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Ken Fahsbender

Ken Fahsbender '49
Illinois Wesleyan University

Josh Immke 2019
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Interview with Ken Fahsbender, 2016

Ken Fahsbender: Hello

Josh Immke: Hello. This is Josh from Illinois Wesleyan.

Fahsbender: Hi, Josh. This is Ken Fahsbender. How are you?

Immke: I'm doing great. Thanks for asking-

Fahsbender: Good.

Immke: So, we are ready to conduct the interview if you would like.

Fahsbender: Okay.

Immke: Alright, so, why did you choose to come to Illinois Wesleyan?

Fahsbender: Because my high school band director in Pontiac, Illinois was a graduate of Illinois Wesleyan.

Immke: Okay.

Fahsbender: And, his name was Jack Norrison. I'm not sure what year he graduated, but it was in the 1930s, and he was such a role model for me. In fact, I wanted to be like him and be a band director, but that's why I went to Wesleyan. I'm sure he had a, I don't know, but I think he had a part in, and I hope, in getting a scholarship, a performance scholarship at Wesleyan too.

Immke: Okay, um, and I guess I forgot to ask this, but what class year are you from from Wesleyan?

Fahsbender: Um, we graduated in 1949.

Immke: Alright...and, so, you came here to study music then, I'm guessing.

Fahsbender: Right.

Immke: You were also a part of Phi Mu Alpha? The PMA fraternity, correct?

Fahsbender: That's right.

Immke: Yeah, how was that?

Fahsbender: That was-it was a...really a great experience at that time. I'm sure it's lasted a while. The house is still there on Chestnut. Um, the reason it was great is that...we-when you were there, and I didn't move in until my sophomore year. I pledged as a freshman, and I actually became an officer, and, then, I was-I had, if I was gonna be an officer I had to live in the house. So, I moved in my sophomore year, and what was great about it was that, uh...you-you not only studied there and ate evening meals there, but and everyone was a music major. And, that meant upperclassmen were there, and if I got stuck on a subject, there's always somebody to ask for help. And, they're very good people to help me. The other thing is that we had our own singing group, and after dinners, we'd go down and sing...music that was for men's chorus and others. Just a great experience and all about my major, which was encouraging.

Immke: Yeah, that sounds really nice. Besides the singing group, what other activities did you participate in?

Fahsbender: Um, I'm one of those guys, maybe like you, who had also an interest in athletics, and I...I'd always played a lot of, in those days, softball was a very popular public sport and stemming from baseball, of course. And, without television or anything, so we-I was a member of a Forge Club, and we had our own team. And, I continued in that, even to age twenty or twenty-on. So, I was playing softball on weekends, when I wasn't playing music. And...I...I did a lot of that, and that became part of my struggle, always is changing uniforms in the back of a car or with my folks driving and deciding which, you know, what was next--was it music or was it...softball?

Immke: So, it sounds like you lived a pretty busy life on campus then.

Fahsbender: Yeah, I did and, you know, I put together a softball team on campus and intramurals, I'm sure they have intramurals there now. And...who would've thought musicians could even do that. Well, we did, and...I-I-I didn't realize we've had that many who, like me, had played, but it was a popular sport, and here we were against the Phi Gams, Sigma Chis, Theta Chis, and the latter years Bobby Winkles said, come to campus...for the baseball team. And, he-he was helping, I think it was Sigma Chi. Somehow, we beat 'em all, and we won the intramurals. And, I was so proud of that and-and in that, Bobby Winkles became my friend, and...I have a lot of stories about the years after that, but I'll save that for when we get there. Anyway, it was a, you know, that was-that was a fun addition. I was not a Wesleyan team, but I did get to know the famous coach there Jack Hornburger quite well. With my group that I put together with musicians, we had a big pen that I put together and Mr. Hortmiller knows about it, but, um, we played on weekends and professionally got paid for it. I was the leader and some very famous people later on were in that group, and Coach Hornburger let us practice on the gym stage when it was dark and no teams or anyone else in there. And, that's, you know, that's the great thing about Wesleyan is you could do things like that in a small university.

Immke: Yeah, most definitely. Do you have any favorite stories or memories about campus? Or were those-

Fahsbender: Well, I just-I just sent a note to Tim about the-the latest Wesleyan magazine that I received here this weekend, and the story about Tommy Titan, which didn't exist when I was there. They were talking about who they thought might've originated it, and it was our former director of admissions, Lee Short. Well, Lee Short was...he graduated the year before we got there. He was a 1944 grad. And, but, he was working in the office and for Wesleyan. He'd come to work as a, you know, a maybe part-time, I don't know how, but, he'd walk into that office with activities or admissions. He's Lee Short with his shirt sleeves rolled up and happiest guy just, you know, just a terrific person. Well, he ended up being a key figure on that campus, and they're still writing about him. It was great to see that he went on to be...a responsible for getting your mascot on-on the way.

Immke: What would you say about Illinois Wesleyan that has made the biggest impact on your life?

Fahsbender: Just the knowledge of...what I learned there. You know, it was so-so good for me. I had been born and raised on a farm and north of Pontiac about five miles, and it was my chance to be with people from all over the country. You know, in my dance **(8:16??)**, but we had-I had guys from New York, a black student from St. Louis, white guy from Sackson, Missouri, the two of them were-they-they have fun with each other, you know, interracial racial way, and it was just it-it's where I grew up, you know, I...and there are a lot of...trying moments and that really hurt...the, um...I-I-I won't go into the detail, but it was just a...from then on I began to-to get so heavy into my own, and what do I do next? Well, the draft was going...and, of course, I joined the National Guard to allow me to get started teaching as soon as I could. I taught one year, and I decided that was-it was my time to serve, and, so, I got drafted into the Army and fought my way into the Army band, and Ft. Letter Wood became a-a leader and First Sergeant and had great experience with fine musicians of Chicago. And, after that...as I moved on after the war, my degree of Bachelor's had been okay for-if I wanted to teach high school, but I needed a Master's. So, the G.I. Bill was applicable, and, so, I went to the University of Illinois for my Master's, and I taught, and I quickly took a job out in California and did well and opened a new school and got to Junior College level and had great bands and...but every-at every-every spot I was in, I kept thinking they-they had taught me well. You know, the-I had to learn percussion there at Wesleyan, and the guy that taught me percussion at John Newnan, he's on-he's on the back of a Ludwig drum booklet **(10:48??)**. He was a Tiffany specialist there but was doing our percussion majors. And, so, for those of us who took it as a minor just learned all this and having a guy like that, what you learn is the right way, so I could teach my students the right way. But, everything I had learned was right and appropriate, and then, when I get to college teaching and same thing--running into people that knew some of my guys. I could tell you later about how some of mine had done. But, yeah, you just knew that Wesleyan had done their job, and for me things like literature, gosh I-I hadn't read that kind of stuff. I got introduced to American literature...Hemingway, Thomas Wolfe, you know, people that...start and I-I took a summer class in History of Far East, and I'm so glad I had taken that, because that helps me now as I hear of things going on. I understand about the dynasties that China had. So, you-you rely on what you've learned each step of the way, and Wesleyan did a great foundation.

Immke: Yeah, I think that's one of the great things about Wesleyan is that you don't just learn about one topic because of the liberal-liberal arts aspect of the college. You get to learn about so many different things that still tie into already what you're interested in.

Fahsbender: Yeah, and it was well done. I had one teacher, there's only one that I recall at IWU, wouldn't have recommended to anyone. He was a Yooks-like teacher. He had such a tick of a...he was lecturing, and he would always walk to his desk and back up to it and do a little handstand and go on talking, and he'd head back to his desk. When we finished the class, everybody said, "how many times did he do it?" You know, we were counting that and not paying attention to what he was saying. Other than that, I had great faculty! They were so good, and they cared about different class sizes, right and none of the big lecture halls.

Immke: So, speaking of the faculty, were there any specific faculty that you remember or-

Fahsbender: You know, I-I can't in the, you know, in the liberal arts I-I didn't take enough of them to have repeat with anybody, after you get to know them that well, but...through anything my memory is as good as it is. But, as you get old, [laughs] older, um...you can't remember where your glasses are today, but I can remember some of the details about when I was in college. Um, the music faculty, my...my voice teacher, I minored in Voice, Bruce Foote, F-O-O or F-O-O-T-E, I think he was. He came down from Chicago and taught at Wesleyan for several-several days in the week, I'm sure, I didn't know how much, but he was a great voice teacher, and I was lucky along with a good friend of mine who was also in my Dance Band...to audition and be shoved into Collegiate Choir. And, there we sang under Lloyd Fouch, who was, you know, the beginning of the great choral directors in America and-and you have one there now, I've heard about it...so, Wesleyan's still doing what they were doing in the late '40s/mid '40s when I was there '45 to '49.

Immke: Yeah, I've actually heard some of my friends who are in music talk about people who came from Alaska to study...there's a du-what is it, uh, singing here.

Fahsbender: Yeah, well he's a-he's made a name, a young choral guy, well he's not that young now, one I selected out of Northwestern when I was a head of a college program out here in California. And, then, we were together again in University of Delaware...he-I was with him here a month or so ago, and he was telling me about the guy at Wesleyan now. He said he's one of the great ones. I mean, they-they're already considering him top, so that they do a lot of touring. They-they go to Europe and...and...sing the things in the proper language, sing it the proper way and live with the people singing it in the-on the church-in the churches where it was intended to be heard. So, it would be a great experience for Wesleyan right now.

Immke: Um, have you visited the campus since you graduated?

Fahsbender: You know, I-I haven't had a chance. I...I would've gone back early, but I was quickly drafted, and I taught one year, and then, they drafted me. And, from then on, I was away and...seeking a career, and when you teach in California, it's hard to get away on a weekend in

the Fall if you have a marching band, and I always had a marching band. I was-so that's what for, so I just-I just could never get a-get the...so I haven't seen that campus since 1949. And, I'm sure it looks different. Presser Hall I guess is still there but that was-that was where I spent most of my life...and I had a private room, shared it with Ellen Profert who is a...Tenor Sax player in my band, and we were about a block-block and a half...of a beast of a-of pressure and we could-we could walk, park was already there. But, it was a...you know, it was a small campus, there's Old College, and that probably don't exist anymore, and there's a library, and there was one administrative building, which I think I was admissions and-and student affairs or...student activities. I got involved in Student Activities my senior year, I think it was. I was-they asked me to be that a Chairman, a Student Chairman, and I got-that was a...you know, quite an honor, and I-I was able to do that...involved a...not only checking with every element that was in it-- football games and...Special Dance and special...program, I think we played a musical in the big room in the Student Center...yeah, that was the cafeteria. But, that's when I saw Lee Short and saw what a terrific he was in that office as a beginning person. But, when you-when you're in a heavy-run job, it's, you know, unless you're a businessman and working a five-day week, it's pretty tough to get to an alumni at Homecoming.

Immke: Have you kept in contact with any of the friends you made at Illinois Wesleyan?

Fahsbender: Yeah, um...not as much as I should've...I'm trying to renew it now just to...um...my discussions with Mr. Miller and...and your office, but I'm verifying dates and things like that. But, I'm finding that...that all of my friends have passed on...and that's what happens when you're...at my age. but...I-I-I've-I had visited with Malcom Pappom. He's a great trumpet player and he also sang in the Collegiate Choir. He was in our class, a very brilliant student. He went on to become a...a top...I guess you'd call him a supervisor of the entire State of the Art for Music Education..and Jay Roger Miller, who is to me Roger Miller, was a...he just passed away last Fall, and he had-had his last twenty years he's-was President of James Millikin University there in Decatur. He was a very good friend, and his wife is still alive, Arlene. She was trust good match. She was a foreign student from...Argentina, Buenos Aires...and Harry Rosenbloom, another student that I've been in contact with the phone, he's-he's older than me. Russel Mathis was my pledge father at-at Phi Mu Alpha. He went on to be a...well, he for twenty years or more, thirty years, I think, he was a professor and-and head of the choral department at University of Oklahoma. And, one time, he was President of the...National Choral Directors Association. And, so, I-I knew, you know, we'd run into each other, or I would talk to him. But...you know, I was...here in California and other things were in other states, you don't always spend much time on the...

Immke: Is there anything else that you would like to add about Illinois Wesleyan?

Fahsbender: Well, there's a...I-I don't know I-I think the...I think the experience was a great, and I think the...the fact that my teacher had been there was probably the reason I went, and that's still going on I hope...and I would never have known Bill Duell then. I'm sure you've read about him, or you know him, but he was a-a theatre major and...played in a...production at Wesleyan, and I-I was in the pit orchestra played saxophone in that group. And he, the head of the drama

department there, and Wesleyan had written a-a wonderful...little play on Tom Sawyer and music was written by Sil Vankier, a fine musician and (23:35??). And, Bill Duell, he came up just a friend as he played the, uh, Huck Finn. he went on to...study at Yale, a great drama school, and, then, he hit Broadway and-and hit the bigtime and toured the country and musicals that '76-1976. And, he was in the movie, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* with Jack Nicholson. He was one of the-one of these guys in the...silent (24:20??) that just-he was a...terrific person. I corresponded with him, and I...I have mail from him but...you know, it was-it was a great experience, and...you know, it was totally different from my Master's at Illinois, my Doctorate from Stanford, where you...you spend less maybe in the class, but it's so intense that you don't get to fravey, you do your own thing, pass your test and...and go to work. No, I'm-I was pleased at-I would give it an A-

Immke: [laughs] Well that's good to hear.

Fahsbender: I-I hear you're a cellist.

Immke: Yeah, I played cello in high school.

Fahsbender: Ah, well you should-let me tell ya, I-I played sax going into Wesleyan, majored in it, played it in the Army. But, when I could teaching stage, I began to put it aside. But, later on, when you get time, you get back to it, and you get back to what you were, and I'm now still playing once a week. I volunteer at a very fine gourmet restaurant, and-and I have a great band of, and I play Tenor, and we play two out of the forty, fifty, sixty, and it's kind of...it reminds me of the past and the kind of thing you could do and string quartet in any community you're around. There's gonna be some others would like to take theirs out, do it again.

Immke: Yeah, I still have my-

Fahsbender: -you're a track-you're a track man too, huh?

Immke: Yes, stay busy as well, just as you did.

Fahsbender: What do you run?

Immke: Uh, I do the sprints and hurdles.

Fahsbender: Ah, well, I was a half-miler, but I-I wasn't too good. I was a-I ran a meet as a freshman or sophomore at Ottawa, you know where that is in Illinois, north of between the planks and Chicago and little West of there. And, it was cold and snowy, and I made us take our...lower gear off, and I thought I was gonna die. But, I could remember rounding that last lap, and the guys came down to the curb, bat me into a corner, and said, "hey! If we...go and we beat this guy, we'd win the meet!" And, I thought I guess I'll...put a kick on right here, and I barely won. And, you know, you weren't good, but you were good enough to, you know, have a

victory here for the team. Um, it was fun. But, yeah, whatever you do, do the best you can, and I'm sure you do or they wouldn't have you doing this.

Immke: Yeah, well, uh, thank you for your time and all the-

Fahsbender: Thank you, Josh.

Immke: -resource you were able to share with us.

Fahsbender: Thank you. Anything else, you may call.

Immke: Alright, this has been Josh Immke from Illinois Wesleyan Class of 2019 interviewing Ken Fahsbender from the Class of 1949 for the oral histories project at Illinois Wesleyan on February 22nd, 2016.