

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH MARK K. STEVENS

CONDUCTED BY THOMAS A. SCOTT AND LAURA BETH DAWS

EDITED AND INDEXED BY THOMAS A. SCOTT

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Interview with Mark K. Stevens  
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Monday, May 12, 2014  
Location: Dr. Stevens' office, Atrium Building, Southern Polytechnic State University

TS: Mark, why don't we begin by you talking about your background? I know you went through high school in Miami and then went to the University of South Florida, so why don't you just talk about that?

MS: Okay, actually I got my undergraduate degree in English Education because I wanted a job. I took a little heat from the English faculty at the University of South Florida. One time, I remember Dr. Hall, an American Lit professor, asked me if I'd be a member of the English students group or organization, and I said, "I can't. I'm an English Education major." She said, "*You're an English Ed major?*"

TS: As if that were the pits.

MS: Well, yes, and I have to say they were not the brightest students often. In fact, I served here [at SPSU] on the undergraduate student status committee, which deals with students who are flunking out. We've got a STEM education program going on here, and although this is certainly not true of all STEM education major students, there was one student we were working with who was failing her biology classes.

TS: And she wanted to teach biology?

MS: Yes. She was getting A's in her education classes and F's in biology and, you know, "Is this the kind of person I wanted teaching my kid biology?" No. I taught in high school for about five years.

TS: Where did you teach?

MS: I taught four years at North Miami High School and started the women's cross country team there back in those women's lib days.

TS: Oh, Title IX had come in.

MS: Yes. I was young, and I never had sisters, so they were kind of like my sisters, and we had a great time. I never cared about our won/loss record. What I wanted for them was what I got out of running, which was it makes you healthy, and it develops your character. That's what I wanted for them, and I think I succeeded.

- TS: Did you run on the track team when you were in high school?
- MS: Oh, yes, and I was pretty good. I was one of the better runners in the state of Florida.
- TS: Why don't you just say how much better you were?
- MS: When I joined the team as a freshman, I was the only person on the team who never scored ever.
- TS: That's because you were a freshman.
- MS: Yes. But by the time I got to be a sophomore, I started scoring a lot. I remember in our district meet, which qualified you for state, I was running the 880, and the top three went to state. I started off, and I was running along, and it got to the one-lap mark in a two-lap race. I counted down, and I thought, "Where am I?" I went, "One, two, three? *I'm three? I can go to state?*" So I really sprinted that last lap, and I went to state every year after that. Even after college I ran a few marathons. I took sixth in the Miami marathon one year. I know that Laura Beth is a marathoner too. So running has been important to me. You're a runner, Tom. For me it's a type of meditation. I mean, I never wear headphones and such. If I want a symphony, I just put it on my head and go. I taught, and my first education jobs, four years at North Miami High, I was teaching remedial English to kids from the ghetto, which was really rough. I got along with them pretty well. They had a pet name for me, Skeebo, which I think was actually a mark of respect; at least that's the way I took it.
- TS: How do you spell that for the transcriber?
- MS: Skeebo is how I would spell it. I never saw it written down. It's just one of those things; we don't write down nicknames. Then my wife at the time started at Florida State University, so I moved up with her and got a job at this little country school, Havana High School [pronounced Hay'van-ah] in Gadsden [County]. The town was called Havana because it used to be a shade tobacco grower north of Tallahassee. I taught regular English there, but it was really like remedial English because Havana was a pretty remedial school. It was pretty tough teaching. I remember at North Miami High we didn't even have textbooks or things like that. I remember running off pieces of paper, so they could have stuff they could read at their level. It was a lot of work. Now that I'm smarter, I would demand a lot better stuff for my students than I did back then. After five years of high school teaching, I went to Florida State and got a teaching assistantship, which most of us probably do in graduate school, and that was real successful for me.
- TS: So you got to teach college students?

MS: Yes, and it was a much cushier job—kids who could read and write pretty well. Florida State is a pretty good university, as is Southern Poly. We usually score in the top three or four in the thirty-one [institution] University System of Georgia on entry SAT scores, so we've got pretty smart students.

TS: Okay, so in '74 you got your bachelor's; in '82 you got your master's. I remember going down and visiting the University of South Florida in about 1969 or 1970 when it had maybe about 15,000 students. What was it when you were there?

MS: I think it was 18,000. I started in the fall of 1970 and graduated in 1974. It was certainly growing.

TS: It was a big campus, but not that many students compared to what it is nowadays.

MS: Right, and we were way out in the sticks. I mean, down Fowler Avenue there was nothing, or just about nothing, between I-75 and us, but that has changed a lot since then. It's a huge place now. But I loved it. We didn't have many residential students, and I really loved being on campus. I didn't have a car, so I spent all my time there.

TS: Okay so you get your master's in '82 and then go back to teaching before you get your doctorate or go straight through?

MS: Actually, I spent a year between my master's and my doctorate because I was a pretty good teacher. I won some teaching awards as a teaching assistant and served as assistant to the director of composition. So they let me teach as an instructor for a year as I figured out, "Are people who are getting doctorates in English getting jobs?" I analyzed a class that was getting doctorates, and I found out that they did. So I said, "Okay, I'll do my doctorate then," because I was confident that I could get a college teaching job. In fact, in the year that I was sitting out, I was walking to get my Volkswagen at a car repair shop and going by the FSU law school, and the head of the English department was walking the other way. He looked at me and shook his finger and said, "Mark, you stay away from there!"

TS: The law school!

MS: I said, "Don't worry; I have no desire to be a lawyer at all!" So it took me the typical six-year plan to get a doctorate. I chose a professor who hadn't had a student work with him for ten years because he was so hard. He made girls cry, Dr. Morris. He was very demanding.

TS: What is his first name?

MS: Harry. Harry Morris. He was an old guy. He must have been pushing seventy.

TS: Oh, real old guy!

MS: Yes, you're seventy, but you're retired; he wasn't retired yet. He and I got along just fine because he demanded work—I could do work. He taught 8:00 o'clock classes—I could get up at 6:30 and be there at 8:00. In fact, a story I have—one time I was taking a summer class from him, and the air conditioner was really down low. It was a Renaissance Literature class, and I noticed the student next to me—some girl—was all goose bumps because she was dressed for summer. We're in this chilly classroom, so I said [during the break], "Nancy, let me run down to my office and get you a sweater I've got in my TA office." Dr. Morris looks at his watch; he looks at me because we have like one minute left on the break; so I used the best of my cross country skills and ran down the hall, ran into my office, opened it up, got the sweater, ran back, and he had closed the door on me (laughter)! That's just the way he was.

LD: Oh, he didn't let you back in?

MS: Oh he did, absolutely, I mean, just because he closed the door...

TS: I was going to say, not only did you not get back in, but Nancy froze.

MS: No, I gave the sweater to Nancy; that was my job. But he and I got along well.

TS: That was very gentlemanly of you.

MS: For my dissertation I did a project based on data—what a concept, data—like collecting data. I ran into an article [by Frederick Salter] that was written in 1945 about this poet John Skelton who lived around 1500, a court poet to King Henry VIII who apparently contributed a lot of new words to the English language. It actually antedated a lot of words in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), which is kind of the authority for when words first come into the language. He did it in '45. This was in the early days in the early 1980s of computing. I said, "I bet I can use a computer to help me find these words better." I noticed that this guy had left out about half of Skelton's words too, so I said, "Let me redo this study, and I bet I'll find a lot more words." So it's data based. I remember when I first started looking up [words] I had a concordance run of Skelton's work. I used a computer science guy named Kermit at Florida State who ran me this long concordance, and we knocked out about the first 200 words, like all the "thes", "ofs", "bys" and "hims" and "hers." Then all the rest of the words—I had in a little printout under each word. I went through each of those thousands of words, and compared it against the OED definition. I remember when I first sat down and had gotten the printouts and had started looking, after about ten minutes I started finding stuff. I thought...

TS: Words that weren't in the Oxford dictionary?

- MS: Yes, words that Skelton had used before the first reference in the OED.
- TS: How old is the Oxford English Dictionary?
- MS: It was done in the late 1800s, from about 1880 to about 1910. It's been kept up-to-date, and it's now online. You can only get it online, but James Murray used cards to get his [information for each word he put in the OED], and I used cards to collect each word that I found a new one on. I remember Dr. Crook at my dissertation defense. I had brought all my cards and my Oxford English Dictionary micro-edition, and he started looking through this and noticed there were little ink dots next to a lot of the words. He said, "Those are the words you looked up?" I said, "Yes." He said to the other professors, "Look at all these!" I didn't have a problem with Dr. Morris. He was a data driven guy too, so he just kind of turned me loose.
- TS: So you found lots of words.
- MS: Yes, I found several thousands of them. I got the best English Lit dissertation of the year award at Florida State, and that was nice. It was good. Although I've not been much of a scholar, I have to say. I focused mainly on teaching and service here [at SPSU].
- TS: I was looking at your website and that's what I concluded—some interesting publications, but all kinds of different [interests].
- MS: Yes, I even did some in music. When I came here, we didn't have any music classes; and then we started one, like a music appreciation, which was taught by a woman in computer science, Becky Rutherford [currently, professor of IT and interim dean of Computing and Software Engineering] who has a master's in music.
- LD: Really? I didn't realize that.
- MS: She taught it for a few years and really didn't want to teach it any more. So I went to Sandy [William S.] Pfeiffer, my department head, and said, "If I get fifteen graduate hours in music—master's level music—can I teach this course?" He said, "Yes." I really love classical music, and he wanted to keep it in our department, so I took fifteen hours at Georgia State in graduate music and got enough to teach for SACS recommendation.
- TS: I think I saw something about "Bach in America" as one of your articles?
- MS: Yes, it's another data driven thing. It was finding early Bach performances in the U.S. Actually, I found the earliest one in a literary journal. You've probably heard of this as an American Lit person, Laura Beth, *The Dial*.

LD: I'm a communications person.

MS: Oh, that's right, okay. Well, *The Dial* is a transcendentalist kind of Emerson/Thoreau publication out of Boston, and I found a reference to a Bach performance that was done in the winter of 1840-'41 that was the earliest I think anyone so far has been able to find.

LD: So Emerson and Thoreau may have been going to hear Bach.

MS: Yes. Bach himself was not famous until really the 1820s when Felix Mendelssohn, a composer you might have heard of, in 1829 did a big Bach mass in Leipzig, and it reintroduced his music. Today's he's one of the greats. Back then he was considered old Bach—that's what they called him—old Bach. He was dead, and his sons were the newer composers. People listened to their music, and no one listened to old Bach stuff. Mendelssohn started the Bach renaissance, and it didn't get across the pond for another ten years or so, but then I found lots of research. I did a lot of research looking at old microfilms in Georgia State University from publications in the 1850s, '60s, and '70's. There were a couple of important national music journals. I combed through those looking for Bach performances, and again [produced] thousands of note cards.

TS: Very good. So you get your doctorate in '88, and then I guess there's a year lag before you start here?

MS: Yes, I was teaching at Tallahassee Community College. I got my doctorate in December of '88 and was seriously on the job market. I had a number of interviews and got several different job offers. My wife and favorite librarian was a quite important person. She was assistant director of the library at Florida State and had a really good job and was also becoming great with child. The deal was I had to get a job in a place big enough for her, when she was ready to go back on the job market, to find a job. I turned down a couple of jobs in small communities. I remember one I really liked in Indian River Community College in Florida that would have been nice, but it was just too small, so I didn't take it.

TS: The community was too small for her to find a job?

MS: To be likely to find a job, so I got the offer to come to Southern Poly or Southern Tech as it was called—Southern College of Technology at the time.

TS: Was it Southern College of Technology by '82?

MS: I think it was '86 we became that [name approved by the Board of Regents on September 10, 1986, effective October 1]. I remember in the gym seeing old STI stickers and stuff like that, but it was Southern College of Technology. Sandy Pfeiffer was just a year as our new department head then, and the guy before him

who was the guy who founded the department, Robert Fischer, everyone called him Poncho. He founded the department back in the 1970s, and he was an historian. Then Sandy took over, and I was one of his first hires. I remember I interviewed on Memorial Day, and I kept calling and saying, “Are you sure the university is open?” He said, “Yes. We get Confederate Memorial Day off, so we have classes on...”

TS: We never did that at Kennesaw.

MS: Well we did that. It was a Georgia law. I’m surprised you didn’t.

TS: No.

MS: So at Southern College of Technology we got Confederate Memorial day off which I think is in April.

TS: April 26.

MS: You would know. Then students went to class on the regular Memorial Day. So I interviewed then. I was not the first choice, so it took about a week and a half for the guy they offered the job to first to decline. Then they offered me the job. I took it because it was certainly a big enough place to work in for Shawn to find a job, and boy did she find jobs.

TS: Where did she work?

MS: Well, she started part-time at Cobb County libraries, the downtown library, and then she got in the DeKalb County system in Decatur, and then she became a branch manager after somebody resigned. Then the director of the library at Florida State was talking to the director of Emory University, and they were doing the big remake of Emory University libraries. I don’t know if you know about that. That was back in the early 1990s. They redid Emory University’s library and kind of doubled its size and stuff like that.

TS: It’s a ten-story building.

MS: Well, actually that’s the old library. They put an addition behind it. So the director of the Florida State library was talking at a conference to the director of Emory and said, “My assistant director is in Atlanta now, and she helped with our move to a new facility. She is really good at building design, and you should talk to her.” So he called her up, and she got on the project and kind of took it over and helped design their library and then started getting [a] national [reputation]. She also designed the Agnes Scott library, the Furman University library, the library in Washington, D.C.—the Agriculture Department library—and was really doing well. Then she started getting directorships. She was director at Reinhardt



College and then director at North Georgia before she took her job at Florida International University, which is why I'm retiring.

TS: She is the director of the library?

MS: She is the virtual director of the Biscayne Bay campus, so she's kind of the main person there.

TS: So you're going to be at Biscayne Bay?

MS: Yes, actually it's wonderful to have lunch with her because we can take our bag lunches and sit and watch the kayakers go by on the pristine Biscayne Bay and look across onto Miami Beach. It's really quite wonderful.

TS: Great. So you get here in '89. What was the campus like when you got here?

MS: Well, it was a lot smaller. The building we're sitting in certainly wasn't there. I was in the D Building, which was open air at the time. The halls were very chilly and windy in the winter and very hot and muggy in the summer, and we had little individual [air conditioning] units. I remember when I started in the English department, I was really grateful to have the job, but it was kind of old school, and the way we all had to grade our English papers was a points off system. If you missed a comma, five points off, if you made a comma splice, twenty points off. Anybody who teaches English knows, even the better students will quickly end up in the negative numbers, so people were really fudging things. I kept quiet for the first year because I knew you can't come and say, "We need to change this"; but once I started getting some street cred, the second year, I said, "I think we should maybe move to a checklist and give things more importance like focus and detail instead of pretty much just grammar." And people seemed really relieved to get out of there.

TS: I remember, when I was going through school, a comma splice was an "F." I never did think that made any sense.

MS: It really doesn't. What's important in writing is, "Do you have something to say? Do you know who your audience is and say it to them in a way that makes them understand what you're saying—and use detail and life?"—which is what I've always tried to teach my students. "Start off with an intro that makes your reader wants to read." When I was at Florida State, I wrote on the student newspaper, the *Florida Flambeau*, which was a real typical college newspaper with a big circulation, 10,000 per day circulation in Tallahassee as a real icon. I started writing for them. I wrote in classical music because I'm a big music fan. The guy who had the job before me—the last column before he graduated, and I've heard him since then on National Public Radio—was a pretty good writer. His last column was, "You stupid idiots, you go to these stupid football games, but you don't go to the concerts because you're too stupid to appreciate good music."

I thought, “Now this is a great way to attract people to classical music, isn’t it?” So that afternoon I marched down to the *Flambeau* office and said—“Mark Murphy”—I think was his name or McAlister or something—“is leaving; nobody else wants this job; give it to me.” They said, “Sure.” So my goal was to make classical music appealing to people who don’t like classical music. I started writing with liveliness and funny detail. I remember I started off one of my columns about a guitarist with, “She has green fingers,” because she played the guitar so much that the calluses [were colored by] the green from the brass of the strings. I always tried to find an angle to get people to want to read it. I got a bunch of front-page articles in the college newspaper because I wrote with liveliness and style. That’s something I came to Southern Polytechnic on a crusade. I want my students to write in an engaging way to attract an audience.

TS: Well, we don’t always think of engineers as being good writers. What was your experience?

MS: Well, we do think of engineers as being smart. I think that we have a lot of good writers. In fact, now that students are writing all the time as kids on e-mail—well nobody uses e-mail but—texting and Facebook and stuff like that, kids write all the time now. I think they’re much better writers and much more comfortable writers than they ever were when you and I or Laura Beth, you’re probably that generation.

LD: Borderline.

MS: Well, what generation are you?

LD: Technically, a millennial.

MS: Okay, a millennial. You and I [Tom] are boomers. I guess, are you a boomer?

TS: I’m a pre-boomer.

MS: A pre-boomer. I’m a boomer, 1952, right in those years. I didn’t write that much, but kids today write all the time. I find they’re good writers. I had a student this fall who started his first paper with the biggest vocabulary he could think of. Every word, and they were often misused, was a fifty-cent word. I said, “Relax, don’t use all these big words. You’re trying to find an audience that will understand you. That’s what you need to do.”

TS: I wrote a book in the summertime when I was about ten or twelve years old, and my older brother edited it all.

MS: Is that so? What was it on?

- TS: It was on baseball. That's all we cared about back then. One of my grandfathers had a regular column in the *Nashville Banner* and the Union City [Tennessee] newspaper. It was a prohibitionist column way back then [in the Progressive Era] (laughter). So everybody in our family wrote.
- MS: I used to do a little kind of fake neighborhood newspaper that my brother would write and do comics for it. I think we called it the Miami News for Cats. We had a cat, and we wrote it for our cat. We'd take little pictures of our cat with his paws on the paper like he was reading it.
- TS: So we didn't have any choice but to be in the academic world, I guess.
- MS: I guess.
- TS: Small campus, you're teaching English, no English major obviously.
- MS: Actually we had just started the TCom [Technical Communication] program. I think it was the year before I got here it began. It's funny that the way they got it to be a major at this engineering school was there had to be a section like a fifteen credit hour, five course section, where you would take it in one of the technical fields. That rapidly devolved into just about everybody doing that in Management because you had to take five three or four thousand level classes.
- TS: They took Management classes?
- MS: Yes, they took Management classes because you didn't need a lot of math for that. What happened—especially the first few years, we got the kids who flunked out of engineering largely because they couldn't do the math. Rarely would they be able to take a three or four thousand level class in engineering. It became rapidly a joke that these students were really doing the other engineering or STEM fields. Just about everybody was getting their fifteen hours in Management. Since that, I think we've gotten the respect of our colleagues, and we don't have to have a technical area any more. That's about ten years ago since we stopped having that.
- TS: Were they getting jobs when they got out of here?
- MS: You know, it's something I don't think we've done well. They may have. Certainly our graduates—I keep in touch with some who have gotten very good jobs. I suspect we do okay, but as far as I know, we don't keep very good data on that. In fact, just in the past year I was talking to a department head at another university up north, and he said that he was judged on his ability to get jobs for his graduates. In the past year 100 percent of his bachelor's graduates had gotten jobs, so that meant he was going to be department chair for at least another year. For us, I don't think we keep very accurate data on that, and it's something that's always concerned me about our degrees, although I suspect we're doing okay.

TS: So the guy you're talking about is being judged as a chair by his ability to get everybody placed?

MS: Yes. His main job as chair is to get jobs for his students, see that his students get jobs and keep in touch with industry.

TS: Makes perfect sense to me.

MS: That's why I went into education. That's why I sat out a year in grad school because I wanted a job. I didn't see jobs for novelists or poets, but I liked school. I like teaching, and I have enjoyed it very much. So we were a little campus with one dean who just had a master's degree; he was in the School of Technology. It wasn't until about three or four years afterwards that we had a School of Arts and Sciences with our own dean, or maybe even longer after that—a guy named Ed Vizzini, who was a chemist.

TS: Yes, we've got to get in contact with him. We know he's in Arizona.

MS: He and I still keep in touch. He's a very interesting person to talk to because he was on the cutting edge when he was the first dean of Arts and Sciences. We were getting majors in Social and International Studies and majors that were not engineering or math. It was an interesting time.

LD: How many people were in your department, faculty wise, do you remember?

MS: We had about ten, I think.

TS: What is it today?

MS: Well, we just lost a lot because of the merger—five this year.

TS: Pre-losing them what was it?

MS: I guess we had about twenty.

LD: Yes.

TS: So you went from ten to twenty.

MS: Yes, and the major has grown, especially since we've started the Media Arts that has doubled our majors. It's a very hot area. I really have to hand it to [department head] Mark Nunes. I think he's a real visionary. Of course, my question is, "Are these people going to find jobs?" I don't know. But it's certainly a very attractive major and very cutting edge. I mean, this is a digital world, and it is not text driven. It is image and electronic driven and sound driven.

TS: You've done a lot of teaching over the years. I think you've won a few awards, haven't you?

MS: Yes, I've got four university-wide teaching awards, kind of early and late. Early in my career I got one from the faculty, and not long after that I got one from student government. Then just in the last five or six years, I've won those again, one from the faculty and one from student government. It's very gratifying, especially in a technical school, to be recognized for that.

TS: This is the teacher of the year award?

MS: I was never *the* teacher of the year award. They have like three or four who were nominated.

TS: Like one from each school or something?

MS: Not exactly.

TS: So you were a finalist.

MS: Yes, I was a finalist, and it's really only about the last five years where they'd take one of those in a rather mysterious process and designate that one as *the* Teacher of the Year.

TS: Right. You also started doing a lot of service, obviously; you became a "trouble maker" on campus.

MS: Yes, our administration was not very forthcoming back then. I don't know if I've talked to you about a fellow named Ranakumar Nadella whom I know you've tried to contact and is not letting you do it.

TS: Well, he didn't respond.

MS: Yes, not responding. He had been a chemistry professor and when I got here was the assistant to the president, to President [Stephen R.] Cheshier and Vice President Harris T. Travis. He [Nadella] was the numbers guy, the facts guy. He knew where the money was, how much of it, and he was not corrupt in any way. We as faculty had confidence in him. When you needed money, you didn't ask Travis or Cheshier. You asked Nadella. Then he would see if it was okay with Steve or Harris. If he recommended it, you'd probably get it. At least that's the way I understood it to work. I was a department chair for several years too, and you'd always asked Nadella for stuff. He was the go-to guy.

LD: What was his division again? You said he was chemistry professor?

MS: He had been a chemistry professor, but the administration found him very useful because he was very good with numbers and very good with money and knew where stuff was and how to get it and how to run data and how to get through SACS. He became really the most powerful man on the campus.

LD: Did he have a formal title?

MS: No, he was assistant to the president. I think that was his title. He was born in India, I think, and was a very fine person in ways that sometimes I think our two top administrators were not. We had some faculty problems with governance and so on. Well, the faculty meetings used to be run by one of the deans, not by the faculty moderator, and they [the deans] could shut down debate. They could stop things from getting on the agenda, which happened several times.

TS: Just by being dean they probably cut out a lot of debate.

MS: Yes, it's been so long ago—over fifteen years—I don't remember what the big issue or issues were, but six department chairs of the fifteen—before a department chair's meeting—called on the president to resign or something like that. The vice president called them together and fired them as department chairs. They were still [tenured] faculty members.

TS: Because they had called for the president to resign?

MS: Yes. They had called for the president to resign. My department chair got fired. For about three or four months we didn't have a department chair.

TS: Was this Sandy?

MS: Yes, this was Sandy Pfeiffer, and we didn't have a dean. Finally, some of my colleagues came into my office and said, "Mark, would you take it on?" I think [they asked me] partly because I was a sucker and would probably do it, and because I gave good service, and because I had a steady head, I think, and didn't have any enemies—knew how to be collegial.

TS: [No enemies] at least yet (laughter)!

MS: Well, yes, I never had any as department chair. So I did it for about a year. Let's see, did Cheshier step down in that year? I think he did.

TS: He officially resigned in '97.

MS: I think that was the year that he resigned. I remember going around getting enough faculty signatures [on a petition] to have a vote of no confidence in President Cheshier. We were going to have a meeting and call for a vote of no confidence, and this was the day he stepped down. I was going around getting

these signatures, and Bud Baker, who was SPSU's legal counsel, called me up that morning and said, "Mark, can you hold off on that declaration of a vote of no confidence?" I said, "Sure, is President Cheshier going to resign?" He said, "There's going to be an announcement coming later today, before noon, that you'll be interested in." I said, "Okay, I don't want to] embarrass the president; if he steps down that's fine." So it got to be noon, and he [Bud Baker] called and said, "Can you wait until 2:00?" I said, "Of course." Then I got a call at 2:00, and [he] said, "Can you wait till 4:00?" I said, "Yes." By 4:00 the announcement came that after many years of stewardship he was going to resign and it was his choice and everything. I said, "Fine." He was gone. I think he was here for another year and then left and then Dan Papp took, over I think.

TS: Oh, okay, then this would have been in '96 that he announced his resignation. I couldn't figure it out because I was going through the Board of Regents minutes of '97, and in March or April they automatically renew the contracts of all the presidents, and he wasn't on the list. I didn't understand that. Then later in '97 he [officially] retired. I need to look back at '96 and find out when he actually said he would resign.

MS: Tendered his resignation. Then Dr. Travis lasted for several years after that. I know he served under Dan Papp and then left shortly after that. I don't think he was a very effective vice president, so I was glad to see Lisa A. Rossbacher, who was a very effective president, come in. Dan Papp too was a very strong leader and set this house in order, I think, and set the job process going to find a really good president, whom I think we've enjoyed for many years since then.

TS: What about Pfeiffer? Did he get his job back?

MS: Yes. After Dan Papp came in I was eager to step down because I don't like administration. Sandy got his job back as did any of the other department chairs who wanted theirs back. I remember Sandy asking Dan Papp what he should have done, and Dan Papp said, "Well, what you should have done was just resign as a department chair. If you don't like the administration, just resign." That made sense instead of requiring their resignation. Then he went on to be dean for a short time after Vizzini left and then vice president of academic affairs, which has been a tough spot for Lisa to fill. Then he went on to be vice president [for academic affairs] of [Ramapo College of New Jersey], and then he was acting president [of Ramapo from July 2004 to June 2005], and then got a job as president in a college in [Asheville,] North Carolina [Warren Wilson College in July 2006] that he just resigned from in [June 2012]. In fact, this [room] had been his office for a while, and I got a wood hanger for my academic gown that had been left in the department that had his dad's name in it. His dad was a part-time musician, and it said Hal Pfeiffer on it. Just last year I learned that Sandy was going to be on campus, and I said, "Sandy, I've still got the Hal Pfeiffer memorial wooden hanger. Stop by, and I'll give it to you." So he came by this office and

got the Hal Pfeiffer memorial hanger and took it back. I think that was significant.

TS: Do you still stay in contact with him?

MS: Yes, I do.

TS: He would be a good contact.

MS: Yes, he would be because he was here for a long time in the growth of the department. He saw it from its very first days to a powerful place and became a very well respected man on campus. I remember when he was a VPAA, he did some unpopular things, and unlike Dr. Travis he would not just blow off the faculty. I've had people he was mad with compliment him to me, saying that he kept showing up at their offices to talk because he was a great talker and a great social person. Even if he was doing something you didn't like, he was always happy to talk to you about it and explain why, and I think he gained a lot of credibility that way.

TS: So does Zvi replace him?

MS: No, I think after Sandy or maybe before, I'll have to look in the record, we had a fellow from Greece that Lisa hired for about two years. It became real obvious to everybody after about a year that he was not working out, but he had a contract for longer than that. I think Lisa had to give a real sweetheart deal to him to find another job. Then we had either Sandy or one of our retired school of engineering department heads who served for two or three years, got us through SACS as a caretaker—I mean, he didn't want the job permanently—so Lisa had a lot of trouble with that position throughout her career.

TS: Why do you think that was so?

MS: It was her first job as president. I think she made a few missteps in hiring, but the day she brought [VPAA] Zvi [Szafran] on campus to meet us—it was at a faculty meeting—she said, "I've got somebody I really want you to meet." And Zvi marched out. It was in the M Building auditorium, which is where we held faculty meetings back then, and we were just smitten with him from the get-go—although he's had problems with some departments, especially Math, because he's been trying to liberalize the math rules, especially for non-engineering majors. Math is very resistant to that, so he's created his own enemies. But our campus has grown in graduation percentage. Something Lisa's done that's great for us is the number of women on campus. I think Chancellor [Stephen R.] Portch, who is the one who hired her—that's one of the reasons he wanted her to have that job. She is a scientist, and in fact she was one of the finalists for one of the early astronaut jobs, which I think you probably know. As a geologist she's got a firm background in science. We have never had a serious faculty issue with



- either Lisa or Zvi. They are forthcoming; they are friendly; you can talk to them any time; and they are effective administrators. We have prospered under their leadership. We haven't gotten bogged down in silly faculty politics, which was a big time-killer back under the Cheshier administration. He was the first president actually of Southern College of Technology once we became a four-year school.
- TS: So it was just a matter of judgment of who would make a good vice president or was she not willing delegate?
- MS: Oh, I think she was very willing to delegate. I think she had trouble identifying the [right] person. Sandy left after just a couple of years. I think he would have been quite good, but he had bigger aspirations. Then for some reason we had to have a place-filler for a couple of years, Dave Hornbeck from the School of Engineering [Technology]. Once she found the right person, she knew it immediately, and boy did she pick the right person. In fact, at Zvi's [departure] brunch a couple of weeks ago, I shook his hand and told him that in my twenty-five years at Southern Poly, he was *the* best thing that happened. Lisa was a very good thing to happen to Southern Polytechnic, but Zvi was really the best thing. I think he really energized the faculty and our programs, was the driver, found the solution with Georgia Tech to get engineering classes—full engineering—here and is a wonderful schmoozer, a wonderful politician—and I mean that in the best way. You know, politicians have a very bad name, but he is a very savvy person politically, knows all about money, where it comes from, where it should go, how to keep some on the side, how to fund the right things. He is really the person that has caused the prosperity of the last decade at Southern Polytechnic.
- TS: Zvi gave his take on how he persuaded Georgia Tech in the interview that Laura Beth and I did with him, but the other day we heard a different interpretation that Southern Poly got engineering to head off the University of Georgia, and that's what Zvi sold. Do you happen to have any inside knowledge of what the real story is?
- MS: I don't. The official version that I heard was that we were willing to run a night engineering program, which Georgia Tech wasn't, and until the other day that's all I knew. I am interested in politics but...
- TS: Not that interested?
- MS: Yes, not that interested.
- TS: Why don't you talk about how the campus has changed? Students, faculty, expectations, buildings, whatever direction you want to take it.
- MS: Well, we have a lot more students living on campus now, and that's been a very good thing because that's what makes a community. In fact, what we've done

over the last couple of years is have student groups that keep in their major, like in my freshman English class...

TS: Learning communities?

MS: Yes, learning communities. I had a bunch of mechanical engineers, and a lot of them continued to take my 1102 class just this spring. They're really tight. They take their math and English all together; they live on the same floor of the dorm; and I hear them in class say, "Well, are you heading down to the "X" [Building X, Stingers Restaurant] for lunch?" "Yeah, right after class." It has really helped retention, which is something I've been working on my last few years—paying real close attention to students and retention. What [I've] been doing the last couple of years, if a student misses two classes in a row, I get their home phone number, and I call them. Sometimes I get their parents, and their parents say, "Is there a problem?" You're not allowed to say so, of course. But I say, "Well, he's eighteen, so I can't give you any information." But I sure put a bug in their ear. I know that they're going to be on the phone to their kid saying, "Your English professor called; is everything going all right? Are you doing okay in English?"

I'm not breaking any rule by doing that. I didn't give them any information. I always try to get their cell phone number, which their parents always have. I call them, and I don't say, "You better come to English or you're going to fail." I say, "Are you all right; are you okay?" I found my retention rates have gone up considerably for, one, because students know I'm going to call them, and they don't want to talk to me on their cell phone; and, two, I think they know I care about them because I want them to succeed. I really do. It's made it a lot harder for students to just disappear, which is what had been happening. It was something that was really frosting my jets because coming into mid-semester there were those students who just didn't come any more. You don't see them for three or four weeks, and then they come once or twice, and then they're gone because they realize how far behind they are. I've got data to show that I've significantly cut down on those numbers by calling them and showing them I really do, one, notice that they're not there, and two, really do want them to succeed.

TS: The administration must love you for that because retention and graduation rates seem to be the biggest issue in the University System these days.

MS: I think it should be. I think it's important. I know our engineers especially were kind of, "Let them sink or swim; in the real world they'll die if they'll die here." But Zvi's approach has been one more of. "They are still learning the ropes, and we need to show them the ropes more clearly."

TS: Which is why he had a problem with the math department?

MS: Yes, probably so. It's a very sink or swim kind of department. As a humanities guy, I'm more of a humanist and more aware of human pride and human folly.

TS: Have students changed over the twenty-five years other than there's more living on campus?

MS: I think they write more. They come better prepared as writers. I think they're smarter than they were. I think they're more diverse in international experience. We have more people who are born outside of the U.S., which can be tough, especially teaching freshman English because we have a lot of Chinese students. They'll come for a summer five-week freshman English class that they cannot handle. In fact, I was just going through my ICA's, my course...

LD: Individual Course Assessments?

MS: Yes, Individual Course Assessments, and I've noticed some of the things I've said.

TS: You have to evaluate your own courses?

MS: Yes, our own courses, and I've had to fail a number of international students. One of my goals was to, especially for these five-week summer classes, be very clear and show them data that says, "I had five students last summer; four of them withdrew by mid-term and the other one failed because this is not an English as a second language course. I have to judge you on native English standards, and if you don't think you can write English as a native English speaker or close to that level, you're not going to get the 'A'—because a lot of these Chinese students are 'A' driven—that you want." I know it's hurt my student assessment somewhat, my SIRS evaluation some, because they want "A's." Even in the fifteen-week semester they get "C's" and "B's" because they cannot write on native English standards yet—although they are very intelligent. But I have a standard, and I can't give you an "A" for this. So I've even heard them say, "But you should judge us differently." And I say, "No, I shouldn't. You're getting a grade in English from an American university, and this means that you will write on a level of English that an American university would give for an 'A'."

In fact, for my colleagues sometimes—I had a student squeak by with a "C" this semester, and I was wondering how he got through 1101. I looked back through his 1101 grade, and he got an "A" in 1101 from a colleague whom I respect. I haven't talked to her about that, but I was thinking, "How could you give this student an 'A'? He is not a good writer." I was really delighted to see him come through thanks to my generous revision policy, which is something else—I think Kim Haimes-Korn, as our director of composition, really moved our department [in that direction]. Kim came in with a [PhD] degree from Florida State. In fact, she was in the English department at Florida State after me, and so was Nancy L. Reichert in our department. [Kim], instead of being an English major, which was

all I was, was a rhetoric major and studied under one of the most important rhetoricians in the country. She really helped improve the way we looked at teaching freshman English [by] focusing on revision, which is a really big part of learning to write well.

In fact, I tell my students now, “Okay, we’ve got a first draft due on Wednesday. It has to be bad. Do you think you can write a bad first draft by Wednesday?” They all say, “Yes.” That takes a lot of the fear out of writing. It was just like that student I had this fall who thought the way you write in college is you use as many big words as you can. No, and they’re afraid to write. When I say this has to be bad, in fact, that’s what I tell them: “It has to be bad because you’ll have to revise it; and it has to get better; so it has to be bad. In fact, I’ll give you a bad grade if it’s good.” Of course, I was joking, but it makes them a lot more willing to write that first draft. I get more students who write a first draft instead of coming up with draft zero; it’s nothing.

TS: You’re still teaching freshman composition?

MS: Yes. It’s an important job. I know a lot of my colleagues try to get the three and four thousand level courses, but I don’t have any chops in Technical Communication or New Media Arts. I do teach the grammar class for our TCom and professional writing majors, which I do as kind of a transformational grammar course. It’s not what’s right and what’s wrong in grammar. It’s a course that looks at how the language works. What are the background real rules for English? It’s really a lot like math. It’s based on a guy named Noam Chomsky. You’ve probably heard of him, great political and linguistics figure.

TS: One of those left-wingers.

MS: Yes, and I’ve heard him speak before at Florida State. He gave a morning lecture to the English department on Chomsky and linguistics, and it was fascinating. As a grad student I took a lot of linguistics and history of the English language courses because I found them fascinating. I get to teach literature too, which I love. When I teach a literature class, I tell my students, “As a computer scientist in your job interview, they will never ask you about British literature, so why do you have to take this course? Because it teaches you how to live your life—that’s the purpose of literature is to figure out how to live your life. You’re going to have a life, and you’re going to be faced with dealing with love and government and politics and faith and lack of faith.” I always end the lit classes with a unit on death. You’re going to have to face that, and literature can help you how to figure out how to deal with those issues.

TS: So you teach British literature. Do you teach American literature here?

MS: That is for sissies, I’m sorry. Their tradition only goes back to about 1600, but they’re a bunch of sissies. I mean, let’s talk Beowulf, okay—700 [AD or CE];

let's go back to the real stuff—Shakespeare and the Renaissance. Of course, I'm joking. It's a great tradition, and that's what I did my degree in. John Skelton was a British guy.

TS: We were talking about the changes over time. Let me just ask you what has kept you here for twenty-five years?

MS: A great job with colleagues I respect and admire. There is not a person in our department I do not respect, and that has not always been true. There have been a couple of people who needed to go, and when I was department chair, I think I helped them find a way to leave.

TS: You mean they weren't good teachers?

MS: Yes. They were not good teachers. One was simply incompetent; the other did not have a teaching mentality. He was not a nice person, and he told me that he was afraid because he knew I hated his guts—which was not true—but [he said that] he knew I was biased against him and hated him because he was a devout Christian, and I was going to see that he did not get tenure. So he left, and I thought, "Good." Students were coming in always complaining about him. He was not kind to his students, plus, he was a twenty points off for a comma splice kind of guy.

TS: So he turned himself into a victim?

MS: Yes, he turned himself into a victim and left of his own accord before he ever went up for tenure, which was fine with me. Oh, and great students, students who are smart and who, by and large, have a wonderful work ethic and are willing to do what it takes to do a good job and are interested and interesting people.

TS: Everybody I interview on the Kennesaw campus talks about how faculty expectations have changed over time. What about on this campus? Have faculty expectations changed towards scholarship or more expectations for publications and presentations or have they pretty much stayed teaching-oriented for the twenty-five years?

MS: They have changed more towards publication. In fact, I think we only have three or four members of the department right now who are full professors, and that's the result of a book they published or at least a collection of readings that got them full professor. I never went up for full. In fact, Terry Carter, who is one of our full professors who has an edited book actually took me aside a couple of years ago and said, "You should go for full"; he practically said, "You'll get it." I said, "No, I don't publish enough. I respect my colleagues who do too much to cheapen that." So I never tried for it, one, because I don't know that I'm worthy, given the publication standards; and, two, I would not ask my colleagues to lower

any standard. I think that's going to be true, especially coming under Kennesaw State, of increased pressure to publish. I have not done a lot of publication.

I've done some articles, like I polished my dissertation results in a journal. I published with a Georgia State professor my "Bach in America" article, which I think is a pretty important scholarship. I've done some decent scholarship, but the problem is in English I think a lot of scholarship is kind of fake scholarship; it's not real cutting edge. It's nothing that anybody reads, so I've always found it pointless. I wanted to focus on service, which has been great, working with students, like on the speech team, which I helped get started and has been great fun. In fact, as an undergraduate I did a lot of oral interpretation at the University of South Florida. We used to do novels as plays, but with a narrator who talked to the audience. We would keep the actual language in the novel and have the narrator talk to the audience. One of the great moments of my acting career was when I got cast in a couple of small roles for *The Great Gatsby*.

TS: What roles did you play in *The Great Gatsby*?

MS: A bunch of small roles. We cast it before Christmas. I went home and said, "Well, I got a couple of roles in *The Great Gatsby*." My parents said, "Well, we'll drive up from Miami to Tampa to see you." After Christmas, the guy who had the narrator role—Nick Carraway, who's the guy who tells the story—couldn't do it, so [the director] Mr. Downs picked me. I was just flabbergasted. I took the job, and I remember I didn't tell my parents...

TS: That you were going to narrate?

MS: Right. So I walked out on the bare stage, just me, to start. I was the only guy on the stage at the end too. I was there for the full two hours. I walked out on stage, saw where my dad was sitting, looked at him, and started off the first line of *The Great Gatsby*, which was, "In my younger and more vulnerable years, my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since." Performing literature was such a great thing for a literature major to do, to bring it to the people. There's Misty [York] right now, our head speech coach that I wanted to bring that to Southern Poly and when Jack Haley and [Richard A.] Dick Hahn started the speech team, I got in right away.

LD: It was wonderful.

MS: I took over as kind of the oral interp guy because I wanted to make this happen on this campus. Just about all of our majors are not in our department. They're all engineers or architects, and they get how literature works, how it's performed, how it helps you live a better life.

- TS: There's no doubt that you are student oriented. I gather, even though you're being neutral, you're not too terribly happy with the idea that things may go more towards scholarship with the merger.
- MS: Well, I'm afraid that a lot of pointless scholarship will be done, which is a shame, but I just had lunch today with a faculty member who has published with his wife Anne, who is on the Kennesaw State faculty, a book on Muslims in America, a book of readings, which I think is pretty important because since 9/11, boy, have we been involved in the world of Islam! I think that is important scholarship.
- TS: Absolutely! Applied scholarship I guess you mean—something that somebody might want to read. Well I've got one more major question. The consolidation—what was your reaction? I know you didn't know about it ahead of time because nobody else did.
- MS: We sure didn't. I've seen Lisa in tears several times since then, but when she got her new job [as president of Humboldt State University] no more tears. I know it hit her hard. I've always been an optimist. I'm convinced it will go well, not only for the speech team because we'll have real English majors who want to do literature and [students from the] Communication Department who want to do public speaking, but I think the School of Engineering is going to be a great addition, and Kennesaw State is going to *love* having it.
- TS: Oh, it's going to greatly strengthen Kennesaw State.
- MS: Under President Papp, who was a professor at Georgia Tech.
- TS: His PhD is from the University of Miami in Florida.
- MS: Miami is where I'm going to be. But I think it will be good for us all.
- TS: Now that the name Southern Polytechnic is going away except for the Engineering and Engineering Technology College, what do you want people to know about Southern Polytechnic that may get lost in time to come?
- MS: Everything gets lost, just about, in the time to come.
- TS: What would you not want to get lost about this institution that people really ought to know?
- MS: It is going to continue. We are going to continue producing high quality engineers that can get the job done, technical writers who know how to write. I don't think anything is going to be lost. We're going to have a facility here on campus. We have wonderful historians at Kennesaw State who are preserving those little bits of minutia that people may find, but probably won't read much or listen to much, in case any curious person wants to know. I am very optimistic

about the continuation of the fine work that Southern Polytechnic has done in creating engineers, people in the STEM fields and in Technical Communication, who will benefit the state of Georgia, the United States of America, and our increasingly interconnected world.

TS: Great. Thank you very much.



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