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Dwight Drexler

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Amy Uden: Okay. To get us started can you just tell us your name and where we are, just so it's recorded in the transcript, and then start out with telling us about how you're connected to Illinois Wesleyan?

Dwight Drexler: Pardon me? [Note from Maxine Drexler April 9, 2010: His hearing is nearly gone.]

Uden: How you're connected to Wesleyan.

Drexler: My name is initial R. Dwight Drexler. This is the 3rd of March, 2010 in my home and I'm a retired professor emeritus for, at this time, 31 years. I went to Wesleyan and started as a freshman the fall of '29. After a few weeks came the famous depression, so my years at Wesleyan were tainted shall we say by the Depression. Actually I stayed out my, what would have been the third year, and then went back and graduated in '34 and that summer I was hired to be on the faculty as a teacher of piano. That's the only job I've ever had because I retired then in '79 it would be, although I came back a couple times then to fill for sabbaticals of colleagues. For three times, I was Acting Director of the School of Music and that's where we stand.

Uden: Okay, let's start with your time as a student at Wesleyan.

Drexler: Yes.

Uden: Do you have a favorite memory or anything you'd like to tell us about that time?

Drexler: Well, I was working downtown mornings so I went to school in the afternoon and Dean Westbrook had facilitated my coming to Wesleyan. He was friends of my parents because they sang in his choir at the First Methodist Church, and so I went to school in the afternoon and did one or so classes individually to facilitate that. At that time, the School of Music was located in three houses along where the Memorial Center is located. At that time also, the streets went through the campus—East Street was a continuous street, University went through and Prairie Street came through where the library is now and joined up with University. And Presser Hall was being built my first semester, so I went to school in the three houses and then the second semester we shifted over to Presser Hall, and it was open. Wesleyan at that time got most of their students from central and southern Illinois and it was a Methodist institution and the students came from small high schools so that Bloomington was a big city in comparison to their home and with 4 or 500 or so students, Wesleyan was a big school in comparison to their high school. Now that is one of the significant changes because gradually Wesleyan became more known and it got more of their students from let's say the suburban areas around Chicago, and they came from high schools with 4 or 5, 6,000 students and a faculty full of PhD's and Bloomington was a little hick town then and Wesleyan was a little school, so that was different then. Also at that time, there were very few dorms. There was Kemp Hall and Kemp Lodge, which was a house, several houses, north of Kemp Hall and I don't remember any other houses there may have been at the time. Many students stayed in private rooms and I was thinking the other day how different it is

now. People don't stay in other people's homes in a spare bedroom and yet when I was a student, the faculty did that.

Uden: Woah!

Drexler: My teacher Mr. Munger, Professor Munger had had eight years of study in Europe and was a very fine teacher and he stayed in a home, presumably ate his meals with them. And Mr. Kritch who also was European-trained and a very fine violinist, he stayed in a home. And Vincent Quinn who was an art teacher from Chicago, he stayed in the home of Florence Pfeiffer there at the corner of Franklin Park. She was a former, a first-state representative. She was the daughter of former Governor Pfeiffer. This is a very prestigious family, yet he had the bedroom and I used to go visit him and I'd have to go through their home and go upstairs. And nowadays of course, I don't think very many students or certainly no faculty do that.

Uden: Nuh-uh.

Drexler: But they have their apartment. So that was different. And students came with very little possessions. I mean, I knew some students who I visited, they had a bedroom in somebody's home, they had one small closet but that was enough because they had one suit and that did for occasions and they had no other—no electronic equipment, no radio, or anything of the sort. There were very few campus jobs as such. Many students worked downtown for their meals and they would have eleven o'clock class and they would have to hurry out and run down to get there for the noon rush. I had some friends that were musicians. They—there was a trio that played at Women's Exchange, which was a popular buffet just east of where the library was or the YWCA, which is located west a couple blocks from the square. So they would come and play for an hour or forty-five minutes or so for their meal or others waited tables. I know that some fellas got rooms in homes, presumably maybe older couples. They took care of the furnace, which most people burned coal and would have to shovel coal and shovel ashes and so on. They would do odd jobs around the house for their room—a lot of families now have been in depressed circumstances, then it was very widespread. The whole tuition was \$90 a semester, which was still a lot of money at that time.

Uden: Mhmm.

Drexler: And athletics—Fred Young was the sports editor for the *Pantagraph*, and he was an international or a national figure. He was a very famous referee but he was also a recruiter for Wesleyan. He would recruit all of these athletes and the athletic department often times didn't have any knowledge of him and Fred would say, "Here so-and-so will come." And there, for several years, some of the athletes were staying in the old Memorial Gymnasium, which is now the Hansen Center.

Uden: Mhmm.

Drexler: And they curtained off parts of the balcony for the living quarters. At that time, Dr. Elliott was the football coach. He was an eye, ear, and nose, throat specialist in town and he worked on me and Mickey among other people and he was the father of Bump and Pete. And they were kids around the coach's bench during games, but we had a very prestigious football team then. We always played the first game of the season at Michigan State and we would give them a battle for three quarters except that we had a squad of 35 or 40 and they had a squad of 110 or so, and so in the fourth quarter, their fourth and fifth and sixth team replacements wore us down.

[Both laugh]

Uden: Yeah.

Drexler: And—but anyway, it was a thing that we were proud of. That time also, athletically, we were in the Little Nineteen conference, which was most of the schools of Illinois including the Normal schools. They were considered, at that time, junior members because they were Normal teachers' colleges and there were a number of small colleges which have since gone out of existence. We also had stricter rules concerning dormitories, especially the girls' dormitory.

Uden: Mhmm.

Drexler: I think they closed up at ten o'clock at night but weekends they were open 'til midnight. Is that right, Mickey? Or occasionally you could get a one o'clock leave.

Maxine Drexler: Well if you had a home to go visit, you could get one o'clock, a pass.

[Maxine Drexler and Uden laugh]

Drexler: And there was no visitation and the doors were locked and of course, repression involved rebellion.

Uden: Yeah. [laughs]

Drexler: There were panty raids, so-called, and of course then a few years later, was the business of the streaking where the fellas would be naked except for sacks over their head. Jack Sikma, the—you made have heard of him—the famous basketball center played for Seattle for years, was a freshman. He was close to 7-foot tall, and the story is that they were streaking one night and then he comes to school the next day and the office staff commented—well he said, "I wanted to know how they knew it was me," and of course 7-foot, you could tell—

[Uden laughs]

Drexler: Even with a sack.

Uden: Where did you live while you were at Wesleyan?

Drexler: Pardon me?

Uden: Did you live in the dormitories or at someone's house?

Drexler: I lived at home.

Uden: At home, okay.

Drexler: Yeah. I was a pledge to Phi Mu Alpha. I had been rushed by the Phi Mu's for a couple years before I—because I sang in the choir at the First Methodist Church as a high schooler—

Uden: Mhmm.

Drexler: And with Phi Mu's and they didn't know what year I was and so I was invited to dinners and so on when I was a junior and senior in high school.

Uden: [laughs] Did they have a house at that time?

Drexler: They had a house. They first had a house on East Locust Street. It was several years ago they wanted to fit it up as a halfway house for probationary, and then they went over to North Main Street across the street from the Alpha Gamma house. It's no longer there but it was later a commercial, I don't know, hair establishment or something.

Uden: Mhmm.

Drexler: And then they moved to where they are on Chestnut, or is it Chestnut or—

Uden: Mhmm. I think so. What was that like, being a part of the fraternity?

Drexler: Pardon me?

Uden: What was being a part of the fraternity like back then?

Drexler: Well, I had my pledge duties—that was when pledging was—pledging was a real deal. I had to go over and make beds I know sometimes late in the afternoon or late in the evening because I worked downtown in the morning and went to school in the afternoon.

Uden: Mhmm.

Drexler: And so I didn't live there but I was there all the time.

Uden: Mhmm. How did things change throughout your time on the faculty at Wesleyan?

Drexler: Well, I started on the faculty in '34 and then came World War II. December of '41 was Pearl Harbor, that was the 7th in December and that was in the Christmas season, that was when we were on the semester plan and the semester break came after, you know, it bumped into January. December 7th was the Acapella Choir Christmas concert under Westbrook. It was a beautiful choir, he had an amazing choir. And that was—had become a community celebration. There were two performances and the first one started let's say at two o'clock and the second at four or something and it filled up. They would start early at two o'clock because every seat was filled. I was a young faculty member. That was in '41, I had been there—it was my seventh year I guess, so I was being important and acting as a host out in the foyer and the concert had started and somebody came in and said the Japs had, are bombing Pearl Harbor, so that was the beginning of—then I knew that I would have to go and so I finished up the semester at the end of January and then I went with a trainload of recruits up to Rockford Camp Grant. Yeah I was gone then. I came back in September, I landed in New York Labor Day '45 and passed the Statue of Liberty with fireboats shooting off their hoses and I was in India two and a half, nearly two and a half years and then I came back here. I had several weeks leave and then I had to go down to Texas to get out of the army and then I started teaching in October, so that was different then I mean because the school had gone for several years without very many men. Mickey was in school then. They had a number of individual barracks on the campus in various places.

Uden: Mhmm.

Drexler: And they had older fellas come back and they had been in the army and navy and marines and they just weren't gunna behave like the administration had thought that boys should behave and did, you know. And of course some of them were married. Before the war, if you were married, you were automatically out of the school, so sometimes couples got married but it was kept secret. Well, it couldn't be after the war, and that made a difference and, you know, with older fellas, and academically probably in many cases they were more serious. They were more individual, you know, they were just older. Also, the schools were expanding and that meant there were more jobs available and so there was more turnover of faculty because what would happen—you'd get a job at one school and you'd get there and maybe the head of the department and so you'd set up your curriculum and make changes, two years later you'd get an offer for a job that's 3 or \$4,000 more salary or something, so you would take that and then a new one would come in. It was a period of revitalization maybe also but one of change and upsetting. And the whole society, regulations and viewpoints were different. It was—does that make sense?

Uden: Yeah, it does. I know one thing that changed at Wesleyan was there used to be the graduate program in music.

Drexler: What, pardon me?

Uden: Graduate school in the School of Music.

Drexler: Oh, the music school?

Uden: Yeah, and then that ended during your time, correct?

Drexler: Yeah. The school had a remarkable growth in the late '30s because there was a remarkable growth of high school music and especially development for bands and choruses and that called for faculty. Wesleyan, at one time—that's what has been responded to—the music school grew from I don't know how many to 180 or so degree students but almost all of them were bachelor of music education of the school of music.

Uden: Mhmm.

Drexler: Westbrook was a marvelous head of school, developer of the school. The year I started teaching, the rest of the school was having trouble getting students but Wesleyan could take we said 50 freshman. Well, we would have many more applicants and we would select maybe 55 or 60 because students would sign-up for two or three schools in case one of them wouldn't take them, so we always counted for some dropping out that, you know. Well then they wouldn't drop out of our school, so we were sort of bulging at the seams and the quality—one—the year I started teaching, we had about 50 or 55 freshman and 25 or 26 of them are high school valedictorians or salutatorians. We had, in the music school, four or five national champions in these music contests.

Uden: Mhmm.

Drexler: They had a much bigger system than we do now. They had regional high school contests. I don't know what high school you come from.

Uden: Joliet West.

Drexler: Joliet?

Uden: Mhmm.

Drexler: Of course that was the premiere high school in the state for bands that—

Uden: Yeah. We have a strong band program.

Drexler: Oh. Well, they would have a regional contest then the winners would go to sectionals and then there would be the state finals. For a number of years we had to—the music school entertained the state grade school contest and we would have 2,000 or more contestants and we would have the solo contests on Friday around the campus and then on Saturday in conjunction with the local high school we would have the band and orchestra. Well, when I was—I don't know where I got—where I was going. We had this—Oh, we got—and it was a—difficulty getting jobs. I know a friend of mine went over to Bellflower, a little town east of here, for a interview for a one-year job for a sabbatical and there were over 100 applicants and he thought to himself, "Well there isn't

any reason to pick me,” so he came home and went over to the Chanute Field there and got a job as a civilian instructor and stayed there all his life. But our students all, every one of them, always got jobs and at one time supposedly there were more Wesleyan graduates teaching in the public schools in Illinois than all the other schools put together.

Uden: Wow.

Drexler: ISU didn't have a—just had a sort of a few music students. U of I had sort of a conservatory set up, I mean, Wesleyan was just one of the pioneers. At one time, we were mentioned in the upper five or six in the United States. I mean, it was—we were good but we were early.

Uden: Mhmm. I'd like to know a little bit about—what classes did you teach?

Drexler: What did I teach?

Uden: Mhmm.

Drexler: Over the years I've taught almost everything. First I taught piano and then I had the freshman theory classes.

Uden: Mhmm.

Drexler: When I came back from the army, I was made Head of the Department, Head of the Piano Department, so I taught that and I also at different times taught—well I had a senior class in analysis and I taught orchestration and composition, I mean, something was needed and so I—

Uden: Mhmm.

Drexler: Could do that but it was mainly piano and early the freshman theory and then after the war I—it was a senior theory course, I guess it, would be just analysis—

Uden: Mhmm.

Drexler: Form.

Uden: Did you ever go on any trips with different ensembles?

Drexler: Oh, early I took piano like kids do—

Uden: Mhmm.

Drexler: But I dropped it before I went to high school. But I could always sight-read and from very early, I went—I used to go around with my mother, she sang and she would go to the mission and to an old folks' home and sing for them and I would play and when I

went to the high school, I played for the glee club and I did—at contest time I was accompanying for—and my first professional money I guess was—there was a well-known violin teacher in town and a couple years would have a recital for all his students and for a couple Saturday mornings before I would go down and play all day long for different students and sight-read there. When I was on the faculty then, I played with Mr. Kritch the violinist and Virginia Husted the cellist in the faculty trio and we did three or four programs a year and I usually played a recital every year and when I was a freshman then I played for the Apollo club, which was a men's glee club.

Uden: Mhmm.

Drexler: So I—during my career, I did more ensemble work than solo work.

Uden: Mhmm.

Drexler: Then after I retired, Susan Brandon and Bedford Watkins played piano duets, had two pianos. When Bedford retired in '88 I think it was, then I took over. I was retired but I took over with Susan Brandon and we played for several years until '94 I guess it was and we went to Europe and played piano and we played around Midwest during that time. We have a—we made a CD, which the school sponsored. She retired a year ago but I retired in '94 or '95, I was 82 or 83, that's the time I was—it was time for me to retire.

Uden: Mhmm. Great. Are there any of the faculty that you have fun stories about or you really—

Drexler: The what?

Uden: The other faculty during your time at Wesleyan, the people you worked with, do you have stories about any of them or?

Drexler: I had some wonderful friends in the faculty and there were some great people. The music faculty, David Nott—what year are you?

Uden: I am a junior.

Drexler: Junior?

Uden: Mhmm.

Drexler: You wouldn't know him. He was a choir prof...man.

Uden: Oh, okay.

Drexler: He was taller than I and I used to play for his recitals and we were—I was bigger then than I am now, I shrunk a couple inches. But he and I were great buddies. There was a violinist here, Edward Preodor, who was remarkable, he was one of the prized graduates of Eastman. He was here three or four years before the war and a year or so

afterward before he left. He and I, we would play, maybe, I don't know, 30 to 40 or more times during the year, various travels. We went south one year to Texas and played some recitals. We played a recital in Chicago, Kimbel Hall. And we played other places on our concert tours. I had some great friends in the liberal arts—Dr. Stone, Rupert Kilgore, the Head of the Art Department. Well, I—I don't know.

Uden: Sounds good. Did you ever get to accompany anyone famous?

Drexler: Pardon me?

Uden: The famous performers that came to Wesleyan, did you play piano for them?

Drexler: Oh, after—when I came back from the army, the symphony was local here and they had—they were bringing in big performers, big time. They would do maybe a number with the orchestra, then they would do a solo group. A lot of them wanted to bring their accompanist, so I played for William Warfield, I played for Mildred—

Maxine Drexler: Mildred Miller?

Drexler: Huh?

Maxine Drexler: Miller. Mildred Miller, is that right? Miller.

Uden: Mildred Miller?

Drexler: Mildred Miller, yeah. I played for, was it—

Maxine Drexler: Raya Garbousova.

Drexler: Yeah, Raya Garbousova, the cellist. What was the tenor, or the bass I mean?

Maxine Drexler: George London?

Drexler: Yeah.

Maxine Drexler: No, it's not George London. Well—

Drexler: Well, I've got a list.

Uden: A whole big list, yeah.

Drexler: But I played for a lot of them—William Warfield was coming here, you know who he is.

Uden: I think.

Drexler: He's the bass in *Showboat* the movie.

Uden: Okay, mhmm.

Drexler: Well anyway, he was signed up to perform with the orchestra here—that was when I was going to New York in the summertime to study and so Hilfinger told Warfield about me being available so he made arrangements for me to meet Warfield in New York in the summertime. So I went to—he at that time was married to Leontyne Price, the soprano, I went down to their apartment in the southern part of Manhattan, and so he—we started on a song and we got about halfway through and he stopped and he says, “That’s enough,” he says, “You’re fine.”

[Uden laughs]

Drexler: He said, “I got Leontyne—”and he had to go do some business up at the bank in midtown and he says, “You want to ride up with us?” So I rode up in the cab with them. Mickey, for a number of years, was sort of a social entertainment chairman for the concert series here.

Uden: Mhmm.

Drexler: So we would have to—

Maxine Drexler: Leave something for me to say.

Drexler: Hmm?

Maxine Drexler: Leave something for me to say.

Uden: She said, “Leave something for her to say still.”

Drexler: Oh.

[Uden laughs]

Drexler: Well anyway, we had a lot of contact with them.

Uden: Great. I think that's most of my questions. Anything else that you thought of that you wanted to share?

Drexler: I better let her talk.

Uden: Okay, well we'll just pause this then and switch over. Thank you so much.

