

SCHEDLER HONORS COLLEGE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Whitney ‘Whit’ Barringer Oral History Interview Transcription

Narrator Name: Barringer, Whitney ‘Whit’

Interviewer Name: Horton, Caroline

Date of Interview: 03/14/2022

Location of Interview: Little Rock, Arkansas (Remote Interview - Zoom Recording)

Acronyms:

WB = Whit Barringer (Narrator)

CH = Caroline Horton (Interviewer)

UCA = University of Central Arkansas

TAG = Travel Abroad Grant

TA = Teacher’s Assistant

PA = Pedagogical Assistant

Interview Summary

The following oral history of a recorded interview with Whitney “Whit” Barringer conducted by Caroline Horton on March 14, 2022. This interview is part of the Schedler Honors College Oral History Project where current students and alumni are asked to reflect on their time before, during, and after being in the UCA Honors College.

Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than prose. The following transcript has been reviewed, edited, and approved by the narrator.

CH [00:00:02] This is Caroline Horton with the Schedler Honors College Oral History Project. Today is March 14, 2022. I'm interviewing Whit Barringer, who is at her home office in Little Rock, Arkansas. We will be talking about Whit's experience leading up to, during, and after their time in the Schedler Honors College. Please state your name and age for the recording.

WB [00:00:31] My name is Whitney "Whit" Barringer and I am 35 years old.

CH [00:00:37] What year did you enter the Honors' College

WB [00:00:39] 2005.

CH [00:00:41] What year did you graduate?

WB [00:00:43] 2009.

CH [00:00:45] Okay. What are your pronouns?

WB [00:00:49] She/her.

CH [00:00:52] Where are you from?

WB [00:00:56] I'm originally from Bismarck, which is about an hour south of Little Rock, and it's equidistant between Hot Springs and Arkadelphia.

CH [00:01:10] Did you like growing up there?

WB [00:01:13] Yes. At one point when I was a little bit older, my mom wanted to move and I fought against moving and we ended up staying because I really liked my school. My grandparents were there. I grew up on 40 acres that my grandfather inherited from his father, so it's been in our family now for just about 100 years. I think a little over 100 years. I had like wide open spaces to play in, even though I wasn't much of an outdoors person, it was really pretty out there, really quiet. My grandfather drove me to school every day. I never took the bus until I was like in high school. But yes, there were some charmed aspects to it. I think I really enjoyed it. I was very poor growing up, but my grandfather was a farmer. I always had shelter over my head and I always had food. There was always food. So maybe I didn't experience poverty in exactly the same ways as a lot of other people do without those resources. There is a little layer of privilege there. Even if you're poor, you can grow your own food if you have your own land, you know. I don't think I really ever wanted for anything. My parents and my grandparents, you know, if I wanted something and it was outside of their budget, they would tell me. If I wanted something and they saw the merit in it, they would usually make sacrifices so that I'd be able to do those things. So yes, growing up there felt pretty good, I think.

CH [00:03:22] So you mentioned your family quite a bit in that little section. Would you say that your family's pretty important to you then?

WB [00:03:30] Yes. Really, really important. I kind of split my time between my maternal grandparents and my mother. My mom was a single mom who worked three jobs and then graduated from college and went on to become a special ed teacher. But she always worked at least an hour away from home. So my grandfather kind of took care of me throughout the week. Then my grandmother worked in Little Rock and then Maumelle. She was a home health nurse, so she went to school with a girl who needed constant care and would go to classes with her and take care of her

throughout the day. Because it was so expensive to commute and my grandmother didn't make that much, she actually rented a house, like somebody's garage where she would stay during the week. I would only see her on the weekends. It was my grandfather throughout the week, my mom at night and on the weekends, and my grandmother on the weekends. My grandparents would take me to church on Sundays. Yes, so I would say a lot of who I am is shaped by characteristics that I inherited from my family. They were always incredibly supportive of me. I always felt encouraged, especially when they realized that I was probably going to be pretty smart. They started really pushing me. My grandfather was the kind of guy that he would be like, "Go pick out your story for bedtime." And I would go into my room and I'd have all my little books, and I would pick up like a stack of books, and I'd bring them to him and he'd be like, "You want me to read all of these?" And I'd be like, "Yup." The story about how they knew I could read was that I did that for my grandfather, and he loved to just replace random people with my name in the book to see if I was paying attention. And I said, "Oh, that's not what that says." And he said, "How do you know?" And I said, "Because it says this right here" and I read it off to him. [My family was] very, very warm and supportive and invested in me doing well and I never, ever felt held back. Or, I mean, I probably felt misunderstood. Right? Because they're your parents, they're not going to get it, right? [laughing] I think that I could feel frustrated about that sometimes. But I also absolutely understand how enormous their love and support were for me growing up. My grandparents, my maternal grandparents, are now deceased. My grandmother passed away during the [COVID-19] pandemic, but my mom is still working in schools and I see her fairly often. So, yes, yes, I think the answer to your question is yes, they were very important to me. [laughing]

CH [00:07:17] I loved the explanation. It sounded like reading was one of your hobbies and you mentioned that you know that you weren't necessarily an outdoorsy kid. What were some of your hobbies growing up?

WB [00:07:31] Interesting question. So I did play sports, I played basketball and softball when I was growing up. And, you know, maybe I'm fooling myself, but I'd like to think that— Certain things happened while I was in high school and I didn't play softball my senior year and I feel like I did have the potential to maybe play in college? Softball was my sport. I hated basketball. I hated running. I hated conditioning. But softball was kind of my sport, and I started playing that pretty early on like I was in middle school. My parents tried to get me to play guitar when I was four and I said “No.” I took a few months of lessons and I was like, “No thanks.” Then they put me on the piano when I was five, and I played that probably for about a year. My grandmother played piano and my mom played piano. We were kind of a musical family. My grandfather didn't play anything but like, there was kind of a musical bone in our family, and like my mom had been in choir and things like that. I loved to sing when I was little. I still love to sing in the car, but you know, it was more like church singing back in the day. And yes, I did read a lot. I think a common experience for people in my generation is reading Stephen King when you're in the sixth grade. For some reason, everybody when they're in the sixth grade. It's like, “Yep, started reading the Stephen King and like, blew my mind.” I remember reading *It*. A thousand ninety pages! I remember how big the book was because it was the biggest book I had ever read at that point. There's some really messed up stuff that happens in that book and being like, “Yes, I know what happens!” And like having one other friend in my grade— who also went to the Honors College, his name is Jacob Filipek. He and I are the only two people from our high school [class] to have terminal degrees. So like, I have a Ph.D. and he has an M.D. He's a pediatrician at Children's [Hospital in Little Rock] now. But yes, like he was my other reading friend. And like his mom was cool enough to be like— He would be like, “I stayed up really late reading a book” and she'd be like, “OK, you can sleep until noon and then come to school,” and I'd be like, “What!?” I was on the over there on that hard grind of being like, “Well, I read all night, but I still got to go to school.” [*laughing*] I did have friends that kind of encouraged that... When other people talk about elementary, middle school, or high school, they usually talk about it like it was a nightmare. I never felt that way. I never felt that school was a

nightmare. Occasionally somebody might bully somebody else, but I also remember people standing up to bullies. I remember people changing. It was just like a small school where it wasn't big enough for the cliques to harden. And so I always felt like I could be anywhere I wanted to be. I could be in sports. I was in band. I played alto sax for eight years. I loved to read. Probably my superlative classes were English and history, like, no surprise. Science was my worst, but I like I got out of high school with a 4.0. I think if I can say anything about my school, maybe I could have been challenged more? But I also don't feel like I suffered.

CH [00:12:11]. You were talking about what your main subjects in school were, but what was your dream job growing up?

WB [00:12:22] On my bedroom wall at my grandmother and grandfather's house— [*laughing*] So every Sunday, we would get the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette like the Sunday edition, which was a dollar, and then it was a dollar and a quarter. We got it from the little machine at the gas station next to the church, and they would have twice a year an insert that was [in a magazine] called *Parade*. Twice a year, “Parade” would do a state of the job and be like, “Here is what different people make at their jobs.” I would shop that. It would be like, *What do people make at different jobs? What are different kinds of jobs?* I would write down on this piece of paper that I had on the wall things that I was interested in doing. I remember one of them was like Steven Spielberg, the one year that I was looking at, it made \$400 million in that year and I was like [*mimics writing with hands*] “Director,” and then in parentheses, “\$400 million per year” like that was a starting salary [*laughing*]. I remember a technician being on there, I have no idea what that referred to. I remember getting from a *Reader's Digest*...a joke on one [page] that was like submitted and it was an exchange that had happened in a conversation and it was with a lawyer in Little Rock. Arkansas *never* got mentioned in anything except that the president was from Arkansas. That was usually the only context that Arkansas seemed to come up in, and it just felt like we were always forgotten. Anytime Arkansas

comes up in like a national publication, I would be like, *Ooh!* The joke was something like, “Hey, I was wondering if I could have a minute of your time?” It was like litigating lawyer and he was like, “Well, I charge five hundred dollars an hour and your time starts now” or something like that. I was like, “Ooh, five hundred dollars an hour for a litigating lawyer” on my little list. But always on that list was a professor. I always wanted to be a professor. Now, for what, I didn't know. I just knew that I wanted to be in college and I wanted to be a person who knew things. I wanted to know them so well that they gave me a degree for it [*laughing*]. People would respect me and they would call me “Doctor.” I had like, medical profession stuff on [the list], but I never really felt drawn to that being my way to help other people. That just wasn't going to be my way of doing things. I was like, “I'm going to be a professor in what? I'll figure it out.” Archeologist was also on that list. For a 90s kid who watched Indiana Jones and loved nature documentaries, and also read *Parade* twice a year [*laughing*] I think it makes sense, there's not really anything like random that showed up on that [list]. My dream job. Oh, well, slight revision – I knew that I wanted to be a writer. I also knew that I wanted to be a professor, and I knew that those two things could work together. I would say my heart's desire for what I wanted to be, would probably be a writer. My dream profession would be as a professor.

CH [00:16:41] That's very nice to hear seeing as you got to achieve one of those.

WB [00:16:44] Yes, I did.

CH [00:16:47] What was the transition from your home life to college life like?

WB [00:16:58] Well, very few of us were going to college. I think that there was kind of maybe some eyerolls about me in general. I was a know-it-all, and I was pretty high-handed about my morals like, “You shouldn't be drinking! You're high school students!” That kind of thing. I think

everybody was like, “Obviously, Whit’s going to college.” Where was really the only question. All my teachers – I could have asked anybody for a reference kind of thing. I was like pretty good across the board as far as my academics went and as far as my involvement went. When I was thinking about where to go to college, I didn't want to go where I could easily drive home. I wanted to be further away from home. Also, my mom had instilled in me from a young age that no matter what, I had to have a scholarship or I wasn't going to be able to go to college. So there was pressure, there was pressure on me to go to college. I had my share of freakouts while I was in high school worrying about like, “I got d-hall like, are they going to let me into college?” [*laughing*]. I've been seeing...this thread on Reddit that was like, “What are lies that people told to you when you were younger that you grew up to figure out where lies?” They were like, [*high-pitched voice, wagging finger*] “This goes on your permanent record!” Like, you think that your permanent record will follow your entire life when you're younger and it's like, “When did I have d-hall?” Nobody remembers [*laughing*] it didn't go on anything! The transition to college, I was not a first-generation student. My mom had graduated from college but had done so as an adult. A little bit nontraditionally. I kind of knew what I was getting into, but not really. Both my friend Jacob and I got accepted [into the Honors College] after our interviews at UCA and the night before we were supposed to go to school to move in, we drove around all-around Bismarck just crying. Crying in the car, just being like, [*dramatic crying voice*] “We're going to leave! We don't know what it's going to be like, we don't know where we're gonna go, and what's going to happen to us! What's going to happen to our friends?” I mean, just on and on and on and on. That was a real fear, though, because it was leaving everything that we knew. We had never moved around, either of us. We had been born and raised pretty much in the same place. I wasn't born in Bismarck, but that's where I lived most of my life at that time. There was that desire to go somewhere else, but of course, just like the stories everybody else tells, the money was a really attractive reason to come to the Honors College. At that time, the scholarship money was like cups overflowing. Most everybody was maxing out their excess aid and getting paid essentially to go to school. [It was a] different time. It

ended up being fairly comfortable. I just reveled in a new educational environment and like Honors? [It was] first class, right? I was like, “Sold! Sold, sold in forever.” I don't think I was ever disappointed by my education.

CH [00:21:25] You said that you were into the Honors College at that point. What was the thing that really drew you in? I know that you said that, the financial aspect was definitely very appealing, but was there anything about your application or interview process that drew you in?

WB [00:21:47] Well, I could tell you about when I went for my interview. My mom was with me. She had come with me to Conway, and we were going into the Honors College. There was this guy who walked out of the building and he saw this and was kind of like a cute little old man in the way that he was dressed. I was like, *Hmm. Janitor? Maintenance guy?* He comes up to me and he greets us, and we're kind of taken aback by this person who's greeting us, but he's very friendly. He was like, “Oh, I see you're going into the Honors College, what are you here for?” And I was like “To interview.” And he said, “Oh, very interesting!” He started asking me questions about myself, and I was answering them, but I was also like, *I don't know who this person is.* And my mom and I go up to the third floor and we're like, “Oh, what a nice janitor.” We go into the Honors office and there's the picture, a portrait of the guy I had been speaking to and it had been Norb. I think what's funniest about that memory to me is that I thought he looked like a janitor. He was wearing a bow tie! He was wearing like a Doug shirt [short sleeved button down], right? A light blue [shirt], wearing his khakis, wearing his New Balances [tennis shoes]. I think it was the New Balances that threw me off. I was like, *Professors don't wear New Balances, obviously.* [laughing] And then I realized who it was, and I was just like [gasp then laughter]. At that time, it wasn't named after him, but I knew he was a big deal, especially when you come in and there's this picture. I interviewed with Phil Frana. There were another couple of students in the room with me, but I cannot remember who they were. I think at least one of them made it into the Honors College. That's just like my feeling of that

memory, but I can't remember. The questions that I was asked, I got to go ham on those questions! When you're in K-12 public education, there's a resistance to letting kids go ham. It's like we have rails on this discussion. You can be disruptive and be outside of those rails or, you can be too effusive and too into it and also be outside those rails. Everything is discipline, discipline, discipline. Everybody has to be focused on this one thing. We all have to be talking about the same thing. We can't go off. Here I was being asked to go off! I was being asked, "What do you think?" by an adult. By an adult who looked very professorial. Phil Frana had a big ol' mustache. That series of interactions made me feel like— I'm taking notice of how this is going. Then when we went to our retreat, the book we read for the retreat was *Gaviotas*. I can't remember what the subtitle was about, but it's a place in Brazil where they were trying to make a sustainable community that didn't depend on outside supplies and things like that. It was like in the jungle of Brazil that they did this. "Gaviotas" means seagulls, if I remember correctly. Here's the thing, I didn't read that book. I did pick out passages, though, to be like, *I'm going to scrape through this*. I have always had a resistance to reading for an assignment and I get y'all being like, "Come on!" But Honors Core I really changed that for me, though, where I was super excited about reading for the assignment. But anyway, the book. What I was struck by was we have been assigned this book that was about sustainability, which is not really something that I had known at that point. I wasn't a part of that conversation. I wasn't in a conversation about sustainability, exhausting natural resources, and things like that. In that book, one of the things they brought up — I can't remember what the particular machine was — but there is something that they needed an engine for, but they couldn't have electricity. So what they did was they hooked up bikes with the bike chains on the thing, and so whoever was pedaling generated the power for it. I was just so struck by that! I was struck by being in a place where you only had yourselves to depend on your own ingenuity as human beings and people being able to make it work. It really shook me like, *[laughing]* I don't even know how many pages I actually ended up reading out of that book, but that really had an impact on me. Then like being at the retreat and being with some of the weirdest, strangest, most wonderful creatures of

human beings I could possibly have ever met. These people being from Arkansas and being like, “You're from the same place I am?! And you're acting like this and you're saying these things?” It was just a feast for curiosity, like everybody was a curiosity. At that retreat, I made my first friend, who was Josh Simmons. In my incoming class, we had 150 students. We ended up losing like 21 at semester, I mean, Tricia has the number like burned into her memory because that's the reason why there's an I-squared process because we lost so many students and that was when [the administration] was allowing them in...with just the ACT score. There was no consideration, really, of GPA. So there were a lot of really brilliant people who just flamed out pretty immediately, just too much freedom, couldn't handle not having the normal structure, and it just kind of fell apart. They didn't have that self-regulatory ability. That's my diagnosis of it anyway, it just felt like we've been in places where— I mean, parenting, especially in the south, is fairly authoritarian. You have your parents who are telling you what to do, and if you don't do that and something bad is going to happen to you. When you remove that voice, what happens is some people learn and some people don't. That's at least how I kind of remember my impression of what was going on. My first friend, Josh, we did the name game at retreat, and he was like the only person in memory who had been able to do all 150 students and all of the faculty. There's an official name for it, but he has a photographic memory. Just that, right, meeting somebody with a photographic memory? That was really fascinating. He was getting to know literally everybody so that he could remember their names. He was the first person who approached me and was like, “Hi, I'm Josh!” and asked me questions about myself. Through him, I ended up meeting people who ended up being my best friends, still to this day. I recently saw him at a wedding. We're still like, weirdly crossing circles. He got a little bit too crazy for me, I mean that not in the sense of “he got into substances.” It was just he was like, [*gestures with hands*] *Wow!* And I was like, *I can't handle it!* This incredible series of events happened very close together. Being challenged, being asked for my opinion, being given something that I never read before, meeting all these incredible people, then those people being very friendly to me. I think I'd been most scared about leaving home because I just didn't know how

to live in a situation where people didn't already know me. What do you do when it's time you can finally have friends of choice rather than friends of convenience? Which, high school is friends of convenience. These are literally the only choices you have. There was just a series of events that just fed parts of me that had been starving for something different. Once you've had that hunger satisfied, even once, you're like looking for it wherever it can happen again. And it kept happening. I never felt like I wasn't learning, and it really gave me momentum in my life to keep learning and to see the value in keeping my mind expanding. That definitely informs how I teach. I'm constantly teaching in the way— like when I'm talking about why we're doing this, I'm always talking about future consequences of us doing this now. Trying to think about, like in the case of the Oral History class, we can talk about how this is a skill set, right, but we're also talking about gaining experiences that challenge our points of view and to welcome that. That's not something that you're necessarily taught when you're growing up to welcome [*gestures air quotes*] “conflict,” to welcome disagreement. We live in a world, I think, that functions best when you don't disagree. To figure out how to find space to disagree, and for that to make things better, not for it to be a place of permanent dissent. For it not just to be a place of devil's advocacy. These conversations are for a purpose and for them to make things better. That being what separates people who can participate in the conversation from people who can't. Like, are you participating in this to actually arrive at a solution? Or are you participating in this to be angry or to just dissent like, “Whatever y'all are doing, I want to do the opposite.” Like, to me, that kind of rules you out of the conversation. I had to grow later on to be able to welcome emotion as part of that conversation. As I just said my initial response to people who just come to be angry, but then I have to learn to listen to anger as information. Emotions are information, and we have to temper the decisions that we make with how they make people feel. I think that was a lesson that I learned maybe later in college, maybe more in grad school, but I was well on that journey by that time.

CH [00:35:02] You said that Core I had sort of helped you enjoy reading for class or an assignment. Did you enjoy any other aspect of Core I or even Core II?

WB [00:35:24] The constant bombardment of ideas that are in juxtaposition with each other does not make sense. That did more to [*gestures 'mind-blown'*] my brain because I was one of those people who three times a week I read and I would be like, *Well, this makes perfect sense*. Then I would read the next thing I'd be like, *Well, this obviously also makes perfect sense*. Somewhere towards the end of the semester, there was this break in me. Because I'm like, *These things don't hold. Everything feels right and it doesn't work if you consider all of them to be equally correct*. I have always been a really good synthesizer of information. I'm probably not the best person for depth of information, but for breadth and then for being able to make connections across disparate ideas. That experience in Core I really fed that part of my brain. There never had been any systematic addressing in my life of that part of my brain that was like, *what is the connection? How do these things work? What is actually working?* I, as a skill set, began to see, *oh, actually, when something feels correct, you don't actually have to take the whole thing*. Maybe a part of this is correct and there are parts that are less correct, or there are parts that need to be interrogated more, or [I could be] using other thinkers to be like, *Well, if this is right, I think this is actually more right than this. And what is the difference?* [There was] never a more fruitful time intellectually than that first semester in Honors. Core II was not my favorite. I think if I were to go back, if I were a student now, I would probably come out the same. I would still say Core I is my favorite, even though as a historian, Core II addresses more of the forces that I talk about professionally. But Core I, just all those things and the way that they bear on you personally. I never had readings that were intentionally meant to be [directed at] you, a person. "You have to make these decisions." [Before], it was always like, "You as part of this church community have to make these decisions. You, as part of your school community, as part of your team, as part of whatever." This was the first time that the emphasis was "No, you. You, not like in conjunction with anything else, like *you*

personally. What do *you* think?" The journals that we did. I loved writing the journals, it was my favorite thing to do for class. I was never late on journals. The only thing that I might be late on was that I went too long writing about something. I was also living in a diverse situation. My roommate was Ashlen Batson, which is not her name anymore. It's Ashlen Thomason. She was Miss Arkansas. She became Miss Arkansas while we were in college, and it was the first year that they tried to do a Miss America pageant reality show. We got to watch our friend on TV. She was my roommate, like I had a beauty queen as a roommate, and then my other two roommates were like a sorority girl and a preacher's kid, a Methodist preacher's kid. Which, I grew up Methodist, so we bonded. But it was also, like, very strange. I had also been a person who had always had more guy friends than gal pals. I remember trying to finagle like a Jacob and I'd be roommates at college, [*laughing*] and that was not going to work. They're coed dorms, but they did not allow that kind of thing to happen at the time. With that constant bombardment and the level of my intellectual engagement, I have never been, nor ever will be, as energetic for the challenges I was at that moment and like as hungry for it. Now, it feels routine, but at that time it was novel to be challenged in that way. [I was] just constantly feeling like an overcharged battery. I talked a lot in class. I had a really, really quiet Core I. On the first day of class, I sat across from my friend Jeremy Morgan –who would end up being my best friend I was the best lady at his wedding – and then I had Matt Hill also in that class and another person, Sean Oakley, who is being interviewed by somebody else. These guys are still, like really close to me. I was just texting with Sean this morning. Matt Hill and I are in several group chats together and we play Oculus together. Jeremy, Matt, and I also play Oculus together. We go golfing and we talk about our weeks and visit. Matt has always said that he thought I was a TA in our Core I because I was always like, "Well! Blah, blah, blah. Hey, you said this, what about this question?" I was willing to be that person in the room to be like, "Well, could you talk about that more?" or be like, "Well, I don't know. I think I disagree." Which, I have found teaching Core I and teaching honor students that you all are very reticent to be challenged [*laughing*]. Maybe I caused some people's fears to come true, like their

worst public speaking nightmares were coming to fruition because of my presence. But I was just so energetic for it. And so, like, it was so funny when Matt says, “I thought you were a TA because of how smart you were.” [laughing] I was like, “No!” It wasn't that I was any smarter than anybody else in the room. I was probably the only extrovert in the room, and that's really what was happening. Yes, just jazzed constantly to be there.

CH [00:42:32] The title of Core I is “The Search For Self.” So in Core I were you able to find where the self is?

WB [00:42:51] In Core I, no [laughing]. I think maybe even in my little box of keepsakes, I might have my response to that. I think I said something like the brain, obviously. My understanding of that question has grown a lot more nuanced. I'm glad that you asked that question because, for my Core I, our first class was in that room first floor McAlister when you come in from the student center side of the building and you go in that door like you're going to the elevator, there's a room that's directly back there, that was where our Core I was. Rick Scott was the one that was asking us that question. I remember hearing other people's answers and maybe, there were a couple that I scoffed at. Like, *Well, no, of course not.* Then hearing other people have a different take on that question, it was kind of like, *Huh, huh? Huh?* [It was] forcing me to think about it. My understanding grew a lot more nuance just even from that conversation, which I think is most people's response to that like, *Oh, somebody can have a different answer than me on where they think the self is.* The way that I would answer that question now is like, maybe it's a pie chart and depending on who you are. The self is neurology. Physiologically, it's in your brain and spiritually, it's in your mind. Then also your community is constantly changing. Whoever you're associating with and whoever you're talking to and whatever you're learning is not a fixed target. It would be like trying to take a picture of atoms or whatever. It's constantly moving. It's so hard to be able to

snap a picture of this rapidly moving target. I think the self can be anchored in your body, but it is definitely shaped and constantly evolving in response to stimuli.

CH [00:46:00] You mentioned how a community can be a part of someone's pie chart, and “The Search For Community” is the title for Core II. Now, or to my recent knowledge, a big part of Core II has been the community service project. Though, some of the other people that I've interviewed don't remember or don't believe that they had one. Did you have a community service project your year for Core II?

WB [00:46:29] We did not. My Core II was the first time we had PAs, it was the first class of PAs. I think that was a later stage of evolution, but the PAs were later than you might think. But that would be spring 2006 and was the first class of PAs. Yes, we didn't do a service project. I think at the time my response to that class was that I felt it was unfocused, kind of all over the place. I think by its nature it can be difficult to organize, that class. Now, I've had the experience of having taught it and know that definitely makes it harder for people to find themes that matter to them. Core I appeals directly to your narcissism like, “You're very important, you personally are very important, all these readings are for you.” Community, you have to do a lot more work to make it meaningful for students.

CH [00:47:57] Those two classes, they're pretty foundational within the Honors curriculum. Were there any particular readings within those classes, or even any of your other Honors classes, that stood out to you?

WB [00:48:15] “What Manner of Man is the Prophet” by Abraham Heschel is my favorite reading that I've ever done. Oh, how to articulate? There's the history of the document that Abraham Heschel did that dissertation— it was a dissertation originally— called “The Prophets.” He wrote it in

German, fled the Holocaust, came to the United States, and translated his own dissertation into English. “What Manner of Man is the Prophet” is the introduction. That reading says to me that doing the right thing won't make you popular. The only way to go through that – like to be a person who calls out what is wrong and tries to guide you back to what is right, the only way to do that– is to have a fire burning in yourself that consumes you. You have to be willing to be disappointed, and you have to be willing to be hurt. I think that was such a powerful reading to me at that time because I so desperately wanted to live a good and correct life. I also wanted to be very well-liked. But the way that Abraham Heschel writes about the prophets, it's searing. It is like words written with fire onto the page, and you're just reading the scorch marks the passion that went into that. As a piece of writing, I found it to be incomparable to anything that I'd ever encountered before. Also that the historical context of that writing is that at that moment in world history when he was translating it, what he was actually commenting on was the role of Jews in the world. He was saying, “Our scripture calls us to be prophets to the rest of the world like we have prophets that are prophets for the Jewish community, but Jews themselves have to be prophets for the rest of the world, which means that we won't be liked, which means that doing the right thing will put us in danger, which means that there will be other people who try to kill us.” He was saying that at a moment of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. There was this debate after the Holocaust, like “As Jews, do we retreat? Do we do mind our own community and do we stop interacting with secular, Christian, or other communities of faith? Maybe we just need to close ourselves off and protect ourselves?” His point was you can't protect yourself ultimately, and the world will be poorer for us not speaking about these things. That was really powerful at a moment where I was starting to feel like there were things that had been taught, things that were emerging in society, that I was becoming an adult person at a time when there were a lot of things that were [telling] me, “You need to take a side.” That piece fortified my courage. I kind of hear the voice of that piece when I am having struggles with myself over what to do. Yes, I would say that piece, more than any other, really seared and left a mark on me.

CH [00:52:38], I will definitely be checking that out, by the way [*laughing*]

WB [00:52:43] It's still in the reader.

CH [00:52:45] Moving on to the relationships that you had within the Honors College. You've talked about your first interaction with Norb and how you thought he was the janitor. Did your relationship with Norb ever get to evolve, especially now that you became a professor at the Honors College?

WB [00:53:16] I would run into him and he would recognize me, but by that time, he wasn't teaching a lot. In 2008, spring semester of my junior year, he taught a class called "Everything You Wanted to Know About Religion But Were Afraid to Ask." It was going to be capped at 30 students because everybody wanted to take a class from Norb. And I got in. I remember loving being in the room with him and listening to him talk. But also, like it was too big of a class for it to be truly meaningful, I guess. For our first assignment for that class, he asked us to write about a kairotic moment... Kairos comes from the Greek word for "time." A kairotic moment is a moment when your life is cleaved in two. There's a before and after, by that moment that changes everything. So he asked us to write about a kairotic moment. I wrote about myself – not necessarily something that I want to commit to the record– it was something that some of my friends knew, but not everybody in the class, and there were people in there that I didn't know. He asked if anybody wanted to present their papers. I think one or two people said yes– no, I think everybody was really reticent to do it. I raised my hand and said, "I'll read mine." My best friend, Jeremy, was sitting beside me, and he is an utterly stoic person. You can look at him and you won't get a read, but he'll laugh, he'll smile. But most of the time you almost would be like, *He looks kind of blank? But there's all this stuff going on behind the eyes.* I see his eyes get really, really wide, and he starts fidgeting. He's

scared for me because he knows what I wrote about. He was really nervous. So I got up there and I read my piece and it was really, really personal. Something that I wasn't talking about with everybody. People were crying by the time I got done. Norb was like, "Thank you." A very, very heartfelt, "Thank you." Later on in that semester, he was in his office—where Cindy's is now— and I went in for some reason. He said, "Whitney. I want you to know that—" Wait, no, that's not right. He wrote something really heartfelt as feedback on what I turned in. It was actually the next year that I ran into him or a few years later, maybe. He said, "Whitney, I want you to know that what you read set the tone for the class. It would have been a much different class if you hadn't been vulnerable and willing to do that." And he thanked me for being willing to put myself out there like that. Also that years later, he remembered it. Norb had Parkinson's, so it affected his memory. His health started was declining already when I had him as a professor. For him to remember that meant the world to me. Sometimes he felt kind of like Zeus, like occasionally coming down from Mount Olympus and talking to us mortals and us being like [bows] "Oh!" [laughing] every time he was around. But that wasn't who he was. It makes me regret that I didn't get to spend more time with him. I guess not regret. That's not the word for when somebody is getting sick and you're moving away. As part of that class, he took us to a mosque, which for some reason I didn't get to go to, but this is during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The anti-Muslim sentiment is very high. The mosque that he took us to had taken down their signs and everything because they kept getting bomb threats. Then he also took us to a synagogue, and then he ended up taking us to a Buddhist temple. I got to go to the synagogue and I met Rabbi Levy, who was great. [We got] to participate in a synagogue service. All of the adults in my life were pretty fixed? Like, staid, had one way of seeing things. I think my grandmother was probably the exception to that. She was always like [laughing] marching to her own drum. Norb fostered such care and appreciation for his students, and it never felt fake and never felt like it was *oh this is what a professor does*. It never felt manipulative, like emotionally manipulative, which, I think you can spot that, even as a student. Like, *I don't like how friendly this professor is being with me. This feels weird, right?* It never felt like that. I didn't grow

up with a father figure, besides my grandfather. There was something about Norb that was very attractive as a father figure. I mean, bearded and stately, portraits of him hanging on walls. Like, *oh, he's an intellectual. He can think about everything. Oh, he knows about everything!* I think that was one of the few times in my life that I felt that. I don't necessarily think about missing my father. I don't really think about that like I missed out on something by him never being in my life. But [Norb's care] touched something that I was like, *Oh, that's what it could have been.* In an alternate universe where, of course, your ideal dad is what you get. That's what it could have been. I didn't see him all the time and I loved him. Very, very much. And like especially for the opportunity that I got to be there.

CH [01:02:20] Thank you for sharing that with me, Whit. That's extremely touching. The Honors College is, at least in my experience, known for kind of cultivating opportunities. Did you have some of those opportunities, whether that be a study abroad trip or a grant? Anything like that in your experience?

[INTERRUPTION]

WB [01:03:17] I studied abroad in Italy for four weeks. I was headquartered in Florence. This was July, well, summer 2007. I got dual credit for an English class and something else. There were two credits that I got for the four weeks we were there simultaneously with the art history trip that was led by Gail Seymour. In an alternate timeline, I would have been an art historian. And so, just being able to tag along just like this [*props head-on fists, giving a longing look*] every time. I would see our groups diverging, and I'd want to go with the art history group rather than go with my group. I left a piece of my heart in Florence. The intellectual energy that I was telling you about, for my freshman year, like going to Italy? Just like— OK, so I had this really great experience when I was in Italy that I want to tell you about. Before I became the historian that I am today, I originally was like, *I'm going to be a medieval historian.* I love medieval stuff, and I essentially minored within, my history major, in one professor and that was Dr. Broadman, who taught all of the medieval

history classes. For one of the classes, he gave us a list of professions that we had to research and we had to find one example of a person in that profession and then also talk about the history of that profession during a certain period of time. I got to choose mercenaries. I read about this mercenary named John Hawkwood. He fought the 100 years war, and then he went down to Italy, where there were all these city-states and it would be like Milan against Florence, and Milan would hire John Hawkwood with his men and say, "Attack Florence!" Then Florence would be like, "OK, we give up. Now we're going to hire you and you're going to Milan." Then they would literally just march back and attack the other person. Towards the end of his life, [John Hawkwood] had made so much money that he gave money to the construction of the Duomo in Florence, which is very, very famous because it's the earliest and largest dome that was built during the Renaissance. What I was reading was saying his portrait was in the Duomo. OK, fast forward a year and I'm in the Duomo of Florence and I look to my left— Cathedrals in Europe are huge because they're supposed to be able to house God! It's supposed to be like, *God can fit in this building! Also wait, this building is too small for God?* It's supposed to be overwhelming when you go in. One of these huge wall panels and it is THE painting that I had read about in my history book! I was like to my companions, who could not care less, I was like, "LOOK! It's John Hawkwood!" His name in Italian is like Giovanni Aquia or something like that because it's an Italianization of his name. Then getting to see the fake tomb of Dante because Florence exiled Dante, and they were like, "Actually, we're going to claim you and we're going to build this tomb for you, even though you're not here." His bones are actually in Ravenna, and I got to go to his actual grave. And I got to see the grave of Michelangelo and Galileo. I accidentally walked through the town where Galileo was under house arrest. We were walking through it— OK, so quick another story. We were in Florence. This has happened multiple times in my life, so take this as a lesson for me. Do not repeat my mistakes. If you see a tower in the far distance, it's further away than it looks. We see this tower and we're like, "Oh why don't we go for a walk. Let's go out here!" Ten. Miles. Later, okay? We make it to this cathedral. It's actually a monastery and it's closed. We're like, "Oh." We're lost in the Tuscan countryside, not the worst

place to be, but it's also still lost. We're walking by this house and there's this bust inset into the wall of the house, and I look up at that and I say, "That looks a lot like Galileo. I don't know if it is Galileo, but it looks a lot like him." We keep walking. The people I'm with, there are few Honors people, maybe, but it's mostly people who are just like from the university. We're really lost, we need to get back to town. We see this guy walking towards us. I can be bashful when it comes to talking to strangers, but I also had my Italian phrasebook. By the time I left Italy, I was able to haggle in whole numbers. They would be like, "Six?" and I would be like "Five." They would be like, "OK." I was getting to what I would call fluency [*laughing*]. This guy is coming towards us and we're like panicking and looking at each other, like, how do we ask him which way is Florence? I was like, "Oh, it's 'dov'è Firenze' [sic]. Where is Florence?" We keep practicing it, and the person who is going to take the bullet for all of us has the most country accent I've ever heard from a person. She's like [*mimics thick southern accent*] "Doe-vay foe ren-za?" I'm like, "No, 'dov'è Firenze," trying to coach her. The guy comes up and she's like [*in southern accent*], "Which way's Florence?" He says, "Well if you just keep going down this road—" Turns out that this guy was a producer in Hollywood. He summered in the Tuscan countryside, just to get away from it all. He did commercials. He's talking to us about like, "Oh, you know, they have such strict zoning laws in Italy that if you plow through a field and you find a foundation, you have to build it to the specifications of the era and size of that house, like what it would have been." And he's also telling us, "All the police in Florence, they all have Dolce and Gabbana sunglasses and they're all policemen so that they can hit on pretty girls." We get like, all of his tips, right? Like his whole travel guide. We get to the bottom of the hill and he's like, "Well, you know if you need anything, if you get lost again, let me know," and gives us his business card. Then a couple of weeks later, we went to English Language Movie Night at the movie theater, and we see him in front. He's like, "Well, hey, how's it going?" We got to see this guy twice. I remember we gave one of our [*members*] the card, and we were like, "Keep it!" Then, of course, she lost it. It was such a crazy adventure to be there and to be in this land where literally history is stacked up on top of other

histories. Going to Rome and being in the place where the circus Maximus, the benches are in the basements of houses where the circus Maximus used to be like, if you go into the basements of houses, you can see literal benches where people used to sit and watch the races of the Circus Maximus. Being in squares cut into plazas where you can see a story down and you can see like old ruins right there beneath all of the modern-day stuff. It was just like a feast in any way that you could describe it: a spiritual feast, an intellectual feast, a physical feast, like I lost a lot of weight while I was there. I was walking everywhere and feeling invigorated by the physical challenge of that. The food! That trip was so formative for me and my roommate, who I introduced to my best friend, Jeremy, and then they got married. That's the person that I was the best lady for. I came back with so many pictures. While I was there, I wrote a journal entry every day. It did not matter how tired I was, I could be falling asleep at my computer. I was just so overcharged by what I was seeing. I wrote like twenty-something entries of just what we did [that day], all of the contexts, how this feeds into this, what it made me think about, and blah blah blah blah blah. That is still an artifact that when I go back to, I'm like, *Gosh, that was such an incredible moment in my life and something that I always wanted.* My family was a family of people who wanted to travel. My grandfather was the only person who'd been to Europe because he was in the war, WWII. He was like, "Yeah, they were really nice." [laughing] Getting to go back and bring back so many pictures because I wanted it to feel like my family was there. Because we were so poor, they weren't going to get to go. Something else that I brought back, was I introduced my best friend to his partner. They have two kids and are about to have a third. So it felt like such positive reverberations in my whole life with just going on that trip.

CH [01:14:29] That's another special story! You're sharing so many special things with me tonight, and I can't thank you enough for that. Well, we're almost reaching our time, but there are a couple more questions that I want to ask.

WB [01:14:46] Sorry, I keep going on too long on your questions.

CH [01:14:48] No, don't apologize. I am thoroughly enjoying it. I promise you. So, you are an alum of the Honors College and now you are a current faculty member, you're a professor. As a current professor that gets to see current students within the Honors College and even teaches them. Can you learn from them or envision what you might have done differently now that you have the perspective of being a professor?

WB [01:15:35] The direction of the question that you just asked is interesting because I would actually reverse it. You're saying like, "What would you do differently as a student?" And I think what I've actually had to learn as a professor is not every student learns the way I do. I honestly don't have many critiques of how I was as a student. What I've really had to learn is like when people are quiet, it's not because they're not thinking. Actually, this is not an Honors example, but I think it really communicates what I'm trying to get across. I taught at AGS, Arkansas Governor School. Do you know Hannah Malone? She was one of my students and I taught Area II. This was the last year that it was at Hendrix. It was basically Core I, with a dash of Core II, and then also logic thrown in. A mishmash of all the things. It was training people how to think better, I guess. I had a student in that class who was absolutely mortified to ever speak. But, it was obvious that the student was pretty brilliant. If I remember correctly she was going to go into a medicine of some sort, but was also an incredible artist. I would talk to my colleagues and be like, "I don't know if I should call on her. I want to call on her because I want to hear from her. I kind of want to break this ice, but I also don't want to mortify her." I went the whole time without calling on her, but like really trying to encourage, "Let's make space for people who haven't spoken yet," that kind of thing. At the end of the class, she approached me like this [*ducks head shyly*] and handed me a little, tiny card. It was like that big [*makes a small square with hands*]. On the front was a portrait of me that she had drawn. On the inside, she wrote something like, "I've never had a teacher like you. This

has been my favorite class maybe ever. Thank you.” And on the back, it said, “Thank you, Whit” in big, big block letters. What that taught me was that she was quiet, but it wasn’t that nothing was going on. She was hearing everything. There were moments where she felt empowered enough— I think I can count that it was maybe twice that she spoke- she was never prompted. I remember Hannah actually being a person who was like, “She wants to speak.” Hannah was making a place for her where she could speak without being spoken over. People would get quiet and listen because she had waited to speak. And what a reality check for me to be like, *I just feel like I'm losing this one*. When I'm in the classroom, and I see somebody disengaging, I'm going into overdrive trying to do something to pull them back in. I'm not going to lose them. Well, it was really a lesson to chill out, which would have been a lesson that I would never have gotten to if I hadn't already been trained by my Honors education to think about people thinking differently. People think about things differently and they don't express enthusiasm the way that I do. It's less that I have lessons for myself back then as a student, but more like my experience as a student has lessons for me as an instructor to remember that the animated conversations happen when you're [the instructor] not there. I was Cindy's PA for Core I and I was like, super energetic to be in that class, and it was one of those first moments where I was like, *Maybe I could be a teacher*. Then I was like, *No, no, bury it. Bury it away. You don't want to be a teacher*. I grew up and my mom was a teacher and like every teacher that I knew was telling their children, “Don't be a teacher, you don't get paid well.” I had sequestered that part – that idea that I could be a teacher. Ironically, I come from a very long line of teachers. One of my ancestors was the first female teacher to teach West of the Mississippi, and my grandmother would have been the first to wave that around. There's this culture in my family of the way we talk to each other, it is kind of teach-y and like sweet, but also like holding your feet to the fire kind of thing. I have this culture from my family that I was drawing on. But then, I had this education to be the right kind of teacher and to be able to see when I was doing something wrong. Giving me the tools to examine myself as a teacher and to say, *That's probably not the best way to do it, chief*. I'm pulling back from some of my impulses. I think that teaching in the United States,

there's definitely like this punitive dimension of being a teacher where you're like handing out the d-hall slips like if you're in high school. The authoritarian institution [where] the teacher is the authority and that means that they hand down treats and punishments. That's the role of a teacher. To back away from being a punisher even though that was all the models I had. But my Honors education allowed me— gave me—the tools to dismantle that and to see a lot of the things that I thought were part of being a teacher were actually toxic and will interfere with you being able to teach. I think the successes that I've had as a professor— I'm going to be hubristic and say that I've had successes — feel more due to my Honors education than anything else.

CH [01:22:40] Probably my final question: what made you come back to the Honors College?

WB [01:23:00] Beyond that it was a job, because jobs can be anywhere, why did I want to teach here? I wanted to teach here at the Honors College because it had given so much to me. I couldn't think of a better place for teachers than UCA. Not just the Honors College, but UCA being a teaching institution. Being how I emphasize teaching rather than researching. Thinking about the kind of professor that Norb was to me, and Donna [was to me]. I've always wanted to be a person who changed the world in some way. Being a teacher to Honors students felt like the most challenging but also the most rewarding place to teach if that was a goal of mine. What we're doing is trying to send you all out in the world to do a little bit better than we did. Can you imagine being taught by Donna, Cindy, Doug, and Allison and then coming back, sitting at the same table with them, making decisions with them, and having real discussions? [I've been] kind of spoiled by being in an environment where they kind of do live their ideals. They kind of live the things that they teach, which is that we got to talk about it. I couldn't have imagined anything better. I don't think of my Honors education as a debt that I needed to repay, but it's certainly something that I wanted to give back. It's been the honor of my life to teach in the Honors College. It was an honor for the rest of the faculty to ask me, "Hey, will you teach the Marx lecture? Hey, will you teach the

Labor lecture?” Then for me to give those lectures and for them to come back and say, “We knew you could do it, but dang, you *did* it.” I wouldn't give that up for anything, the time I've had here. I'm sad for it to end, but I also feel like I had a pretty good five-year run. I got to teach a lot of stuff. I got to meet some really rad students. There's never been a student that I've regretted teaching or wish hadn't been in my classroom. Never before, and maybe never again, will I ever have a job where everything I put in I got back. Of course, I mean, it's not always been perfect. This semester has been really hard. The pandemic semesters have been really hard. I gave the last in-person lecture of Core II the semester of the pandemic. That was a Wednesday. My grandmother came home on hospice that Sunday and the university shut down Thursday, Friday, Monday, and Tuesday to start up again on Wednesday during the pandemic. I've lost years off of my life since March 2020. So it hasn't always been perfect or great, but it has always been rewarding and consequential. It has always felt like it mattered. I don't think even most people get to feel that way about their job and about the place where they end up. There's always something to complain about, right? And sure, there are complaints to make, but it's more [about] my satisfaction. I couldn't have made a better decision than to come back.

CH [01:28:38] That was such a sweet note. Do you have any final thoughts or comments that you'd like to make before we wrap this up?

WB [01:28:54] This is such a weird moment, to do this interview, for me. I'm moving away from my home state, the furthest I've ever moved away next week. I was hanging out with one of my friends from Honors a couple of days ago and I was like, “Oh, I posted in the [All Honors GroupMe] group chat about the Panic! At The Disco album,” and I was telling him, “The kids these days are listening to it.” And I was like, “That was in Fall 2006. When we listen to that together in your car on the way to Something's Brewing, which is now something else.” I was like, “That was 16 years ago.” He was like, “I beg your pardon?” [*laughing*] I'm saying goodbye to not just y'all

[the students], not just the college, but also to my life that I've tried to build here. I don't know what I'm going to be doing next, so it's a really interesting moment of reflection [for] me to talk to you and answer these questions and to think about what has mattered to me. So much of that has been just the community that I came in to, the Honors College, and the community that I continue to be a part of and that continues to affect me. It continues to pull on me, draw me in, and engage me. I think that the true signs of who I would grow up to become first came to fruition while I was at the Honors College. It's just a strange moment to reflect on that. That I'm leaving a place that in more ways than one has been a home for me. It's also been a birthplace. I think that also is why it hurt so much when y'all have complaints. You want things to be better, and it's not like we didn't back then either. But it's also like, I want it to be what for everybody, what it was for me. Part of growing up, I think, is realizing that it's a constant evolution, that it can't be the same. I constantly feel like I'm in a moment of nothing will ever be the same. That's this moment right now is looking back on the last five years of teaching students at the Honors College. The five years of my teaching career and saying, "Well, nothing will ever be the same as that." That feels very warm, but it also feels very—there's a melancholy to going and to handing it off to whoever's next. But I'm grateful. I'm grateful that you were willing to do this, and I'm grateful that I got to talk to you. I'm grateful that I got to turn over these mossy stones in my heart and remember what's underneath them. Thank you.

CH [01:33:05] Yes ma'am. Well, thank you. I am and I will be eternally grateful for this because this has been – [*jokingly*] off the record – it's been the sweetest interview. It's just so heartwarming and just lovely to hear. Thank you so much for sharing everything with me. Thank you for your time, Whit. This concludes our interview.