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Oral History Interview with Meghan Murphy-Lee,
Conducted over Skype, January 23rd, 2016

Conducted by Meg Miner, Illinois Wesleyan Archivist

Meg Miner: Good morning. My name is Meg Miner and I am the archivist at Illinois Wesleyan, and this morning I am on a Skype conversation with- with an alum of our institution. Today is Saturday, January 23rd and Meghan, please introduce yourself and state how you're affiliated with Wesleyan and Minor.

Meghan Murphy-Lee: Okay, my name is Meghan Murphy-Lee. I went to Illinois Wesleyan starting in the fall of 1989 and I graduated in the spring of 1993. And I'm affiliated with Minor mostly through my role as a student. I was present when he was inaugurated, I guess is what the word they would call, as president in 1989 I believe it was.

Miner: Okay. And what do you know about-

Murphy-Lee: And I was- I worked most of my time at Illinois Wesleyan through the senator and a vice president.

Miner: So student senate, you have a lot of contacts.

Murphy-Lee: No?

Miner: Can you hear me? Can you hear me?

Murphy-Lee: I'm sorry, yeah. I missed part of that.

Miner: I said so as a student senate-

Murphy-Lee: No, yeah I had-

Miner: Oh, go ahead. We'll get the hang of this time delay.

Murphy-Lee: Yeah, I had quite a bit of contact.

Miner: So tell us something about that.

Murphy-Lee: Yeah, it was in student senate that I had quite a bit of contact with Minor Myers. So- especially as vice president so because I went to the board of trustee meetings for the year

that I was there, and I worked- you know, met Minor Myers and talked to him there. I also knew a lot of him because he- I was a Russian major when I was there, a contract major. And they didn't have that major then, so I worked a lot with the provost Horowitz and Minor Myers on getting it all set up. And he and along with Dr. Balina helped me out a lot in organizing my classwork and things like that. So I think he took a bit of an interest in me because of the- my- because I wanted to do something a little different.

Miner: Okay.

Murphy-Lee: So he's out- yeah, he was always very willing to meet to talk to me about, you know, about student senate things and also just about my major and interests.

Miner: That's great. So what did you know of him or did you know anything of him as a collector? Part of my project is focused on trying to understand how a person with as many varied interests and collecting interests in particular would have influenced people at Illinois Wesleyan and the institution as a whole. Do you have some contribution for that?

Murphy-Lee: Well, unfortunately I didn't know about him much as a collector. I do remember him as being a- a scholar and he was interested in a lot of different things and he- every time I talked to him seemed to know a lot about whatever we were talking about, if it was current events or politics or religion. And so that's one thing I was impressed with him about and kind of for me he's the model of what a university president should be because he-

Miner: Be- I'm sorry, I lost you there.

Murphy-Lee: -as a great scholar and a very good leader. But I didn't know much about his collecting.

Miner: Okay. So-

Murphy-Lee: Hello?

Miner: Yeah, I think we got a little bit of delay here. So as a- as someone who was widely knowledgeable, I think that we can infer into that the widely read kind of thing. What kind of- you said that-

Murphy-Lee: Oh yes.

Miner: -you think of that as a model for presidents. What kind of- why is that? Why do you think that's a model for a college president?

Murphy-Lee: Well...I think that it's a model because it kind of shows what everyone should aspire to at the university and I- and I always think that the president as the leader should lead by example and I think that- I think that the fact Minor Myers was such a well-read, inquisitive scholar open to new ideas kind of helped all of us at the university strive to be better academically and more curious intellectually. And I- I- I actually- I- I filled out surveys for the search for the new president, and I did tell them that I thought they should hire someone more like Minor Myers in the future-

Miner: Hmm.

Murphy-Lee: -'cause he being a teacher and being an academic, I think he's better at understanding the university and leading it, you know, in the right direction.

Miner: Sure.

Murphy-Lee: So I think he's- and I've worked at many universities since then, and I've kind of always kind of used kind of Minor Myers as my standard for president. And really not many of them have lived up to his standard in my opinion.

Miner: How 'bout that inquisitive side, the scholar side, has that influenced you in your own life?

Murphy-Lee: I think it has. I mean I- I actually teach here at the university. I teach Russian and folklore, and I think that his inquisitive nature- 'cause it seemed to me that he was always reading something new or studying a new topic, or trying to expand his knowledge base. And I- I think that that has inspired me I guess to look outside of my own area of expertise, to learn more about different things.

Miner: Hmm. Did you come to Wesleyan with the idea that you were going to be a contract major? Is that something you decided afterwards, after you got there?

Murphy-Lee: If- I decided it afterwards. I actually came as an economics major and wanted to go to law school.

Miner: Huh.

Murphy-Lee: But I had to take a foreign language and so that was fall of 1989 and that was the first semester that Dr. Balina was there. And so she started teaching Russian and I- I just kind of took it on a- as a whim. I- I knew I didn't want to take French anymore 'cause I had taken it in

high school and I wanted something different and exotic and I think probably because what was going on in fall of 1989 I was drawn to Russian so-

Miner: Yeah, it was a big year for-

Murphy-Lee: Yeah, I did not plan that.

Miner: Okay, interesting. Well, are there other things that you think we should know about Minor as a person and the work that he did for our campus or you in your life?

Murphy-Lee: Well, I mean, I- I think that it's important to remember him 'cause he was very student-oriented. And he- I remember he would always- he kind of was your stereotypical absent-minded professor so he would be rushing around campus with his hair all messed up with all these books, you know. But he was always very friendly to everyone, would always stop students in the quad area and ask them questions or see how they're doing. I mean, he knew a lot of the students. And you know, and I think that that is really important 'cause he seemed to care about the students a lot, you know, and about their academic progress and what classes they were taking and what not, you know. So I- I think it was he influenced my life and- and seeing he kind of showed me what a president should be like.

Miner: Hmm.

Murphy-Lee: But it rarely is like that. Most presidents are more bureaucrats than they are scholars.

Miner: Yeah. That's interesting, interesting observation. Did you have any contact with him or the university after you graduated as an alum?

Murphy-Lee: Well, I mean, not any with him...particularly. I...I would go back occasionally for reunions. I have been moving around a lot so I haven't lived very close to Illinois Wesleyan. I lived in Kansas, in Arizona, and New York for a while. But I would come back every decade so I- I didn't have any- after I graduated I did not have any direct contact with him. I stayed in touch with Dr. Balina throughout the years but not with him in particular.

Miner: Okay.

Murphy-Lee: Because I can't remember when he stepped down, what year it was he was no longer president.

Miner: Actually he-

Murphy-Lee: But-

Miner: Yeah, he died in office.

Murphy-Lee: Okay.

Miner: He- he was still president when he died, yeah.

Murphy-Lee: Yeah.

Miner: So is it-

Murphy-Lee: Yeah, and it- what year was that?

Miner: That was 2003.

Murphy-Lee: Okay. So yeah, the- probably what I did was I went back for my ten year reunion in 2003. I think I might have run into him. My- my husband and I went to Illinois Wesleyan on a visit during our honeymoon, believe it or not, 'cause we were driving home. And I know we ran into Dr. Balina. I believe we ran into Minor Myers as well.

Miner: Hmm.

Murphy-Lee: And I- and I think that was probably the last time I saw him and I introduced him to my husband. I think he had already been gone by the time that I came back for my reunion.

Miner: Yeah, he would have if it was your ten year, yeah. 'Cause he was- he was gone in that summer, so-

Murphy-Lee: Yeah, that was my ten year.

Miner: Yeah. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Murphy-Lee: Yeah, I think he was a wonderful guy.

Miner: Yeah.

Murphy-Lee: No, I just wanted to say that he- he was wonderful and I- I was sad when he passed and it...things weren't the same with President Wilson. I know he did but the best job he could,

but it's really hard to replace Minor Myers because he was such great personality and such a great scholar, so yeah, I mean, yeah, I do miss him a lot. So I'm glad you're writing this.

Miner: Oh, thank you. Well hopefully- hopefully this will be of use to people in the future too and I really appreciate your help with it.

Murphy-Lee: Oh, no problem! And I'll try to look- try to get those emails for you.

Miner: Fantastic. Thank you so much Meghan. I hope you have a great day up there.

Murphy-Lee: Oh- Oh, you're welcome. You too.

Miner: Thanks, buh-bye.