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## Pamela Buchanan Muirhead

Pamela Buchanan Muirhead '68  
*Illinois Wesleyan University*

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Oral History Interview with Pamela Buchanan Muirhead '68

Date unspecified (2000), in IWU's Communication Office.

Conducted by Bob Aaron, Communications Director

Bob Aaron: Hey Pam we're going to talk for a bit about your experiences at Illinois Wesleyan this afternoon and I'd like to start off by asking you, what is it that you like about teaching at Illinois Wesleyan?

Pamela Buchanan Muirhead: I love teaching at Illinois Wesleyan. I—I guess I have to be frank, although there've been moments when I claim that I have a lot to complain about, but I really don't. I love this place. Um, I love, I love students that enjoy being a part of the community and that are encouraged um, to think of this as an opportunity to learn for itself. It's a liberal arts college and students sometimes have to be persuaded that it's not just the goal that you're working towards but the process of getting there and I enjoy it where there's a sort of meeting of the spirit between students and faculty, the liberal arts spirit I guess. That's why—that's why I like it here so much.

Aaron: Speaking professionally, what brought you to Illinois Wesleyan and why have you remained here over the years?

Muirhead: The story of how I came to Illinois Wesleyan is not one of those I guess you would hold up as an example of guided professional history. I think in some ways I was—I was fated to be here, but I had to be guided here. I graduated in 1968, not too long after Martin Luther King's death. I taught high school for a year during season of race riots and was pretty traumatized by that. My husband and I went into the Peace Corps, and we went to Sri Lanka. During the period of the Vietnam War, and I really began to think about what I wanted to do when I came back—and to the States. So I started corresponding with one of my professor's here, Robert Burda, who had been nudging me in the direction, "You know you really want to teach how about teaching at Illinois Wesleyan." I thought, I've always wanted to be a high school teacher. I don't know if I could be a college teacher and Bob Burda kept saying, "You know, get that—get a graduate degree." So I headed off to graduate school when I got back from—from Peace Corps and I came to Illinois Wesleyan with offers from other places and came here for, I think were probably good reasons at that particular time, in 1972. One of which was, when I was recruited, I was told, "We would value any teaching that you want to do in African-American literature but that's now why you're here. You're not here because you're black, and you're not here just to be black," and it seemed a sort of haven that I could be lots of things. I could have the possibility for developing my teaching and following my literary interests without feeling that I had been put in a box and so that was one of the reasons for coming here, and the other was, this was home. I grew up in Chicago but this campus, I think was imprinted on me and if I was going to start a—what at least attempt to be a college professor, this seemed to be the most congenial place intellectually and emotionally to do that.

[Muirhead laughing]

Aaron: Congenial

Muirhead: Say that again.

[Everyone laughing]

Aaron: Press the rewind again. Now at Illinois Wesleyan, Pam, we have a rather low student/teacher ratio. What are the benefits of a close relationships that the teachers and students have here at Illinois Wesleyan?

Muirhead: The low student/teacher ratio is a challenge I think to faculty members. Some people think that it makes it easier to teach because you don't have as many—as many students. I think it's a challenge to connect with your students where you find them intellectually and emotionally and they get to see you close up and I hope for the students that's a benefit. So they know us intimately and we know them intimately, and I think ultimately we all do better that way. It's not merely a matter of putting information out there on the table. If we are really the liberal arts college we like to think we are, we want to suggest that there's an engagement with the mind, with ideas and students and faculty when we're in small groups, I think that engagement is fairly honest. You know it's right out there. So I like, I don't like large groups. It's information and its performance with large groups, and I think in smaller groups we learn together.

Aaron: In today's day and age, why do you think it's important for students to have a liberal arts education?

Muirhead: Oh, a liberal arts education is for now and I think for a long time into the future, the way to live in a world that changes and to live within that world with a degree of integrity. I think a liberal arts education gives you a kind of humility. You value, you value your stupidity. [laughs] If that doesn't sound too odd. You know that it's good to ask questions. You know that it's honest to search for answers. Your—you respect ambiguity, in a way. A liberal arts education, I hope it's not quite wrong to say, but it's a preparation for being comfortable with uncertainty. People who have a liberal arts education can even enjoy the fact that things don't stay the same. There's a kind of security in the insecurity if you have a liberal arts education. I certainly have—have valued mine. There are things that my growing up, in my own reading and thinking, would never have taught me. I'd have never come into contact with them, and I think I've seen a larger world because of my liberal arts education.

Aaron: I like to follow up that question with this, what do students take with them from a liberal arts university that they can't get at other types of universities?

Muirhead: Well I think there are many things that a university would offer that are available at any university, but I think at a larger university, at a place that's not a liberal arts college, you might stumble upon it by accident. It isn't necessarily the mission, the central mission of that—of that university. I think a liberal arts college like Illinois Wesleyan assumes that you will go out in the world and that you would be prepared to learn, that you will have, that you will be a reader, one would hope, someone who is engaged in language, that you will be receptive to ideas, and you will know how to question yourself in relationship to those ideas and I think in that way it's preparation for the world.

Aaron: Great. I think you've been, correct me if I'm wrong, I think you've been on the faculty since 1972. Tell me about some of your favorite memories of students over those years, since 1972.

Muirhead: Well I've been here since 1972, on the faculty, and it took me awhile, of course, to get used to being a faculty, a faculty member, in many ways. I came with that, I'm not sure that I'm going to be a college teacher. You know this might not be really where I belong and so my becoming a faculty

member is a function very much of the students that I came in contact with, and I—I remember that James Shaw who is now an administrator in the school district administrator, as an undergraduate who reminded me that this place was not comfortable for everyone initially, and I remember James telling me, because we're from a similar place in Chicago, in the Southside of Chicago, and James talked about going home for his first break and came back and told me this story. He said, "You know I got back to Chicago and I—I almost kissed the first wino I saw on the corner," and I had a huge laugh about this because I may have been years away from that corner but emotionally I understood what it meant to—to go someplace else to learn, not only the learning of the books but the learning of being with other people and what the cost was emotionally, and so one of the things I really value James and other students for is the continual reminder to me that learning is something you do with your heart as well. When you come into this community, it's not a matter of simply making the grade and filling the notebook and learning the formula, reading the text on the page, but engaging in a way that helps you grow—grow your spirit and it will change your spirit in a way and I think James helped me understand that, remind me of what I knew, but may have been in danger of forgetting without him.

Aaron: How have students changed? How have they remained the same over the years? Even thinking back to your days as a student here at Illinois Wesleyan.

Muirhead: Well um, students have changed a great deal, something perhaps, in a totally frivolous way. They're a lot taller than they used to be. I think Illinois Wesleyan students have travelled more than they did when I was a student. When I—when I was an undergraduate here there were more students for whom this was the family's first generation to go to college, and it was a huge change. Some of my classmates where the first generation to leave the farm, to go college. Some of my classmates, Bloomington, Illinois was a big city and still live relatively a small town. I think our students in that way are more sophisticated in the ways of the world than we used to be. We had a lot of book knowledge and a lot of curiosity but we hadn't travelled as much so I think that's a huge change. There are times that I think students of my generation read more, but I think in many ways our reading was more circumscribed. It was more limited and directed. If it's true that our students don't read as we did as much in earlier generation, they are quite frankly more widely knowledgeable about current events, about culture in general. There's a sort of liveliness of mind with our students than necessarily would be found with our generation. I'm not sure I really want to admit that. I guess I have to.

Aaron: What attracted you to the field of English, to teaching English and why do you think it's important that students should study English during their undergraduate years?

Muirhead: I like literature. I've always known that I like stories. I was the little kid who read the library, our local branch library, I started out reading everything in the children's, [laughs] the children's section, and at that time you had to have an adult library card. I don't know if that's still true to borrow books from the adult section, and I remember going to the librarian and saying to her, "I finished the other ones," and she looked up, bless her heart, smiled and gave me an adult card when I was about eleven, and I could continue reading at the library. So I had a sense that it's the thing I most passionately loved, love to talk about, love to continue reading, and I think the study of literature is...is important not just because I love it because I think in some way those stories are—are gateways to the larger world, the world of ideas, places emotionally and philosophically, we may not visit or may not yet have visited but we'll come to eventually. I find that students who say, "Well I'm not a reader," do end up being participants in stories, and engaged by stories. I think whether it's poetry or it's theater or plays or the stories in novels that I enjoy so much. I think literature is at the core of the way we express culture, and I

think it's important for students to feel comfortable, to feel it belongs to them no matter what their so-called majors are or lives are like, that literature is part of their cultural heritage.

Aaron: At Illinois Wesleyan is known for the quality of its teaching, what does it take in today's day and age to be an outstanding teacher?

Muirhead: Oh my, I wish I knew what it took to be an outstanding teacher. If there's a formula, I'm—I'm not sure I can articulate it. I do know for the teachers at Illinois Wesleyan University that I have heard students praise, and that I myself have been taught by, they're excellent partly because they don't know it always, partly because they think they can do it better and partly because when they walk away from a lesson or a class, they're usually thinking about the students. I do think at a liberal arts college like ours, an undergraduate college, that the student is at the center and good teaching means putting—putting students at the center of your concern. I don't think it means making students comfortable. We will—we would all find the most mediocre, unriskey place that we could for comfort, but sometimes the greatest comfort or the greatest achievements are on the edge and I think good teachers try to move students away from that place that they find comfortable.

Aaron: Now I'd like to ask you this next question from two perspectives. From your perspective as an alum of the university and your perspective as being a faculty member, from those two perspectives, what does Illinois Wesleyan University mean to you?

Muirhead: While I'm an alumni of Illinois Wesleyan University and a faculty member, I have family members who are alums of Illinois Wesleyan and sometimes I'm not sure that I can separate those two things. I was away from the university for four years before I came back as a faculty member, and I've done most of my graduate work while I was teaching here. So being an alum and a faculty member in many ways are the same thing. What I've enjoyed about it, been privileged to have had the experience, is that my pride in the university, I think is deep from obviously being a student here and one, you always have an affection I think from where you graduated. If you learned and you grew and it was a place that fostered that, even if there were some rough spots, you have a deep affection for it, but I've come to understand and—by being a faculty member here the mechanics, the ideas, the struggle, the constant work that has gone into making this an excellent university, and excellent liberal arts college, on the part of administrators and faculty, so it has been important to me to be a part of something, an endeavor which I sensed as a student, was an excellent one and I know from a faculty—as a faculty member, I know that the dedication of people to the university and the standards for this university are ones that I can be proud of. So it's been an important experience to me.

Aaron: From your perspective, as thinking back to your student years through your years now on the faculty and as an alum, how has Illinois Wesleyan University changed since the sixties?

Muirhead: I think I've seen, not just a change in Illinois Wesleyan, I've seen changes in Illinois Wesleyan. Sometimes by being a faculty member here, you're rooted in cycles. You see too many ups and downs and so through the cycles that I've seen. I think we have grown to imagine more for ourselves. We've changed to the point we're not always looking over our shoulders to see who the competition is or be worried about where we're located in Central Illinois. I think there is a confidence and an energy at the university, maybe, almost a slight sense of arrogance at odd moments you know that we wouldn't exactly admit to. I think we've—we've long thought of ourselves as a regional university, and I think we're beginning to think of ourselves as a national liberal arts college and that's probably one of the largest changes, our confidence in the kind of education that's offered here.

Aaron: Thank you, that's a wrap.