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Carol Phoenix

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Illinois Wesleyan University

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Oral History Interview with Carol Phoenix

At Homecoming on October 5th, 2018

Carol Phoenix: Hello there. My name is Carol Pedigo Phoenix and I graduated from Illinois Wesleyan in the class of 1967. My major was music education so I hung out at Presser Hall a lot. It was an interesting time. The first year, in the fall, we got news of President Kennedy's assassination and you would've thought the place was gonna fall apart, but we held it together. That was the seminal beginning of our year. As a music education major, I played piano. I played violin, and I sang. I did a lot of all of them. So, a music major has not much free time, so we hang out at Presser Hall a lot. I didn't go through rush until second semester, and then I became a Sigma Alpha Iota, and I was tickled to death. My mother was an SAI. My mother graduated from Illinois Wesleyan with a music education degree in 1934. Her name was Ruth Yenerich. That is not the only reason that I came here. When we did college visits when I was in high school, I just happened to like the ambiance of this campus, and this music building, and the people that were here that I met were extremely friendly. When I got here, I felt like I belonged here, and where have you been all my life. It was a wonderful place. It is a wonderful place. And people are still friendly. And still accommodating. And still willing to listen. And that's what I cherished the most. I grew up in Monmouth, Illinois, and was the first in my family to go to college. My mother having had a degree in music education from Illinois Wesleyan was the proof that I could do the same thing, but more importantly, she also got a master's degree from Illinois Wesleyan in 1936, and that was back in the day when women hardly ever went to college let alone got an advanced degree. Her job was teaching elementary music, junior high music, high school music in Monmouth, Illinois. And she was the vocal music teacher. There was an instrumental teacher, and they were the music department. She was allowed to teach as a married person because my father, Herald Pedigo, was in the Pacific because that was during WWII. I learned all of this, of course, later, but I was so impressed. My mother was the piano teacher in town, the voice teacher in town, the choir director at church. Therefore, I played piano, and accompanied everybody in choir, and for solos, and I played in the orchestra. I sang in the choir at church. We just had music coming out our ears. And so it goes. My sister, Julia Ann Pedigo also graduated from Illinois Wesleyan with a music degree in 1974. She is still teaching. She is currently at the University of Appalachian State at Boone, North Carolina, and is a professor of voice. So we have warm and fuzzy feelings concerning Wesleyan and concerning what happened here what we learned here the beauty of the campus the experiences that we had. When I became a member of SAI, I felt so accepted. It was a beautiful feeling. I had never spent so much time with people with like interests. So, when I got to college, it was the best time of my life. And I always felt of course, that I learned more outside of the classroom than I did in the classroom, but that's not true, I still remember some of the specific things that I learned in the classrooms during the four years that I was here. One of the favorite things of my classmates and I and my sorority sisters and mine was to sing in co-choir and I was thrilled to death to be chosen to sing in co-choir with Dr. David Nott. He wasn't Dr. Nott when he came. He was just Mr. Nott. And choir was an eye-

opening, expanding, thrilling, experience. The tours that we took every spring around different parts of the country unified the group in a way with esprit de corps that only happens with either music groups or team groups, maybe more with music groups than with teams because when you create something together that is much more meaningful than when you create something alone. Culture shock came when I had to stand up on stage and play my recitals at Presser Hall. And I remember thinking it was a beautiful day and it was the custom then to receive flowers from well-wishers for your recital and we put the flowers along the front of the stage, and while I was listening to the piano play the introductions for one of my pieces, I was looking around and my mind was wondering, which it should not have been, my mind was wandering, and I thought you know these flowers, it looks like a funeral, I wonder whose funeral it is oh gosh it's going to be mine if I don't pay attention. So, I had to focus again. And find my place in the music, and that was a little scary at the time, and it helped me learn to concentrate. I got a job teaching after graduation in Davenport, Iowa in the public schools, and I was an elementary and junior high string teacher, so I taught orchestra to kids, and I absolutely loved it, and it didn't take very long before I figured out I needed to learn more. I worked. I had done student teaching in Bloomington. I had good student teachers, but I was not completely prepared for teaching. Richard Hirschman was the education supervisor for music, and he was good enough to come supervise me in the classroom in Davenport the year I started work, and could help me out and answer some questions. I just felt like he had thrown me an intertube to save me, and I was thrilled to pieces. I don't know if the school still does that, if they do follow up visits on their graduates, but that was a lovely thing. I subsequently went to get a master's degree at the University of Iowa. And there I majored not in music education, but in violin performance with a wonderful teacher Leopold La Fosse. And, got associated with American string teachers association, and the international string workshops, and was able to travel to several foreign countries and meet friends and colleagues and famous musicians, and famous pedagogues, and I still have those connections and they're wonderful. One of the things that we had when I was here was a marching band, and so, many of my friends and co-students and sorority mates were all in marching band it was a lot of work but it was a lot of fun. It that was another unifying experience for them. I miss the marching band. I am sorry that they don't have it any more, but I know how much work it is. We like bands though for football games and other kinds of games and pep bands aren't quite the same thing as a band doing a design out on the field its just a difference they are doing today I'm sad to see it go I don't miss the homecoming parade too much. There are so many memories, so many lessons learned, so many people that had an impact on my life. The orchestra music that Mario Mancinelli, who was our orchestra director, taught us was excellent preparation. We did a Brahmd symphony, a Beethoven symphony, and a Mendelssohn symphony. We did operas. We did overtures. We did Spanish music. We did French music. It was thrilling to learn world class music and to really learn it. It was thrilling to have colleagues that were learning vocal techniques. It was thrilling to have colleagues that were learning their instrumental techniques. So many of us were in music education at that time. I think music education has faded a little, and I would like to see that change. Music is part of our

lives. Music is part of everybody's life, and sometimes, we don't know how much part of our life it is, but music education needs to start in elementary school, and it needs to go through school. You can get people to start things when they are in high school, but you can't have an orchestra or a band or a choir very well. You for sure can't have an orchestra unless you start them young and bring them along. So I am thrilled to pieces that Illinois Wesleyan School of Music has been and I hope continues to be excellent training ground. We did not have music theatre that's something that they have added. We still need music education or musical theatre is hardly going to exist. You can't have ballet. You can't have opera without music. And canned music doesn't make it. The live music is what has to be. Interestingly enough, I still live in the quad cities on the Iowa side of the river, and I taught school up there for twenty-five years. I played in Chamber Music Groups up there. I played in the symphony up there, which was known as the Tri-City Symphony, but now it's known as the Quad-City Symphony, not that they got any more cities together, but that they just kept enfolding different cities. Some people want them called the quit cities. Be that as it may, that orchestra is one hundred and five years old, and I am happy to say that this year will be my fiftieth year participating in it, and I am assistant concert master. I don't know how many people are able to follow their profession for fifty years, but being a musician with an instrument has enabled me to do what I love.

There were some memorable people around Presser Hall. There were some memorable students. But because my mother had graduated from Wesleyan she knew some of the people and had stories to tell too. Dwight Drexler was one of her classmates that she looked up to, and as he became a piano professor, and I had him for music classes. It was wonderful. His wife Mickey gave me voice lessons. I learned to sing all my vowels properly from her. I am so pleased that she has established a music scholarship in hers and her husband's name. I was pleased to establish a scholarship in the name of Ruth Yenerich, Carol Pedigo Phoenix, and Julia Pedigo in honor of the women of my family. Now, I am doubly honored to make a scholarship in the name of my husband John F. Phoenix and myself. After I moved and taught for twenty-five years in Davenport, Iowa, I met the gentleman who I married, but I was forty-six years old when I did so, and I had kissed a lot of frogs. Took a long time to find my prince so to speak, and I am glad that I waited. John and I felt that we were matched up... this is going to sound corny...but that we were matched up in heaven. The pastor at church introduced us to one another, and something just clicked. When I learned who I was married to, he was working for John Deere and company. He worked in the industrial manufacturing advertising department. He spoke often of his grandparents and his great grandparents who had lived in Bloomington, Illinois, and Delevan, Wisconsin. I said you have to come to homecoming with me sometime. He said I will do that. In the meantime, he was going through former family papers and things, and gradually it has unfolded that I married the great grandson of Franklin Kelsey Phoenix who owned the Phoenix Nursery in Bloomington, Illinois in the 1850s and 1860s, who it was then run by Franklin's son Fred Stanley, and John remembered helping his grandpa in the greenhouses as a kid. Low and behold when we came back for homecoming Dr. Minor Myers was here and apparently unbenounced to me John had been communicating with Dr. Myers and he had known and I

hadn't that some of this ground on which Illinois Wesleyan sits was some of the Phoenix Nursery ground. Rooted in Phoenix's Nursery, which is a phrase from a book that was written about this subject and this culture several years ago seems to capture the whole thing. I noticed right away the names of the streets: Myrtle, Chestnut, Walnut, Maple, Locust, Phoenix. Names of trees. Then, I found out about the arboretum on campus, and that we are designated as an arboretum because we have such a variety of trees. It was discovered that the ten acres of the nursery were purchased by Illinois Wesleyan Trustees to found the campus. This year we are celebrating one hundred years of homecoming. A couple of years ago we celebrated one hundred fifty years of the school of music. That history was fascinating to learn about too, but I get shivers every time I walk on this campus and think that my husband's grandfather and great grandfather both were here nurturing living things. The history of the nursery is still being compiled. A lot of it is at the Mclean County historical society in Bloomington. A lot of it is in Wisconsin because great grandpa settled in Delevan because his family brought him from New York and they founded a nursery. It was supposed to be the biggest nursery in the Midwest, and by all records and there are quite a few records, it was splendid. It propagated trees and bushes and fruits and berries all over the Midwest. It helped propagate this prairie. It helped shade our wonderful campus. It means so much to be walking around and seeing these places that have been here before. Dr. Myers got thrilled to pieces when he met us and I began to understand the connections.

I love IWU for what it has meant to me both for education in the practical sense, but in the spiritual sense it has been an amazing place. For ten years, after I graduated I came back as a camp counselor for the Illinois Wesleyan summer music camp. It was organized by Morris Willis, and held out at the Lake Bloomington Methodist church campgrounds. It helped put the music school on the map. Most of the kids who came said how did you find out about Illinois Wesleyan well I was at camp in fact I went to camp that's one of the ways I learned about the Wesleyan music program. That was a wonderful culture. Here it is fifty years hence and the lifelong friendships that the people that worked with Morris Willis out at the camp still get together once a year or more to reminisce and share news and share information and reflect on what we learned and who we learned it from and it was great to say do you remember when and the person says yes I do. Do you remember when?

Those kinds of memories and those kind of connections I assume are the reason you are doing this oral history. I think it's fabulous because people talking to people and people reaching out to other people is how we connect and keep our humanity. That's something very special that Wesleyan has they don't lose their students in a maze of numbers people still keep their personalities and of course when we were students in the dorm or in a house or in Presser and late at night you sit up with your friends and you solve all the problems of the world. I don't know why these days the world is so messed up. But I guess there's enough that we can keep every generation going.

Wesleyan has impacted my life ever since. I frequently come back for homecoming, although not always. I am thrilled with the donor dinner sponsorship dinner. That is a very nice custom. I am tickled pink that the SAIs have a homecoming brunch every Saturday that is a great way to connect with the sisters and the music that we all shared the music that brought us all together the music that unites the world together one of my favorite memories not so much of Wesleyan but of afterward was when I studied abroad, and I was walking down a street late in the evening in Venice, Italy along a canal and through an open window I heard someone practicing a violin with the Krutzer exercise that every violinist has to learn. It was also the one that Jack Benny who was a comedian on radio and television then always played and I thought here I am in another continent and we studied the same thing. That was really cool. It's still being done today. Wesleyan is still making these connections. And I think that's so important. Bravo to Illinois Wesleyan. Thank you very much for the opportunity to visit.

I'd like to add an anecdote because I played a violin and I played the piano and I sang. I was a busy girl at Presser Hall. The first year I minored in piano. The second year I minored in voice. The third year I played oboe. I had played oboe in high school for two years. Not very well but I could read music I could count, and the band director needed a second oboe player and so he gave me a horn and a reed and a music book and said here ya go kid. Well, I attempted to learn a little bit more about oboe and since I was in music education I thought that would hold me in good stead I had to take instrumental methods classes: trumpet, trombone, clarinet, percussion, lower strings. That was eye-opening and interesting. But one of the most fun things I did was at the time of semester tests or semester juries or semester exams. Whatever we call them now. The best oboist in the school, during my time here, was a Phi Mu Alpha named Joe Seidel. Since musicians seem to be multitalented and do many things everyone thought that it would be a real hoot if we went in together, Joe and I so I had Joe accompany me for my exams and I thought the committee was going to fall on the floor laughing. I didn't do very well because I didn't have enough embouchure to last through the whole song, but I passed because everyone got such a big kick out of it. That's a little irony there and I don't know what happened to Joe Seidel, but he married a classmate and a housemate of mine, Charlene Smith and I think they lived happily ever after. I was invited to be a bridesmaid in their wedding in Wisconsin several years after graduation and I haven't talked to them since. So many special things. So many lovely memories of singing. So many lovely memories of operas. So many lovely memories of being on stage of playing concerts. Classrooms, times in the dugout, times in the basement of Presser; things were different then there was no elevator in Presser. I miss being able to look down three flights of stairs to see who was in the basement, but they call that progress. What a lovely idea this is to record some oral histories. I hope that this doesn't just stay in the archives but is of use for information and identification and improvement in some way to the university. Thank you for the opportunity to do it.