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Peggy Liggitt Oral History Interview, 2017

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Eastern Michigan University Archives, Oral Histories

Oral History Interview with Peggy Liggitt (PL)

Conducted by Historic Preservation Graduate Student Matt Jones (MJ)

Transcribed by Nonprofit Management Graduate Student Amelia Yunker

Recorded 2017, November 13

(muffled sound)

PL: You can treat me just like everybody else.

MJ: Okay. Well, this is Matt Jones and we're in the Bruce K. Nelson Faculty Development Center. It's Monday, November 13th, and if you'd like to give your name and your position at the University.

PL: I'm Peggy Liggitt and I'm the Director of the Faculty Development Center.

MJ: Okay, well you obviously had a working relationship with Bruce. What was that? How did it kind of relate? What kind of contact did you have?

PL: So I became the Interim Director of the Faculty Development Center in 2012. And I didn't work directly with Bruce but I got to work in the office that's his namesake is, the Bruce K. Nelson Faculty Development Center. It was February, March, something like that of 2012, Don Lopnow and his wife Nancy and the University Librarian at the time Tara Fulton (?), they invited me to go with them to Bloomington to drive down to visit Bruce. And so I came along, and we went to his apartment that he had in an assisted living facility and it was wonderful walking into his apartment. It had multiple rooms and he had, you know, a little bit of EMU memorabilia. And he was so cognizant, to share with us some of his memories of working at Eastern and there weren't specific stories that are sticking with me but his general feel of Eastern. He had a lot of pride when it came to Eastern, many, many memories of specific people and just this overall good feeling about his career. When you see his pictures, so my students, my two graduate students, we invited Alexis to come and meet with us to understand how to get ready for this birthday and Celebration of Life Event. So Alexis helped us think about how we might look through Bruce's materials in his archive. Then my two graduate students went up into the Archives. Alexis pulled 12 boxes out of like the 29 and they spent the day there and they pulled out a variety of different documents and it helped us understand, you know, who Bruce was. When I met with Bruce and he's talking about these different aspects of Eastern, and now when I see the archive of the information it's really nice for me to put together this whole story. Where before I've had these bits and pieces and now I'd like to spend more time really putting it all together and that's going to take a little while. Part one having met him. One of the things that was so beautiful about his apartment was he had this beautiful quilt on his bed that Fran, his wife, had created and it had basically landmarks. They were symbolic things of

Michigan and so there were things about Ypsilanti and the Upper Peninsula where he had lived. You know that there was just this fondness of Michigan and of course his wife, who had already passed away by then. It was just so wonderful to spend time with him and get to know the essence of him as a person.

MJ: How do you think it's got to be reflected in this place?

PL: So much. So much so. When my students were going through the Archive there were a couple of things that they found. I had said to them, "You know, this is going to take us years to really go through these documents and spend time to get to know him. We know we can't do that in a short period of time getting ready for this event. However, when you go up there just let it be a treasure hunt. Find something that surprises you." So they brought back a couple of documents that were just very precious. One was letters that he had written, Bruce had written to students and also meeting minutes where ... You see in the meeting minutes, this is with the University Curriculum Committee, and there are several points in the minutes where it says "Now remember everybody why we're here. We're here to support student learning." So he always had student learning first. You see this in his letters that are very articulate and very thoughtful and whatever the student was wondering about, he's helping them find the solutions. If he couldn't help them directly, he always had some kind of answer for them that would get them to their next step, and very thoughtfully and kindly written. You get a sense of him through these documents. The students said "Well he was a real advocate for the students" so one of our posters out there was called "Bruce was always the student advocate".

MJ: Yeah, I saw that. So many people that I've talked to, not even just today but as I've done some reading, always mention his sort of engaging, very open. I think it was Stephen a second ago who said he'd never met anybody who seemed less like they would, not take advantage but sort of walk over you, he was just considerate.

PL: Right.

MJ: And that seems like such a good trait to have in the FDC here too.

PL: Yeah. In getting a chance to talk to Don Lopnow today and Burt Green and with Ruby and with Steve who worked with Bruce, Steve and Ruby said he welcomed us. Ruby came in '64, Steve came in '69, so Bruce was the administrator there to welcome them to their long career at Eastern, and they did have a long career here. Then when I talked to Burt, Burt said "What I really liked about Bruce was that he knew how to relate to people." That's kind of what you're referring to as well. Another thing Steve said was he wasn't in the position that he had to make a name for himself. He didn't put his career first, he put the job first, the job of helping students learn. Being the Vice President of Instruction, and Burt said that was the first position. They didn't have a Vice President of Instruction ever, he had the first position of it because Eastern had three names. It was Michigan Normal School, then it became Eastern Michigan College, then Eastern Michigan University. Bruce was here to help make it a University, which was very different than a College. And that's what Burt was trying to emphasize the importance of that distinction between a college and a[n] university. So having the first Vice President of Instruction, which is similar to the provost position, it's a really big responsibility.

MJ: And he carried that out well. Another thing that people have said is he was able to keep his head when things weren't so great. Sometimes when there were demonstrations. Somebody burned a car.

PL: Oh wow.

MJ: Yeah, I've been kind of looking for ways to describe that. Why was he so well suited to keeping his cool and still be helpful and an advocate?

PL: Right.

MJ: That's rare.

PL: One of the things that Don and Burt -- we were having a conversation with the three of us -- and they had commented about how Bruce's children, two of his children, became teachers. They have their PhD and one of them was a university professor and the other one is like a counselor in a school district, so a pretty high position in Arizona. And education and ed leadership is really such a part of who he was. Part of what we're doing today is the quote that he has, that Bruce had, was "Instilling in others the love of learning is a teacher's greatest challenge" so our question to people "What do you love about learning?" would be if the greatest challenge for anyone, of a teacher, is how to get people to love learning, then that's our question. What do you love about learning? The different responses, it's so exciting to read all the little messages that are --

MJ: I was reading them, yeah.

PL: I'm looking forward to my office compiling all of those and we'll be putting them in a public display on our website so people can read them. Also we're sending them to Bruce's daughter or granddaughter so she can present them to the family --

MJ: Oh cool!

PL: -- for Thanksgiving because it's the first Thanksgiving that they're not going to have Bruce there at the table.

MJ: Okay.

PL: So I think they're going to enjoy this legacy that Bruce really has left here and all the people here being able to describe what they love about learning. He had a part to do with that here. I mean, to see who's here, like we've had a variety of different people coming and we had different things for them to engage in, looking at the posters that we had of this data. Ruby and Steve were here like an hour and a half. Don was here almost an hour. People really wanted to stay and talk and that says a lot about what they are caring about and that Eastern has a place in their heart.

MJ: Do you have any other memories of Bruce you'd like to put into the Archives? You mentioned visiting him.

PL: I think, maybe two things here. One is that after I saw Bruce -- he was 96 years old -- and I kept up with his daughter. His daughter shared these wonderful photos of Bruce, which we'll also put in the Archive. Some of the things that she said is that, as he's getting older, he's losing some of his memory and then as time went on it became more and more evident of that. But she said he's a very happy person and he lives in the moment, and he's able to do so many

things so he was physically able to sweep the floor and be present. I think that is ... when you think about his long life, and how engaged he was, how he ended his life was just as beautiful. And then he died peacefully in his sleep at almost 102, to think about this legacy that he leaves, and he had not only a great life but he also had a great ending and a great death. I think that's something for all of us to understand and to appreciate and to celebrate. Boy, if we could do it like Bruce did.

PL: And then the second thing is: I feel like my goal as the Director here to help show Bruce in a holistic way. Burt brought it up where he said Emeritus Faculty are people who have retired and moved on and now they are beginning to pass away. It seems like there's not much of an institutional memory at all about them. Alexis is helping us understand how important these archives are. I'm really enjoying learning about Bruce almost backwards in that I did get to meet him first when I just started my position here and now to have the opportunity to take the time to get to know him through these documents and through hearing the stories of people who worked with him and knew him. I would like to make sure that my staff who work here will always know what kind of person he was and to know his history. When I have opportunities like in Orientation, to be able to tell new faculty who Bruce was and maybe provide some examples of how he cared about students and how he cared about faculty and staff. That's what I'm hoping to do, to let people know who Bruce was as a person, but also as a leader and also as somebody that really cared a lot about EMU and had a very impactful career here at EMU. We don't want to forget him and what he's done. I think that's really important, an important mission of the Faculty Development Center to try to do that, help highlight that.

MJ: That was a really great answer.

PL: Thank you for being here for these four hours.

MJ: I've loved it. It's been really fun.

PL: Good. I'm glad. One of our sayings here is how can this turn out better than we could possibly imagine and today turned out better than any of us could imagine and you were part of that. Thank you so much.

MJ: I'm really happy about that.

PL: It's so nice to meet you.

MJ: You too. You too.