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Suan Guess-Hanson

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Oral History Interview with Suan Guess-Hanson,
in Hanson Student Center

Conducted by Meg Miner, Illinois Wesleyan Archivist

Meg Miner: Okay, good morning. This is Meg Miner. I am the archivist at Illinois Wesleyan University, and I am on a sabbatical project talking to people who knew President Minor Myers Jr., a little bit about his interests, collecting interests in particular or just generally his- his interests and influences on campus. So I'm in the Hansen Student Center today with someone who has kindly volunteered to be here with us. Would you please introduce yourself, tell us how you're affiliated with Minor and- and we can take the conversation there.

Suan Guess-Hanson: I'm Suan Guess-Hanson. I attended Illinois Wesleyan and graduated in 1964. And that was one of the fun things for me when we had our- I guess it would have been our fortieth reunion that Minor and Ellen came to our reunion and got to sit with them. And that was delightful 'cause he had graduated from Carleton College in 1964. And I had mentioned that Ellen had taught at... Metcalf lab school where I also taught so I got to know her and their two boys went to- when they came to Bloomington they went to Metcalf through eighth grade. So I'd kind of known who they were and it was neat- neat connection. And Ellen said I mentioned that my son was interested in going to Carleton College and so she said, "Well, make an appointment. Go and talk to Minor about it." And of course Minor was like "Oh, well it's a lot different from when I was there. Chris, why don't you want to go to Wesleyan?" You know, he said "I want to get out of town, I want to go north." [Miner laughs] So that was fun. So Minor said that Carleton was a lot different, you know, back in the early nineties than it was when he was there in the sixties. So that- that was fun to hear about.

Miner: Did he say what way it was different?

Guess-Hanson: Oh, it was a lot larger. The student body was much more diverse than it was at that time. The interest in the students going into the Peace Corps was much greater. It had just started when we were in college, so he- he actually mentioned that when we were talking.

Miner: Hmm.

Guess-Hanson: So anyway, Chris enjoyed, you know, talking with him. The minute we got on Carleton's campus, that was it. So it's like, "Okay, that was- that was- that was fun." But I thought that was so nice when Ellen had just said, "Well, make an appointment. Minor will love to talk about it." And then I would see Minor at the different concerts I'd go to...over in Westbrook Auditorium. And he actually played the harpsichord on some and it was like, "This- this is fun. Here's this college president just out there just playing away with the rest of the

faculty.” And he seemed to really, really enjoy it. And his thing about the passion. What is your passion? And I’d- I’d even after he died I wrote a piece of music kind of using some of the quotes he had and that was something that was important for me and I think you know, Ellen enjoyed having a copy of it so that was- that was fun. It hadn’t been performed yet, and I was kind of hoping that it might be some time but-

Miner: And you said you recently turned the score over to-

Guess-Hanson: -to Jonathan Green-

Miner: -to Jonathan Green.

Guess-Hanson: -yeah, last year some time. I forgot, I could have brought a copy with me today and I didn’t even- I’m still unpacking so...[laughs]...didn’t quite get that done.

Miner: Yeah. Thanks for coming in so quickly after your trip. I- I really appreciate that. So when you wrote the piece, did you write it for a particular-

Guess-Hanson: It’s a choral piece.

Miner: It is a choral piece, okay.

Guess-Hanson: Yeah, yeah, you know, soprano, alto, tenor, bass...choral. And it’s just the- the words that- that he spoke. And to me he was a very inspiring person. It’s like I wasn’t a student any longer, but kind of the excitement of being around and- and being on campus I- I really enjoyed and I felt I’m probably more a part of the campus as a result of him being here.

Miner: How so?

Guess-Hanson: It’s kind of like this family. You kind of come in- it’s always been a small school but I didn’t go to a lot of the reunions. Just ‘cause you’re in town, you go other things that are here and- and so I hadn’t been involved. But like when the Shirk Center was built, having activities and doing things over there, I really appreciated that. And the fact that it was open to the community-

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Guess-Hanson: -I mean, you would hear all the people say, you know, “What a marvelous venue!” and that it’s open and that it’s being shared.

Miner: Hmm.

Guess-Hanson: So- I had thought that you know, Minor- that's what he did. He shared a lot.

Miner: You felt that it was his involvement in- in making those kinds of things happen, right?

Guess-Hanson: Yeah.

Miner: Yeah, I mean obviously the building projects and things were- he was central to, so-

Guess-Hanson: Yes. Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Miner: Did they send out like invitations or anything personalized from him for that sort of thing for area alumni?

Guess-Hanson: I'm sure there must have been. I- I didn't keep them but...[laughs]-

Miner: Sure.

Guess-Hanson: -you know, it was kind of- kind of there. But- and it was interesting for me to see when the sculpture was finally put up over at the new library that yeah, there was- it was really captured well, the scene of hurrying across campus, just hanging onto his violin was funny. So there was- there was a bit of humor to it which of course he had. And I remember being over at- at the President's home and it might have been one of the reunion things, open house and all of the instruments that were up around that upper area that he had and it was like that brass, the- the people that are the- almost like the...civil war reenactors.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Guess-Hanson: And I think he loaned out his instruments for some of that and some of them weren't playable but they- they were really neat. So I- I enjoyed that a lot.

Miner: Did you talk to him about that kind of thing or [overlapping] his music collections?

Guess-Hanson: [overlapping] Not a whole lot. I'm kind of busy and it's sort of, like you said, we're trying to get them out the collections. I think I saw the result of them, but I didn't take the time to say, "Oh, how'd you get into that?"

Miner: Yeah. [laughs]

Guess-Hanson: But I remembered Ellen saying- but they had a lot of really nice furniture that they would get and- at different places and period pieces and I remember seeing some of them here, and I'd also seen them at Ellen's place out in Connecticut 'cause I visited her.

Miner: Have you?

Guess-Hanson: Yeah.

Miner: Oh wonderful, so you kept in touch?

Guess-Hanson: Right. Mm-hmm.

Miner: Oh, that's great!

Guess-Hanson: She's in the Mystic area. And we had been out there visiting friends in Noank and I had taken Ellen to meet this- this lady. And it was- it was kind of fun 'cause she really enjoyed seeing the antiques 'cause she's kind of a collector herself. And come to find out that people that I knew knew somebody who lived in the same complex where she is at Bishop's Cove.

Miner: Hmm.

Guess-Hanson: They're in Mystic, Connecticut. Then we were out another time to go and see in Groton where the- this Nautilus, which is the first nuclear submarine. Here, we're doing a tour of that and we see Ellen and her son Jeff. Now, what's the likelihood? [Miner laughs] We hadn't- I hadn't talked to her that time and here we are on a ship together. [laughs]

Miner: Oh my! Small world, huh?

Guess-Hanson: Yep.

Miner: Yeah. So you knew the kids pretty well growing up then too?

Guess-Hanson: No, I knew them some. I was an adaptive art teacher at (name of school, 7:39??) and so I didn't have them in, but we did the outdoor education program. I didn't do as much with them at the time when they were going through-

Miner: Hmm.

Guess-Hanson: -but I certainly knew who they were. And then I believe that Minor the...the fourth, lives in Noank now. And it's like- well, he'd been in New York City or the Bronx or something and then he moved there, and so it was like, oh, when Ellen said, "What street did this other friend Nancy live on?" So I'd have to say, "Oh yeah, I think he lives down the street from her, so that seems real interesting.

Miner: Yeah. So...when you taught with Ellen then, what was she teaching?

Guess-Hanson: She was teaching French.

Miner: She was? Okay. I knew she taught, I didn't know she taught in that school. So...and so your paths would overlap in- in the curriculum at all or-

Guess-Hanson: No, just kind of around. And she didn't like going and doing outdoor ed so I kind of filled in for some of that for her 'cause it's like camping was not her thing.

Miner: Is that something they required even of-

Guess-Hanson: Well, seventh and eighth graders would go out four or five days to- actually, in the woods and do the camping thing. And the math teacher, Terry Oberhart was the one that kind of got that going. And Ellen always appreciated that- that he helped both Jeff and Minor with learning math, which was kind of an important thing for...[Miner laughs]...what you need in the future. But I remember then also taking Ellen to Chicago. We- we spent a weekend- my daughter (name, 9:13??) lived up there and we did some things for a weekend and that was- that was fun-

Miner: Hmm.

Guess-Hanson: -for them to get together 'cause she- Ellen hadn't known her. She had met Chris before, my son-

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Guess-Hanson: -but not my daughter.

Miner: What does your daughter do in Chicago?

Guess-Hanson: She works- well, she used to work for PricewaterhouseCoopers. She's in marketing, and now she works for Performance Trust. She has an accounting job, and enjoys that a lot.

Miner: Congratulations. [laughs]

Guess-Hanson: Yeah, having jobs.

Miner: I was just wondering if they had a connection, you know, through language or the arts or something like that.

Guess-Hanson: Oh, probably, 'cause we did- we did go to some things together.

Miner: She did the Chicago tour- tourist thing with the self- with a- with a local daughter.
[laughs]

Guess-Hanson: Yeah.

Miner: That's wonderful. So are you a collector of anything yourself?

Guess-Hanson: Well, I collected a few folk musical instruments at one point, but not, you know- I don't- I don't have the space. [laughs]

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Guess-Hanson: And if you're a collector, you've got to have space for things.

Miner: Oh, that's true.

Guess-Hanson: I don't quite fit that, not like Minor was.

Miner: Do you think you can- one of the things I was curious about is if there is a connection between the kinds of personalities that become collectors or have such wide-ranging interests and a place like Illinois Wesleyan, and what sort of place there is- I don't know, in their- in their frame of the world, or their worldview, or their way of thinking?

Guess-Hanson: I think- I think with- with Minor, it's an extremely broad worldview. He was well-traveled, and I remember Ellen talking about they'd go to London. Well, he's in the bookshops looking for things. And it's just this constant activity. "Oh, what could I go look for?" and sense of discovery. I think that- I think of something Minor dearly loved and it's like, "Oh, guess what I found!" You know, nobody's seen the light of, you know, this whatever book hasn't seen the light of day for years and years and years...[laughs]...and all of a sudden there it was. And he knew the value of it. To me that was the impressive part 'cause other people can look at something and it's like "I don't know what that is. I don't know what that's worth."

Miner: And when you say he knew the value, you mean in a- in a monetary sense?

Guess-Hanson: Oh, oh I would say even in the- the-

Miner: In all senses?

Guess-Hanson: Yeah. More the- the humanities sense of where does this fit.

Miner: Yeah.

Guess-Hanson: And I'm sure that he got a lot of bargains 'cause he might have known the monetary value and he could sort of talk somebody out- "Oh no, it's not worth that." So I think he was- he was a good, what do you call it, negotiator-

Miner: Uh-huh.

Guess-Hanson: -that he could handle that.

Miner: What do you think that kind of a person does for a place like Illinois Wesleyan? You had- you've been in town since you graduated?

Guess-Hanson: I was away for-

Miner: You were away for a little while?

Guess-Hanson: -ten, ten, twelve years and I came back.

Miner: How do you think Wesleyan changed or- or did it change under Minor? You mentioned the Shirk Center.

Guess-Hanson: Right, well I think his- the fact that he attended the activities- and I know the other presidents have- have done that. Dick Wilson was one. I would always see him at everything.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Guess-Hanson: And I'm sure the new President Jensen will. I've seen him a couple times even before he started. But I think the presidents know they need to be present. The students need to see them. They need to be in- and they need to be in the community as well. And you know, I

think Miner had the- the- you know, the- what is it, it's not really absent-minded professor but that really fit him. And I think a lot of people really enjoyed that. Now, maybe it's not a strong, you know, financially to backing. Yes, he could get supporters, but Dick Wilson coming in as a business person, that's something that was needed.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Guess-Hanson: And we've had different presidents who were that way. When I was a student here, it was Berthoff who was the president, and you know, just loved hearing about the bees. That was- biology was his area.

Miner: Oh!

Guess-Hanson: And so you got to know the direction the people had come from. But when you move from your area of expertise into administration, that's a whole different ball game.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Guess-Hanson: So I- I- I just felt like you know, Miner was just around a lot.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Guess-Hanson: And I'm- I'm thinking he was always talking with the students on campus. Seeing him walk- he liked to walk. [Miner laughs] You know, he'd- he'd- he'd- be around. So to me that was- that was a good feeling about the- the campus. And I think I enjoyed being around here more because he was there.

Miner: Hmm. That's great. Yeah, and that's exactly what I'm, you know, trying to put my finger on. Maybe I just can't. Maybe- maybe it's the wrong thing to think about doing is trying to identify how that affected people. How his presence did- what it sounds like you're saying is sort of- I mean, presence is part of what you've seen in several presidents...[laughs]...to put it that way.

Guess-Hanson: Sure.

Miner: But the- the sort of energy and-

Guess-Hanson: Excitement.

Miner: -and excitement.

Guess-Hanson: You just- he was always up.

Miner: Okay.

Guess-Hanson: I'm sure that he had downtime, but most of the time I saw him, he was really up. But I don't know if that's you go really really high and then you go really really low, I don't know if it was that, but genuine excitement about things.

Miner: That's great.

Guess-Hanson: I- I value that.

Miner: That's great. Yeah, as the sort of intangible thing, that does have an influence on people I guess. That's great. So what else should we know about Minor or your involvement with him or Illinois Wesleyan in general, I mean?

Guess-Hanson: That probably covers a bunch of it.

Miner: Okay. How- what is the biggest change you've seen on campus since you've seen it since you've graduated?

Guess-Hanson: It doesn't- the look-

Miner: The look.

Guess-Hanson: -on campus, the buildings. I remember Buck Hall was the library when I was here. I was an art major. We had a studio- it was like the carriage house. All that change when the new- the art building that's- that's all since I was there. Fred Brian was my...one of my professors. And it used to be Blackstock hall and we were- the printmaking area was in the basement of that, which, you know, it's used for something else now. And then our slides- where they showed slides for our art history programs, you know, it's like all of sudden when you've got a whole building instead of several different places you had to move around to.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Guess-Hanson: And then I can't remember what- there was some building we actually had studios in- I- I'm sure it's long gone.

Miner: Hmm.

Guess-Hanson: But- but to me- but- but- again we still have Presser Hall, that's kind of gone a little transformation, but that's still there.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Guess-Hanson: But the fact was it having, what is maybe three different libraries you know, and once the Ames Library opened, I mean that is just fantastic.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Guess-Hanson: I just enjoy going over and just looking around at stuff. And that they could display- oh, what's his name? The-

Miner: Powell? Powell pottery?

Guess-Hanson: Yes, Powell's stuff. And and it's like it had been over at the Sheehan library, but I like how it's displayed now. And to have in the Ames Library, they've got that auditorium. I've gone to a lot of activities there. And I've always appreciated- and that's still true of- when things are going on, much more is looking online. Ok, when is this presentation, what's going on, been to so things over in the- in the science building. And when I was here, that's when IAA had just come in and built the buildings, and so, you know, the Fred Young Fieldhouse. I mean, all that has changed-

Miner: Hmm.

Guess-Hanson: -so much.

Miner: Hmm.

Guess-Hanson: You know, they had to close the street, you know, open up- even this had been the swimming pool, in...[Miner laughs]...you know, Memorial Gym. But you had the Memorial Student Center. That's changed some, and once you've had Stevie and Roger Joslyn did that addition that really, you know, changed it. So- so that just physically- the physical plant of the- of the university and it's- it's a lot prettier than it was, to have the campus and to get some of the sculpture. That was fun last year, when they had the one just on campus, and some of them moved out and Stevie was able to keep that one which I thought was really was the family.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Guess-Hanson: That's, you know, just the different art events, and the music events, and the sporting events that are all going on. And I know some people who didn't go here to school but they are rabid basketball fans. [Miner laughs] You know, with Denny Bridges just being there forever and he graduated a few years before I did. And it's- it's- that's kind of neat to have that longevity.

Miner: Yeah. People appreciate that Titans have loyal fans.

Guess-Hanson: Yeah.

Miner: [laughs] That's wonderful.

Guess-Hanson: Yeah.

Miner: Well, you said that you hadn't gone to the auction but you knew about the auction of Minor's collection, right?

Guess-Hanson: Mm-hmm, yes.

Miner: What do you think, knowing the family and knowing him a little bit, what do you think he would have thought about that decision?

Guess-Hanson: I'm not sure that I could say.

Miner: Okay.

Guess-Hanson: I mean, I remember reading about it, you know, that it was happening. But when you've amassed something over so many years-

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Guess-Hanson: -you know, it's kind of like, well, it can't stay. You can't keep it together, then maybe that's the best thing. And I- I don't know if he ever thought of someday, you know kind of saying "Well, this is my retirement."

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Guess-Hanson: "I- I built up- there's more value to what I purchased than- than what it was." I- I would have thought he would have considered that-

Miner: Hmm.

Guess-Hanson: -but I really don't know.

Miner: You never- it never came up in conversation with the family or anything?

Guess-Hanson: No.

Miner: Well, these are delightful stories. Are there any other things we should know about or-

Guess-Hanson: I don't know if I can think of anything else right now.

Miner: If you think of anyone else I should be speaking to, I would love to hear that or if anything else comes to mind later, you can give me a ring.

Guess-Hanson: Okay. Oh sure.

Miner: Thank you so much for your time, I really appreciate it.

Guess-Hanson: You're welcome.