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Daniel Bassill

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Oral History Interview with Daniel Bassill '68,
Conducted over Skype on January 23rd, 2016

Conducted by Meg Miner, Illinois Wesleyan Archivist

Meg Miner: My name is Meg Miner, and I'm the archivist at Illinois Wesleyan University and special collections librarian. Today is January 23rd, it's a Saturday, and I am on a Skype conversation with Daniel- is it Bassill?

Daniel Bassill: Bassill.

Miner: Bassill, okay. Why don't you say who you are and how you're affiliated with Wesleyan and- and how you know Minor and we'll see where the conversation leads us.

Bassill: Okay, I'm- I'm Dan Bassill. I- I live in the Chicago region. I've lived in northern Illinois and the Midwest for most of my life. I went to Illinois Wesleyan in 1964 and graduated in 1968. I studied history and political science. I was a member of the Acacia fraternity and involved in a variety of other campus activities. I- I went into the army after graduating and spent three years in army intelligence and in some ways that's an extension of studying history, it's- it's- it's gathering information and...from a variety of sources and using that information to support decision-making.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Bassill: After the army, I ended up in Chicago as an advertising copywriter for the Montgomery-Ward Corporation. And shortly thereafter, I was recruited to be a volunteer tutor at a tutor-mentor program, and a couple years later I was recruited to be the leader of that program, so from 1975 to 1990 I had an advertising career and I had a growing career leading a tutoring and mentoring program. It was in 1990 that I left Montgomery-Ward and converted this to a non-profit, and in 1992 we created a new organization seeking to help...teenagers, but we also saw a void where no one had a master database of the different tutor-mentor programs in Chicago. Therefore, whenever there was an act of violence or some story about poverty that was on the front page, no one could really lead any kind of marketing program that would help existing programs grow or help new programs grow where they're needed.

Miner: Hmm.

Bassill: I began to say, "How can we try to figure that out?" and in doing so I- I connected with... several different people at Illinois Wesleyan. One of them was Yvonne Jones who worked for the university at that time, and she became part of our initial board of directors. Another was...Pam Lowry who was a- a assistant -just joined the faculty at that time and she took on a role of helping us develop the initial survey of Chicago to determine what tutor-mentor programs were there. And through that the first article was written about my work in the Wesleyan magazine. And there were several subsequent works in the years following that, and through these Minor became interested in what I was doing and supportive of what I was doing and so I- I- I- had a...distance relationship, if you will, all the way up until he passed away.

Miner: Hmm. So about when was that initial relationship started then with him?

Bassill: Probably nine- probably between 1992 and 1994.

Miner: And...go ahead and tell us a little bit more about that then. How did it develop, how did- how did you discuss things, what was the topics and- and mutual interests?

Bassill: Well...my work of- was two-part. One was we operated a site-based tutoring and mentoring program connecting volunteers from different workplace backgrounds with inner city kids and we did it as a non-profit so we were constantly trying to find money to do what we were doing. At the same time...we had created the Tutor-Mentor Connection which was really an information library of- of not only who the programs were, where they were, why were they needed where they were needed, and as we were doing that, it was- we had to create an advertising or a public awareness cam- campaign to get more people to look at the information, and to get more people to use the information to support the growth of existing programs in different neighborhoods.

Miner: Hmm.

Bassill: If- so my- my advertising background, we- we spent millions of dollars every week to reach out and tell potential customers that we have stuff at our stores and they ought to come to our store and buy something. In my- my...leadership of a tutor-mentor program, even back in the seventies and the eighties when had a hundred to two hundred to three hundred pairs of volunteers, I was doing advertising using a mimeograph machine, saying to our volunteers "this is what we're planning to do this week, this is information available to you, these are things that we- you need to pass onto the kids," so we were- and as we did that then we would facilitate their understanding of that information through social interaction, through one on one talking to the volunteers and so forth. When we created the Tutor-Mentor Connection, we ex- continued that process but in a much much larger circle of people. The- instead of mimeograph it became a printed newsletter and in the... 'bout 1998 it became an email newsletter, reaching out to people who were involved with programs saying, "Here's some information you might draw from to help improve your program," reaching out to people who support programs saying, "Here's programs and where they are, and where they're needed, and here's things you can do to help support them." And reaching out to even beyond that to political leaders, university leaders, and other people saying, "This is information you can do from your institution or from your position of influence to support the growth of programs in a neighborhood or in a lot of neighborhoods."

Miner: Mmm.

Bassill: Through that process I- I- kept putting my initial printed newsletter in 1993 I think I had four hundred people on the database. By 1999, I had about twelve thousand, and I did that by just adding layers of people through different groupings of my own background and of the volunteer background and the people I learned about, so I went into the Illinois Wesleyan directory, and I added my- 'bout a hundred of my fraternity brothers, I added... Wesleyan people who were in the Chicago area, and I added people who were down at Wesleyan including Minor. So he started getting my printed newsletters and he responded. That- that was the good thing about Minor, he responded and said, "Oh, this is pretty good, I like what you're doing." And through that he helped me connect with other people. At one point in I think early 1994, we actually had an agreement that there was going to be a team of people including faculty, the...provost, and students on Wesleyan's campus, looking at the same information that I was looking at and doing things to build a better understanding of that information among more people. That never really went into fruition because there were too many chiefs and not enough Indians...[Miner laughs]...and I didn't have the money to support the process and we were 150 miles apart.

Miner: Yeah [laughs].

Bassill: But...it was through those initial things that over the years, me going down to Wesleyan, Minor here in Chicago, through printed newsletters and things like that- that we developed an awareness and a relationship that he used to tell other people "Take a look at what Dan's doing," or to encourage coverage- we had stories in the Argus, we had stories in the Wesleyan magazine a couple different times.

So the...probably no little- level of influence on his part to encourage other people to take a look and- and perhaps get involved in supporting what we do.

Miner: That's great. So what do you think the connection then is between... his interest in your program and then...the kind of person that he was or that you came to- to know him as?

Bassill: Well, he was interested in issues of those who were less fortunate than most. He...was strongly supportive of efforts to help minority kids from Chicago and Detroit and perhaps other cities get to Wesleyan. He encouraged...a project in Detroit that I know of, maybe others. So his collections were collections of people that he felt were doing good things. In...in 2001, he called me in late August or maybe late July, and he said "Dan, can you come down to Wesleyan in September?" And I said- I looked at my calendar and I said, "I'm not sure I can do this," and he said "Well, we want you to come. We want to give you an award." Well...th-the award was an honorary doctorate, and I was one of five people that day who received them which were people doing interesting things in different fields that Minor had become aware of and through his awareness of them was doing things to give them attention and recognition and support for their work. So- so on that level...his interest in- in helping people living in poverty and my interests are the same. From a collection standpoint, if you browse around the...my websites, one of them is www.tutormentorexchange.net, another is www.tutormentorconnection.org, and then my blog is tutormentor.blogspot.com. All three of those are really libraries of information. The categories represent... direct links to organizations that are working with kids, but also direct links to people who are re- collecting research on why the programs are needed, about poverty about... race, about in-inequality, about social justice, there- there's...just a- a huge amount of literature that has been created and kee- and gets created every year that sits on people's shelves that I point to as part of an effort to increase the number of people looking at that information, understanding the information, and then acting as a result of their understanding in ways that support the growth and improvement of existing programs in poverty neighborhoods, or help new programs grow where they're needed.

Miner: Mmm.

Bassill: So it's this- this- my process of collecting, I...which has been ongoing for 40 years, I'm going back to my study of history, my army intelligence, you know, when I started leading the tutor-mentor program I started...getting handbooks and manuals from other people that I could look at to say, "How can I help improve what I do by learning from what other people do?"

Miner: Hmm.

Bassill: In 1975, '76, I begin to reach out to leaders of other programs say, "Let's get together for lunch. Bring your stuff. Let's share. Let's learn from each other." I begin to say "Let's- let's do things together that we can't do by ourselves," like volunteer training and so forth. So the...the paper collections are things that sit on your shelves and- and very few people look on each other's shelves. When the internet came available, the paper collection became...somewhat outdated because I can point to the website of someone who wrote a research paper on poverty or race or whatever, and if you go to that website, you not only can you read that paper, you can probably read a dozen other papers on the same topic. And you can follow their web library going to even more people who are writing and reflecting on the same things. So the- the- the- internet as a library is a dynamic thing. It's- it's not that...that paper you wrote in 1992 is still there, it's still valuable, but you've probably written ten more papers since then and maybe you're going to publish another one next year.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Bassill: So the- the amount of information available to help us understand all these problems is- is massive...[coughs]...it's available in more places, and I think Miner understood the value of that. I sent you a note where he said I... that he thought that what I was doing could apply in other cities and I agree with that. The- the- the- the challenge and- and the reason that he- I reached out to Wesleyan and to other universities is it's a massive amount of work collecting and organizing this information...and- and that's only the first part of the challenge. The- the real challenge is how do you get thousands or millions of people looking at the information on a regular basis, and how do you help them understand that. Well, that's what colleges do, that's what high schools do, that's what faith groups do. They- they have a- a body knowledge that is- you're a librarian, you understand this. They have a body of knowledge collected in a certain space and all they do over the term that a student is on campus is facilitate the understanding of certain parts of that in an organized, ongoing way.

Miner: Mm-hmm. Did-

Bassill: So if- if- if- we if we think "How can we use the body of knowledge we have to help understand social, environmental, health problems that affect a city, a country, a world...we have a virtual organization of people who could be doing a heck of a lot more to solve those problems in the future than we've ever been able to do in the past.

Miner: So what's holding that back?

Bassill: A number of different things, I...my reaching out- going back to when I said we tried to have a partnership with Wesleyan back in the...1994, 1995. The- the... department chairs that were part of that were way too busy to spend any significant time on it. The junior professors who might have been a part of it were focused on their own research and publishing...as an advancement to their career. The students who might have gotten involved had a faculty member take it- it on themselves to try to get students involved, never really did get involved because that faculty person wasn't there. And- and- and my own case, I was never able to generate any significant attention and money from Chicago civic leaders, businesses, or foundations to be able to come to Wesleyan and say- or to any other university to say "Here, I've got to endow this program, to make it more important for you to try to be part of it."

Miner: Yeah, and that's gotten even more difficult in the last few years, the money part of it. But, have you had any connection with anyone on campus recently?

Bassill: Ongoing. I'm still connected to Dr. (name, 15:21??), and I- I just met the new social enterprise faculty person in January, so I- I have an ongoing interaction with different people, both alumni, and I- you know the Acacia group has had a listserv since 2001 so we're constantly sharing information about what's going on. And so there's- there's- there's en- enough interactivity- you know, the- the beauty of the internet it's...so in my one blog or whatever I- I collect links that point to people who- who have interesting ideas. One link I put in there maybe ten years ago was a- a article that focused helping churches develop strategies to attract people to their faith. And the other goes on web evangelism and- and the writer said in the past we would stand on street corners and we would pass out pamphlets which people might have picked up but they'd put it in the trash. Now we can put our message on the website and the people who find it and come there are already interested in what it is we have to say.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Bassill: That's a profound statement of possibility. That means...if you were to google tutor-mentor today, my websites would be three or four on the first five on that page. That means that anytime someone sees a newspaper story about poverty, about race, about violence... and- and says "Well you

know, if we get more adults involved in helping kids, that could make- that could make a difference. You know, January is National Mentoring Month. Right now...there is media all over the country...talking heads, celebrities, talking about how mentors have helped them.

Miner: Hmm.

Bassill: If you- if someone did research looking at all of those messages, I would wager that very few of them are saying "Search on goog-Google tutor-mentor or other key words and begin a learning process so you build a deeper understanding of where these programs are needed, what is needed to make good programs, how long they need to happen in order to happen in order to transform lives...where can you...connect and learn from mentors, where can you facilitate other understanding, where can you find people who are funding that process."

Miner: Right. Yeah. Hmm.

Bassill: So the- the- the potential of the internet as a- a place to meet and solve problems and dig deeper...is unrealized as more and more of the internet becomes, you know, 140 character soundbites of...and people really talking out loud to get attention for themselves, you know-

Miner: Right.

Bassill: The- I follow a number of education groups...via internet conversations where the focus is on deeper learning and- and the- the idea is how do we reach kids as early as elementary grade level to- to teach them to dig deeper into information, to teach them habits of reflection...spending time reading on your own and thinking about the reading and- and- and how that relates to you and how you respond to it. You know, these aren't habits we've taught for the last 30 or 40 years, and therefore the internet as a tool without that habit of learning is a unrealized potential.

Miner: Mm-hmm, yeah.

Bassill: And yet as I talk to you and as I talk to other people every day, I keep- on any given day the person that I talk to could be someone who has the where with all to begin a facilitation of that process within the group of people who they interact with on a daily basis.

Miner: Mm-hmm. Well, that is so true, it's a- a medium that's used to sell things mostly. [laughs] But...when you got this sort of recognition then from Minor for the work you were doing, you were already doing it on the internet, right?

Bassill: We had- so Minor started connecting with me in the 1993, '94. We were not on the internet at that time. We were doing printed newsletters and my library...we were sponsored by the Montgomery-Ward corporation so I had a tremendous space in their headquarters facility for a huge library of printed material that if people came to it there's a lot of stuff they could look at. We went on the internet in 1998 thanks to the help of one of my volunteers, so we had only been on the internet for two or three years...it was in September 5th, 2001 that the ceremony down at Illinois Wesleyan awarded myself and a few others an honorary doctorate. So if you think of a timeline from 1994 to 2001 of a growing amount of information and recognition and accomplishment an- and support, th-that awarding of the doctorate at that point would be a- a high point on that timeline.

Miner: [overlapping] Yeah and I apologize, that is what I meant is-

Bassill: [overlapping] A week later was 9/11.

Miner: Go ahead.

Bassill: A week later was 9/11.

Miner: Right.

Bassill: 'Kay? So all- all- all of the good momentum that is achieved up to getting an honorary doctorate from Illinois Wesleyan evaporated over the next ten years in the aftermath 9/11, in the aftermath of the... dot com bubble bust, and- and hurricanes, and tsunamis, and wars, and political...stuff. And- and Minor died. The support he had...continued all the way up- I'd received a-a- Associated Colleges of Illinois award in I think 2004 which might have been just toward the end of his life. The next administration did not pick up that degree of support and...all kinds of other things that...made it much more difficult to continue doing what I'd been doing and- and really the fifteen years since then.

Miner: Sure. And I apologize for not being more specific but I did mean when he did give you recognition in 2001. So you made a comment that he thought...would have- might have thought that what you were doing on the internet was just as...I don't know, fulfilling or wonderful and comprehensive, and of course when he died the- he was using internet resources for his own collections. But one of the things that I'm interested about in this project relates to what you've said you feel about the web, and collecting paper things on the web in digital formats so they can be shared, and Minor was very much an artifact person and so did you have any- because you did know him and get recognized by him and were doing your web work at the- at this- this key moment in internet history and as it turned out in his life. Did you have any contact or conversations with him about the utility of online versus print as you stated it to me a little bit ago?

Bassill: I- I don't really recall that we did...I- I don't know how aware I was of his own archiving on the internet, I don't- like I think you said he wasn't much of a self-promoter...and I don't recall him ever connecting or us linking each other which I wish we had. But no I can't say I recall anything like that.

Miner: Ok, well the reason that I- I raise it in this context is because in- in his- there have been a few published interviews with- about him as a collector, and one of the things he was very adamant about was keeping the physicality of a library, so he- he opposed...the notion that libraries could get rid of printed material and move to online material and he very much saw a role of the artifact in learning...and in- and in teaching so...and especially with creating the library that we have now at Illinois Wesleyan which would have...which would have come after your 2001 visit, so...anyways I'd just- I'd wanted to see if you'd had any discussion with him about that sort of thing.

Bassill: Well...without talking about it that we probably share kindred experiences. Yeah, I think the Ames Library was a fifty million dollar building if I recall at least. My library may be one hundred, two hundred dollars [laughs]. But I- I- in my library I'd been collecting printed materials. I've been collecting newspaper clips from Chicago media since the late eighties...about...poverty, violence, different stories that...show why we are- need to be doing what we are doing.

Miner: Uh-huh.

Bassill: And I've had these in a paper based library...cubby holes and stuff like that for fifteen years. Because of my own downsizing over the last few years, I started about a year and a half ago going through those files and having to- I did two things. One is that for the newspaper stories, I- I use my cell phone to take pictures of these stories that I could put the jpg images in my web library...with the idea that the printed stories, if I can't find anyone to take them to archive them themselves, they're going to go into the trash. A- a huge amount of other material that I had collected has already gone into the trash

because it's- it's stuff that just...isn't transferable very much. And as I'm sitting here in my- in my basement office, I've got four or five file cabinets full of additional stuff that...if I can't find someone to take ownership of it, I- it too is going to end up in the trash because most of it is- will not get to the internet. Even the stuff that's on the internet is sitting in files on my hard drive, and unless someone wants to take ownership of those files onto their hard drive, that stuff still has the potential to be lost, and as- as someone who's done this work for so long as someone who values history and values the artifact being saved and preserved and available for future generations, it really pains me to make- that- that might be the end result of- of what I've been doing for so many years. So there's probably a kindred spirit between myself and Miner... he's just been in a better position to generate the resources to not only collect and save his archives, but many, many others as well.

Miner: Well...now that's interesting. So you don't know how the end of his collecting days went then? You didn't hear that story?

Bassill: No, no.

Miner: Okay. After he died, his family asked the university to purchase all of- or- or at least a majority of his collections. And it was evaluated by...from what I understand I think it was just a library decision. It might have been influenced by the fact that the university needed to purchase it...but the library did end up auctioning almost everything. We kept about ten percent of the...books that he had, but many of his other collecting interests- he was interested in musical instruments, and- and other kinds of objects, most of those were taken by the family and I don't know how they got dispersed, but...but most of the things the university purchased were then sold at auction.

Bassill: Hmm. That's...that doesn't sound really very good.

Miner: Yeah. It's a recognition I think of the kind of institution that...we are and the, you know, the community that we serve, but it is certainly an area I'm interested in getting people's reflections on 'cause it's...for all of the reasons you're stating...but it's- it's a- it's a struggle, right? I mean, as you know, it's a struggle with resources. If you've got a copy of all of your things on one hard drive, that hard drive needs protecting, and...and so it goes with even the physical things you know. Physical things don't just take care of themselves either. So it's a real- it's a real balancing act. I think you can speak to it a lot better than everybody.

Bassill: [overlapping] Well...it is. And- and that's why, you know- you know, universities are inst- are collections of books and artifacts, but they're also collections of people. And- and- and- and they're not just people that you just attract to try to give dollars to keep paying for things to happen at the university. Th-they're people that...the university has- has the potential to stay connected with through a lifetime and use those artifacts to support what its community does to affect the well-being of the world.

Miner: Yeah.

Bassill: I- I put a graphic on and- have you- have you ever read any of the Robert Jordan *The Wheel of Time* science fiction books?

Miner: I don't think I have, no.

Bassill: Well, I- I- it's the same series but he uses the term (30:10??) as- as a character that had sort of a gravity that as he went through life he pulled other people around him-

Miner: Hmm.

Bassill: -and I created a graphic on my blog a few years ago showing the universe, and showing a- a- a- arrow through the universe, of showing how some of us as we go through life...we have a gravity of who we are, of what we are, of what our ideas are, that attract other people and pull them along with us. And if we think of the- the- the alumni and the friends of the university as a universe of stars with their own gravity, and each with their own solar system rotating around themselves, that represents a huge, huge body of people that over time could be learning from each other, helping each other, doing things in a virtual world as well as in a physical world that might make a bigger impact on problems we face now and will face in the future than what we've ever been able to do before.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Bassill: But that- that- that mental picture that I just drew has to be one shared and owned by a lot of different people, including people of influence, power, and wealth who are better able to support such a vision than those of us who are on the other end of that spectrum.

Miner: Boy, that's so true, [overlapping] but that spectrum-

Bassill: [overlapping] It's only just a baby [laughs].

Miner: Yeah, that spectrum is not as broad as we want it to be though, that's for sure.

Bassill: That- that- that's why I, you know I talked to you, and I talked to other people, and maybe someone at Wesleyan will read- listen to this interview and say "Oh, I can do that."...[Miner laughs]... Well that- that's what gets us up in the morning every day, so then there's someone else out there that...the universe, the world is a huge haystack where there's needles in there waiting to be discovered. And if- if we're not out there...nudging the network, trying to expand the network, then we can't count on other people to do it for us. And Minor was someone who did try to help do that for myself and for I think other people as well.

Miner: So true. Well is there anything else you think we should know about in order to understand him and his relationship with you know, the university and his influence on you?

Bassill: Well, like I said, his influence was positive and profound and...unfortunately way too short. I'm sure it's- I- I- I- guess I would say I hope you would find ways to share a- a web link to archive so that I and other people can pass it on and hopefully more people will come to know him in ways that they didn't know him.

Miner: So true. Well, yeah, that's certainly something I'm going to be trying to do. So we'll...we'll keep that in mind. But I really appreciate you taking the time and oh my gosh, the amazing work that you're doing now there...thanks so much for your help today.

Bassill: Thank you, and I enjoyed talking with you. [overlapping] Good luck.

Miner: [overlapping] You too.

Bassill: Buh-bye.

Miner: Thanks. Have a good day.