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Nicodemus, Nancy Oral History Interview: Retired Faculty and Administrators of Hope College

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Joint Archives of Holland
Oral History Project- summer 2000
Retired Hope Professors
Interviewee: Nancy Nicodemus
Interviewer: Melissa LaBarge
6 June 2000

ML: This is Melissa LaBarge with professor Nancy Nicodemus, it's June 6, 2000.

NN: D-Day.

ML: That is right, what is it the fifty....six....?

NN: A momentous occasion. Our chaplain we had when I came here, Bill Hillegonds, who was an incredibly fine man and chaplain- and one-thousand times superior to the person we have now- was part of the Normandy Invasion. I was just thinking about that when I was watching the, I just saw "Saving Private Ryan"- I finally just saw the movie, and I was thinking of Bill when I saw that, Bill Hillegonds.

ML: What year did you come here?

NN: I came to Holland in '64, and I started teaching at Hope in the fall of '66. '66 I think, yeah.

ML: I know maybe some of this already is stated in the past file, but what led you to be a professor at Hope? Where did you grow up and your education?

NN: The Reformed Church had nothing to do with it, we'll start with that. I grew up in north-eastern Indiana in a very small, kind of farm community of about two thousand people. And then I went to school. I went a variety of places: I went to Hannover College in southern Indiana, and then I did some summer courses at Western Michigan University when I was a junior, and I was really excited about the philosophy courses I

was taking. So I transferred there, and I finished my undergraduate education at Western Michigan. Then I did my masters work at University of Wyoming in Laramie, Wyoming. Then I went back to Western Michigan and taught there for three years. I was their first, what is now fairly common practice, but it was their first- what they call one or two year appointment person. I was there for three, but it was a time when there was a real scarcity of teachers in higher education as well as just everywhere. So someone with a masters degree could get a job teaching on the college level for a year or two years before they went on to get their P.H.D. And I was the first one they had, and then by my third year there, there were like forty-some one year appointees. I'm not sure if private colleges did that as well. Hope probably never did, I'm not sure. But that was a fairly wide practice that you're not hired on a tenure track, but you're hired just to come and fill the need for a time. And then when I left there, I went to the University of Minnesota to do my graduate work. I came here because Holland High School was only two or three years old, and the campus concept at Holland High was nationally- it'd been written up in a number of magazines. And my husband had just completed his Masters of Arts in teaching and had read about this unique high school, and he interviewed for a position at Holland High and got it. That's how we happened to come to Holland.

ML: Really, I wonder if my dad had your husband as a teacher.

NN: He may well have, I'm sure he had. Ken Taylor was his name, and he would have been teaching both America Lit which all students were required to take, and English Lit which all college bound students were required to take- and I think there was just

one section of that English Lit, I'm not sure. So he probably had him.

ML: So how did you go from there to Hope?

NN: I'm trying to tell only the essential part of this and not malign anybody here okay. I had made an application to Hope before we moved here because I knew... actually, I had applied back to Western Michigan, and I was actually thinking- the key thing when we were coming is I'd kind of planned to drive there to teach back to Western Michigan. But then I had also applied at Hope, which I had never heard of before, until I heard of Holland, and then I found that Hope was here. And I had assumed- the practice in most places is that you apply to the department, and I had done that- but at the time, the practice at Hope was that you applied to the president, but I didn't know that. So my application just kind of sat on the desk of the English department chair, at that time, who was in England for the summer. And so, you know, nothing ever happened to it- it was just there; and my application and my files and everything. So I never heard from Hope, and I assumed they weren't interested. Then when we arrived here, I decided I didn't want to do that drive to Western Michigan. I thought I would try to do some part-time, and with the other daughter who was two at the time, and I thought I would try to do some part time teaching. So the first week we lived in Holland, I went to Holland High School and asked if there was any part time teaching. And I was asked if I would like to teach half-time. I mean I just like walked into this job. And Fred Birch, who was principal when your father was there, was new- he had just come into the job. And Edie Dike, who was a fantastic english teacher at Holland High School- really wonderful woman, had just been promoted. And she had been the

teacher of the honors courses. And she'd been promoted to assistant principal and suddenly, like two weeks before school started they didn't have a teacher for honors sections. So I went in to just meet the principal, and I met him, and I took the job. And one of the students in my class was Clacena VanderWerf, who was one of the daughters of President VanderWerf of Hope College. Okay, so I knew Clacena, and she was just a brilliant student. I worked with her out of class and in class on a lot of things- we read a lot together and did some things together. And so I met her family through her, not really even knowing who they were or anything. And they were just charming people- the VanderWerfs are favorites of mine. They were just a very lovely couple. And then the following summer, I took a Great Books Discussion leadership course run by the University of Chicago. It was held in Herrick Library, which was a new library at that time, only a couple of years old. One of the women taking that leadership course was Rachel VanderWerf, Clacena's mother. So I got to know her even more through that course, and then we began to lead Great Books groups in the community for adult groups: we started with fourth grade and went up, I mean this group of people did. We started with fourth graders and then taught up through an adult group. And then as that summer, this was my second summer in Holland, there was the historic Holland High School teacher strike, and teachers had never gone on strike before in the United States. And this was a first, and it happened because Holland was very, very anti-union. There were just like no unions in this city. And there was a union at the Michigan, whatever the teachers union is in Michigan- the M.E.A. I guess it is- the Michigan Education, whatever. They had unionized some

teachers at Holland High the year before we came, so that would have been in, I guess in '63 or something like that. And then there were some cuts made in the staff, and the rumor is- I don't know how accurate this is- but those people who had joined the union were the people who were cut by the school board. So there was a very iffy kind of history, and it was clear that the city as a whole didn't want anybody unionized and certainly not the teachers. And there hadn't been raises for, I don't know how long, so the salaries were low and the class size began to get larger. And this is nothing like the problem in the last couple decades, but it was sizeable enough. And so, the teachers organized, most of them joined the union and they decided they would go on strike. And it was covered extensively national and everything. We had made the decision, my husband and I, that if the strike wasn't successful, we were really going to have to move because... I can't remember- the salary but I mean it was like, I think five-thousand dollars was the salary when we came here for a year. Which is really hard to do any comparison to, but it was very low. And there were lots of influential people in town who were in favor of raising the salary and in favor of the strike and all that. Anyway, in the midst of all this- and then I also had had a second baby that fall.

ML: This is '67?

NN: This is, no, this would be in the fall of '65. We came with the two-year old, and then I had a baby in the fall of '65, and then this strike happened and there was no contract reached in the spring or summer of '66. And so we were making a decision to leave. And that was the context in which president VanderWerf called me and asked me if I would like a teaching position at Hope because they wanted us to stay in the

community. And I had been teaching, in effect team teaching with his wife, and I'd had Clacena for a year- in fact, we're still good friends, so it's been a long time friendship. So it came, kind of what I call through the back door, but kind of through the front door at the same time. So he called on the phone and offered me a job. And he didn't do it out of the blue, but it was because there was very suddenly an opening in the English department. Two members of the department, who had taught there for some time and were single, decided to marry. It was Ed Savage and Jean Prothwell, and it was like a disaster from the moment they married. They married in the summer, and the marriage just was terrible. And so, he decided he would leave because they just simple couldn't teach at the same place after that. So he made that decision in the summer time, and he left. So Hope was sitting there with a gap in the English department. The English department- I think more so than in other departments- you can do like moving around. There's not like a single specialty that you can't do anything else but. But it did happen that his area of expertise was close enough to mine, but things got moved around anyway. So I was hired to take Ed Savage's place, and interestingly enough, he was hired at the University of Minnesota where I had just left.

ML: Your masters?

NN: No, I worked on my PHD there. Did my masters at Wyoming. So he went where I was, and then I came where he was. So I came because I was a teacher and because I had taught well in the eyes of people who were attuned to that kind of thing. That's how I happened to be at Hope.

ML: What was Hope like when you first started there?

NN: It was very interesting. Physically it's nothing like it is now. I mean it was- I could just name all the places that weren't there. The physical changes were really major. There was no Dow Center, there was no Kollen Hall. There was no... the administration building and theater- Dewitt, there was no Dewitt- that was a playing field. And then up on top behind Dewitt, you know where it slopes down and there's a hill up there- that was where the old gymnasium was, way up on top of the hill.

ML: Oh the Carnegie Gymnasium or something?

NN: The Carnegie Gymnasium, and it was there. The music building must have been there by then, I don't remember that getting built so the music building was there- I think. And Phelps Hall was there but not the freshman dorm thing. That wasn't there, that came later. And all of Twelfth Street was lined with cottages that were owned by Hope. So Cook Hall wasn't there, and the building that's now the Chaplin's office was one of about six or seven or eight houses along that street that belonged to Hope. The Admissions building wasn't there, the library wasn't there. The building adjacent to the library was the old library. The Physics building was quite recent when I came, but the big science building- that wasn't there. And all those places were just grass. So the campus looked, and there were probably some other changes too there; where Peale now sits was just a charming little white colonial house that was the Physc. department. So it really looked very different. And the entire athletic complex was not built, so it looked very different in that way. It was a small campus. I'm terrible about numbers unless I can plug something into the age of my daughters, and if I can't then I'm just

terrible. I don't think there were too many more than about twelve-hundred students at the time. It was a great size- the student body really knew one another. President VanderWerf knew the name of every student on campus, greeted them by name, knew all kinds of information about them, had a really open- well, of course, they have five or six children I think. I think five daughters and a son, maybe four daughters and a son, at various ages. And that had a lot to do with his attitude toward a number of things. So they were raising a large family on campus, but their house was like virtually open all the time. They had students there- students went there for Bible study, the students were there to meet with him and talk with him and do book discussion and everything. So that part was... the size of the campus was really nice. A major building on campus is the one that burned down; that was in the center of the Pine Grove, not so much toward the center but toward the front. That was the administration building, and that was also where the political science, english, and history departments were located. So that was a big- Van Raalte Hall was the big center of campus. So the campus was smaller, the students were fewer- it was a very cosmopolitan campus compared to the campus now. It was an east-coast and west-coast campus. I had in my early days, I think my second or third or fourth year there, I had an entire class that was from New Jersey and New York. I taught a world-lit class with an eastern accent, the whole thing. There was so many students- there were many more Reformed churches in existence and I think with larger membership than is the case now, and there certainly were many more in New Jersey and New York. And it was a common practice at the time for churches to give pretty sizeable scholarships to their

own church members who were coming to Hope. So that was one of the ways they donated to Hope- was through their students and through that kind of thing. So it didn't feel like a Midwest campus. It felt less Midwest to me than Minnesota had felt, interestingly enough. I don't remember, and then there were a lot of California students who were here as well from the California Reformed churches. Then by the middle Seventies, it was also racially a much more mixed campus than it is now. We had a number of Afro-American students from Chicago, from New York and from Bruten, Alabama. And that was in the difficult Civil Rights Sixties. But the campus was, as far as percent was concerned, certainly had a larger number of non-caucasians on in than it does now. And we had a number of foreign students here from a variety of countries.

ML: More so than we do now?

NN: Umhmm. More countries, and I think more visibility because the student body was almost, like two-thirds less than what it is now. They were more part of the campus as well. And it was a much more accepting time, the late Sixties and through the Seventies. It was a much more inclusive, the attitude was much more inclusive. It had to do with, I think, the time period more than anything else. It had to do with Chaplain Hillegonds who was an incredibly inclusive Chaplain and one who knew the faculty well and was friends with the faculty- didn't think they needed repairing morally or anything of that kind, and had a really fine relationship with the student body as a whole. So there was that attitude. There were like national movements. If there was a rally in Washington, we had at least a bus load of students heading there from Hope's

campus. So it was a campus where the student body was really involved in national issues and with national integration issues; with politics in a world wide sense. It was a really exciting campus to be on. There were very strong student leaders on the campus. Heading a student senate was a really prestigious position, and there was lots of people running for that. It was a campus with ideas bouncing around all the time. So I really, I loved the Seventies- I think I would have loved them anywhere, but I really loved them at Hope and the students who were here during that time period. And they were really activists, it was not a passive group at all. They had very strong ideas about justice and about integration, and they voiced them.

ML: Do you have a comment on- I know VanderWerf was much more open about his hiring policies, and I know that's when Dr. Penrose and Dr. Cohen were brought in.

NN: That's right, and they're almost all gone now.

ML: I was wondering, do you think that has contributed to changing it, the newer hiring policies for professors?

NN: That's an interesting question. I think I'd have to be more of a historian than I am to answer that with any kind of accuracy because I think attitudes in the U.S. are just... the attitudes today are not the attitudes of the Seventies or the Eighties, it's just different everywhere. There aren't student strikes happening- well there are student strikes happening now on campuses again having to do with, you know, the work. Well, the most recent one is the garments being sold in campus bookstores all over the United States are being made out of the country in sweatshops. So we have those strikes going on. But strikes to get woman studies in the curriculum, to get Black

studies into the curriculum- strikes to get better qualified faculty. Those kinds of things would happen all over the United States in the late Sixties and Seventies. So that's part of it, and the people who were coming here, the people who were being hired to teach were coming out of graduate schools where protest was just a way of life. And so I think we were just a different group then than the group coming out of graduate schools now. But it's true that Cal's hiring policy was much more liberal. I think he started here as president in '62, but I'm not sure. But I was hired by him, and then I was here through Dr. Van Wylen's tenure as president, and through Dr. Jacobson's tenure as president, and then the first semester of Dr. Bultman's tenure as president. And the hiring policies were definitely, comparing those people, they were the most conservative under Dr. Jacobson- they were the most liberal under Dr. VanderWerf. They were conservative, as well, under Dr. Van Wylen, but he listened to faculty much, much better than Dr. Jacobson ever did. Dr. Jacobson made more unilateral decisions than any president I've ever been around, and just simply wasn't as attentive to what chairman were telling him or anyone else. If the religious question wasn't answered right, that was the end of the interview- and nobody came. But during the time that Cal was hiring, he came to Hope at a time when his major objective, or at least one of them, was really academically to strengthen the college. He came at a time when there were lots of people retiring. And I don't see how this could be true, but I remember his saying, and I came in '66, and at this initial dinner for the faculty in the fall, I recall his saying that there were as many new faculty that year as there were faculty already there- that we were, in effect, fifty percent new. And that was both

because of retirement of people who'd been there for a really long time and expansion of the academic program. So he just did massive hiring that first year, and what he did pretty much was hand-pick who he wanted- and he wanted people who were really strong in the classroom, and it was very important to him to have, in the sciences because he was a chemist- and an outstanding one, to have researchers as well. And researchers, that was an important component, and colleges often say when they're considering promotion, they say they look at teaching, service and research. But in reality, many places look at research. And then somewhere down the line, service to the college community. And then somewhere way down there, teaching. But Cal really wanted to have teaching be a number one thing. You had to be dynamite in the classroom or he wasn't gonna, you know. So he did hirings that weren't limited in any way by an individual's religious background. It simply wasn't a factor for him- I mean my perception is that it wasn't a factor, it may well have been, but he didn't ask religious questions, he didn't impose any kind of thing. I remember, for example, being in an administrative- I'm jumping now to Jacobson, just for a minute- being in an administrative board meeting where we were discussing the phrasing on a document. And I had found it very exclusive, and I was wondering why it had to be phrased the way it was- religiously exclusive. And President Jacobson was irate at my question, and he wanted to know if anybody else had that objection. And someone else said, Bill Mayor said, 'Yes, I do,' and he said, 'maybe it's just because I'm coming at this from a Catholic perception, and I'm the only Catholic here'. And President Jacobson said, 'no you aren't'. And I thought, 'why would he know the religious background of

everybody sitting at this table?' And I was just so amazed. I said, 'how can you know that?' And he, of course, didn't answer the question. But I think of President Jacobson as a man who felt... he evidently thought it was important to know exactly what affiliation anybody had who was on the campus. And these people were not people he had hired, they were people who had been there before. And I say that in contrast to President VanderWerf who I don't think cared. I mean it didn't matter what he wanted- he had goals, and he assumed that if you were a decent human being you would be a decent human being. And that he didn't have to know where your church membership was, or something like that. But anyway, so his hiring policy was quite a bit different. And I think part of it had to do with him. He came out the Reformed Church himself. A lot of it had to do with the time, and a lot of it had to do what he saw as the need for the college at the time, and he just wasn't going to impede that. And it sometimes gets impeded that way. And it's been the case with the history department for its entire life. I always joke with Larry, whose one of my good friends in the department- and so is Bill, but I'm always joking with Larry about 'you see plots where they aren't. You're too Russian'. But it's true, if they need a specialist in the Middle East, who could be better than someone from the Middle East. And you get someone from the Middle East, and they don't have a Christian background... then again and again and again and again through Van Wylen and Jacobsons' years the person just isn't hired. One could argue that they were qualified but just didn't fit in in some way. But what it comes down to is the religious issue. So the hiring practices were really different. There's a phrase somewhere in the whole hiring bit that says the

critical mass of faculty at Hope should be Christian- it doesn't say 'Reformed Church' it says 'Christian', the critical mass. And critical mass has been interpreted different ways by different presidents. Whether the critical mass means, you know, seventy-five percent or whatever. Why that phrase has to exist to begin with I don't know, but anyway it's there. But the way, my perception and the perception of my colleagues- not just in my department but all the colleagues that I've ever talked to about President Jacobson's hiring policy- was, and he said this repeatedly, if you found a perfect candidate for a job... if they were atheist- forget it, or agnostic- forget it. But if they were of another religion- if they were Muslim, if they were Buddhist or whatever- it was always 'yes, we'll consider that'. But there's not a department at Hope, certainly including the religion department, that couldn't tell you about excellent candidates who were turned down because even though they fit all of these other criteria, the chances were there was somebody out there who was just as good and was also a Christian, so keep looking. And so we'd look the next year and the next year and the next year, and some departments get worn down over that. And they just say 'it's no use, why should we bring another Jewish candidate to campus when I'm just gonna be told 'they're excellent, but I'll bet we can find someone just as good'.'. And letting that fall under the critical mass thing, you know, so that it sounds as though the hiring policy is open too, but it isn't. Theoretically, if the critical mass has to be Christian, then we could be hiring Jews. No Jew was hired under President Jacobson. No Jews were hired under Dr. Van Wylen. There are some Jewish converts teaching there, but they may not know about who happened after. Jane Bach, for instance, is converted to Judaism

about four or five years ago. So Dr. Cohen is not the only Jewish faculty member on campus, but I don't know what Dr. Jacobson would have done about that. So the hiring policy, its interpretation has been- how a president interprets it- has been the big change. I think somewhere, because I've just been in so many discussions about this I close my ears to some of it, I think somewhere it does say in some policy that's been agreed upon to follow, that the critical mass should be, and the critical mass certainly was Christian under VanderWerf. And the critical mass under Van Wylen was certainly Christian. But one of the things I really admired about President Van Wylen was when faculty members disagreed about what was happening in hiring and whatever, we had faculty meetings and he openly discussed these things; he didn't shut out voices. He, at least, listened and when the faculty as a whole said 'this is what we want, this is what makes sense', he would at least take our wishes to the Board of Trustees. And I don't think that President Jacobson... well he hasn't done that 'cause he doesn't listen to what the faculty say, he just says, what's his favorite expression 'that's my decision' or 'that's my realm' or 'this has nothing to do with the faculty, this is an administrative decision', so he shuts it out. But Gordon Van Wylen, even though his hiring policy was a lot stricter than I would like it to be. And he too was fond of the 'have you been saved by Jesus Christ?' question. He, never the less, would listen to people who would say. Our department, the English department- for a position it wouldn't be uncommon to look at 150 to 200 applications. We have usually four or five people doing this, and those four or five people independently narrow those down to about twenty. And then they get together, and they discuss all that. I mean, you

wouldn't believe the man and woman hours that goes all this kind of stuff that's done. And then the list gets whittled down to ten. And then the ten get interviewed at a national conference. And then the list gets whittled down to three- we're allowed to bring three to campus. And so, you start on this in October, and you work all the way- October, November, into December. The conference happens over Christmas break. Three or four members of the department spend their Christmas break at the conference doing the interviewing to get the three people. The three people come on campus. In our department, they have to do a scholarly colloquium for faculty and interested students- faculty in other departments as well if they want to come. They have to teach a class; they're evaluated by the students, they're evaluated by the faculty at the colloquium. They have to have two to three days... incredible- they all say, everyone we've ever interviewed all say, 'we didn't go through anything like this any other place, but it was great preparation for all the rest of the interviews of our lives'. And then they have meals with majors and are interviewed by majors. They have luncheons scheduled with people in their same age group in other departments who are relatively new and can say 'don't ever come here, or come here'. Or, you know, 'here's the straight scoop'. They have meetings with people from other departments if their particular specialty happens to touch somebody else, we get those people together. And then they do all of that before they interview with the provost and the president. So if you do all that work, and you spend all that time with them- and then while they're here, they also individually or in groups of two or three, spend at least an hour with everybody in our department. We individually talk to them about what we do and how

they can fit into it and all that. And so, after months of that, and we say 'here's our candidate', and President Jacobson says to them 'have you been saved by Jesus Christ?', and if they are of any number of churches that don't use that terminology and don't quite know what it means and don't know whether he means personally, have they had a visitation in the middle of the night or something like that, and they're hesitant- they're dead ducks. So the hiring stuff is really, really frustrating here because what the English department does is really similar to, we happen to be terribly thorough about everything we do, but I think it's quite similar to what other departments do. So if you do all those things to come up with a candidate, and you spend- by the time you've done that- you've spent hours of time reading what they've done, in effect we decide whether they're effective classroom teachers and important scholars and all those things... and what the provost and the president are doing, what the president is doing in effect...

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with the interview that he has, whatever else he may or may not choose to talk about- his decision, he can't make an accurate decision about the expertise in the field because he doesn't have it, and the department has it. He can't make an accurate judgement on the basis of teaching because the students have and the faculty has, and he hasn't heard it. So what does he have to go on? He's making a judgement on the basis of the religious criteria.

ML: So the president has the final say in each hiring?

NN: Umhmm. And sometimes those visits are a half-hour, sometimes they're fifteen

minutes. We were interviewing a nun, and she was an incredible Afro-American scholar- international Afro-American scholar. And he had the audacity, President Jacobson, to ask- I've forgotten sister's name, Sister Rita or something- ask her if she'd been saved by Jesus Christ. It was the shortest interview any of our candidates had ever had with the president. She was just incensed. I mean, here she had dedicated her life to the church, and he asked that route question. So anyway, the religious exclusive attitude of two presidents, Van Wylen and Jacobson, have made a big difference in the faculty. And by no means am I saying that the faculty that they've hired are not competent faculty, because it's really a very strong faculty at Hope. But it's not a diverse faculty. It's not a diverse faculty. And I don't really know; I can't say for the current president. I think things aren't all that much different from what I've heard, although there's still not lost hope that they might be- in terms of hiring policy.

ML: Almost along the same lines, I was wondering what does a 'four year Christian liberal arts college' mean to you?

NN: What it used to say was that it was a liberal arts college in the Christian tradition. And what that means to me is what Hope meant to me in the Sixties and Seventies; that this is a college that's a liberal arts college, and that comes first, so you're gonna go here and you're gonna get a liberal arts education- you're not going to get a narrow, you're not going to get a Bible education. You're gonna get a liberal education and all those fields. 'It's in the Christian tradition' would mean to me that it was founded by a church, and that there's a spiritual dimension to the campus, and that could come in any number of ways. Certainly one of those would be in faculty, chapel services, that kind

of thing. Not just nominally so, but that's an important thing. The assumption is that a school that would say that would be saying in effect that the assumption is that the company there would basically live out of the Christian tradition. That phrase was changed by President Jacobson to the 'Christian college in the liberal arts' whatever kind of thing. And when it was changed, there was furor on the campus, and a meeting was called and people explained with great- asked why, you know, why he would make that change? And he said that he couldn't see any difference between a Christian college and a Christian liberal arts college, and that he had made the change because it was fewer words and economically it worked. It was explained to him in great detail how that would be read by some people. It would mean that the college put a larger focus, it's a hard thing to say- not that they put a larger focus on Christianity, but that it would be read as a Bible college. The faculty members protesting this said 'we are not a Wheaton, and we don't wanna be a Wheaton. We are not a Calvin, and we don't wanna be a Calvin so we don't want that phrasing to say to people, to students, to counselors, to parents, to whatever- we want this'. Finally he said, 'okay, okay. We'll change it back'. And then he did, but then now it's changed back again. At that time, this was at least six or seven or eight years ago when the big stink was raised, and then someone noticed a couple years ago that the Admissions Office had adapted that other phrase. And I don't know what it says in the catalogue- I just gave up, and I thought 'forget it'. So it means to me that people with Christian values will probably be your classmates, will probably be your faculty. But there are so many human values that are not exclusive to the Christian faith. Those are the values of Buddhist and the values of

Jews, and I think it's that value system- to me personally that's important. I don't think I'd ever, I mean I've had super religious people in my courses. In a particular course that I taught, expository writing, when we were doing argument writing, I would always do exercises that had to do with debatable issues. And the debatable issue I always raised in class was, we weren't discussing issues, but the concept was just to get people to see that they did have things that they could take a stand on. So I would say 'here's the issue, vote on it. Stand over here if you vote this way. Stand over here if you vote that- this and that'. And I always included the issue of only Christians should be hired by Hope College. I always put that one. 'Where do you stand on this? Do you agree/disagree, strongly agree/strongly disagree, or neutral?' And so I taught this course practically every semester, so I've asked this question over twenty-five years, and in the last few years, fewer and fewer people stand anywhere but strongly agree that everyone teaching in a college, of their teachers should be Christian. So it's like one person over here, and maybe one 'I haven't made up my mind yet', and thirteen over on this side. And then again, the object isn't to get a discussion of it, but I usually stay on it just long enough to say 'what do you think the danger would be?' And you just hear, I can't believe people say those things. So they just go on, and I'll say 'do you have anybody? Are you taking classes right now with anybody who would try to persuade you'. 'No, no, we're all safe here' kind of thing. And then I say 'well, so what's my background?' Well they don't know. 'And maybe I've been infiltrating your brain. Maybe I've been trying to...' whatever kind of thing, you know. 'You wouldn't do that, no, no'. I just can't believe the kinds of... I can't believe the fear- I

can't believe the ignorance, that's what it is, the ignorance and... contemporary students, and for me contemporary at Hope really means since Patterson came because the whole tenor of the student body has changed since he has come, and recruitment has been aimed that way. But I can't believe their ignorance of what an opposing idea or someone with a different opinion- how it might challenge their whole life or something. As though your head can't hold those things. To me, certainly one of the hallmarks of a liberal education is that you don't cut off fields. You don't say 'I can't discuss Buddhism because I might like it'. Or 'there's no way I can read that literature because it wasn't written by a Christian'. In the last decade at Hope, mainly in the last seven and eight years, I've had students- and this has never happened before- I've had students in World Literature asking if the writer is Christian. And I simply say 'that's irrelevant, we're reading the great literature in the time. I'm not gonna answer that question. I don't know it, or why are you asking that question- what difference does it make?' Or that they tell me in all sincerity that they really think this novel shouldn't be taught because there's adultery in it. And I say, 'there's adultery in life. Should we destroy all that? Because an author writes about something, are you assuming the author approves of it?' Just incredibly naive ideas that if one is asked to read the great French classic "Madam Bovary" and they read Flaubert and he's a realist, and he writes about a woman who has affairs, that therefore this shouldn't be taught in a Christian college. And I can't imagine anyone in the Sixties or Seventies or Eighties asking that question. They may not like the novel, they may not like the character, but they don't think that the literature is corrupting them, something of that kind. So that kind of

question, or the kind of person in a classroom who will put down, verbally, someone else for suggesting that the woman in the story might have a point, or something like that. Or maybe just some innocuous statement. It's almost a fanatic kind of narrow-minded fundamentalism. And there are students like that on campus now, and if they were here in the Sixties and the Seventies and the Eighties, I never came into any contact with them. But I certainly have come in contact with them in the Nineties. And I think they're here because of the Chaplain's programs. I think they're here because the Admissions Office makes it- I think the Admissions Office consciously has people, students working for it who are really into the Chaplain's program and who promote that when they take students around campus. And that is going to attract some students- it's going to totally turn off others. But I think Ben Patterson has made an impact in Hope College, and if that's what he hoped to do he's certainly done it. But I think the impact is incredibly negative.

ML: Do you want to talk more about that?

NN: I think probably not because it's hurt so many of my friends and me and so many students that it's a very emotional topic for me, and I'm just sick of it!

ML: In the past, were there other controversies that even touched anything like this?

NN: You know, I don't think so. I was writing that same thing to President Jacobson before he left. The big controversies on campus that I can remember, and I've got a good memory for those; among the faculty, the hiring policies are always, that's always been the issue. It gets revisited all the time- hiring policies- huge, huge area. But I think that the Chaplain's program and the Chaplain's manner of doing things and the

Chaplain's attitudes toward things is even bigger than that. It's caused more division among faculty, just incredible division. And a lot more general, not generalized, but just like overriding unhappiness. The hiring stuff is always an issue, but it's something you can discuss with people and not walk away depressed- terrible. I mean, you can be really upset about it, and you can say 'well okay, we can fight it this way or another way', but the Chaplain's program- it just, almost every time there's a blow-up about it, the blow-up leaves the faculty in tears and ready to leave the college. So I think it's just been a huge, in my history at Hope it's been a very, very big issue. Then other huge issues, but they were really- I think student more than faculty because the faculty were, like, there. And that was the whole Civil Rights movement where there was the strong Afro-American voice on campus, and it really was strong. Very strong leaders were demanding courses, and the faculty gave them. But their problem, not their problem but part of their issue, was that they wanted Black studies courses taught by Black members in the departments, and there weren't Black members in the departments. But the departments did listen that they should be taught, and then they had suggestions on who of the existing members of the department, they would take them from and who should teach them. And I don't think that was a surprise to any of the departments. Like in our department, it was Elizabeth Reedy. And I said 'well, Bets could do Black literature well'. She did, and she was clearly of their mind set, and so that's where the selected and choose through capable of it. Because nobody was prepared in those fields, it was like a whole new topic. So those sit-ins, but they were mostly the Black students- my recollection is that most of the protesting they did was

they wanted better relationships, they wanted stronger acceptance from the white students. And they were saying, 'we're tired not having it, and we want it', instead of just not having it and being in the background. They were a vocal enough majority. And so, there were- I can't think of the name of the group that came out of that, but Bets Reedy and David Myers were the key people on that, but it was a human rights force, or a human rights committee, or something like that, that called meetings of the white students and the black students in the Pine Grove and listened to both sides and did exercises to get people to communicate with each other and so they really made efforts and, I think, some pretty strong inroads. So I think of that as an issue, but I would say the Chaplain and hiring and the acceptance of the non-white student in the white student body have been really the issues since I've been there. There's probably something major that I'll remember three years from now and say 'oh'. But really, those have been the things that have caused hours and hours of debate.

ML: We already talked a little bit of how you came to the Holland community. I wondered how professors who move here feel like they fit into the community. Do they find their friendships within the other Hope faculty?

NN: I think very much so. When we moved here in '64, we lived on the north side of town-kind of really in the country, we lived off 160th. On a one-block long street called, ironically, Main Street. It was a little development, and all of the houses were owned by the same man- the VanWieren who owned the hardware out there. And we were all renters, and they were nice homes out there. We'd been living there for about three months when we had neighbors bring a petition to our door, and they told us in hushed

tones that some Catholics had just moved in next door. And they were petitioning to have VanWieren oust them. And we had just left a Catholic campus.

ML: Where was that?

NN: The College of St. Thomas. When I was at the University of Minnesota, my first husband was at the College of St. Thomas, and we lived virtually on that campus- he was doing his master's degree there. And we lived in a Catholic neighborhood, and I had Catholic friends all my life. I didn't make this distinction. So they were trying to get rid of them, and we just laughed. We insulted them terribly but... okay. And I think it was not difficult for me because my husband was a member of the Holland High faculty, and they create a really strong social group- I think teachers do in any school, and those teachers were mixed; which ones had grown up in Holland and which ones hadn't. And it was a really good group. So we had like an instant social group when we came. And then once I started at Hope, I had another instant social group. But I think if my husband didn't have that- and in both of those cases the social groups were mixed male and female. If he'd been in some business, and at that time there were very few women in Holland business, and he'd had just male associates, and I had just been there alone on that road- I would have been miserable. Because it was a joke but a joke that wasn't funny to me, that when you met anybody in those days, it was like the first question is 'what's your name?' and the second is 'what's your church? where do you go?' It was like incredibly confining, but it wasn't at the college. The college was like the liberal place in town, and Holland High School certainly wasn't conservative or it wouldn't have been as innovative as to build a campus instead of a

building. So in those ways, and then in other ways, I just never changed my habits. I mean, if when I had time to wash was on Sunday, I would hang it out. And if that's when I had time to mow the lawn, I'd mow the lawn. And I just refused to... it was harder out in that community where all those... We were asked if we would at least have our cookouts- we were asked by the same neighbors who had brought the petition around- if when we cooked out on Sundays, could we do it out of sight in the backyard so their children wouldn't have to see us. Because our daughter was out playing, and their children were not allowed to go outside on Sunday and it made them sad, and I thought 'well I don't want to make those kids sad. That corner of the yard was big as this corner of the yard. But I don't think it's a easy community, I think it's a lot easier now- a lot easier now than it was in the Sixties. I've read a history of Holland, of people who moved here in the Forties and Fifties and just couldn't believe how difficult it was to break into a community that, for the most part, had a similar religious background, a national background which is tough. But I think it's a lot easier now than it would have been then, but I still think for teachers, they're kind of saved. We get immediately there's gonna be a fall potluck, and immediately there are people that you kind of gravitate toward, and that type of thing. But my social community has almost exclusively been the Hope community for years. That's where my really dear friends are. You know, I have neighbors who are good friends, but the ones I do things with; travel with and party with and discuss things with are my Hope people.

ML: Has the ethnic diversity in Holland, has that helped to change things?

NN: You'd think it would. I think it's helped change it for people moving in. Because it's a

more realistic mix than it was then. I mean, if it hadn't been for the Hope campus where there was a lot of diversity, and those students were often at our house- I would have thought it was a skewed community to raise children in. But because they had... because I had friends who were Afro-American, so did my kids. And they just naturally had Hispanic friends when they started school because a large percentage of the school system was Hispanic and there just wasn't that kind of, even indirect, prejudice at home, that I'm aware of anyway. So I think it's helped the community an awful lot. But I think it's made some people who are prejudice all the more prejudice. It's that assumption. When I first came here and there were like no African-American families in the city or on the city limits or anything, and there were two Jewish families and everyone knew exactly who they were. But I can remember when I first moved here, if there were robberies- actually there were so few crimes it was just amazing- but if something happened, what you would often hear was the assumption was that it was part of the Spanish community because it certainly couldn't be Dutch. And so I think the same people- people with innate prejudices are gonna get more so when you suddenly have a mixed community. Now they have Hispanics to be suspicious of and Afro-Americans to be suspicious of, and then what are you gonna do about all those Indonesians- you gotta be suspicious of them too. So I think it's, as a whole, it's helped a lot. And some people it will probably never help. But I like the community much better with its ethnic mix than I did before. And it's one reason that I also like St. Francis because there is truly a mixed community in that church in a sense that you just wouldn't find it anywhere else in Holland, you're not gonna find it.

ML: The new building is beautiful.

NN: Isn't it beautiful, it's really nice.

ML: What led to your decision to retire?

NN: Well, I'm sixty-five, and I had more lives to live. So age was certainly part of it. In my mind, I love to teach and it really was a huge part of my life. I mean summer and winter and day and night and everything else for a lot of years. But I also love to do any number of other things that I never had time for. And so I wasn't someone who was going to hang on in the classroom until forever, so I knew I'd be stopping sometime. So that was part of it, and part of it was that I knew that when I wanted to stop, I had told myself I would stop when I knew I wasn't as good as I had been, and... I don't know why that makes me sad. And I was beginning to feel that, and I wanted to stop when I would still be missed instead of 'thank God she's gone'. But also, and this is interesting because I've heard my other friends who've just retired this past year say 'you know what's happened?' and it just is a kind of thing that happens when you've taught a while. Suddenly you just feel, sometimes not that suddenly, you feel really out of touch with students, or you feel as though your world just isn't their world anymore or there's isn't yours. And I've felt that way about freshman for... probably about the last five years that I've taught. And I don't feel that way at all about juniors or seniors. But with freshman it's like, I don't know their music. I don't know their allusions. I don't know their mind frames. It's truly like- I just feel like I'm the odd guy out in the room or something. It's a really strange feeling because we're not making any intellectual connection 'cause they're not there yet. And they're so terribly focused on

adjusting and each other and everything. But it's a really strong- I think the last freshman class I taught was either this year's seniors or your class when they were freshman. And I taught a course at the freshman writing course that we teach- themes. And I taught this course in film. My intent was to look at classic films of about ten different genres and then see the film and write about them, talk about them- whatever. And it was like I was coming out of this total other world. I couldn't believe they were people who hadn't heard of Dustin Hoffman, and I've been a film buff since I've been a little kid. And this may seem incidental, but it's an example of the kind of distance that I feel. It was like the names didn't mean anything. The films, because they weren't- I mean like, Hitchcock's classic "Psycho", my class laughed all the way through because it was predictable- and they had never seen it before. But it wasn't violent enough, and it didn't have animation and all these things. And I thought, 'you know, I just don't live in the world'. And I'm a current film goer, I mean I'm a very selective film goer but... And that kind of thing when you feel as though you must be from another world 'cause these people in front of you certainly aren't from the one. And I think their value system, in terms of education, is just like nothing like yours. And when a student gets to be a junior or senior and starts to focus, then that's another thing. You might really want to be able to write a good piece of fiction, so they're working on it. Or they might just love this author, and they want to read them. But freshman are, somehow, they're somewhere else. So I've felt a huge distance between freshman, and then the sophomore course I taught. So I just simply asked, I said to Peter 'I'll teach five writing courses, but not the freshman course- just keep me away

from there'. And then the World Lit courses, which I've also done and really enjoyed through the years, have been phased out of the curriculum into the new structure kind of thing. And also, the last time I taught those, which were about three years ago, is when I had two sections and they were just filled with students who didn't read. I had converted the courses to discussion courses 'cause I knew it could be done, and I had students who just thrived on that. And I just, day after day, I'd have like a third of my students come without having read the assignment so they couldn't take part in the discussion. And it was like, they just didn't care to learn it. Someone said 'well I started to read it but it was hard'. And I thought 'so you stopped?' So I felt that distance, and that's been coming on. And it happens to be, Jane Bach just said to me, 'I just am not on their wavelength anymore', and the time comes when you're just not. And so I wasn't. And the Chaplain thing has worn me down. It's taken a toll from a lot of people. And it's the kind of thing I worry about and I talk about, and try to do something about. But it just gnaws and gnaws and gnaws, and it's really exhausting. And it was a fight that I just didn't have the energy to fight anymore, but it was hard for me to be there and not fight it. So that was a factor. One of the things I've wanted to do for a long time is take courses. I've done that from time to time when I've been teaching, and then I really wanted to do art courses so I wanted to get started. So I have.

ML: What have you started with?

NN: I've taken beginning drawing which was terribly exciting for me, because I'm not a drawer. I didn't even know one pencil from another. I didn't even know the names of

the things of the supplies to buy for the course. I had no idea what I was buying. And I took that from Judy, and it was a great course. I took that in the fall, and then this past semester I've taken Afro-American art history and photography. Both of those were- I've really enjoyed it, and I'm signed up for courses in the fall as well. I love creating things, courses- all kinds of things, and I've just wanted to do... I've done some art things through the years at Hope but never for credit. I'm doing all these for credit, and I'm an official minor. I was gonna be a major and then I figured I'd be 85 by the time I'd finish. But they've moved to practically all two hour courses, and they require so many, and I'm not going to do more than two at a time- so I thought 'I'll settle for a minor'. But it's been a lot of fun to be learning new stuff. So that was one thing, but there are really a lot of things that I want to do. I think another factor is that all these years I've taught, I can really honestly say- except for days when I was just exhausted or something- I would always have rather been at school than someplace else. I mean, that's really where I wanted to be. And in the last few years, there were whole streaks of two or three weeks at a time when I really wanted to stay home and read. I didn't want to go. I thought, 'hey, that's a sign'. So I'm attuned to signs, and I think signs told me that... you know, I just figured that sometime between 60 and 65 I'd probably retire. And things were going well, and then little signs came and I thought 'okay, if I really would rather sit on the porch and read a book than go in and teach something, then something's wrong. My students aren't gonna get one hundred percent of me, and there's not enough here to attract me anymore'. But friends of mine who've retired in the past have always said 'agh, you'll know, when the time comes-

you'll know', and I think you really do. The time comes and you know 'I think I should stop this and do something else'.

ML: What are you gonna miss most?

NN: Well it won't be reading papers, even though it was only the volume that got to me. I never saw it as a chore, it was just sometimes 'how can I possibly do one hundred', you know, I just can't do it. The things I think I'll miss the most, it's kind of hard to say at this point. I would say that I'll miss my colleagues, but actually I plan to still see them. I mean they're my friends, and I'll still be around them. And that would have been a big thing. I'm in touch with so many of my former students- just so many of them that it's as though I still have all those students. And now that I am a student, I'm still around students. So I would have said 'it's the people that I'll miss', but I think I'll still have... I plan to still see my colleagues and, as far as students are concerned, I don't know that I need new students. I've had enough other students who are far and wide and friends with whom I'm in touch- that kind of thing. I think, actually I'll have much more time to read, and I write poetry and I rarely had time to do that. I'll have much more time to do those things then if I were teaching because I'm the kind of person that always reread everything I was teaching and rethought how to teach it and everything. So I don't think all the energy that I put into that, I'll miss- I'll just put that energy somewhere else. I probably could answer that better five years from now than I can now. I think the shifting from teacher to student was an ideal thing for me personally to do because I get energized by people and being around them and by learning things. And I always learned, I truly learned, as much from my students as I

learned from anything I was reading. And I love being a student, I do. I've kind of always been a student, even when I was a teacher. And I haven't given that up, I've just shifted that to another area. I certainly will not- I know what I won't miss. I won't miss the tremendous drain that the faculty have for committees and things of that kind. I didn't realize how much, but that had to be at least a third of my efforts and stuff. And I didn't realize how much until last fall, because I officially retired a year ago, but because of departures in our department I had agreed- even a year before I retired- that I agreed that I would come back in the fall and teach a full load, but without any extra. No department meetings and no committees and no independent studies and no advisees. And I used to advise all the minors for English so I had those thirty plus my ten majors and stuff. So then I began my art career. And so last fall I taught four courses, and there was a huge difference in the amount of time that was freed up because I wasn't doing the other things.

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