came to the United States as very young immigrants who were fluent in English.

PC: Oh, okay.

RS: So, I could do a lot of oral history interviews with them and that was really a key to it. Then, I found a friend of mine, a Livingston student, Raya Bokor, whose mother spoke Yiddish and I gave her some of the song sheets and programs and things like that and she translated them for me and explained what they were. It's really interesting. Her parents had grown up in Central and Eastern Europe in the years before World War II, and both went through the Holocaust and I remember her father saying, "Look, I'm going to give you some advice, don't get publicly involved with doing a paper about communists because the government is going to come after you. You don't know. I've seen governments do all sorts of things." "By the way," he said, "Watch out for the mailman, letter carriers are the exact people that governments use to spy on people. This is just my advice to you." [laughter] I didn't take his advice, but he was really serious and his wife, interestingly, did the translations, not him.

So, I used translators. I used oral history interviews. Part of it, what was interesting about the chorus to me was that from the '50s to the '70s, really the last twenty years of its roughly fifty year existence, they were trying to always reach a larger American public, so that Jewish issues remained very important to them, but they also did concerts with African American choruses. They often did songs in the English language as well. Although Yiddish and Jewish culture was always the heart of their performance repertoire, you could understand, looking at the arc of their

existence, how they moved out of the mostly Yiddish speaking world and to a more multilingual world, and that left a nice trail of sources for a guy like me who didn't speak Yiddish, right.

PC: This is a historian's question. Is there stuff?

RS: Yes, I gave all my interviews and the paper to a collection at the YMHA [Young Men's Hebrew Association] in Wayne, New Jersey. A fellow named Jerry Nathan set up a collection on Jewish history and because the Jewish community of Paterson tended to migrate out to Wayne, it struck me as the logical place, so I donated those interviews and all my papers to him a long, long time ago.

PC: The choral music itself, is that around the area?

RS: It is. I mean, it's really interesting. When I was in grad school, I did a minor in folklore and to fill that I did a fair number of courses in ethnomusicology. In one of the courses that I took with a professor named Salwa El-Shawan, she said to me, "Look, if you want to do a paper on the New York City end of this choral movement, and do an ethnomusicological analysis of it, that would be a great idea" so I did. So, I then found the New York City branch of this choral movement and I went to their rehearsals and I interviewed a lot of the women in the chorus, and then, I went to one of their performances which was in memory of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. I learned a lot during that and it was much more about the contemporary end of it and what I had concluded at the end of my research in that graduate course in ethnomusicology, was that the chorus was going to become more and more of an ethnic institution and less and less of a political institution, and indeed this is what happened. When I was interviewing these elderly, mostly women--I don't know if I can remember a single man who was in the chorus. It would have been in the early '80s, but these are mostly elderly women. Many of them who came down from the Bronx and they would rehearse once a month at least at the McBurney Y in Manhattan. They were women who if they had not been members of the Communist Party, they'd been sympathetic to the Communist Party. If they were political, they vigorously defined themselves against another chorus that had a similar repertoire, but was out of the world of the Socialist Party. I didn't say that deep in my heart I was closer to the socialist world than the communist world, but that was the truth and I interviewed them at length about these things and what was fascinating to me was that the two choruses had very similar repertoires. They both drew on the songs of Yiddish speaking radicals in czarist Russia, but they performed separately. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, this all began to change. The sharp separation between the two of them just didn't make sense anymore and they basically merged into one chorus that the last time I checked--I would say this is probably at least five years ago--were still singing in New York City.

PC: Wow.

RS: They had younger people in it all the time then. I mean young, relatively young, people in their fifties. The children or grandchildren of these women who were in their eighties when I interviewed them and they would sing, but it was Jewish, it always had a kind of liberal end to it. There would always be a mention of sort of justice and equality and things like that, but it was more Jewish than fiercely political and over time I think you can see how that shift occurred.

This kind of reconciliation that happened in the chorus happened in other places too like in publications, and magazines and newspapers. Where some of the old divisions that were grounded in the differences over the Soviet Union, the Communist Party and Stalin, it didn't make sense anymore once you got into the late '80s and early '90s.

PC: I want to actually push that just a little bit.

RS: Sure.

PC: I mean, my sense from working with, I don't know anything about Yiddish culture in America today, but my sense from working with the graduate students in our program who have done things in the '20s, '30s, and '40s and who have had to go back and learn Yiddish in order to do it. It's not a dead culture, at least a dying one. The way you're describing it, it is not. It is still around.

RS: No, well I think this is a very interesting question and I have friends who would vigorously dispute the idea that its dead, I mean, vigorously dispute it. There's no question that the world that these women grew up in--they had worked in garment industries often, they had been teachers sometimes, they had been politically active people before World War II for gosh sakes--they grew up speaking Yiddish, and the Yiddish language was very important to their larger sense of their identity as Jews. They often had a fairly secular Jewish identity and the language they would use in Jewish functions, where they expressed their Jewishness would be Yiddish. Their world has sort of faded out with their passing. There is, though, a world today of the Yiddish Book Center up in Massachusetts, of the klezmer music scene in New York City, and Yiddish language instruction programs and universities that I can think of which is vigorous, at least within itself. [Editor's Note: Klezmer music is music of Eastern European Jewish origin. It is sung in Yiddish.]

I had a very good friend who once said to me, "You want to learn Yiddish?" and I thought, "Of all the hobbies I'm going to pick up." I had to say, "Sadly, it's kind of low on my list. It's going to take me so much time to learn. I don't know how I'd do it." I know I'd have huge problems with the alphabet. I could probably pick up spoken Yiddish pretty quickly, but since the whole point would be to read old things that were published decades and decades ago, Yiddish without the alphabet wouldn't do that much for me.

PC: Right.

RS: So, I wouldn't call it dead, but I think it's living in a new context. These women spoke Yiddish fluently among themselves. It was the everyday language. It's kind of the world my father grew up in. He could speak a little Yiddish. He always understood what was being said around him in Yiddish, but once these people of that generation passed Yiddish became something else, something that deliberately had to be resurrected and sustained for all sorts of reasons. I think there was a difference between the old Yiddish language world that these women came out of and the world of some of the klezmer revival and the Yiddish Book Center today. Often, people have family connections, political connections, cultural connections between those two different sort of tendencies in the Yiddish speaking world, but in the end, I

think it's important to understand both the similarities and the differences and the changes over time that take us from the world of 1912 to a world of 2012 with Yiddish.

SI: So, tell us about your topic for your doctoral dissertation?

RS: I knew it wasn't going to be Yiddish, but I wasn't sure what it was going to be. I knew it would be in American history. I knew it would be somewhere in post-Reconstruction American history. I knew it would have an urban dimension. I remember we had John Gillis in to speak once about one of his books. He was researching a book about marriage on the time and he said, "Marriages are a kind of theatre in the sense that they're a way that people have in the wedding ceremony of expressing things that they would have trouble articulating verbally."

I said to myself, "Huh, so what kind of ceremony or ritual can I look at to understand how people thought or felt about changes in the American city in the early twentieth century?" I pretty much thought of myself as, in my most focused way, as a historian of US history from the 1870s to the 1920s. What you might call the Progressive Period.

It's interesting to me. As I reflect on choice of dissertation and my years since, outside of that spark of interest in the 1870s to the 1920s, most of the topics I looked at, in fact, were post-World War II. I thought very seriously about doing a dissertation about the George Wallace campaign and the white working class in northern cities. I thought that would shed light a lot on conservatism and working class politics in the United States in the '60s and '70s. I thought that was important because I had done a lot of work in labor history with Danny Walkowitz and there was a way in which, it was clear to me by the early '80s, that the trajectory of American politics that we had anticipated was not bearing out, that things were headed in a more conservative direction and that working class politics was not necessarily liberal or even left wing. I thought the Wallace campaign might be a way to get to that, but we didn't see the sources. [Editor's Note: George Wallace lived from 1919 to 1998. Politically, Wallace was a conservative democratic governor of Alabama and presidential candidate who advocated a segregationist platform and courted white working class voters.]

I thought about doing a dissertation about ethnic conflict in changing neighborhoods in New York City, because by the '80s, certain neighborhoods, particularly the ones that I knew best from my family's history had just been transformed demographically, economically, socially and I'd think, "What was this like? How was this experienced? How would I begin to understand that?" But when I talked to a few professors about that, they all saw a need to do a very quantitative study with numbers and data. I was not a data man myself and that didn't seem to me to be a very interesting way to do it. I let that drop.

The other post-war topic that I thought a lot about was the *Daily News* and the rise of right wing populism in the US, because I thought that, again, it seemed to me, by the '80s, early '80s, there was a rising conservative current, but there was nobody on the faculty who really took up on that question in a way that was really interesting. We wouldn't know how to do it, didn't know how we'd research it.

So, I circled back to the Progressive Era and Danny Walkowitz, who was my advisor, recommended to me an essay by Gareth Stedman Jones about the English working class and it had a little bit about music hall. In fact, it was derived from a short book about British music hall and the British working class. I started to think, vaudeville is the American version of this and perhaps there's something to be understood by looking at vaudeville that would help me understand the changes in New York City between roughly the 1870s and the 1920s. I poked around it. I poked around it. I found a few books. I found a dissertation written by a fellow whose last name was Snyder, no relation of mine. I felt that there was probably something worth doing here. That it would help me bring together urban history, social history and cultural history, and struck me as a lively topic. My long term ambition was that whatever dissertation I wrote, I wanted to make sure it became a book so it wouldn't just sit on a shelf. I settled on the vaudeville topic. Danny Walkowitz was my first reader. Tom Bender was my second reader. I worked very closely with both of them. Both of them were very important to me. Then, Brooks McNamara in Performance Studies was my third reader and he was a historian of theatre and he helped me keep honest on that.

PC: Just for the record.

RS: Yes.

PC: This is Danny Walkowitz at NYU?

RS: NYU, yes.

PC: Yes, right.

RS: Yes, by then at NYU.

PC: Danny was here before that, right.

RS: Yes, exactly, here, and then, he was at NYU, yes.

PC: Yes, okay.

RS: So, I put an ad in the *New York Times* seeking reminisces from anybody who knew the vaudeville scene. I started to look for places that were haunted by ageing actors around Times Square. I found a nursing home in North Jersey where there were a number of old vaudevillians. One way or another, I probably interviewed I think two dozen old vaudevillians. Not just performers, but also audience members and I also devised some questionnaires that I could send out to people. The project took off. I wrote the proposal, the department liked the proposal, even put it on file as an example of a good proposal for other students to use. I had, by this time, finished my exams.

I took my written exams in US history. At the time, there was very little specialization and really very little student control over the exam process. All you could do is pick your committee and that was it. You sort of knew that if you had Pat Bonomi for colonial and early national, you'd

get at least one question about politics or maybe another question about religion in American life, but that was all you knew. You did an enormous amount of reading. I would talk to professors about it and I know Danny sort of spoke with me several times to get a good sense of whether I was ready. At the time, going into that, I had three years of financial aid at NYU which I thought, in retrospect, was really too little and I felt that I've got to take this exam as quickly as possible. There was a tradition of students spending a year of their financial aid studying for exams. This struck me as a colossal waste of aid money. So, I said, "Alright, I'm going to take my exams in my last year of coursework," and that's what I did.

I vividly remember going cross country skiing in like January and looking at the calendar and thinking, "Okay, five months from now I have to take the exams. This is the last really big, fun thing I'm going to do. It's exams from here on in." I fell on that ski trip and badly tore a muscle. It took years for it to heal, so I really was not that active. That winter and spring I read and studied a lot. I worked closely with a friend who was also taking her exams at that time. I talked to professors, but at the end of the day you were going into the exam room relatively cold.

I knew I was going to have one question on 18th century and early national, one question on 19th century, one question on 20th and one sort of omnibus on all of American history. The other thing that I did that was new was I insisted on typing my answers. My handwriting was abominable. My typing isn't great, but I knew that the faculty could read my typing. They could not read my writing over the course of an eight hour exam or six hour exam.

I had a dream before I went into the exam where at some point Danny Walkowitz is saying to me, "When you get to the orals, I'm going to grill you on Schwartz's book on the Federal Reserve Board and you better know it." [laughter] I just like die inside and in my dream, I go running to the encyclopedia looking up the word F to see what the entry is on the Federal Reserve Board so I'll know something going in.

But I took the exams. It was hard. I took them all in one day, broke for lunch in the middle, and I passed them with distinction. I remember Danny saying to me afterwards, "You did a really good job. I want to tell you the answer to be really proud of is the distinction from Pat Bonomi, because if Pat said it wasn't good she would tell you it's not good and she would grade you accordingly. If she liked it you really achieved something," and I wrote about the political interpretations of the American Revolution.

I took my oral exams in United States social and cultural, 1870 to 1920. That was a challenge in the sense that we argued loud and long among ourselves about what was social history, what was the meaning of social history. At one point I remember thinking this is like a drill that I had on the high school wrestling team called shark bait where they put you in the middle of the mat and the team stands around you in a circle. The coach would blow a whistle and a guy would jump out and wrestle with you and he'd blow the whistle, that guy would get off and he'd call another name and another guy would come at you. Obviously, you're like in the middle of the mat. You're wrestling ever fresh guys and you're getting worn down.

There were moments when the orals felt like that, but I could make it work. I had read a lot of folklore that they had not read, so sometimes, when I was in a jam, I would use a folklore book

to make my point. They couldn't really contest that well. I used guile once. They asked me about the book *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. I said, "I have to confess, I haven't read it. It's a classic. I can praise it without having read it." They all laughed, and then, we went off to the next question. At one point, the faculty were even sort of disagreeing among themselves because I used a point from Elizabeth Fox Genovese and Tom Bender thought that was unsubtle and they argued among themselves before they came back to me, but it came out fine. I passed with distinction. I was very pleased.

PC: So, you had to take both written and orals as a sort of two stage comprehensive?

RS: A two stage comprehensive--the oral was probably two or three weeks after the written. You took the written, you got the results, and then, you took the oral. The oral was a separate field. I mean it was US social and cultural. The other thing was utterly omnibus, I mean, I was reading back in the history of slavery, and the history of the South. In retrospect, in the comprehensive, there were fields that I didn't know a heck of a lot about. You read very broadly, and then, in the oral, though, you were on a field. I mean, social and cultural, you had to justify Reconstruction to the 1920s and go from there.

Then, I got to work on my dissertation. One year, I guess it was my fourth year, I'm not positive about this; I had no formal aid from the department. I had to scrounge up something for myself. I worked at Random House as an editorial assistant. I adjuncted a little. I picked up research work. I just remember that that made a big impression on me because I felt that, "Hear I am. I'm really ready to roll, and then, instead of working on my dissertation all the time, I'm getting maybe a day or two each week to work on my dissertation. This is not maintaining progress."

Then, I got a fellowship after that from the department. That was very good. That let me work full-time. I worked like a mad man, made a lot of progress, and then, at the end of that, applied for a Smithsonian pre-doctoral fellowship and I got that and I went down to Washington DC in the summer of 1984 to begin the pre-doctoral fellowship at the Smithsonian.

I was in residence there from '84 to '85. That was a tremendously rewarding experience. I went there not expecting to like DC too much. There was some sorrow and turmoil in my personal life, so I started under a bit of a cloud and a bit of a funk, but I actually fit in in DC very well.

I didn't know anybody. I had a beloved aunt in the Virginia suburbs, but otherwise didn't know anybody except from the people that I shared a house with and I didn't even know them very well, so I sort of quickly set to sort of building up my life again within the Museum of American History. I organized a seminar for fellows. I noticed that there were fellows and interns wandering the halls like me. They had nobody to talk to or there were limited people to talk to. I set up a seminar that would meet once a month and that worked out really, really well.

I found out how to get into the folk music scene and the Irish music scene in D.C. I found a place to play so I could start playing.

I looked up the Sierra Club. I started leading hikes for the Sierra Club and I pretty quickly was in the middle of all sorts of things.

I loved living in DC and I loved being at the Smithsonian. It was great. We had a very good dynamic seminar going. I think I helped make the fellows at the Smithsonian a more visible part of the intellectual life of the place; some of the fellows that I knew that I'm still in touch with today. In fact, two guys that I can think of--one--really one of my closest friends--lives in London and we're still in touch.

We also organized a campaign to testify in Congress, on why the Smithsonian should divest its holdings in South Africa. I was impressed by the Smithsonian in the sense that they didn't try to stop us. I mean, we sort of told them we were going to do this. There was going to be a hearing in Congress and I was eager and I probably pushed myself to the fore and said to the other fellows, "Look, if you want to split the testimony, we can do that or I can do it." The other fellows said, "No, you do it." So, I wrote a statement and anticipated being quizzed by Congressman Newt Gingrich the next day, who was going to be at the hearing, and I was going to be ready. It reminded me of my orals again. I just crammed relentlessly until about midnight the night before. I knew everything about South Africa and divestment.

PC: Did you know he was a historian when you went?

RS: Yes, I knew.

PC: You knew that, okay.

RS: When we got there, it was a committee hearing and two things struck me--it was the enormous affection for the Smithsonian. I mean, congressmen again and again genuflected towards the Smithsonian on this issue and they didn't want to harm the Smithsonian in any way and I read this statement out loud. The congresswoman who questioned me was Mary Rose Oakar and she was very friendly. There were no hostile questions. She asked me did I anticipate this was going to get me in trouble and I said, "No." She said, "If you have any trouble, call me." I said, "Thank you." It worked well and I think a good policy came out of it in the end.

I left in the summer of '85 and went back to New York City. I thought of living in DC longer. I didn't have anything personally to pull me back to New York City at that time, but I went to my friend's graduation at NYU--one of my closest friends from high school got his PhD in chemistry--and I was just thrilled to be back in New York. I couldn't believe how much I must have been missing it because I really immersed myself in DC. I refused to read the *New York Times*. I read only the *Washington Post*. I thought of myself as a Washingtonian, but boy when you got me back to Washington Square at Tommy's commencement I thought, "Well, this is really a place to be. I should come back, why not." So, I came back, I got a job through the history department working in a humanities council in Bobst Library. It was an administrative job. It was a difficult job. After I had been there for about a month I was talking to Tom Bender and he said to me, "By the way, an editor from *Newsday* just called and I gave him your name. He's looking for a research assistant to do a book on the significance of ethnic and racial diversity in the history of New York City. Would you like to do that?" I said, "Would I? Sure." I said, "Give me the guy's number."

I got the number and I called the guy right away. His name was Bernie Bookbinder. He was a senior editor at *Newsday* and I was just excited by the idea of working with him for two reasons. One, it was a really interesting topic. It was right up my field of interests. Two, I still had a fascination with journalism and I felt that the academic job market was still pretty tight and this might be an alternative career that would be really good. Bernie said to me later that he really liked the way I called him and didn't wait for him to call me.

We met at a restaurant in Huntington, Long Island. I was very impressed by his work as a journalist. He had created a kind of sociological investigative team at *Newsday*. He edited the editorial page. What I liked about him when we sat down at the restaurant--it's a nice place--and he says, "Look, *Newsday* is paying for this, so if you want to have lobster, you should have lobster." So, I had lobster. [laughter] I was so happy and I probably had one drink too many. I got on the wrong Long Island Railroad train headed home. It took me ever further east into Long Island until I realized I was not heading back to New York. I got back to New York in the wee small hours in the morning. He called me the next day and said, "Look, you've got the job if you want it."

There was some complaint in the department that I was going to ruin a valuable connection to the Humanities Council at NYU by doing this. One of my favorite faculty members, Al Romasco--dying then of cancer, a superb economic historian--I mentioned this to him and he just sort of waved it off. He said, "Rob, don't worry about it. They're going to find somebody else to fill your job at the Humanities Council in two weeks and given the way the job market looks, you would be crazy to turn down a job like this, that could actually help you into a different kind of career if you need one, do it." So, I did it.

I worked with Bernie for a year-and-a-half. It was a wonderful experience. I fit revisions of my dissertation into a book, into the side. I had gotten, by then, a contract with Oxford University Press under Sheldon Meyer. I worked very closely with Bill Taylor who was a great cultural historian doing work on Times Square, consumer culture, popular culture and urban culture. I worked on revisions. I did a couple presentations based on the dissertation. My analysis of the significance of vaudeville evolved and I worked very hard to make the book something that would be readable and comprehensible for the general reader. I always took very seriously a point that Warren Susman made that, "Good books should be comprehensible to a college freshman." I took that very seriously.

Bill put me through a couple rounds of revisions and it was either two or three, let's assume it was three and after I finished the third I kept thinking to myself, "Oh, I can't do this again. If he says one more time, I'm going to fall apart."

I was going cross country skiing. I was heading out to ski and I'm walking through the streets of the Village with my skis over my shoulder and I see Bill and I think, "Oh, well, no avoiding him." He says to me, "Rob, I've got to salute you. You've done a great job. You have an important point. You make it so elegantly and effortlessly that people would be persuaded without knowing they're being persuaded, nice work. This is really good and I think it's time to send it back to Oxford. It's ready to go." That was it. I was in heaven.

A little bit later I was trying to figure out what to do the next year. It would have been, I guess, the spring of '87 and my job at *Newsday* was winding up. I had made inquiries at *Newsday* about staying on there. The signals were uneven. They didn't quite know what to do with me and I didn't quite know how to market myself to them and that was a bit of a problem. I anticipated I could do a great job working somehow on the editorial page, but I couldn't make a really good connection there, even though I've written some op-eds for the editorial page--one about the Statue of Liberty, another one about the Vietnam Memorial in Lower Manhattan. I sat down and had a long interview with the guy who was then managing editor and when he looked at my resume, and then, he asked me about what I had done with Bernie he suggested that maybe I can be the researcher for a comic strip on New York City history and I said I didn't think that was a really good use of my abilities.

Working with Bernie, I had done much more than research. We were a great team. He was a great writer. I was a young whipper snapper of a historian. I was doing a lot more than research and I was designing chapters, doing all the research, handing it over to Bernie. He would read, interpret, and then, write, but I was as much an editorial architect to the book as he was. I would read his drafts all the time and work on them with him. I didn't quite know how you sort of push yourself into a newspaper at the appropriate level at the time, so I didn't like what I was hearing at *Newsday*.

I was up for a job at the Smithsonian as a curator. I made the short list. I wasn't sure that a museum job was the right job for me only because I had no experience in collections management. I didn't have an enormous amount of enthusiasm about collections management. I still saw myself as a historian and a writer. I didn't know how I would make that work within the Smithsonian. So, I interviewed for that job and I didn't get that job.

Then, out of the blue a call came that Princeton was looking for history lecturers and Tom Bender got in touch with me and he got in touch with a few of my other friends and I went down for an interview, and gave it my best shot and I was hired to be a history lecturer and I was there from '87 to '88, and then, '88 to '89. The job market was getting really tight. There were not many jobs out there and I was starting to feel really confined.

I was also a bit conflicted about Princeton. A very good friend of mine, Frank Cavill, once heard me talk about my reactions to teaching there and he said, "Rob, you talk as if teaching at Princeton makes you some kind of a traitor." I said, "Exactly Frank, I feel like a traitor. I wanted to help kids like you and me, who didn't come into the world with a lot of assets, get a good education. At Princeton most of my job is helping kids who have plenty, get plenty more." He said, "Come on, lighten up."

I was there for two years. I applied for some fellowships that would take me out of there and I got two--one at the Humanities Center at Columbia and another at a place at Columbia called the Media Studies Center and I chose the Media Studies Center for two reasons. It was a one year fellowship. That was a problem, but it was a one year fellowship doing your own work. You didn't have to teach for anybody else and I was, after two years at Princeton, tired of being a lecturer in somebody else's courses. I would teach small seminars, but in general I felt that it was time to teach my own courses or just take a break from teaching.

So, I turned down the Heyman Center [for Humanities at Columbia University] and I took the Media Studies Center Fellowship and I was very happy to get that and I thought that I'll use this probably now to sort of find an alternative career. I had, by that time, been on the market for three years and it just wasn't opening up for me the way I wanted it to.

I remember very vividly, it would have been the spring of '89, I was at Princeton and I had this growing consciousness of myself of being Jewish and I decided I'd look around for a Seder to attend and I called the Hillel and they sent me to this one group to another group and a long story short, I went to a Seder and it was, in fact, organized for inter-faith families and in that sense I felt right at home. I'd grown up in an inter-faith family.

I was talking to a woman and she just starts pouring out to me in casual conversation that her daughter has a PhD like me; that her daughter's on the job market, that her daughter's just finding it so, so hard because the job market's not leading anywhere for her, and this sounded like a very familiar situation.

She says, "What can I do?" She says, "What can I do for my daughter?"

I said, "Well, you want to support her, but the one thing you want to tell her is that she doesn't have to persist in this forever if it's not leading her to the kind of life she wants to live. Don't tell her to persist in endlessly staying on the job market if it's not taking her where she'd like to go because I think it can be really debilitating applying for jobs you don't want and pursuing a career where the chances of rewards get slimmer and slimmer over time. Support her, but if she decides to do something else after having had gotten her PhD don't let her think in anyway she's doing anything less or mistaken or failing."

Obviously, I was talking about myself a little bit there. I went to the Media Studies Center thinking I'm going to build a new career off this. I started doing a research project on crime and reporting about crime in New York City. I got involved in the borough president's campaign of Ruth Messinger, a sort of very progressive, smart Democrat. I started reading a lot on criminal justice because I anticipated doing a book that would be about crime in New York City. That would be my second book after the vaudeville book. I felt very strongly that crime had been high in New York City now for more than two decades and that discussions of crime had been monopolized by conservatives and to very bad ends. I had, by that time, been active for a couple years in the Israeli peace movement and I took great insight from the fact that in Israel you could find people who had impeccable security credentials who were also doves and I thought this was utterly lacking in the US in discussions of crime. I think, "Where are the progressive police chiefs?" Where are the criminologists?

I started doing research, and I would drop memos to Ruth now and then, try to bring this person into the orbit of our campaign. A friend of mine later, who worked on her staff, told me that was absolutely the third rail of her staff, that there was an absolute polar division about crime. One side of people who we called that "the root causers" said, "You can't do anything without changing the root causes." The other people, who I identified with, said, "There are things we should start doing, let's get to it." So, that didn't lead to a job the way I thought it would.

PC: To intervene just for a second here.

RS: Sure.

PC: Because you told us some fascinating things about the job market and what it meant to be a struggling academic in the '80s. Are you married at this point in time during the '80s?

RS: No, but I had met my wife. I met my wife in '89.

PC: The reason I'm asking is because I was curious about how you were supporting yourself.

RS: Sure, okay.

PC: What does a struggling academic do?

RS: I mean, I was really proud. I had jobs and fellowships. I made a living.

PC: Okay.

RS: I used to be constantly astonished by the way senior faculty would refer to people like me and say, "He didn't have a job." Or, "He never got a job." Or, "It took him ten years to get a job." I said, "Wait a minute, I had jobs all my life."

PC: Okay.

RS: "Buddy," I used to think, "I supported myself as a freelance writer. Do you know how hard that is to do? I made a respectable living as a freelancer. That's really difficult."

No, I met my wife in the fall of '89. I had just taken up this fellowship at Columbia at the Media Studies Center to write about crime and reporting about crime and I got a call from a woman at *Newsday* and she said that she had been referred by Joan Scott, a historian, an old friend of hers. Joan had said that I was particularly good at connecting journalism and history and making them work together, and could we meet some time to talk about this. She wanted to apply for grants and things like that. I said, "Sure, I'd be happy to give advice." We agreed to meet at the White Horse Tavern.

We met at the White Horse Tavern. I recognized her from *Newsday*. I had seen her in the newsroom while I worked at *Newsday* in '87. I remember she had a fierce argument with the woman who ran the expense accounts. I thought she handled the argument in an unsuccessful way.

When we started to chat we hit it off very well. I thought she was really interesting. She was covering the mayoral campaign. I walked her from the White Horse, east to the Astor Place train station and I remember we were both laughing and having a great time talking along the way. I thought, "Gee, she's really nice, maybe I might ask her out or something." Then, I see this guy,

he's beating up on this woman near Astor Place so I run over and I pull him off the woman and he's shouting again and again, "She's cheating on me. She's cheating on me." I said, "Look, you just can't hit her. You got to stop man. Get off." She goes one way. He goes the other, they separate, okay.

Clara then comes over to me, "What happened?" I said, "Well, he says she's cheating on him."

Clara says, "Well, that doesn't give him the right to abuse her in public." I said, "No, you're right, you're absolutely right." Remember, I pulled him off. He's a much bigger guy than me.

So, I actually liked her a lot and we ended up talking on the phone occasionally and I was afraid that if I asked her out on a date she would accuse me of sort of improperly taking advantage of what was a professional call, but it was sort of obvious over time that we liked each other very much and we started dating and we were married in, let's see, 1991, in June of 1991.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: Are you ready?

RS: Sure.

SI: Okay.

PC: Now you talked, periodically, through the last half hour about *Newsday*. Now, my sense of it, I live in New Jersey, so I read it occasionally, but my sense of it is that at one point in its life it was a great newspaper and I'm just curious to hear, just briefly, your reflections on it.

RS: Pete Hamill, a very fine journalist, once said that everybody who worked for *Newsday* had something unique in a career in journalism: They worked for a newspaper that you could be proud of and *Newsday* was a paper you could be very proud of. I had admired it from a distance when I lived in New York. I knew that it was a Long Island paper for a while; Bill Moyers was the publisher there. I remember going out to Jones Beach with a friend of mine from grad school and picking up *Newsday* and looking at it. I said, "Look, this is a really smart newspaper. This is a really intelligently done. This is a good paper, boy, really something."

When *Newsday* moved into New York City, I actually had a desk in the New York office and it had a really big staff, some very, very good people working at it. The op-ed page was stacked with talent. I mean, Murray Kempton, Pete Hamill, Sydney Schanberg, Jonathan Schell, just off the top of my head. The op-ed editor when I was there was Ken Emerson, a guy who made *Newsday's* op-ed page really a sounding board for every conceivable voice for the city. He would have an op-ed from the commissioners in the city government responsible for homeless affairs and he'd have an op-ed from a homeless guy and Ken had actually done some graduate work, I think at Rutgers as a younger man. He's working on a book about [Stephen] Foster, the songwriter in the 19th century, so you have a really amazing collection of people. There was strong investigative work being done and there was a commitment to covering the city and its neighborhoods.

I mean, what other newspaper would announce its arrival in New York City by doing a really elegantly produced, beautifully photographed and illustrated book about the significance of ethnic and racial diversity in the city and devote one of their top editors to it for like two years and hire me to work on it for a year-and-a-half? I mean, this was astonishing to me.

What we did was we wrote that book and the chapters were then repurposed as articles that ran in the magazine section of the paper.

This was just a way of doing journalism that was exceptional.

We had a foreign bureau. I used to chat with the guy who covered Beijing. I'd chat with the woman who covered Moscow. It was just amazing. It was, I think, partly the creature of its times economically. I think it was partly secure, because of unusual economic circumstances.

It was understood when I was there that the real competition was going to be the *New York Times*. The people who moved *Newsday* into New York, basically, moved it into New York after already having a beachhead in Queens, and they thought that either the *Post* or the *News* or maybe both had to fail. Economically, they could not stay afloat. Even Bernie bought this line of reasoning.

I'd say, "Why do they have to fail?" He said, "Because they're losing so much money."

I said, "Bernie, they're owned by two really rich guys. Maybe rich guys are willing to lose money in order to have a soap box in New York City. You know, not a bad toy if you're so inclined." He'd say, "No," that they have to; they're going to fall apart. One of them is going to fall apart.

Well, that never happened. A *Times* editor who went to *Newsday* told me once that the *Times* anticipated having to compete with *Newsday* someday.

I thought that if there was a failing to *Newsday* when I was there, a weakness to *Newsday*, it was that, as Bernie used to say, "At the end of the day, they're not going to do anything original with the paper."

It was a sort of an odd mix between a tabloid New York City paper and the earnest, serious, but tabloid-designed paper they published on the Island.

The joke among one of my colleagues up at *Newsday*, which I thought hit it on the head, was, he said: "*New York Newsday* was supposed to have the intelligence of the *Times* and the liveliness of the *Post*. Instead we have the intelligence of the *Post* and the liveliness of the *Times* and it doesn't work." Now I think that was a little bit unfair, but it was sort of on to something there.

The editor thought that you had to have really, classic, bloody, throat grabbing, slightly sexual headlines to get the paper sold every day, but then when you looked at the paper it was stacked with these intelligent policy analyses. I mean, it used to drive my wife crazy. She said, "I could

never crack the code. You had to have this hint of sex and scandal to get on the front page and I just want to cover the issues." So, I think that put us in a bad way, but it was a great paper while it lasted and its loss was a real loss to New York City because there is not a good local newspaper now just covering the city anymore. It doesn't exist.

SI: Alright. So, you were at Columbia, writing about crime and also working on this campaign. What year was the campaign?

RS: The campaign was '89.

SI: Okay.

RS: Then, by the spring of '90 I could see I was not going to get a job in city government. I started to look around more. I got a call from Molly Nolan at NYU and she said, "Rutgers-Newark needs someone for a year. What about a one year job?" I talked to Clara about it. We were then pretty serious and I said, "This sounds pretty good to me. I'll stay in the area. We don't have to go anywhere." I took a job on a one year line teaching history at Rutgers-Newark. Jan Lewis was, I think, the chair at the time, I'm not positive, but she played a big role in bringing me in. I taught courses in immigration history, popular culture and urban history, a three-three load. My book came out while I was there. [I] stayed on the job market, but with trepidation.

I sort of felt like my year at the Media Studies Center, and my work there and my work with the Messinger campaign had amounted to a turning point that didn't turn, so I was going to push a little harder with the market. I was shortlisted for a job in Chicago at Roosevelt University and I remember going out there and thinking, "This is a really hard job. The teaching load is huge and the salary is less than I'm making at Rutgers-Newark. How am I going to tell Clara that we should go to Chicago, where she lived as a college student? This makes no sense." So, when I didn't get that job I was actually secretly relieved. What to do next? I decided I have to do something. I have to give it a different tack.

So, I went to see McGeorge Bundy who was in the history department at NYU. It was very controversial that he was there. He had been brought in to do work on nuclear weapons and disarmament. He had written a book on the subject. There was a lot of anger at NYU about his presence. I knew about his history in the Vietnam War, but what I also knew was that he had been a really serious colleague. He had a good office and a research assistant and a secretary that other professors at NYU in history lacked, but McGeorge Bundy did his work seriously; everybody said that again and again. Ask him to write a copy for a brochure for a graduate program, he would write the copy for the brochure. Go to a meeting, he would be well informed.

So, I talked to Carl Prince who was the chair of the history department and I said, "What do you think?" He said, "I think, if you really want to make this move then I think Mac is the guy to talk to. "Because he did all that work at the Ford Foundation. You have some ideas and connections about urban affairs."

So, I went to see him and I had been impressed by him. I had seen him speak publicly a couple times and I once saw him speak alongside a representative of the Reagan Administration at a forum at NYU. I had never seen somebody so coolly, coldly, and relentlessly take somebody apart in public with absolute contempt for the guy. I mean I had absolute contempt for the Reagan guy too, but Bundy very deliberately sliced up his positions again and again and he showed how clearly he thought they were dangerous and very stupid.

So, I went to see him, and he was cordial, friendly. Then, he said, "Do you really want to make this shift?" I said, "Yes. I mean, it's just not working out. I think I need to sort of try something different and I've been doing this work on crime. I have this interest in contemporary policy issues, working on a book on crime in New York. I think this is a good idea." He said something really very useful to me and I've passed this on to many people. He said, "Here's the one thing I went to tell you. The problem that you're going to face is you're now going to be working against the grain of every credential and every connection you built up over more than a decade, and you built up good credentials and good connections." He said, "I was on the committee that gave you the department's prize for best dissertation your year, but most of the people you're going to meet are not going to know anything about that. It's going to be maybe irrelevant to sort of odd to them that you wrote a book about vaudeville. Having said that, I think you're making good moves to sort of reinvent the arc of your career and I'm going to give you a couple names."

He gave me some good names, people he had known from Ford. One of those names led me to a project being run out of the School of Public Affairs, the Wagner School at NYU, which was going to try to address crime and poverty with an integrated strategy. We would look not just at law enforcement, but crime, education, public health, social work, if you will. It was run by a guy named Bill Grinker who had been a top official in the Koch Administration and before that a top person in the Ford Foundation, so that actually gave me about two-thirds of a good income. [Editor's Note: Ed Koch was mayor of New York City from 1978 to 1990.] Then, I went and double backed and I called some people at NYU and Danny Walkowitz, who was then director of Metropolitan Studies at NYU, gave me a job teaching Intro to Metropolitan Studies, so I had a good income. I had a teaching job, and then, a much more remunerative income from this public policy work and did well at it, had an office and a desk.

We'd go to different cities around the country and sort of simultaneously evaluate, and a little bit coach, different policy making organizations in different cities about how they might apply to be part of this big project being run out of the Wagner School. There was all sorts of grant money involved some of from the Ford Foundation--no, some of it from the Justice Department, maybe some from Ford, although I'm not sure about that.

It was good work. I thought the staff was very good. There were a lot of people who came in from different corners. One was an ex-cop who had become a lawyer and had once been Ruth Messinger's chief of staff. Another was a woman who dropped out of an English PhD program at Yale, become a writer on policy issues involving crime, and then, become a policy analyst. Another person whose long-term ambition was to be a family court judge, but found this very congenial work while she did it.

So, we all worked together and I actually even convinced them of the value of having a history component built into all our evaluations of these projects, because what fascinated me was that policy analysts, to me, operated in a very short term reference. For them to go back two or three years was a huge look back in time and I would say it's nothing. I mean, let's go back at least ten or twenty years. Let's use the census. If we're working in a neighborhood, is this a neighborhood that's gaining or losing population? Is the ethnic mix changing or stable? Let's look at all these things and I built those in and did a lot of consulting in different cities around the country--Savannah, Indianapolis, Memphis, Newark--and it was good work.

The problem with it was the grants did not come through. The grant that we had hoped to get, which would have given us a strong qualitative research dimension, didn't come through. So, the qualitative research budget got cut and I was not a quantitative researcher. There was just no way I could present myself as a numbers cruncher and that was what was needed, so they explained to me that it basically, by the end of the summer, I was going to be phased out.

I got good names from the director of the project. He gave me the names of people he'd worked within the poverty research industry for many years, but to make a long story short, I did not see that as a really good way for me to go. If the key to jobs and policy and analysis was quantitative analysis, I was not going to become a good quantitative analyst. This was a jam. He gave me a lot of work in my final months on the project. By that time I was married and expecting, Clara was expecting our first child. My friend said, "He's crazy like a fox, Rob. He knows you're an expecting father. He knows you need to make as much money as possible. Of course he's going to dump work on you."

So, I'm doing a ton of work and piling up the money. Clara was still at *Newsday*. So, that job wound up and I called Danny at Metropolitan Studies that summer and I said, "Look, this public policy job is two-thirds of my income. I can't adjunct and make a living. I have to make a living first. I mean, adjuncting is nice, but I need another big income job. I think to pursue that I'm going to decline to teach Met Studies and devote all my time to finding a really good job. That's going to be an alternative to the career because this is just not working way I want."

Danny was very kind. I mean, I was putting him in a jam. He was going to need somebody to teach at the last minute. So, in that fall of '92, I started doing two three things. I worked as a volunteer in the press office in the Clinton campaign in New York City and started sort of reinventing myself as a journalist again. It's funny, I remember I had a conversation with Virginia Yans about this and she said, "You know, one of the things you have is a lot of editorial skill, don't diminish that. That can be a way for you to pull this off," and I did. I went to a workshop on career changes.

An old friend from the Media Studies Center who was now working at Channel Thirteen said, "Gee, we need writers. We need people to write treatments for scripts, proposals for documentaries. Would you like to do that?" I said, "Sure." I picked that up and I started doing a series of treatments for a documentary on the world economy. For me, once I could get the knack of how you write a treatment, I could use everything that learned in grad school. I sort of knew about the large courses of world economic development and I could visualize them in ways that would be compelling in a description of a potential documentary. So, I started doing that. I

started working at Channel Thirteen. I got a job. I answered an ad in the *New York Review of Books*. They were looking for someone who could take an oral history collection on transit workers and turn it into a book.

I answered that ad and I got that job. I also had going, steaming along in the background, work doing an exhibit for the Smithsonian on the Ashcan artists that really traced to the seminar that I had begun down there in '84 and '85. [Editor's Note: The Ashcan School was an art movement of the early twentieth century. Viewers recognize Ashcan art for its representation of daily life and poverty in New York City.]

So, this is all about '92, '93, and I felt that once I made the decision to reintroduce myself to the world as a writer and a kind of reflective journalist who wrote off a base of historical and contemporary knowledge, things were working quite well. I then got a job as one of the people who ran the research for Ric Burns' New York City documentary. He did a really big series on Channel Thirteen and that was a full time job for more than a year. So, between Channel Thirteen, Ric Burns, the Smithsonian, the Transit Museum, I was actually doing a lot of work. I worked pretty much four days a week.

My son was born in '93. My advisors at NYU always said, "Apply for jobs anywhere, go anywhere, go anywhere." I had always been very skeptical about that advice. It did not seem to me to be a recipe for a happy life for me. I loved Livingston. I hated living in Piscataway. I didn't want to repeat that. I thrived in Oxford the first time I lived in a city that had real heft to it. It wasn't New Brunswick. It was Oxford. It was a really interesting place to live. I thrived in New York City. I was happy to go someplace else that seemed exciting. I applied for lots of jobs around the northeast, but I didn't really want to go that far away from my native region.

I also liked the idea of being around my family. My family was very important to me.

What I'll never forget is my son was born on July 8, 1993 at Saint Vincent's Hospital and within four hours, just about everybody I loved and cared about in the world had come by to visit us and I remember saying to my friend--we went out for a beer in the White Horse Tavern that night, while Clara recuperated from the delivery--and I said, "If I had gone to Iowa. If I had gone to Nevada, to New Mexico, this never would have happened this way."

And I just want to say I feel utterly vindicated in every big decision in my life. This is the way I want to raise my kids. This is the way I want to live and it's been difficult at times, but I've also had it more on my terms than not and it feels really great.

In '94, I got a call from the Media Studies Center where I had been a fellow. They were looking for a new editor for the journal that they published. They published a quarterly called *Media Studies Journal*. The director of the center used to say he wanted an editor who could turn *Media Studies Journal* into the journalism equivalent of *New England Journal of Medicine*. I thought, "Interesting idea, I'll give it a try." We talked, I was interviewed again and I began that job in the fall of '94. So, for me, the big turn in my career that was wrenching and hardest was really roughly. … Well, let me put it this way, once I began the turn toward a career more as a writer, as an editor, that actually yielded pretty consistent results from '92 on. It took a while to

make something permanent happen, but it yielded results much more quickly than the policy world did; frankly, I mean, much more than the academic job market did.

I found the job market a depressing experience. It scared me, there's no question about it. I'm sorry that it worked out so hard for me, but I'm proud that I sort of stuck it out and found a way to make my own life again.

I try to pass on to the graduate students that I mentor all the ideas, habits of mind, strategies, that'll help you survive as a thinking scholar and thrive in a world where jobs for scholars of a traditional kind are harder to find. I try to pass that along, all the time.

So, in '94, I went back to the Media Studies Center and worked there for six years, and in many ways that was a very rewarding job. It was a hard job. The center was under all sorts of pressures in all sorts of complicated ways, but, for me, a job where my task was to edit a publication that encouraged scholars to write for a broader audience and journalists to be more reflective and analytical than they would normally get to be was a very good match. It was a very good match.

I worked with a very good staff. The associate, and then, senior editor, Lisa Delisle was just spectacular. We could bring in very smart, young people, sometimes Columbia students, sometimes people who came across the transom. I was sort of very proud that I tended to hire people who were history majors, philosophy majors, literature majors, and then, work with them to produce intelligent, compelling, thoughtful journalism.

It's interesting to me, I didn't hire many journalism majors. One came to me by accident, basically, but--my feeling and I had learned this in an interview with a really smart editor at the *New York Times*--said, "It's much easier to put style on substance than it is to work the other way around."

So, I'm going to start with people who have substance and I'm going to figure out how to put style on it. I will never forget watching this one young woman who was a philosophy major at Columbia take this piece, which I just thought was impossible to decipher, and she bit by bit takes apart the intellectual architecture of the piece and explains to me why it's such a mess, but why if we just move these three paragraphs and put a new introduction on it, the whole thing flies, and I said, "Jen," Jennifer Kelley was her name, "You've got it. Tell the guy, we have a piece."

Similarly, I remember a senior editor at the *New York Times* we were fact checking his piece and it just didn't add up and I sent one of my assistant editors who's a young guy, who had been a history major at Columbia, out. I said, "Look, you've got to come up with this, explain how he's got this sequence of events. I think he's all wrong. So, tell me when the Chinese communist armies won the major battles in the wars with Chiang Kai-shek. Tell me when this city was evacuated. Tell me when this policy was implemented. If we can figure out those three dates, we can sort of straighten out his totally messed up chronology." The kid goes off and he comes back in an hour and he's got this detailed analysis of the whole thing and we straighten it all out.

We would do that kind of thing again and again. I was very proud of that work.

So, I was there from 1994 to 2000. By 2000, you could see that the institution was changing. We'd gone through some different directors and the foundation that funded us I think was planning to move in a new direction and one in which the kind of work we were doing at *Media Studies Journal* was going to be harder to sustain. They wanted a much more daily impact on the stories of the day. I argued that our job was to provide long term perspective.

The director I started with was Everette Dennis. The guy I finished with was Bob Giles. Both of them, in their own ways, had a very good idea for what the *Media Studies Journal* could be, but by 2000, working with Bob Giles, it was sort of clear to me that the future of the *Media Studies Journal* was in difficult circumstances. So, I started looking around for future work. I looked at some conversation with *Columbia Journalism Review*. Looked around at some documentary companies. I had some preliminary conversations about foundations.

Applied for one job in urban studies, and then, out of the blue, saw a job at Rutgers-Newark in journalism which would require the PhD. To me that was always a code, because if you wanted a PhD in the journalism professor, you wanted a person that could teach academic courses and not just rely on newsroom knowledge. That was intriguing to me. I went out for the interview. It was conducted by the English Department and I interviewed with then Dean of the Faculty, Steve Diner, and hit it off quite well with him. He was a historian and he told me that his vision was to make Rutgers-Newark a great urban research university, where the scholarship of the faculty actually helped understand and improve the lives of city people in Newark and elsewhere.

PC: Excuse me, Steve was a, at that point, a history professor?

RS: He was dean of the faculty. He had gone in there as dean of the faculty. I had heard about him from a couple of friends. Danny Czitrom mentioned it to me. Yes, a couple of people had mentioned that there's this interesting dean at Rutgers-Newark, he has lots of good ideas. I hit it off well with Steve. I felt that this was a job where my own background as a journalist and a historian can come together in very complimentary ways. It was very important for me to find some kind of a job that integrated the two, and the strengths of the two, and Steve's notion of what we could do at Rutgers-Newark, I thought, was consistent with that.

So, I got the job and started in the fall of 2000. I left the Media Studies Center. I was sad to leave behind my colleagues, but I also felt that the Media Studies Center, as I had known it, was coming to an end and that it pretty much folded up shop not too long after that so I thought I left at the right time under the right circumstances. Bob Giles went on to run the Nieman Foundation at Harvard. Lisa Delisle, the senior editor at *Media Studies Journal*, went on to work at magazines. The young staffers that I worked with became, respectively: internet designers, Jen Kelley works at a high level way at the web. Joel Rubin works for the *Los Angeles Times* as a reporter. Kathleen Collins became a writer, and then, a librarian, and is now a tenured library professor at John Jay College. So, I sort of felt like the group of people that I had worked with had actually accomplished something unique. I loved the fact that we had a favorable write up in the *Times* literary supplement in their review of journals. I mean, this was not the kind of place

where we were going to be mentioned before I was the editor there. I thought we did a good job and it was a rewarding job and it was time to leave though, by 2000 and that's when I went to Rutgers-Newark.

PC: Did you know Diner's wife?

RS: I didn't know her. I knew people who'd mentioned her because she was at NYU.

PC: Oh, right, okay.

RS: I actually crossed paths with Steve Diner years ago. I was doing a piece for *Dissent* which in the end didn't get published in *Dissent*. It wound up in an editorial train wreck between two of the editors at *Dissent*. I had actually interviewed Steve Diner about thoughts about politics in DC in the Barry Administration and I thought he was really interesting. We also shared a friend in the historian Roy Rosenzweig. I had been part of the delegation of American historians that went to Budapest. I met Roy there. We worked in similar interests in the history of leisure and urban history. I tapped Roy for advice many times on both this book that I did with Rebecca Zurier on the Ashcan artists and just general career things. So, when Steve found out that I knew Roy, he was thrilled and e-mailed Roy. Steve told me later that Roy wrote him back and said, "Oh, Rob's a wonderful guy, works very hard, completely devoted to the institutions he serves and will accomplish the work of two staffers." I thought, "Ouch, the work of two staffers. You really need to hire two people, you can't just work me double time." So, I thought that Steve's vision of what we could do at Rutgers-Newark drew very much on ideas that I'd been germinating for a long time.

SI: We should

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: Sure.

RS: Sure.

SI: Alright I wanted to ask, before we get into your career at Newark after 2000, about your impressions of Newark when you were there in the early '90s, the students and the department that you were part of it.

RS: Yes, when I taught in Rutgers-Newark from '90 to '91, I taught in the history department as a visiting assistant professor. I had a three-three load. I only knew a little bit about the city. I had been out a few times as a child to visit the Newark Museum, occasionally took a train that passed through it. I was always struck by how much it looked like a big city as you come out of the train from New York and it's so close to New York. How did I miss this place otherwise?

When I got to the campus I, in fact, was in Jonathan Lurie's office, because Jon was on leave that semester so I used his office, and I was fascinated by the student body. A lot of them were very familiar kinds of kids. They were the kinds of kids from North Jersey that I'd grown up among,

but for one reason they stayed at home to go to college instead of going away. I mean, one of my best friends had gone to Rutgers-Newark for a year, Frank Cavill, a friend of mine from Livingston College.

A couple of things struck me. I had daytime courses and nighttime courses, so I taught in University College which was the night school and there I found the students quite mature, quite straining to keep up with a workload and a family life and a job, but for that, I thought, actually, often, very strong students. I was really impressed by the University College students. They were mature and motivated in ways that I found really a delight to teach and I taught courses in immigration history with them. I also had grad students in the history department, master's students. I taught an MA course in popular culture one semester that went over well. I was thrilled to see one of my students get a PhD and actually go on to teach in the University of Texas. Then, daytime courses with undergrads too.

I was struck by two things. In my perception, the University College students could handle reading loads better than the daytime students. I mean, when I flipped the University College syllabus right into a daytime course, it was clearly too much reading for the students. I got a little frustrated a few times, at least once, maybe more than once. I said, "Look, if you haven't done the reading, I'm going to cancel class. There's no point in having a class if you haven't done the reading," and I left the room. That was not fun that day, but in general I had a lot of students that I liked very much and a few that I sort of run into now, and then, since.

I remember at the time there were all sorts of debates in the news media about how somehow "political correctness" was muzzling robust exchanges of ideas on college campuses and this is not something that I saw.

What I did see inhibiting my students and really sort of limiting the range of their inquiry was their fear about their future prospects for jobs and getting jobs. They wanted to do whatever it was that would get you the job. I said, "My job is to teach you how to think and read, and write, and appreciate and analyze the relationship between the past and present, and you'll use that ability in many useful ways all your life." I mean, that was, for some of them, a little bit hard to fathom. They had a much more career-oriented focus and if you couldn't show an immediate job's payoff in something that you were doing in class, they were skeptical, but I had felt, over the course of my life, in conversation with my mother who had majored in business subjects at Hunter College, and in just watching my own career and the careers of friends, I felt very strongly by the time I even got to Rutgers-Newark that a narrow vocational range of courses doesn't serve you very well. It might get you started, but I knew profoundly that what had sustained me through difficult career changes in my life was what I learned in my history major and in my graduate education.

That doesn't mean that my editorial abilities, my writing, and my editing, and the television work I did were unimportant, but the skills needed to do that were relatively modest or at least sharply focused. It was the habits of thinking and analyzing and researching and inquiring that I had gotten in my undergraduate history major and my PhD that saw me through difficult times, on that I'm absolutely convinced. One of the lessons that I took away from that experience in '90, '91 teaching was, "How can we address the student's desire to feel employable upon graduation

and my deepest conviction that a narrow emphasis on vocational courses does not set you up well for the rest of your life?" If you train for one narrow job and you don't get that job, you're really in trouble, but if you acquire certain habits of mind and inquiry, and expression, you can do many different things and do them well and that's something that I've thought about ever since.

SI: Did you get involved in any kind of mentor student groups, more out of the classroom type of involvement with students then?

RS: Not much, I didn't sense much of the way of intellectual community. It was a commuter school. People came and left and that was true for the faculty as it was for the students. It's a much more busy place now with intellectual life and academic life. That's one of the big changes between the Rutgers-Newark I knew in '90, '91 and the Rutgers-Newark I know today. The department had some very distinguished people, but they tended to do their work, and then, go home. Students lived very similar lives. I organized a couple walking tours that went over really well with students. I always try to build them into my courses. Some of them showed up for that and clearly enjoyed that, learned a lot.

PC: I'm sorry walking tours of what?

RS: We did one on Ellis Island in the course on immigration. We went to Ellis Island, we walked around. We looked at not just the place itself, but how the exhibits and the design and the museum related the history of immigration through Ellis Island. I think I did a New York City walking tour. I might have. I know I took my students to the Apollo Theatre for the course I did on popular culture which they loved.

PC: Yes.

RS: Apollo Theatre Amateur Night is one of the last examples you can find of an old time vaudeville institution which is the live audience which has life or death power over the performer and the thing that fascinated everybody was the audience was almost always right. Within, at most, three bars, they knew whether you were good or not and if they didn't like you the booing was just overwhelming.

PC: So, you took them to the theatre, not simply as a "museum of the past." You took them to one of the actual shows there?

RS: Yes, yes, because I had figured this out in my research and in other courses that I taught that the experience of the Apollo Amateur Night is the closest thing you can come to the experience of the old vaudeville amateur nights.

PC: Yes, right.

RS: Where it's the knowing audience. This is one of the things that made vaudeville so great--the audience itself was so knowledgeable and could make really high level demands. They knew their stuff and artists had to meet those standards and if they couldn't they were in a lot of

trouble. So, that was a lot of fun and those kinds of exercises were really a delight and I think students learned a lot from them, yes.

SI: I am just curious, when you were at Princeton, did you have the freedom to do stuff like that?

RS: I did it a little. It was a very funny experience at Princeton, yes. One time I was working for Sean Wilentz in a course on Jacksonian America, so I said to the students, "Okay, if anybody wants to come in on Friday and we'll walk around some of the neighborhoods that figure prominently in Jacksonian New York. It'll give you a sense of what housing was like, where some of the immigrant parishes were," etcetera.

Some students came in, but in a class of easily sixty kids, I mean, four. I asked one of the students. I said, "Why?" He said, "Because they're like, stressed. They're overworked and Princeton focuses your life on Princeton and the thought of leaving Princeton is sort of daunting for people and so much is packed in that the thought of leaving is kind of challenging for people." So, a small group went out on that tour.

Then, I had another seminar I taught on popular culture and I found out that at the Village Gate, Mongo Santamaria, Dizzy Gillespie, and Tito Puente were all on the bill on the same night. I didn't know much about sort of Latin jazz. I knew just a little. I called one of my friends who knows a lot, and he said, "That's the most dazzling bill imaginable."

So, I built the whole unit around sort of African, Caribbean, and North American exchanges in the world of jazz and assigned readings, pumped it up, and then, went to the department secretary and said, "So, can I get any support for this?"

She said, "No, there's no money for something like this." "So, you can't drive us in?" "No."

"So, you can't give the kids like a break on the cost of admission? Things like that?" "No, can't support it in any way." I said, "Alright, I'm going to tell them that, and then, I'm still going to run the trip. We'll see if we can pull it off."

All the kids show up. They all agree it's one of the most dazzling, fantastic, interesting performances they've seen in their life. It resonates nicely with the readings we've done. They all order like Coca-Cola, not drinks to keep the bill down.

I found out a couple weeks later that a trip to the Metropolitan Opera was just fine; the department subsidized that for another colleague. Now, my thought was, "Well, maybe it's because he's a tenured professor, maybe because it's a different course, maybe, maybe, maybe." But I thought to myself, "You guys are really missing something. This is the kind of activity we should be encouraging students to go on. We should be putting supports under this. Please, please, please, think next time." It was, to this day, one of the most spectacular performances I'd ever seen and I couldn't think of three better artists to have on stage to talk about those exchanges. [Editor's Note: Mongo Santamaria was an Afro-Cuban jazz composer and percussionist. Tito Puente was a Latin jazz composer, percussionist, and mambo musician.

Dizzy Gillespie was a jazz composer and trumpeter. During their lifetimes, all three men were considered by their peers to be among the top musicians in jazz.]

PC: As an adjunct professor, did you feel a part of the department there?

RS: At Princeton?

PC: No, at Rutgers, the first time you were there. When you were there for one year?

RS: Jan certainly was really welcoming. Clem Price I remember being really friendly. They had a nice secretary who was very kind. Warren Kimball was very welcoming, but there wasn't much going on of a common nature. I'm hard pressed to remember an event on campus that I went to and I can't really remember much in the way of an intellectual community that was there at the time. I don't think that was unique to any one department. I think there just wasn't that much going on. It's very different today.

SI: You said, dealing with your undergraduate courses, the reading level when you flipped that course was tough, they were focused on their careers, but do you think they had been well prepared for college level study in general or do you know if a lot of them had to go for any kind of additional help or anything like that?

RS: I wasn't that aware of any support systems that I could rely on. I wasn't aware then if there was a writing center that I could send them to, if there was a reading center that I could send them to. It varied.

I mean, I thought that the students were bright people who had not gotten the best high school educations around and thus were sort of making up some time's lost ground when they were in college. Sometimes they were juggling the burdens of college and work and family life in complicated ways.

I just remember, it's funny, a couple kids stick in my mind; a cluster of young West Indian women who were incredibly bright and hardworking. I remember one of them had to get operated on for cancer in the middle of the semester, but she doesn't miss an assignment. She does a great job and at the end of the semester sends me this little gift pen saying "It's been such a pleasure to have you as a teacher. Thanks for standing by me when things got rough." I'm thinking, "When things got rough? You're the one who really…" [laughter]

Another guy, who's an immigrant from Ireland who was really smart and who was working as a construction worker in Jersey City, Hoboken area. I just remember doing a lecture on the Irish Famine and he sort of pops his hand up and he riffs off some statistics about the scope of the Irish Famine. I think, "My god, this guy is smart." Well, I bumped into him walking around the city seven or eight years ago. He got his degree. He became a psychologist. He's married, living in New York, really interesting life.

There was one young woman, Chinese American, incredibly smart, sitting in the back of the room with a Chinese-English dictionary so she could translate what we were talking about while we did it, and then, still getting A's at the end of the day. I mean, she was incredibly smart.

One young guy who I liked very much, this was the year of the first war in the Persian Gulf. I remember something I never thought I'd have to do when I went into this life was see a guy who was going off to war. He was in the Marine Corps Reserves and he explained he was called up and I said, "Look, come back, I'm sure I'll see you. We'll figure everything out. You're not going to lose any academic ground because you were called up." We talked for a while, and then, I saw him afterwards, he had made it. He said, basically, they were deployed offshore in a feinting maneuver on troop ships. Never got into any combat, he was fine, came out fine.

So, I mean, as ever, I think some of the students that I taught there were just unforgettable people because they were working so hard to establish something in their lives and were often overcoming obstacles that most people would faint before.

Then, you had the average student. They were ordinary folks trying to get a college degree, trying to make up for what they might have learned in high school, and juggling huge family burdens all the time. I remember thinking if there was one thing that I noticed it was that all of them had jobs; all of them had family obligations, and the combination could be really, really tough for them, really, really tough.

PC: Do you have an impression, numbers don't matter, but an impression of what proportion of your students were African American in a typical history class you might have taught that year?

RS: In the immigration history course, a chunk of African American students, because I remember this one young West Indian woman and a couple of other West Indian students--a group, by no means a majority, not even half, I don't think even more than a quarter African American in the immigration history course I taught at University College. Immigration history course taught in the daytime, small class, ten students, maybe one African American at most. Popular culture class, no African Americans. Course on US politics, culture, and society since '45, a few African American students, but not a lot. I would say African American students were not a majority, not even half in any of my classes. I think at most maybe, I'm thinking now about a quarter. I think that's probably right.

In my courses that I taught, the African American presence was not large. What was visible was a mix of people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds, some African Americans, some Latinos, some Asians, some kids from both older European ethnic groups and sort of newer European immigrants. I mean, I remember I had this one woman, she was Jewish, her boyfriend was Irish. They were sort of from older stock ethnic families. Maybe some kids who came in from more recent European immigration as well. It was the mix that I remember more than any one racial group predominating. I know for sure, as I think back on my courses, African Americans were never even half in any of the courses that I taught then.

SI: Alright, yes. Well, this will conclude today's session. Thank you very much and we will pick up with your career at Rutgers-Newark, next time.

RS: Sure.

SI: Thank you.

RS: Thank you.

----------END OF TRANSCRIPT----------

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