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Rebecca Anderson Matuszak

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Oral History Interview with Rebecca Anderson-Matuszak,
Conducted over Skype, January 27th, 2016

Conducted by Meg Miner, Illinois Wesleyan Archivist

Meg Miner: My name is Meg Miner, and I am the archivist at Illinois Wesleyan University. Today is January 27th, 2016, and...I am here with Rebecca Anderson via Skype who's going to talk to us about Minor Myers today. Rebecca, why don't you go ahead and introduce yourself and we'll get going.

Rebecca Anderson-Matuszak: Sure, I'll be glad to do that. My name is, as you said, Rebecca Anderson. I'm recently married so it's Rebecca Anderson-Matuszak. I graduated from Illinois Wesleyan in 2003 and as a prospective student I believe in 1997- I'm trying to remember what year I first came down to Wesleyan to visit, I was lucky enough to have Minor speak. And my mother and I were each visiting campus, and his speech kind of struck a chord with each of us and neither of us said anything about it and we went about the day and campus tours and so on and so forth. And when we met back in the evening and we were discussing our- our- our thoughts and our- you know, gathering what we noticed about the day, both of us kept coming back to his speech and what he had to say and I feel like that was probably the most pivotal moment in my college selection journey was that speech that Minor gave that day. And then it was very strange. I- I- it was my first time in a university setting, but I had always foreseen that the president of the university was this kind of this figurehead and you never really had any experience, and yet everyone on campus seemed to act like he was a good friend of theirs.

Miner: Uh-huh.

Anderson-Matuszak: You know, people would say, "Oh, we have this problem. Let's call Minor." And- and a number of times we did contact him and he would come in right away and fix the situation when I'm sure we should have contacted many other people first. And I actually had an interaction with him right before his death. I was one of the last students to meet with him before his diagnosis and- and then subsequent death. And that was a really touching experience as well because he kept coughing and coughing and then here it came out what was going on afterwards with his lung cancer. And it was a very- it kind of shook us that here we were, and then two weeks later to have this person that had been such a part of our life there as students gone.

Miner: Hmm.

And I think the most telling thing is- is that now how ever many years later, we still, all of us that have graduated, casually talk about Minor and what a strange thing. I think we talk about him more than any of our professors.

Miner: Interesting. Well, I- why don't you tell me a little bit about what you spoke to him about and- and you said that was- what was your- was it- were you in Student Senate? What was your capacity or reason that you were speaking with him?

Anderson-Matuszak: You know, I don't even remember the exact specifications. It was a group of students. We were trying- we were trying to get some sort of funding for some job fair. And there- there was some problem with the normal- I- I- seriously don't even remember the details.

Miner: It's okay. Yeah,

Anderson-Matuszak: I just remember that- that it was something we were trying to get funding for and- and we weren't getting the- the campus support that we thought should have gotten from the- the faculty that was supposed to be taking care of it-

Miner: Hmm.

Anderson-Matuszak: And- and he was involved in so many things that it was just so commonplace to say, "Hey, let's just bring it up with Minor." And- and what we didn't realize at the time was here we went and we met with him I think kind of as a sounding board of "This is the problem we're having, who should we go- what should we do? We don't know what to do." And actually, that kind of got the ball rolling and actually a number of people got in trouble for it. [Miner laughs] So we- we didn't really- we didn't really think it through at the time. We just- we were like, "We want to talk to him about this situation." And he, you know, scheduled a meeting with us and sat down with us and discussed our concerns and- and said he would look into it and see what he could do about it and I think it was the next day actually that he, you know, left his position there at the school and then, you know, because of his health, and the- and the situation actually still continued.

Miner: Hmm.

Anderson-Matuszak: It was dealt with, even though he wasn't there, so he did get the ball rolling on that. I don't even remember how it turned out. I don't remember if we cut our funding. [Miner laughs] We were so stunned by his death that- that I don't honestly-

Miner: Yeah.

Anderson-Matuszak: -remember the other part of it.

Miner: Yeah, other things sort of took a back seat after that. Well, that is phenomenal. But you said-

Anderson-Matuszak: Mm-hmm.

Miner: -that it didn't sound like it was unique- a unique experience, that that was something that you just thought, "Oh yeah, sure. We can do that. We can go and talk to the president."

Anderson-Matuszak: Yes.

Miner: Hmm. Wow.

Anderson-Matuszak: Yes, exactly.

Miner: That's great.

Anderson-Matuszak: There was- there was a group. I'm sure- I'm sure you'll hear about this from other students, but there was a group- there were new situations when new dorms were being built with smoke alarm issues in the middle of the night and in blizzards and snow and sleet, and students would get stuck out. And I remember a group of friends that I made that the year before I became friends with them they were stranded out in the cold while waiting for yet another fire truck to come. And this situation was not being dealt with and nobody on campus was getting them into warmth and they picked up one of the campus security phones and they somehow managed to get connected with Minor and called him and he came out in his bathrobe...[Miner laughs]...and made sure all of the students got into the student center and got warm in the middle of the night. I think it was two in the morning. And that was just- everyone just said, "Oh, we'll just call Minor. He'll take care of it."

Miner: [laughs] Oh my gosh!

Anderson-Matuszak: And it was not until I graduated and had more of an understanding of the real world that I can see how unusual that was that- that was not a normal situation on a campus. But that was the consideration then.

Miner: Oh my gosh. Do you think that was early in your time at Wesleyan or a little later in your time there? I was trying to think of who the Dean of Students would have been.

Anderson-Matuszak: The- the- I believe...[both laugh]...and- and I actually had a number of dealings with with- oh, the dean, I trying to think of what his name was- was something else. And- and he would be frustrated because we would all go to Minor first and he would say, “You’re supposed to come to me with your situations!” [both laugh] But I feel that the speech that Minor gave- I’m sure he gave it year after year, was- was about multi-talented individuals. And graduating high school and not knowing what direction I wanted to go because I excelled in so many different areas and you took an aptitude and it would say, “Oh, you should be an engineer, an architect, an artist, and a farmer.” [Miner laughs] And you didn’t have any clue what direction to go. And every university I went to would say you need to- you need to pick one thing and we can explain it to you. And here I show up on this campus and have this person get up and speak and say not only do I understand this concept, but it felt like he was specifically speaking to you and saying I understand you. I understand that because you have this talent, this happened. And he spoke about all of the books he read and- and- and would draw so many different references that made you feel like you were sitting down and having a conversation with one on one with- almost like a doctor knew- they understood your brain.

Miner: Huh.

Anderson-Matuszak: You know, that he knew what was going on. And so I think all of us after getting kind of that- any time you spoke to him, having that connection, then you sort felt like, “Okay, this guy understands me so I’m going to go to him first rather than this person that I should have gone to.”

Miner: That’s really interesting. So this was something where a group of prospective students and their parents gathered? Is that right?

Anderson-Matuszak: Yes. I believe it was a- I’m trying to think of what it was called. I worked in admissions and I can’t think- like a recruitment day where they would have all the students come and visit the campus and go to different speeches and different presentations and you could tour the classrooms and kind of get a feel for the campus. And my mother and I came together that day.

Miner: Hmm. That’s great. So you said that it had an influence on the course of your life. You want to talk a little bit about that- a little more about that?

Anderson-Matuszak: Sure. Growing up, I was always put in gifted programs for, you know, various reasons, IQ, aptitude, different things like that. But I never felt like within any program that I had that sense of this is what I’m called to do for the rest of my life.

Miner: Hmm.

Anderson-Matuszak: And there would be spaces in my life where I would think, “Oh, this is what I want to do or maybe I want to do this.” And then the tides would change and my mood would change as- as happens at that age. And yet coming upon graduating from high school, you know, they had been preparing us, you know, taking these aptitude tests and you were doing internships and going after all these places and yet I just couldn’t seem to commit to one course because I felt like it was cutting off a part of my life, you know. If I pursued art, then like I was losing out on the science part of my brain and if I pursued, you know, math then so on and so forth. And at that age, I felt like everyone wanted to pigeonhole you into, you know, you’re going to be a doctor, you’re going to be a lawyer, you’re going to be this. And he was the first person that actually said each of those strengths that you have balances out and makes your other strengths greater. And, you know, have science background as well as an artist, you’re bringing your science in. And if you’re, you know, a musician and a physicist, your physics is going to make you a greater musician. And you know, it was the first time someone had explained to me the concept of that completeness, of the fact that each of your interests and hobbies and your aptitudes and- and every part of what makes you can make you stronger in- in the path that you take. And- and I think that going to a school where everyone there felt the same way of yes, I can be a physics and music theater double major, or I could be a, you know, an art and a psychology ma- double major and to have the sense that you had a group of people that felt the same way that you did, and you know, we don’t know where we’re going to go and we don’t know where we’re going to end up, but we know as long as we learn more about these different areas, it’ll make us greater at wherever we end up. And I feel like the combination of being given the awareness of myself and being kind of given permission to- to look at that as a strength as opposed to a weakness I think that I had been told the “jack of all trades, master of none.” [Miner laughs] And suddenly to be able to realize “Well, if you’re a jack of all trades you’re going to be a better master in one of those areas,” the theory is. And- and the fact of here was this very, very accomplished, very, very intelligent man saying, “Hey, I have been researching this for years, and all of my research points to every single one of these geniuses in their field having pursued another- their right brain, left brain.” And it kind of gave me that security to be able to study all of the different things I wanted to study and to be able to look at something that seems completely isolated. You know, a math course, you’re not thinking of where that’s going to draw in and then figuring out in my theatre class how that applies to what we’re learning today.

Miner: Hmm.

Anderson-Matuszak: And that gave me a different kind of confidence in myself. It also gave me a group of people that I probably wouldn’t have- maybe I would have ended up with to- to do life with ‘cause you stay friends with people after college. And I feel like it is also throughout my career continued to give me a different understanding of my sense of self, of the fact that every single aspect of learning I’m doing is strengthening another part of me.

Miner: Hmm. That's a really great observation. What is- what is your career, if I can ask?

Anderson-Matuszak: I'm a senior sales director with Mary Kay Cosmetics.

Miner: Fantastic. Alright.

Anderson-Matuszak: And I graduated- I graduated with a BFA in Theatrical Design and I believe that as I was graduating they were changing the courses of the programs that I actually did get a theatrical design degree. [Miner laughs] I planned on having a BA but I had too many credits. All of a sudden, at graduation they said "You have too many credits to be a BA," so I suddenly had to cram things in to finish my BFA. And I had had a double minor in...I don't even remember what it was called now. It was a Spanish minor and Women's Studies. And at the end I think I had to lose both of those as minors and just get my BFA because of the course- the way that it worked.

Miner: Hmm.

Anderson-Matuszak: That it- I mean, it didn't matter. I still was included in those departments for- for having been in them for those years.

Miner: Right.

Anderson-Matuszak: And worked in the theatrical world for about four years before I left to pursue other things.

Miner: That's great. And you said you are keeping in touch with some of your classmates. You find- you find yourselves reminiscing about Minor and these same kinds of effects on your life?

Anderson-Matuszak: Yeah.

Miner: So you said-

Anderson-Matuszak: Yeah, we do. The thing that I've- I'm sorry.

Miner: No, go ahead. Go ahead.

Anderson-Matuszak: I just was saying when they put the statue up in front of the library of Minor, that's become the thing that now each of us as we go back to campus, you have to take your picture with Minor and you tag it on Facebook. And so I see as each-

Miner: Hmm.

Anderson-Matuszak: -as each of us have traveled to campus that you have to get your picture taken with Minor, so-

Miner: Oh fun! Somebody tried to get a tradition started of decorating Minor seasonally or-

Anderson-Matuszak: Mmm.

Miner: -or for different events on campus and, yeah. You mentioned that in the talk that Minor gave that he talked about his research. Did- is- is that related to what you said in the online comment that you left about his reading and studying?

Anderson-Matuszak: Yes. He- he specifically referenced many different books and research papers and things that he had read. We were given the impression that he was writing a book about the multi-talented individual and that this was a course of study that he was taking on. And so he was- he gave a lot of information about what he had learned and talking about studying Da Vinci and studying Mozart, and all these different- these different geniuses in their field that he was studying them and learning more about them that you only hear about maybe their music or their painting, or you know, somebody's dance or their- he even talked about athletes, you know. And yet then when you study more about them you find that, you know, as a child maybe that football player actually excelled at the piano and continued to play piano throughout his career. And he- he referenced all of that a number of times in his speech.

Miner: Hmm. Yeah, I don't know that he ever finished that. But I have heard that that was a really interest of his, so that's- that's really interesting to hear then how his sharing of his- his research affected you and your- and your colleagues. What do you think- and- and this is I think a little bit- a little bit of a different direction, but I'm wondering if there's any observation you could make or connection you could make between what effect he might have had at Illinois Wesleyan as a whole.

Anderson-Matuszak: Oh yes. I can definitely comment on that. I'm assuming you're familiar with his- his famed quote at the end of commencement every year?

Miner: Yes.

Anderson-Matuszak: The "go forth and do well but more importantly go forth and do good?" I remember each of us- each of us were so devastated by his loss, and it struck us in such an odd way. I mean, I remember each of us discussing, you know, here's this person that you didn't have a daily interaction with, that maybe you had spoken to on a handful of occasions, and yet

for each of us it felt like this huge loss that- that the world was losing this as well as personally. And I remember it was- it was not long after he passed away that all of sudden we started seeing that we started seeing that quote appearing on t-shirts and mugs being attributed to him- to him. And each of us would forward that on, you know, different students in an email. “Oh my gosh, did you see? You can get the t-shirt now!” or you could get this or that. And I think it speaks a lot to the fact that there was quote that he could use and yet that that quote is now available. I’ve seen it worldwide, this quote on things, always attributed to him.

Miner: Hmm.

Anderson-Matuszak: And- and it’s people that have never known him, never met him in any capacity, and yet I- I have run into colleagues now professionally that have used that quote. And I say, you know, “I know the man who spoke that.” And they’re like, “Oh, really?” I mean, it’s almost like celebrity sighting kind of thing.

Miner: That’s fantastic.

Anderson-Matuszak: But I feel like that’s just an example of him, of the fact that he could- he could take one thing and- and sum it up like that.

Miner: Hmm.

Anderson-Matuszak: And- and that is what his wish was. I mean, I was trying to think when you said you wanted to talk, I was trying to think about what made him so unique that gave us such a lasting impression. And I feel like he- he was always learning and so in a conversation he came across as such a great listener. Not necessarily that he was listening to what you were saying, but because he wanted to hear what you were saying, because it was going to teach him something.

Miner: Hmm.

Anderson-Matuszak: And so when you got the occasion to listen to him speak, it was so interesting because you suddenly got to sit back and listen to everything he learned throughout all of his years taking in all of that. And I feel like you were more invested if you had spoken directly with him because you knew what- he was a very intense listener and I feel like that intensity you kind of wanted to listen even more, like, “Oh, what did he- what- what has he learned from everyone?”

Miner: Hmm. Well, that’s a really...really great way to put it. Are- are there other things that you think we should know about Minor or comments that you’d like to share?

Anderson-Matuszak: I'm trying to think. I know that I- I know that I was in President's house with him at one point in time, but I don't remember the context in the slightest. [laughs] And I remember- I remember the discussion of- of his books and how many he had and- and his wife making the comment of, you know, "These books." But I- it's so hard, you know, thinking back to these certain details that you just-

Miner: Yeah.

Anderson-Matuszak: -don't remember later on. You know, the lasting impressions are really just those things that he said that struck that chord that then changed each of us-

Miner: Sure.

Anderson-Matuszak: -and the fact that we all felt, "Yeah, this is a person you can call at two in the morning when the fire alarm won't stop going off," and things like that.

Miner: Yeah. That's a-

Anderson-Matuszak: And when I got your email that that you were- that you were doing this, I actually contacted a number of my friends from Wesleyan and said, "Oh, you guys! Somebody's studying Minor, I'm so excited!" because we each had looked so forward to eventually a book coming from him and so it's that- that didn't come to fruition or at least not that anyone's found. And so I think any research into- into him is- is fascinating just because he himself was just such a fascinating person.

Miner: Oh, I'm glad to hear you say that. I'm hopeful to be able to put this together in a way that people can benefit from and certainly we'll share it widely...[laughs]...when that happens, so-

Anderson-Matuszak: Yes.

Miner: When you were in his house though, did he- was it him- I know you don't remember the specific context of it, but was it him showing you things or you were there for something else and just the conversation turned to books?

Anderson-Matuszak: We were there for something else, and I- I- I've been trying to remember what it was. I'm trying to remember if it was, if it was that I was part of an organization that was going there for something or it was the fact that I was taking a number of decor classes and perhaps we were just looking at the architecture of the house, which is a distinct possibility. I don't remember that. I just remember thinking at the time he always had his crazy and his glasses askew and his arms full of books and usually half of a backpack full...[Miner laughs]...and half

his shoulder- he was- he was the stereotypical disheveled professor wandering around campus. And then to see him in that setting, in that house where it's such a formal house, I'm just- I'm struck with that memory still of having that very, very formal, beautifully ornate house and there he was and I thought, "Oh, this is not this not to scene that you would expect him," you know, just- it felt amiss.

Miner: Sure. Oh, that's great. Well, yeah, a study in contrast I think is one way to sum- to sum it all up. Did you have-

Anderson-Matuszak: Yes.

Miner: -any awareness-

Anderson-Matuszak: Yes.

Miner: -of...after he passed, of- of the university acquiring any of his collections? I'm sure that was probably a really busy time in your life too, right after graduation.

Anderson-Matuszak: No, I don't remember. I- I moved out to New Mexico the day of graduation and I was just pretty- I had no internet access. I was- I was out- out working in the mountains there. And I pretty much lost touch and the only reason that I had any information was because that my sister was still a student there. I mean, it wasn't until, you know, we all got more active with the website and, you know, going back for alumni events and things that we started to be more aware of what was going on.

Miner: Sure. Well, okay. Well- well, I really appreciate you telling me your colleagues about this project and I'm- I'm going to be working on it for the next couple months and you know, even after that. I still get to be the archivist, so I'm always, you know, willing to take more information and- and make it available for people in the future. But I really appreciate your time today, so thank you so much.

Anderson-Matuszak: Yeah.

Miner: Have a great day, Rebecca.

Anderson-Matuszak: Thanks, and good luck!

Miner: Thank you. Buh-bye.