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Oral History Interview with Garrett Davey '04,
Conducted over Skype, February 4th, 2016

Conducted by Meg Miner, Illinois Wesleyan Archivist

Meg Miner: Today is February 4th, 2016, and this is Meg Miner. I am Illinois Wesleyan University's archivist and I am working on a project on Minor Myers and his influence on campus during his presidency. I am on a Skype call with Garrett Davey, is that right? Garrett, you go ahead and introduce yourself and-

Garrett Davey: Yes.

Miner: -tell us how you're affiliated with Wesleyan.

Davey: So, my name is Garrett Davey, and I graduated from Illinois Wesleyan University in 2004. I ran on the cross country and track teams there...and yeah. [laughs] So I'm an alum.

Miner: Wonderful. What was your major?

Davey: Oh sorry, I was a- an English major and I did the writing concentration...portion of the English major if they still even have that.

Miner: They do. So how did you know Minor? What context...did you know Minor in?

Davey: I guess, I mean I knew him in a variety of contexts. I mean, he was obviously the president of the university when I was there. I believe he passed away the summer before my senior year. And...I also knew him through the English department. We- I had two classes that went over to his house. One I remember- I guess a- a little bit better than the other was with Dr. Muirhead and...I mean, he- Minor sort of occupied a mythical space on campus, you know. He was- he was a real affable person, he was a renaissance man, but there was also this sort of this, I guess mythical side to him for many of us who hadn't met him yet. And...Professor Muirhead sort of picked up on this and I believe that she really- she really enjoyed Minor as a person and as a scholar as well. And so she arranged to have a class trip over to his house and, you know, he showed us his rare book collection when we were there. He played the harpsichord for us, which was just amazing. I mean it was like listening to Mozart quite frankly. [Miner laughs] And I remember him showing us this book that he didn't even know about it at the time he had bought it but it ended up being a book that was coincidentally was printed by Benjamin Franklin's printing press. And he had picked it up at a rare- at a rare book store in downtown- downtown Bloomington. I'm forgetting the street names now, I haven't been back to Bloomington in a long time. But it was- I'm trying to think, it was near- there was an- an old movie theater that they...that they renovated when I was there. And it just off of downtown, I guess just to the east

of the rare book store there. And they had called him about this- this amazing rare book and he went and picked it up and sure enough when he was thumbing through it had been printed at Benjamin Franklin's printing press. And he was, you know, super excited to- to tell us about that. And you know it's funny, like thinking back on it kids when you sort of see the energy and the passion of an adult about something as dull as say collecting rare books, it's sort of easy to say, "Oh who cares, it's just rare books" you know, "we don't- we don't really care, you know, and frankly we don't even read books anymore!" It's all digitized.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Davey: But just his- his- his- his passion for- for not only the rare books but for, you know, his other collections and he was such an eclectic collector, I mean, his harpsichords. He- he catalogued every single type of tree that was on campus when we were there and he was, you know, excited to show us that information. And-

Miner: Oh my gosh!

Davey: -it was just contagious, you know. He was, yeah, he was such a- such a wonderful person and a wonderful personality and when I think about him I think how someone who was the president of the university. Now granted Illinois Wesleyan is a little bit smaller, it's liberal arts, and we tend to think a little differently than some of the major state universities, for example.

Miner: Hmm.

Davey: But, I mean, in talking with other people about their university experience, I don't think any of them have ever met the president of their university, let alone a handful of times, and seeing him on campus, at frankly all hours of the day. I mean, I remember running into him out front at- out in front of Ames Library, at- I mean, frankly at one o'clock in the morning during finals week...[Miner laughs]...and ten o'clock at night going to pick up a friend of mine who was working there. I mean, he was just- he was around and he was- he just had a presence that was really...that really permeated the entire campus and it was really- it was really a sad moment when...when he passed away. In fact, I- I can remember still...I was working in a camp up in the Poconos, in...northeastern Pennsylvania and I was actually there with another Wesleyan student.

Miner: Hmm.

Davey: And first- I mean, we were- we were hit hard by the news that he had cancer, especially- it was lung cancer, right?

Miner: Yeah.

Davey: And he hadn't- wasn't a smoker or you know, he was a healthy guy. And then when he passed away, it was like- it was like sucking the air out of Wesleyan's campus.

Miner: Hmm.

Davey: I mean, I- I think that everyone literally felt it 'cause like I said he was such a- such a passionate person, and his- and his passion was contagious. I mean, he was he was awesome. [laughs]

Miner: [laughs] Oh, that's amazing! When you said that you visited his home for the first time, do you remember when that would have been in your academic career? Was it towards the early part? You said he already had a mythical status, I'm just curious when that sort of took hold.

Davey: Well, you know, honestly he became a little less mythical to those of us who got to go visit him.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Davey: Because we actually got to see him and see what everybody was talking about. But I think that...I think that the- I guess that- that mythical place he held in our heart and our minds frankly, I think that drove Dr. Muirhead...to want us to go meet him. You know-

Miner: So-

Davey: -like we looked up to him...sorry, go ahead.

Miner: No, go ahead. It's alright.

Davey: Oh...yeah we looked up to him, we would talk about him, and she knew how accessible he was, you know, something we didn't necessarily know. We didn't necessarily know that you could just reach out to him and then go over to his house, you know, and frankly he had extended that invitation to us at any time when we were over there. Just any time you wanted to come over, come on over. [laughs] And who does- what university president does that?

Miner: Right.

Davey: I- I can't think of any. I'm sure that there are, I don't want to generalize too much.

Miner: Hmm.

Davey: But it's few and far between, definitely.

Miner: Are you in academia now?

Davey: Am I in academia now? [laughs] Sort of. I'm in law school right now, I'm finishing up my final year of law school.

Miner: Oh.

Davey: But before I went to law school I was very much a part of I guess more traditional academia. I- I taught- I taught for five years out in Brooklyn at a boys and girls high school. And then I taught for three years at the University of Kansas where I went to get a Ph.D. and ended up leaving the Ph.D. program to come to law school.

Miner: Hmm. Well I guess-

Davey: I very much consider myself an- an academic though. [laughs]

Miner: Sure. Well it's 'cause, you know, you made the observation that you just never see that in a president, so I thought "Well, what is your personal experience...[laughs]...with the presidential exposures-"

Davey: Right.

Miner: -so to speak. Yeah, so when you had this idea of him as a myth, I'm taking it was fairly early in your academic career, and you went to his house and you saw books, were they things that were already pulled out and available to you? Were they things that were relevant to what you were studying with Dr. Muirhead? I- I don't know, did he take you on a tour of his house?

Davey: Yeah, he took us on a tour of his house, and- and- and- both in terms of the books, I mean, you know, of course he tailored our tour to- to the actual class that we had. But then, like I said, he showed us some of his favorites in the collection. So yeah, he- he I guess showed us books that were more tailored to- I think it was an American literature class. And then- And then he wanted to make sure we saw the- the highlights of his collection as well. [laughs]

Miner: Were you able to get a sense from him about the highlights or the things that he was showing to you? I mean, obviously if they were for a particular class- but to get a sense of what he valued in them. One of the things that I've observed about the books he collected was they weren't in particularly good shape all the time.

Davey: Yes.

Miner: And some collectors value form over content.

Davey: Yeah. Well, I got a sense that it varied, you know. It depended. It could be that it was a book that had a particular subject matter. It could be, like I said earlier, a book printed at Ben Franklin's printing press. You know, I remember him showing- I- I can't speak with very much detail on it but I remember him showing us a book that the thing he loved about it was the inscription inside, you know, and I thought- I just thought that was awesome, you know. Here's this, I mean, it- it is an archive. [laughs]

Miner: Yeah.

Davey: It's this relic of the past. And- and he found meaning in- in that inscription. Not only from the meaning from the inscription itself, but meaning to him. And- and that was always something that was just really cool, and people think about- think about collecting books and think "Alright, well [laughs] what are- what are the famous books that I need to collect?" and "Who wrote the various editions of certain books," and "What's the most valuable?" But seeing that the value to him was in the content, you know. And- and in things that had nothing to do with the book themselves but had to do with I guess the- the passing on of that book from person to another, the gifting of that book. And that- that was really cool.

Miner: That's great. Mmm. What kind of effect do you think that had on you as a student? That kind of- not just the closeness, but the- the sort of passion that he evinced?

Davey: You know, I guess I- it's one of those things that unfortunately I never really thought about until he was gone. And...I, you know, it was just inspiring and I tried to- I tried to find those things that I'm that passionate about to go- to you know, to dedicate my time to. I mean, he certainly had a lot more interests than me and frankly was an expert on...[both laugh]...on such a wide variety of things that I- I guess can't match that, but you know, it was just always inspiring and like I said, I try and bring that passion into the work that I do now and I try to bring that passion into my hobbies. Yeah, it was- he was a very inspiring individual, and I mean, I still think about, of course, it's engraved on his statue, the "Do well, but also do good."

Miner: Hmm.

Davey: You know, and it- it just- it resonates. And it resonated with me. And I think that I've- well, not necessarily being cognizant of it at all times but it has in a way guided I guess my- my path in life.

Miner: That's really interesting. Well Garrett, is there anything else you think we should know about Minor that you'd like to share with us?

Davey: You know, he was a diamond in the rough. He was one of a kind. I mean, I can't say it enough. He was- he was just such a- such an amazing individual and such a well-respected individual. And to- and to occupy such a- I guess such a place in the hierarchy of- of university administration and with people who still feel that way about him says a lot about him as a person and the work he did at Wesleyan.

Miner: That's great. Thank you so much. I really appreciate you taking this time.

Davey: Yeah, thank you, I hope it goes well.

Miner: Thank you, I appreciate that too. And I appreciate your perseverance through all of our crazy scheduling things here. [both laugh]

Davey: Yeah, no problem, I totally understand. [laughs]

Miner: Ok, take care. Ok, take care.

Davey: I will. Have a great night!

Miner: Thanks, you too. Good-bye.

Davey: Bye.