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van Putten, James D Oral History Interview: Retired Faculty and Administrators of Hope College

Melissa LaBarge

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Joint Archives of Holland
Oral History Project- summer 2000
Retired Hope Professors
Interviewee: Dr. James van Putten
Interviewer: Melissa LaBarge
1 August 2000

ML: Can you start by telling where you were born, where you grew up?

JV: I was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan because my parents were passing through. My father had just taken a job as dean of a small school in Illinois- Blackburn College. And my mother grew up in Coopersville, Michigan and they were just traveling through- that's why I was born in Grand Rapids. I grew up, part of the time, in Illinois- a small town- Carlinville, Illinois where my father taught at the college and was dean. But I really lived many different places. My father was a naval officer during World War Two, so we lived all across the country during that time. I went to grade school in New York City. After the war we moved to a small college in Missouri- Park College. I was there for a year and then my father joined the Foreign Service. I spent my high school years in Peking, China. And we were vacationing here in Holland when the Korean War started waiting to go back to Korea. So, I spent one year of high school here, and since we still thought we were going to Korea, 'well, why don't you start Hope College?' And so I started Hope College and that's how I got to Hope College. My mother and father both graduated from Hope. My father grew up in Holland. His family, the van Putten family is one of the original families. His father- was it his father or his grandfather? Guess it's his grandfather, he built the Tower Clock building. He had the first bank in Holland with money that he had earned by being a lumberman. He owned almost all of the property south of Holland to the

Kalamazoo River. He owned all of Waukazoo woods- he was the person who lumbered it originally. With that money he started a bank and eventually built the Tower Clock Building and then shortly after 1900, the bank failed. And there were other owners and finally it really failed in the depression. So, although I didn't really grow up in Holland- I only went to High School one-year here- the family has long roots here. I'm relatives with the Cappons- you know, we're all relatives. You know, when you come from one of the original families, everybody seems to be a relative. I've got lots of relatives. So, that's how I got to Hope College and then went to graduate school at the University of Michigan- taught there for awhile. I went to Europe on a fellowship, and taught at Cal-Tech quite a few years. And then came to Hope College and taught here for thirty-three years and then retired.

ML: You're a physics and engineering?

JV: Physics and engineering, yes. My Ph.D. was in physics, and I did research in fundamental physics for the first half of my career and then switched into being an engineer and did engineering here primarily.

ML: Since you have more depth than most people because both your parents went to Hope and you went to Hope...

JV: And my kids went to Hope.

ML: Amazing. What was it like when you were here as a student?

JV: I started here in the fall of '51. It was a small school at that time- I can't remember exactly- six, eight hundred students, something like that. It was a parochial school in that it drew most of its student body from enclaves of the

Reformed Church. Whether it was California or the East Coast, New Jersey, New York. Both New Jersey and New York did not have any state universities at that time. So many parents sent their kids to colleges in other states. The faculty was so-so. There were some people who were very good- there were a lot who were very poor.

ML: Poor in what ways?

JV: Academically. The result was that the students actually had to teach themselves a lot. So it was interesting in the sense that it attracted a cadre of really dedicated, energetic students who had to teach themselves because the faculty couldn't do much for them. Which is interesting. And the faculty were very overworked. They would teach six, seven different classes and definitely had very little time for doing anything else other than teaching classes. It was more like a glorified high school in that sense. It prepared you very well because you had to be so independent. Very little of what we now see in terms of helping students adjust, or giving them assistance in choosing a career, or anything of that sort was all up to the person. The town was also very, very backward. Having come from being in the Foreign Service, it was quite a shock. At that time, members of the Christian Reformed Church were forbidden to go to movies and many of them refused to have television sets. That gives a certain atmosphere to a community.

ML: Was it hard for you to come?

JV: Well in a sense, you found friends that were outside that kind of a community. And you learned how to... you chose your friends on the basis of mutual interests and that sort of thing. It was a very, very conservative... I'm trying to find

exactly the right word. It was a patronizing kind of community. I think it's characterized in some sense by a question that was asked me, a couple of questions that were asked me, when I first came here to teach in 1967. One was I met somebody on the street and her question was, 'well, who are you a son of?' It all had to do with relationships and the community was nothing like what the community is now. It's very, very different- the college is very, very different. Which, I think is interesting in that there are some people who want it to go back to the way it was. Well, I know what it was like and it isn't the place you want to be. They have idealized it in some way. It was a very narrowly focused institution. There were a few strong intellectual areas. The chemistry department was very strong at that time. But most of the programs were pretty weak- dedicated teachers but weak programs.

ML: When did you start to see that changing, assuming that it's changed?

JV: Well I don't know. I graduated in '55 and I really didn't come back to Holland until '67- for twelve years. So somewhere in there it really started to change. Although, in '67, there still were very few places that were open on Sunday. In the city, there were very small grocery stores actually. You wouldn't dare mow your lawn on Sunday. But a major change had already started by that time, by '67. Otherwise, I don't think I would have been interested in having to come back- particularly living in Southern California. And that was another shocker, you're living in Southern California where if you go out to a party on Saturday night, on the way home you stop in at the Supermarket and buy your groceries. Well, we tried that the first Saturday we were here... [laughter] and you know

what? It's really a very different kind of community. One thing I should probably just stick in there is that my father also taught at Hope College. He started teaching at Hope in 1954. While I was still in college, he started teaching and he retired in 1968- so after he left the Foreign Service he taught here. So we have other connections.

ML: What did he teach?

JV: Political science- he had his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago. But he started the political science department there. I think, as far as Hope College goes, the real change took place with the appointment of Calvin VanderWerf as president. He is a person who had experience outside of the local community. He had been chairman of the department of chemistry at the University of Kansas and a nationally known scientist. And he understood, from an intellectual view, what a faculty should be. And at that time, Hope College was owned by the Reformed Church, when he took over. And it did not have an independent Board of Trustees. The Board of Trustees were essentially appointed by the Reformed Church. They weren't a self-perpetuating Board of Trustees. (It's similar to what Calvin has right now, and they are now starting to pull away from church ownership.) Which meant that the school was not eligible for many types of grants and gifts. And he saw that as a real impediment for the development of the college as an intellectual institution. One of his first jobs was to convince the Reformed Church to give up their ownership in Hope College. Which, if you think about it, is unbelievable to convince them to do that. He managed to do it and established it as an independent institution with a self-

perpetuating Board of Trustees. So, probably that marks the real beginning of Hope College as an institution that has more than just really local influence, so to speak. And that occurred before I got here. And then he planned to have the school grow and grow substantially. And he started to recruit new faculty members and he went nationwide looking for faculty members.

ML: What was he stressing in these hirings?

JV: Very much academics. I believe when he took over probably well less than half of the faculty had a Ph.D.- he understood that we needed an active faculty, and he was using what the Chemistry Department had done on their own as an example of what could be done in all departments. And so, he worked at reducing teaching loads so people could do research. He looked for faculty members that were energetic, he brought in a lot of people from different institutions that were not necessarily associated with the Reformed Church when right before that it was almost a given. And he had to because there was a large number of the faculty who retired. And to keep the institution going, you had to replace a lot of faculty. So he worked very hard at that and brought in a tremendous number of new faculty numbers. And in 1965, '66, '67, '68, and that also caused problems because there were people who thought he was pulling Hope College away from its tradition. And, yes it was to some extent. But I think he was really pulling it back towards its long traditions. It's very interesting to read some of the old catalogues and see how open an institution and how outward an institution it was in 1900- compared to what some people think about the way it should be and how it sort of turned in on itself in the forties, thirties and forties.

ML: That leads me to an interesting question. In the present catalogue, it says that Hope is a four-year liberal arts college in the historic tradition of the Christian faith. What does that mean?

JV: I don't know, that's a political compromise. When Gordon VanWylen became president, he established a committee on goals and purposes. And it was absolutely clear that there was no common goal or purpose that you could write down. And he, more or less, came up with that statement that everybody could agree with. But anytime he tried to make it more specific, there was objections- whether they tried to make it less specific or more specific. And I think that's healthy for an institution because if you have everybody believing and looking at it from the same point of view, you are no longer an academic institution- you are an institution designed to reinforce current beliefs and to propagandize. And that's, to me, a sign of an institution that's headed for trouble. The earlier catalogues, for instance, made it very, very clear that Hope College makes no requirements on the beliefs of its students. And it's even in its original charter that that's the case. Interesting because, you know, there have some movements in recent years to suggest that all students should be Christian. Well if they actually do that, they're probably in violation of the original charter. It specifically says that in the original charter. And it's chartered by the state of Michigan- they'd have to go back and have the legislature pass a new charter.

ML: Nobody has mentioned that before.

JV: I bought some of the early catalogues that the archives had at surplus- they're very interesting to read. And it's very interesting to see how practical an

education the original, say the first fifty years of Hope College- we talk about it as a liberal arts college- yes that's there. One of the statements, I can't quote it exactly, but it's something like, 'Hope College offers a classical, liberal education to students so that they may better undertake the more practical activities of life such as being farmers, physicians, teachers and ministers'. I think that's from the 1890 catalogue. So when people talk about 'should there be a nursing program?', or 'should there be an engineering program?', or 'should there be a sociology program?', or 'should there be an accounting program?' I look at those as just natural outgrowths of the original dreams of people who founded Hope College.

ML: With the liberal arts, how much interaction is there between departments and how much should there be?

JV: I think there should be a lot, but I don't think it comes, necessarily, from pushing departments together to do, 'say, why don't you two work together on something interesting'. I don't think that works. I don't think it works in saying, 'why don't you two teach a course together? Make up a course'. I don't think that works, I think the best way to foster it is to foster a social interaction between various members of the faculty. And in their intellectual discussions, will come out interesting things that they can work together on- whether it is for the development of programs, whether it is the research, whether it's just the interchange of ideas. And one of the things that I have found so good and intellectually challenging has been to have lunch at the Kletz regularly, where people of all different departments sit down together, tell jokes, discuss what's

going on, and you get to know everybody. It disappoints me that more people don't do that.

ML: I've heard from people that it's getting less and less that way among professors.

JV: Well, when the school was smaller, then you could have a larger fraction of the faculty around the table at one time. So, I don't know, but I would guess that on a given day there may be thirty or forty faculty members having lunch at different tables in the Kletz. Now, if that could be really expanded so that a hundred people were eating- that'd be half the faculty having lunch together and talking. I don't know how you could get more than that. So, to me, the way to get cooperation between faculty members and departments and things and intellectual fertilization that comes from that, is through social interaction and not through forced academic interaction. That's my opinion. There used to be a lot more faculty socialization on weekends. And that may just have to do with changing interests. Early on, there was nothing else to do. It was just a way, early on, fraternities and sororities were the major social life on campus. Eighty percent of all students belonged to fraternities and sororities. There was no social activity in town, so what are you going to do? You joined a fraternity or a sorority. And that's where you had your social life. And they planned things and did things and had regular meetings, and they had regular meetings and all that sort of thing. Nowadays, there are a wide variety of social opportunities outside of fraternities and sororities, so while the numbers in sororities and fraternities have remained fairly constant, the percentage of students belonging has gone down. And that may be true with faculty. When I joined the faculty, there were two places that

you could buy a beer in town. There was no place that you could buy a bottle of liquor. The country club was the only place that you had to join to get dinner there and there was a restaurant out at Macatawa- Point West- it was the only good restaurant. And that was it. So, of course, if you wanted to do some socializing, you would do it mostly in your homes- invite people over, that sort of thing. Nowadays, there's so much more to do, it's just a different community- it's a much wider, broader community than it was at that time.

ML: Do professors at Hope normally find most of their friendships within the Hope community or do they spread it out?

JV: I can only talk for myself. Most of my friendships are outside the Hope community. It's not that I don't have friends in the Hope community, but I would say more of them are on the outside. Although, most of my friends have some relationship to Hope College in some way or another. But I have friends in industry and professionals- people that I get together with, primarily, are not from Hope College. I don't think there's anything wrong with that because I think a college better look to the outside. If it doesn't look to the outside, it is not going to thrive. If it satisfies internal goals primarily, then it isn't serving its clientele. Its clientele is not going to stay here in Holland. It is not going to be associated with Hope College. The clientele are going to go out in the world, and they better be looking out and seeing what the world is like, and helping everybody know how to succeed in the outside rather than the inside.

ML: How has technology changed the way that your classes run, and that you've taught?

JV: Well, since I teach technology- it's what I teach that changes. A few years ago I gave a talk to incoming freshman. I titled it, 'I am a Fake'. And I meant by that is that, at that time, I was no longer teaching any course in which I had had formal instruction. I'd had to learn it all on my own, and now I was passing on what I'd learned. So, technology, as far as the subject matter, changes dramatically. As far as how it affects my classes- very little. I still find the blackboard to be an incredibly good instructional tool. Certainly in more recent years students can look things up on the Web and that sort of thing. Some of my textbooks have discs with them in which every illustration, every graph, every diagram is active- so the student plugs the disc into the computer, he can vary the parameters and see what happens. They can change things- yes, it has the ones that are in the textbook, but then they can change them so the textbook becomes more alive in that sense. You can say, 'well, you know, what would happen if I did this?' And, you can see what happens if you did that. But as far as technology really changing what goes on in the classroom, I think it is going to take a long time. It takes much longer to prepare a lecture that you're going to deliver by PowerPoint or something like that than it normally takes. And one of the things that I have always tried to do in my teaching is to listen to what's coming back from the class and modify what I'm doing on the basis of the response I'm getting from the class. So that I have an overall goal- what I wish to accomplish, say today or this week or something of that sort. But how I get there may depend entirely on what I sense is the level of understanding or the interest of what's going on in that particular class. And if you prepared all ahead of time with a bunch of screens

and handouts, there's no way you can make it. You need to have that kind of instant feedback and responsiveness to the needs of the students. I was thinking back about the big push for distance education. And that's something that everybody's talking about. And maybe I'm just an old curmudgeon, but I think it's doomed to failure- except for the people who cannot get to institutions. Now maybe that's people who are working full time and need to- for them, okay. But, we've always had distance education- it's called a textbook. Anybody can buy a textbook for a lot less than they pay for a distance education, and read it and do the problems. And, at least half of the problems will probably have answers for them. So we have had distance education available for centuries, but it has not really been the answer to education because education is not passing on information, it's the interchange of ideas. And, it is understanding how to use that information to solve very practical kinds of problems. Whether it's a political problem or whether it's a problem having to do with writing or creating a poem or an essay, or understanding the psychology of a situation. What's in a textbook, or what's in a distance education is only the information. So I think colleges are going to struggle a bit with that, but if they really understand what they're here for- is to pass on, and I guess I would use the term wisdom as opposed to information, you aren't going to have any trouble.

ML: That is very interesting.

JV: You're one of the first people I've expressed that idea to. Because there's a lot of people who say, 'oh yeah, we should put all our courses on the Web- students can do it whenever they want'. Well, they've been doing that forever. It's called

textbook- it's not worked. I mean, how many students really read the textbook before class- very few. How many people are willing to buy a textbook in a subject, sit down and work through it all on their own. Very difficult to do- you need a guide. You need somebody to motivate you to do it. Now, there are people who do that. There are people who have got to teach a course in which they've never had formal education. And, okay- I've got to teach about Micro-controllers this year. I've never used a Microcontroller- they weren't invented when I was in college. Well, what do you do? You buy a bunch of books- you start reading the journal articles. You buy some equipment, you get the things from the manufacturer, you start playing, you make mistakes- that's fine. But, that's not education for the masses, so to speak, that's education for a very select set of people who have a definite need to learn a particular thing. That's very different than what it is in the colleges and universities.

ML: So, it sounds like a lot of work for the professors who have to be the guides.

JV: Yes, classroom- being in the classroom is a minor part of being a professor. You're in the classroom nine, twelve hours a week. What do you do with the rest of the time? Well, besides work for the department and trying to recruit good students and people dropping in and that sort of thing- you spend a lot time just trying to understand your field at a deeper and deeper level. So that when you're talking to students, it's not just essentially going through the old notes or textbooks, you're trying to get an insight as to how you understood this and how you could take that information and help understand the world around you. To me, the ideal would be to start with a real problem and then go back and see what

you need to understand it. To me, that would be the best kind of education.

Here's the problem- what do I need to understand that, because that's what you're going to be faced all throughout your life. Nobody's going to give you something to do that they already know the answer for. Nobody's going to pay you to do that anyway. You may pay for them to give it- that's called college education. But nobody's going to pay you to do something that they know the answer for. They're going to give you something for which they don't know how to do, whether it is a business problem, whether it is a educational problem- teaching, whether it is a service problem of how you help somebody in a particular situation, whatever it is. Your boss is going to give you something for which there is no obvious solution. And you're going to have to pull together everything you know and figure out what you don't know and where you get it. To me, that would be the best kind of education. The courses were, as you went through your program, increasingly orientated towards that kind of method of learning. And to me, that's one of the problems of the liberal arts- is there's a huge tendency within the liberal arts to look at education as passing on a heritage and leave it at that.

Yes, that's part of it, but why do you want to pass on the heritage? Just to pass on the heritage? You might as well write it down in books- make sure your libraries are safe from fire and flood and earthquake, that's the heritage. You want society to be able to improve itself. So in some sense, I'm at odds with a lot of what goes on. That comes from my background.

ML: How much of your time has been taken up by committees?

JV: Well, it's hard to say. Actual committees, probably not that much. But, and I've worked really hard to get engineering started at Hope College, and that took a lot of time. It took a lot of political maneuvering, it took getting external support to do that- finding internal support, all those sort of things. Recruiting students. In the last ten years, I'll bet I have spent a quarter of my time recruiting good students. And I think everybody should do that because to me, that's how you make an institution alive. So, why not? They recruit basketball players and football players- why shouldn't they recruit good students.

ML: You started the Engineering Department, correct? How does one go about doing that?

JV: First you start teaching a few engineering courses on the sly, and you see whether there's a need. And you find out that students are interested. Why do you even start teaching a few on the sly? You find out that a whole group of your students are going into engineering rather than into physics. So you teach a few courses, and you find out that they... And then you convince a Dean that maybe you ought to hire an engineer to teach a few of these. And you build up from that, and you get some grants to study the problem, and you find sympathetic administrators who are willing to sign off on certain things that maybe they really shouldn't. You build it that way. I guess I'm disappointed that Hope College couldn't see the opportunity. We started our engineering program before Grand Valley, but they had a full blown engineering program long before Hope College did because we were so slow moving. If I have a criticism of the way Hope College runs is that it wants to plan its way into the future- believes that by study and intellectual

dint, figure out what's the best way to do things. And I think maybe you can, but it takes forever and many items- the need for it- maybe have passed you by or the opportunity. And, I'm much more of an experimentalist and if it looks like a good idea, you discuss it and set up goals for something, and then you do it- you see whether it works. And if it doesn't work, you drop it. If it does work, you support it. You do it much more on an iterative, experimental basis than trying to study it to death. That is a problem that some companies have too. They study ideas to death, and they never do anything. There's others that are very proactive. As a consultant to many companies and having students work in many companies, I can name right here in this community various companies that go under those two models. And you can see the difference in the way they grow and the way they succeed. My judgement would be that you're much better off doing your homework, but then trying. And if it fails it fails- don't be afraid of failure. That's just the world telling you that this isn't what you should be doing.

ML: Has Hope become more or less diverse since you came here, both with the student body and with the professors?

JV: We had a very diverse group when I first started teaching. And that's what Cal VanderWerf did. There were very many different points of view. Perhaps, I think there has been too much of an emphasis on similarity. And it's grown over the last dozen years. I find it very interesting that the Reformed Church's covenant with Hope College says, for instance, that the majority of the faculty members should be Christian- should be predominately Christian- that's what it says. I think those were the exact words. That has been interpreted, particularly

by John Jacobson, is that they all have to be Christian, which, when you consider we have Muslim and Hindu and non-Christian and Jewish students- that we are, in fact, saying to them, 'you can graduate from Hope College, we'll give you a diploma. You can become the world's most famous person in your area. You can become one of the best, the most admired from the point of view of your humanitarianism and however you treat people, but under no circumstances can you teach at Hope College'.

ML: Because of the faith issue?

JV: Because of the faith issue, yes. And what you're really saying to them is, 'unless you give up your faith, you cannot come to Hope College- you can't be a part of Hope College'. I think that's very divisive, and I think that could very well strangle our whole movement towards a more diverse student body. Among the faculty, they probably won't say it out loud, but when you say, 'well, we want a diverse faculty. So what are we looking for? We're looking for a black woman who's a member of the Reformed Church'. I mean, diversity has nothing to do with being a woman, being black- it has to do with ideas. Diversity is not having to do with skin color, it doesn't have to do with ethnic background. Diversity has to do with ideas. And what you're really thinking about is you want people who bring different cultural, intellectual, religious points of view. And the fact that the majority of those have the point of view of ...

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Someone who has grown up in the black community can understand the black community just as well as the person who was black. And so we get hung up on

these, I guess I call them “icons of diversity”, and don’t really understand that what we’re really talking about is intellectual, religious, emotional diversity. And that’s something that we don’t get if you have a very narrow view of what is the person that should be teaching at Hope College or should be the student at Hope College.

ML: So, you think in the last dozen years it’s gotten less diverse?

JV: Much less diverse in this case.

ML: Where do you see it going in the future?

JV: I don’t know, I think we’re at a turning point. I think it’s very critical. There’s some indications that there were some very bad decisions made this year about that- in terms of hiring. But it takes a while for a new administration to find its feet. So I’m not willing to make a judgement on the basis of one year. But, if there are religious tests made and that people have to subscribe to a certain religious or social or ethnic kind of test, and only if you answer the questions the right way and those kinds of questions- you’re limiting yourself to a culture in which those are the kinds of questions that people ask of each other. And, one of the things that I know is that outside the kinds of questions that people feel comfortable asking in Western Michigan are not the kinds of questions that people feel comfortable asking or answering as close as Lansing. And so, we’ve got to be very, very careful that the words that we use do not so closely reflect our narrow culture that we are denying the validity of the beliefs, the ethical understandings of people who are not close to us- not from this area. I mean, that’s like that question that I got asked, ‘well, who are you the son of?’ As if that

would put me in my niche. 'What church do you go to?' That's a way in Western Michigan of categorizing people. Doing it perfectly innocuously, but those are prying questions for most people who come from more than a hundred miles away. So I think we've got to step back. This whole business of stepping back and looking out and saying, 'how what we do is perceived by people outside? And how do what we do for students make them so that when they go out they will feel comfortable?' Nothing like living outside this area to change the way in which you look at the world. Have you had that opportunity? It's different isn't it? When you come back, it's different- and they're just as fine people too. I find it ironic that when the academic head of Hope College can quote a famous Jewish scholar as representing a wonderful philosophy of life and education, but would not hire him to teach- it says something. It says that we've got a tremendous blind spot as to the effect of our actions.

ML: I know that you were involved in starting the Black River School.

JV: Yes, Black River Public School.

ML: Tell me about the philosophy there and how that all came about?

JV: Well, it's a charter school, and Michigan passed a charter law which allowed individuals to come together to propose to a chartering institution that they start a public school. And by public, it means that it has to follow the regulations of the state, which includes open enrollment- things of that sort, you have to follow the regulations of the state. And you have to find a chartering organization- Black River's chartering organization is Grand Valley State. And state universities and colleges, intermediate school districts and local school districts are the only

agencies that are allowed to charter- private schools are not allowed to charter. There were a group of us when this law was passed... I had worked very hard in the local public school systems, various committees and things, and found them very unresponsive to parent needs. I had worked in the areas of math and science and couldn't get the West Ottawa system to budge. John Donnelly had worked in the Holland School System and just was incredibly frustrated. So, we just happened to meet socially and started talking. And a friend of mine, who was on sabbatical, who had been headmaster of several private schools, and we just started meeting and having open meetings- and decided what Holland might need is a charter school, middle and upper school, that would have a theme. And that's one of the things that a charter school can have- is a theme. Ours is college preparatory, that will prepare students, really, because that was the thing that both John Donnelly and I had been unhappy about. West Ottawa had no AP courses- a great big school system with no AP courses. I mean, why? Holland had only a few- big school system, lots of money. So we decided we'd do that, and we also wanted to reorganize the school in the sense that we wanted to make it smaller, smaller classes. Make it one in which there was a theme for each general year that carried across certainly all the humanities, and maybe social sciences and possibly into the sciences and math too, although that's harder to do. For instance, sixth grade starts out by studying Africa. And seventh grade, I think, is the Pacific Rim. You know, things like that rather than American History, World History, European History and all that kind of junk. So all the writing, the art, everything goes along with that- music. So we decided to try something different,

and that's how it got started. And, it's been a lot of work, a tremendous amount of work. It's very difficult to start a school- it's not something you take on lightly. The board there has just worked incredibly hard, and we are fortunate to be on pretty good footing now. I think we'll have well over four hundred students this fall. We've gotten a wonderful gift of a building, which we've just put four million dollars into to renovate it, and eleven acres of land so we're ready to start. The next thing is a gymnasium and a performing arts center. So that's the next goal. I thought it was interesting that, and this is just an aside, my father was the first president of the board of West Ottawa school system- he helped start that one. I helped start Black River. He started the Political Science Department- I started Engineering. I don't know, maybe we're just rebels at heart. It's been a very good experience but very hard. I think that it's been the experience of most of the charter schools that they go through very difficult times in getting going. And you have to have very dedicated students, faculty, and parents who are willing to take a chance. I don't know if you ever saw where we started out, this building on Eighth Street- I mean, it was terrible. It was the only place we could find. And we ended up with more portable classrooms than we had real classrooms. And now with our new building, which was the old former Holland Furnace office building. It's a beautiful old Art-Deco building, just gorgeous. To send your kid to that place down there on Eighth Street- eeeegh, it takes a lot of dedication on the parts of parents to do that.

ML: I bet a lot of recruitment is involved with that too.

JV: Yes, recruitment in a sense that you want students who are comfortable with the theme- college preparatory- that doesn't mean that every student has to go on to college, but that's the theme. The level of intensity of the academic work- most of our students... for various reasons when students transfer back to traditional public schools, almost all of them end up graduating a year ahead. The academics intensity is higher. So, we want students that are happy with that level of intensity- we want students who are willing to subscribe to the social norms. And we aren't strict with uniforms or anything like that, but one part of our stated goals is respect- every student has a respect for every other student. And so, you know, fighting and things like that are just not acceptable. And if a student repeatedly does that, we will expel them. Respect for other students that are different than you are. It's an interesting experiment. And we can already see, you know, one of the ideas was that other public schools needed some competition. And we started right away with the AP classes and all the sudden, West Ottawa and Holland started offering AP classes. We start foreign language in the sixth grade, and students have to take a foreign language continuously. They also have to take music, a performing art, continuously every year. It could be music, it could be theater, it could be art. And, all the sudden we find that language instructions in Holland and West Ottawa are starting to creep down to lower grades again- they had all but abandoned that. So, it's amazing- we've got four hundred students, and I think there are fourteen thousand students in this general community- we draw up as far north as Grand Haven, as far east as the western part of Grand Rapids, down to Allegan. We have students who drive in

from Allegan everyday. And in that, there's fourteen thousand students in the middle and upper school- we've got four hundred and that makes a difference. Just the fact that you can attract four hundred students from a huge population makes a difference and makes the other schools more responsible. It's affecting the whole area- amazing. You just wouldn't think it would be true. And there was great animosity by some of the schools because it means that they do have to start thinking about their programs.

ML: What led to your decision to retire?

JV: I thought the school had a chance to reclaim some of its original vitality and view. So I was waiting to see what would happen with the new administration. So that's why I was sixty-six when I retired, so I went beyond. I was happy with what was going on in Physics and Engineering, particularly Engineering. This past year we went through the accreditation process- ABET, which is the American Board of Engineering and Technology. And, as far as we can tell, we passed with flying colors. And it's just sometime this summer we'll get the official notice so that we will be an accredited program. It will also help in attracting good students. We were on our way, we had good faculty and students. It looked like a reasonable time. I mean, if I look down the road- sure, a couple more years. Would there be another milestone? It was a good time to retire. I can retire on a higher salary than I am making because if you teach a long time, the Teachers Retirement Agency, TIAA, which most colleges belong to- Hope belongs to it- allows you to put away enough funds, if you start early, that you in general can retire on more than your final salary. It's a good program. Before

that, college teachers were usually in desperate straits when they retired because their salaries are not high, and they couldn't put away very much.

ML: What are you going to do with your retirement?

JV: I built a house in the Bahamas, and I'm going to spend quite a bit of time there. It's a very nice community- about fifteen hundred people on a small island. I understand it's the third largest settlement outside of Nassau. There's only 250,000 people in the Bahamas anyway, so the whole country's small. It's a nice community, lots to do, nice populace. I'm going to live here some of the year- I am going to continue with Black River. I've been asked to do some consulting in local industry again. I've got a couple articles I want to finish up that I'm in the process of writing. I'm thinking about writing a book, or at least a long monograph, on what I call the trouble with the liberal arts, which I think stems from a fundamental philosophical error- that's my idea anyway. And it's an error that Descartes made and although philosophers no longer believe what Descartes said, liberal arts colleges continue to fall back on his ideas. And his ideas have been proven scientifically wrong, and we've built a whole educational system on the invalid premise- that's my idea.

ML: Very interesting.

JV: So I don't know whether I'll do it or not. I've got my laptop computer.

ML: I wonder if Hope will support you in that one?

JV: I don't know. I gave a short talk on it to a group that I belong to. I don't know if they understood it because it's mostly businessmen and professional men- I don't know if they really understood what I was saying. I offered to give the talk at a

faculty luncheon. At the faculty luncheon, somebody gives a talk. I offered to give the talk and gave a synopsis of it. I never got a response- I think it might irritate some people. But wouldn't it? If you aren't challenging ideas continuously- I'm not saying my ideas are right- but if you don't challenge ideas all the time, you are not going to have a really viable situation. And if I would say that there's one thing that's characterized Hope College over the last dozen years or so, has been its unwillingness to have a conflict of ideas out in the open where people can really talk about them and debate them. They have confused the idea of disagreeing with somebody, with being disagreeable. And that an intellectual community should be a place where really tough questions are asked out in the open and there can be very strong disagreement, but you can still be friends. And the philosophy of some of the people at Hope College has been that that's not nice to have disagreements out in the open. It's okay in a small room to talk and disagree, but you should never do that out in the open. Somehow, that is bad for the institution, and I believe that is absolutely incorrect. That keeping those kinds of arguments closed is bad for the institution. That an institution should be a place where ideas are challenged in critical and out in the open.

ML: Relating to this, do you think the whole Chaplain controversy is good for the college?

JV: No, in the sense that I think that whole thing is an example of our insensitivity to the diverse ideas. I have no objection to evangelical services- the kind of music that is played, it's not my kind of music. But there is a whole heritage of other kinds of services, other students, other beliefs, other ways of expression- either

religious or ethical beliefs. There are centuries of religious music that our students never hear that are all part of the Western tradition. Let alone, the music from the Eastern tradition or African tradition. So the Chapel controversy comes to me from an unwillingness to be humble in that, say, I may not know all the truth. I may not be able to say, is this person really... I'll use a term that they use... saved? I don't think humans can do that. And I think we have to be much more humble, and I think the Reformed Church is very clear on it. I've talked to the people at the seminary, and the Reformed Church is not dogmatic about what you have to believe. Whether this person or that person can be a Christian or not or can be saved or can go to heaven, or whatever you want to say. They're not dogmatic about that, and yet we have institutionalized an approach that has that to it. And that goes back to the problem I see with selection of faculty, where those kinds of questions are asked of faculty members. Not whether they are comfortable with what Hope College is- not whether they have strong ethical beliefs- but do they say things in the way that we want them to say them. And I find that disturbing, and that's what makes me disturbed. What really struck me with the Chapel controversy was the unwillingness of a college-wide institution to service all of the students. If it's a church, that's fine. You decide that that's what kind of church you want to belong to. You can belong to an Evangelical Church, or a very Orthodox Church, that's fine. That's something you select, but you come to a college and you have an institution in the college that's only willing to service students of a certain set of beliefs. And I find that objectionable. It would be such as somebody coming and saying, 'okay, we have

all these computers for word processing, but you can only write articles that favor the Republicans'. Yeah, it's equivalent. 'We are not going to service Democrats because most of the students are Republicans. So therefore, we'll only service Republicans, and Democrats have to provide their own way'. I think if it's a college institution, it's something that the college provides, it's got to service all. And that means it's got to service non-Christians as well as Christians. And I think the turning point came for me when the Chaplain refused a student whose parent had died- he had refused to see that student because that student had expressed to him dissatisfaction with the program. And that student's advisor had to go to her own pastor to get that student seen. There's no reason for that, no reason. If you have a Chaplain service at College, you'd better serve all students- not just a fraction, even if it's a majority. That's my beliefs.

ML: Last question, what are you going to miss most about teaching at Hope College?

JV: Students. They're always challenging you- a lot of friendships.