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Lynn Haas '64-Claire Bronson '69

Lynn Haas

Claire Bronson

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Lynn Haas: This is Lynn Haas and I'm class of '64 although I don't think you care. And my interviewee is ...

Claire Bronson: Claire Bronson, Claire Sekulski Bronson, class of '69. Today is May 31st, 19-19-, wouldn't we wish, 2019.

LH: Well, it's good to meet you.

CB: Nice to meet you too.

LH: So, we just go down the questions, Why did you decide to come to Conn College?

CB: Well, I applied to several colleges and they were all women's colleges, but Connecticut College gave me fairly significant scholarship money and my family was poor and so I came because I had a scholarship and I knew it was a good college to begin with. It wasn't that kind of a- an issue, but when I got here ...

LH: What other colleges- what other colleges did you apply to?

CB: Smith, Pembroke ... I've forgotten already.

LH: Holyoke?

CB: Mount Holyoke, yeah.

LH: Well, great. What- what were you surprised at, if anything, here?

CB: Well, because I came from a large family and came here and went to a large public high school, it was- it was different just coming into this kind of environment of all women and being taken seriously, a little more seriously I think than in high school where there was always the competition with the guys. Even if you were at the top of your class, you were still, you know ... And then with the president, you were the vice president or secretary or something.

LH: What high school was that?

CB: Torrington High School in Torrington, Connecticut.

LH: Wow, yeah, so big school too.

CB: Yes, yes. We had a class of 400-something.

LH: So that was different too.

CB: So that was very different, yeah.

LH: Where did you live? What was- and what was the- more interestingly- what was the- what- what was it like for you living in the dorms?

CB: I lived in Larrabee and I liked it because there was a ...

LH: All four years?

CB: Well, for three years. At the end of my junior year I got married. My husband and I decided it was- we'd been dating from high school and it was just getting too expensive. He was at UConn and I was down here. Going back and forth, we decided that we would just get married and hoped it might keep him out of the draft. It didn't- ultimately, it did not, but that was our motivation, so my first three years were quite different than my fourth year. While I was in Larrabee for all three years and a woman-girl, I don't know, we were just girls then, really- from my high school who was a junior, lived two doors down, two rooms down. One of her friends didn't come back for the junior year and so there was an open room, so that's where I got stationed, as you might ... But, it was a great experience. Everybody, you know, there- I think there were more freshman on my floor in that particular year for a variety of reasons, than they have- they have now and it was just- I thought it was fascinating learning about life from these other women and one experience I had, right from the very first week, before- before they ever, you know, let the upperclassmen in, was I wanted my ears pierced, badly.

LH: Oh my gosh.

CB: Back in those days, the way you did that, you didn't just go to the mall when somebody pierced your ears for you.

LH: You put ice ...

CB: She put ice- put ice and sterili-, you know, burned the needle, and then was digging and digging.

LH: Who did that?

CB: My- she's my friend. She's not here- she's not here now, she's in Paris for the weekend, she couldn't make it here, but, so, she did it, okay. I was really brave and every- every so often when the earring doesn't go in, I think of that day when there she was icing it.

LH: It makes me cringe. I still haven't done it. Wow, that- that was terrific.

CB: Over all, it was a- it was a good experience, and it was a-an opportunity to meet other women too, because Larrabee and Katherine Blunt, KB, we shared the same, not the same dining rooms, we each had our own dining rooms, but we shared the same food service, so it was convenient to go back and forth as we- as we met other people.

LH: That's great.

CB: It was good.

LH: Do you remember any bad things?

CB: Any bad things? The only- about being in the dorm?

LH: Anything that was troubling or ...

CB: No, not really.

LH: Great. What did you study?

CB: I was an Economics major and I had- I just- the woman I just interviewed, she was a Government major, and- and she said- we said, you know, initially, "Why don't we know each other?" you know. I mean ...

LH: Was she also '69?

CB: Yeah. Yeah, she was. Is. And, you know, I mean, there are a lot of women that you meet in different classes and we never overlapped in a single one that we- that we could ...

LH: Identify.

CB: Identify. Well, back at that time in the curriculum, it- I was- I was a college professor and so I was involved in the curriculum and all that stuff. Now I- it has dawned on me how all this worked- there was a- you had to have a social science requirement and so you could choose

economics, you had to have either basic economics or basic government or basic sociology and I, by that point, I actually did some thinking about what I was choosing. I didn't really like government and I wasn't any good in history, so- so I crossed that off. And then I thought sociology just was a little too squishy from what I had heard, so I went into economics. And- but that was a very positive experience for me.

LH: That's excellent.

CB: My freshman year I was a- a work study for Professor Vidich, Virginia Vidich. She was in sociology. She was a sociologist, maybe that swayed me. But my job, interestingly, they let me help her work on her dissertation. I was her- she was writing a dissertation to finish up her PhD and I was checking her statistics. That was my job, and I was like holy-moley. Okay? That was good. But my sophomore year, she finished her- she finished that year and I switched over to working for Miss Ruby Turner Morris Norris Morris. And- and so, she had a major influence on my life and my education and everything, including the fact that she-I was her research assistant.

LH: Ruby's?

CB: Yeah, yeah. What did you major in?

LH: Psych.

CB: Oh, okay. So you didn't have an intimate relationship with her?

LH: No, I didn't.

CB: Okay, well that's what she let me do too, was work on her research. And by the time I- I graduated college, I had two publications with her. Well, she had- she had them with me. You know what I mean, I was the student, she was the person on all those things. But that was what helped me in my- my education, higher education, and in my career, because that's what you're supposed to be doing, is writing and publishing and researching, so ...

LH: Wow, that was fantastic.

CB: So, that was really- and- and I learned a lot of different things about, just involvement, just her involvement in city government. She- she ultimately became the mayor of New London.

LH: I didn't know that.

CB: But she used to troop us down, we were in her public finance class, she used to troop us down to town council meetings on Monday nights, learn how- how all of that worked. And she never held back from telling you she was teaching you things that you- you would need to use in the future, whether you believed it or not.

LH: Wow, that's great.

CB: She and that- it- that was really incredible. That was- it was a good choice for me, because I started as a math major and you probably remember back in those days that you kind of went in areas that you were good at. You just didn't come--well, I didn't come to college full-blown knowing I was going to major in this and- and minor in this and be a neurophysicist at the same time, like kids do today when you read in the newspaper and they're going wherever and they're going to major in something like, holy-moley ... How do they know that? I didn't know that.

LH: For years. So, I have a question, if you don't mind and totally off this, but, coming to-coming to a women's college with a beau already in hand, someone that you were already partnered with, do you think that that relieved some of the pressure that the rest of us had? You know what I mean?

CB: Partnered with ...

LH: Your- your- because you said that you were- your husband was somebody you knew in high school.

CB: But I wasn't dating him then. I wasn't dating him then- I would date him periodically, but not- not continually and then I finally just went back to him, like, went back to him, but- but coming to college with other classmates was the- I gave- I think gave me strength. And today I met both- two of them--one has passed away and the other, she just, okay, doesn't do this sort of thing, you know, but what do you expect out of a group of five--and the three of us, I mean it was like ...

LH: Right away

CB: We just picked up, you know, so ... but that, I think that was more ...

LH: I just- you're sounding to me like you were really mature ...

CB: No, I wasn't.

LH: Even when you got ...

CB: No, no, because my grandparents went to college but they- they died when they were in their forties, so my mother was an orphan and that whole- so we came up North. I was born in Memphis and my father's family, they weren't college-educated, so I- my mother just kept pushing me and pushing me and I honestly had no- no outlook beyond going to college. You never- I never thought hard that I need to do something. I remember Ruby Morris asking me what was it I was going to do when I graduate and like, "Oh, a decision." You know, I was partly, "You're going to be an educated wife and mother and that should be good enough." Didn't end up being good enough, okay?

LH: No, I know that feeling. Well, thank you for sharing that. Were you involved in any groups or activities that were important to you?

CB: No, I don't think so. I- I think the- between the friends that I had and, you know, here on campus then working, because I was on work-study, that took up a lot of time, so.

LH: Yeah, huge.

CB: No. No, that didn't carry over from high school. I mean, you can't get in unless you're into everything, run everything.

LH: Yeah, that's really true, isn't it? Yeah, I thought this was a really interesting question, especially after our Sykes experience today. What was the campus climate like for you? Were you a part of that whole political unrest kind of ...

CB: No. No, I wasn't and my friends weren't either. I can see that even- we had the- the video today, that was highlighted much more than I was aware of. I- I was thinking, "Where was I when all this was happening?" A matter- just a matter of- really, I- I don't know. Part of me feels like I missed something, the other part of me ... Hmmm, okay.

LH: We really were in the ivory tower.

CB: Yes, very much, very much so.

LH: That's what it seems to me when I look back too. I mean, there are a couple things in my class that kind of hit us all over the head, but, like Kennedy's death, but- that you couldn't avoid. Anyway, there's one question about the- becoming coed. Was that something that you all talked about? Did you ...

CB: Well, we all talked about it. I- I think that we were not in favor of it. We came to a woman's college for a reason. I mean, I- I really did feel that that was a- a good reason to come to college so that you could be independent. You could be treated like you had a- had a mind. You could think, you could- could grow. And so, why did we need men around here, to suddenly do what they had done all through high school, you know. They- they're nice to you, but they're- they wanted to-not step on you-but they want to beat you all the time, and so you- you didn't have a chance to have your say all the time. And I was- I talk a lot now, but I- I was not a talker at the time, so, you know, I would just sit there, okay ...

LH: Let them- let them carry on.

CB: Yup, yeah, so, but we knew that all the colleges around were already going coed. And once they were going coed- started going coed, it was a financial decision, you know. I work in higher ed and I know financial decisions drive a lot of things. It wasn't just broadening programs, all that kind of crap, okay, it was money.

LH: You need money.

CB: It was- it was the fear they weren't going to have enough applicants if they didn't go coed.

LH: Really? I remember just being furious, but ...

CB: Yes, they lost a lot of donations, money. I mean, women didn't want to do that. But my niece is- now, she- she graduated from here and never gave two thoughts to the fact that there were men here. The whole educational system now, I think, thrives because there are men and there's that intellectual challenging, but everybody is smart here.

LH: Yeah, that's right.

CB: Okay, so that in itself is a whole different environment.

LH: It's true. It's true. Thank you. Your life after Conn. You said you moved right into academia.

CB: Well, I- I told you that Ruby Morris really influenced my life and when she said, "What are you going to do?" and I didn't have an answer, she said, "Well, I really think you should go to graduate school." And a friend of hers-she- she was an incredible woman-and she worked-during the war she was in India. She- she challenged all the men. She was a Vassar graduate, so she had- she was strong and independent and already had that mindset of "I can do anything," you know, "I don't need you." And- and the most well-known John Kenneth Galbraith, she

worked side-by-side with him, okay, during that time and made decisions on his [unclear], but one of them was in public finance and he would come- he came to U-, actually he only came to UConn for one year appointment, but I didn't know that and I don't think she knew that. She just said, "My friend so-and-so was going to be at UConn, so go- go there and in public finance. You're really good in that and I think you'd be good in the program." So I applied and they took me in, gave me plenty of money and said we'll let you know at the end of the year if we'll invite you to be in a PhD program. So ...

LH: You did it.

CB: So, well yeah, I was telling Kathy before, though, I had- I had to put this in because this is really kind of important in my estimation of why being here at the women's-is it time?

LH: No, I just want to make sure it's all going.

CB: why women's colleges have accomplished a lot of what they did. And maybe it was just the time, maybe it was just the age that we were at in the lifecycle of education and all that. I majored in Economics, 25 other women. I walked into the class at UConn. There were 28 men and two women. There were 28 men and ...

LH: Two women. Oh my God.

CB: Me and the girl, she graduated from Mount Holyoke.

LH: Oh wow, what a ...

CB: Was like the biggest shock in the world, because I'd been here and being an Economics major was no big deal. There was- I was Economics, my best friend was Psychology, you know, and the other one she was Art History or something. We were just everything.

LH: And then all of a sudden there you were.

CB: So I really was kind of quiet, okay? I mean I was quite a- I mean, I ...

LH: Did the work.

CB: Did the work. Did fine, got good grades and everything. Yeah, that was a big shock and only one time when I was there did I ever feel, really feel, uncomfortable and that was when one guy turned to me one day and said, "What are you doing here? You're taking up a guy's space. Do you realize that?"

LH: Oh my gosh.

CB: And I was so devastated. "I'm entitled to an education, just like you."

LH: Isn't that amazing?

CB: Yeah.

LH: The story that ...

CB: I mean, you know, 1970 and- and since then, if not I mean maybe it was a year ago or so, maybe it was- it was deeper than that. It wasn't just that I was taking a man's place and the fact that they were all men. War was going on. I was a woman. That was a deferment. I was in a deferment seat.

LH: Oh, interesting.

CB: Took me fifty years to figure that out, okay, but I didn't take it that way.

LH: Of course not.

CB: "What are you doing here? You're taking a man's seat."

LH: What did you respond? What did you do? Do you remember?"

CB: I said, "They accepted me just like they accepted you," or something, you know, but, yes, there were very few women in the economics program and they were all overall treated very well and they went on to have accomplished careers. One- one woman who was before me, she became the president of Turkey.

LH: My goodness, so ...

CB: I hear they were very corrupt eventually. My Turkish friends that I- I met along the line, but yeah, she went to be president of Turkey. So- so, it was- it was good, but then I eventually- so they accepted me in the PhD program and having two publications helped me right off the bat, but ...

LH: So then did you teach? Or did you do research?

CB: I did. I- I taught. I started out at the community college, and you know, little here, little there, but I had three children by then. And so my- and so we lived in Enfield because my husband was working in the state prison system, so we moved up to Enfield. And then he- he was making good money so I was taking care of the kids and working on my dissertation to get that finished. And then I was finishing up and this is just chance, one of the guys who was teaching at- at the school at the time at Western New England, came into my office and said to me, "You want a job?" and I said-I was finishing paperwork at UConn-"You want a job?" I said, "What?" "A job. I- I got a job and my advisor told me not to take it. And so if you're interested, I know you live up in that area, you- you want to go for an interview at Western New England College. They need somebody to teach Principles of Economics this coming semester." This was in December. January was when we started. I said, "Oh, okay," you know, and I'll send them my resume and I'll check on it. By the time I got home, they had called me asking me to come up for an interview. I had no resume. I wasn't going into the job market. And I went in and I sat and the chairman of the department talked to me. Now, this is where being a woman came in handy, because he didn't have any women, so he loved me and I was coming with a PhD in hand. He didn't have to worry about was I ever going to finish and all that kind of jazz. And so he took me over to the dean, so, okay, blah blah, took me over to the dean. The dean starts interviewing me like he was going to make a decision and the chairman said to him, "Will you stop asking her questions? We need her." And so I got a start there and I moved from teaching economics into the fin- teaching finance in the School of Business, because they needed somebody over there and it was the same thing, there- there were not enough women in that particular area. And I stayed there for 25 years. I retired when I was age 60, am still in contact with them.

LH: All great. So what are you doing now?

CB: Well, now I'm- I'm the consummate volunteer. I volunteer for, I don't want to say everything that goes by, but it seems like it and take- take a lot of leadership roles. I found that in my field there are a lot of people, good people, wonderful people who want to volunteer. They'll do things. They'll help. They do not want to be in charge. And actually, I've taken more leadership roles since I retired than I had before. And I did a lot before in education.

LH: Good for you.

CB: Yeah. I mean, it's kind of fun, I mean ...

LH: A good life.

CB: Yes, it is.

LH: Ups and downs I'm sure.

CB: My husband's a retired prison warden and then he taught criminal justice at the college that I was teaching at. Yeah, pretty good.

LH: Very good, very good. Let's see, did we miss anything? Yes, did you keep in touch with your classmates? You said, a couple of them?

CB: I do. I- well, one, she was my matron of honor, but she- she made a mistake and- and she booked going with some friends to something in Paris over this weekend ...

LH: Poor baby.

CB: You know, she's not here to enjoy all this, which is too bad. And I met with one of the others who was in my class, she- and I concluded after meeting her again recently that if it hadn't been for the fact that if we lived next, or across, or whatever, we would not have been friends in life.

LH: Yeah, it's interesting.

CB: So then some of our other friends were- they- they're in the next class down, so I met- so we met, and we still relate. And- and the fun thing is that two of them had met some other people that I know in my life. Golf- well, they're golf people actually-I do a lot of golfing-they had met some of my friends on trips they had taken, so ...

LH: It does- it does give you an entree, doesn't it?

CB: It does, it does.

LH: A common experience, yeah. This is an interesting question, isn't it. In thinking about the College today, is there something from your experience that you wish students today could have? Is there something happening now on campus that you wish you could have experienced?

CB: I- I think that- I wish that I could have experienced this: studying abroad in the junior year. I- I think now just about everybody does. And I think- and now scholarships carry forward, at that time they didn't. It wasn't just common that the schools now, they plan to have a whole class away and they- and they bring in large classes. So ...

LH: Didn't know that.

CB: Yeah, yeah, they do. Colleges, almost all of them, do that, but here particular. So, I- I think that would have been something I would have enjoyed doing, having that kind of experience. But overall I say that- I see that the College has grown and developed intellectually and that- that's because of the level of students that they have. I taught at Western New England College. Now, it was a good career. Students there, a few of them, are educationally driven and a professor of mine back at UConn gave me this, put this in my head, that there are people who go to college, go to school because they need to. Their end goal is a job and, you know, you have to have an education to get a job. They didn't go for the education. I went for the education.

LH: Almost everybody here did.

CB: I have always- that, yeah, that's the truth. And so, when everybody is educationally driven, very different things happen than when you're in an environment where they're here because they need it to get a job and if there's- if there's any disappointment in my career, it was that, that I had way more students that just came because that's what they had to. I had a chance to teach here and it was at a time when it was too far to commute and so I- I had to turn the job down. And I regret it from- from that point of view, because it's nice to come into an environment, just seeing wherever you go, you just feel people are interested in education, any aspect of it, it doesn't matter. Just today at the- this luncheon, they were talking music, and I thought, "Wow, this is really cool. I never thought about music this way," and she's giving me a demonstration and teaching, you know?

LH: Fantastic, it brings tears.

CB: Yeah, really, really. But, we did the best we could. I did the best I could with, you know, where I was and where I am today and I think I've come a long way, so ...

LH: And, this is off the question, are your kids nearby and are you grandparenting?

CB: Yes, my granddaughter got an award today. She- we live up in upper Connecticut in Somers and so this time she was selected for acts of kindness. Where do you live?

LH: I live in Vermont.

CB: Well, ShopRite is a grocery store and they have- they have awards that they give every single month to students who are nominated in different grade- there are different grade levels, they don't do the same grades every day or same school. And, it was for being in the environmental club and worrying about plastic straws and all that stuff and I said, "What else did you do?" and she turned around and she pointed and she said, "Well, we pulled weeds out there in the yard," you know, in the common area, okay? And she- she- she said something else, I

forgot what else, several other things, but also because she's very- she's a very kind person and a girl came into her class this year and she's in the seventh grade, my granddaughter is, and in, like, Octob-, no, like January, now seventh- you're talking, junior high, and here- and now you're coming in in the middle of the year on top of it. And so, she just took to this girl and included her in everything and got her participating in all these different activities and things and- and so the teachers noticed that. But my granddaughter, and I only have one grandchild, she is in remission from leukemia. She got it- she was diagnosed at the end of fourth grade and just, really, just at this time three years ago and it was awful. It was- it was- you know, you can't sink any lower than watching your- your- your grandchild and feeling she's going to die any minute, you know, I don't mean to be ... she's in- she's in good shape. She's in good shape, really good shape now. So- so, the teachers have watched- watched her grow and develop and still thrive during this time because she had- she had intensive- intensive chemo in the hospital, she was in the hospital all- all that summer and finally she had two intensive rounds of chemo because they didn't knock it out of her complete. And then once they do that, then they start chemo for two years, the kind of leukemia she had, and so then you take pills every day, you go to the hospital on a regular basis, and anyway ...

LH: Takes up a lot of time.

CB: Yes, and, I mean, she was bald. She went bald twice, poor baby. She got an infection at the beginning of her sixth grade when she went to middle school and she was closer to death than she was even the first time. And, I mean, she ...

LH: This is very sad, but now she's okay?

CB: She's okay. She's- wait a minute, wait a minute. I've got a picture I've got to show you.

LH: And she got an award.

CB: She got- she gets- she gets tons of awards. This is her now. That's at her award picture. That one taken at Disney. So she's back ...

LH: She's beautiful. Yeah, she is robust. She looks terrific.

CB: Well, she's got her grandfather's German build, okay, what can I tell you. I mean, she's not- she's not petite. She doesn't take that side, but ...

LH: My granddaughter's like that.

CB: she's into everything and involved and builds ...

LH: What's her name?

CB: Genevieve.

LH: Genevieve, nice.

CB: And don't call her Jen or Jenny.

LH: She's Genevieve.

CB: She is Genevieve.

LH: So yes, that's great. Thank you.

CB: Anyway, I'm sure we've used up our time. Somebody else needs to. But it was nice talking to you.

LH: I loved it.