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Benjamin Panciera-Marcia Perry '59

Benjamin Panciera

Marcia Perry

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Recommended Citation

Panciera, Benjamin and Perry, Marcia, "Benjamin Panciera-Marcia Perry '59" (2019). *Alumni Oral History Project*. 23.

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Benjamin Panciera: My name is Benjamin Panciera. I am the director of special collections and archives and today is May 31st, 2019 and you are

Marcia Perry: I'm Marcia Perry was Marcia Corbett at Connecticut College.

BP: And you are class of ...

MP: 1959. All those years.

BP: So what made you decide to come to Connecticut College in the first place?

MP: Well, some positive reasons and some, I suppose at this point, negative. I was a pianist. I did not want to go to conservatory. Actually, I wanted to go to Barnard, but I came to Connecticut. I had a wonderful scholarship and I fell in love with the campus, I have to say that. I came to see the campus and- and I loved the buildings and I loved the chapel. It was a very tiny music department, but they made me very welcome and it was a wonderful school. It was- in those days of course it was Connecticut College for Women. We had a marvelous faculty, so this place was- the physical setting was- was marvelous. The green, the blue, the- so, if you wanted to be at peace with yourself and removed from the world, you certainly were.

BP: Did you know what to expect when you stepped on campus or was it all completely new. I mean, did you visit before you decided to come?

MP: I did visit before and I truly wanted to come. Truly. The- and it certainly wasn't Barnard, which was a city and plea- would have pleased my parents probably more, but no, I- I loved the setting.

BP: Where were you coming from?

MP: Upstate New York. Up up in ... And of course it was, must have been nice weather when I came. It's so cold up north. I didn't- you know I was- the catalog was impressive, you know. The written- the faculty was marvelous. You know, we had- William Meredith was here, James Baird was here. The music department, though small, Zosia Jacynowicz was here and Zosia had [unclear] in Boston and- and knew where- where I didn't want to go. She has been part of that world so ... José Limón was here in the summer and she had come to play for him. So, for me I thought it was what I wanted and I- I have to say in the end it was more. Intellectually, it was a

marvelous place to be. You know, people like Professor Haines didn't- didn't seem to mind that we were perhaps a little deficient in European history or- and there was great opportunity in the Music Department to play.

BP: Did you end up studying music?

MP: I did. And I did a lot of history and a lot of English.

BP: Was Rosamund Tuve still here when you were ...

MP: Yes, she certainly was.

BP: Okay. I couldn't remember what years she ...

MP: Although I would say that she- I didn't have any classes with her. The- she was- she was very special and I think the very best students had her. I had a lot to learn.

BP: Yeah. What were the stu- what were the- the professors who particularly stood out to you when you were here?

MP: Well, in the music department, Arthur Quimby was head of the department. Martha Alter was there. Zosia was there. Who else was in the department? Those are the people I think of right now. And James Laird, or James Baird, Jim Baird, I had several classes with him. I made a list, because I didn't want to ... Suzanne Langer was still here. Of course, she was going back and forth. I had a wonderful course with a young person named Engel, a philosophy of art course, which was a real eye-opener for me and that sort of gave me some sort of justification for finding that I had to be a musician. I tried not to be a musician. That's why I came here. I thought I could just shed it.

BP: Did you do- did you do mostly performance or theory or just do performance?

MP: Doing composition with Martha Alter was difficult for me, but- but where else would you do a comp- a couple of composition courses and have everything performed? And- and they did it. They presented full programs of what I had written and the choir sang them at graduation. It was- it was a gift.

BP: What was residential life like? Where did you live?

MP: What?

BP: What was residential life like?

MP: Oh, well, it was- for me it was different. I was a scholarship student. I lived in Emily Abbey. And I think I- I learned how to manage daily life in Emily Abbey.

BP: But Abbey was originally founded as a house for scholarship students. Was it- was it still that way then?

MP: Yes, it was a co-op dorm. There were 26 students divided in—I guess it must have been 26 weeks of school, I don't remember—everyone was the hostess for one week. Planned the menus. And, you know, I don't know if you know how the work was divided, but House 1, House 2 ... There were- and it was- it was hands-on and you had to get your chores done and the meals were, you know, dress for meals and there were breakfast cooks and-, which entailed just making the food and there were people who served, which meant that you rinsed the dishes and put them in the dishwasher. There were people who waited the tables. We ate together, three meals a day and there were mostly single rooms, so we had, I think, a wonderful life. It was, you know, it was across the road, so ...

BP: Yeah, did- did- did you ever feel like you were missing out on things in campus life?

MP: Yeah, a lot and it makes coming back to reunions somewhat of a challenge.

BP: Because- because you find that like your classmates have a different- just have a different memory of what college was or ...

MP: Well, they had a different experience. I don't know that it's a memory. Even when I was here, the experience—but I wouldn't trade that for anyone. I- I would say, if you could go to college and everyone live in a co-op dorm, life would be better.

BP: Yeah. Did you- I'm assuming you meant that Abbey was a much more tight-knit group of students. Was that a ...

MP: I think it was a tight-knit group of students. Yeah, I think the only- I think because I was part of the choir and part of another department whose students were mainly living on campus—there weren't any other music majors in Emily Abbey—I think I knew a lot of people. And I'm the only one—or one of the few, I should say—who comes back to reunions. And I- the rest of my classmates prefer to—because we all led working lives after we left. But I have to say, where else could you go to school and have Eleanor Roosevelt here for a week. Or, yes chapel was required, but to have Paul Tillich or Niebuhr come. I mean, these were everyday experiences. They

weren't unusual. And I don't know, unless people live in academic life after that, that you have that kind of intellectual life.

BP: I was going to say, you- there may be that kind of intellectual life going on at big research universities, but then do student necessarily have the same level of access to it that would at ...

MP: They don't have the time. You know, we lived in Washington DC for so many years, but in the end you can only afford the time and the money to go to many concerts and you can't do it every day. Giving away all my sentimental memories.

BP: What- so was there anything else about college life that surprised you coming here? I mean, you talked about how rich the intellectual life was and that was a ...

MP: I had gone to a- a coed secondary school. I was amazed that women were managing the Honor Court and managing the whole school. And I think I probably one of the few who is sorry that- my- two of our daughters went to women's colleges ...

BP: No, there are plenty who are sorry.

MP: I mean, very nice that you people [men] are here, but I learned to be self-sufficient, I think, and rather independent, but I also knew that I needed to get along in the world and- and work.

BP: What- what- what- non-academic stuff were you involved in on campus?

MP: Not very much. The choir, the chorus and that was several rehearsals a week and some traveling for concerts, you know. We did concerts with Yale and MIT and Brown and ... I walked a lot in those days, so I walked downtown when I had time, but I didn't- I didn't have a rich social life.

BP: Yeah, yeah, academics and co-op living.

MP: I'm afraid that I don't have any memories of much of a social life.

BP: What was the- what was the- the campus climate like when you were here? Were there any particular debates or controversies on campus that you remember?

MP: No, no. I have a friend who has-I found as a neighbor-who lived in Emily Abbey and now is- and she's class of '57, I guess. She was always demonstrating for something, and so I- I don't remember- there were- there was some demonstrations. There was some people who

demonstrated against the nuclear submarines or against something and they would sit out on—and I don't mean to—it was coming, but it wasn't the '60s and I missed the '60s. I just- I, you know, I don't know where they went.

BP: How do you think your experience here shaped your life afterwards.

MP: Tremendously. The Emily Abbey co-op life prepared me to move 22 times and set up housekeeping.

BP: In- in a military family or were you guys just on the move?

MP: Yes. My husband was a naval officer, submariner, and he was gone half of every year for twenty years, so I managed—we had seven children, so- and we moved, some moves, I moved alone. In most places I found an opportunity to play and/or teach. I found that local- local- the smaller colleges were willing to hire a decent pianist. I was always the last hired and the most worked, you know, but I was able to do that. In general, my children went to bed at 6:30 at night and I went off to rehearsal, but the- the co-op living prepared me to manage a household. I didn't know that. I didn't know what a potato peeler was before I came to Connecticut. And I think the academic life helped me to participate. I- for a long time I was- I was just, you know, busy with whatever adjunct activities there were for the- for my husband or schools, although I was teaching most of the time. After we sort of retired and came back to my husband's home in northern Vermont, I was politically active. Until recently I chaired a Democratic committee. I think there were, you know- I think I owe a great deal to this school.

BP: My last question's a two-parter. And in thinking about your experience and kind of the modern college experience, what do you think students today are missing out on that you had and conversely what- what is it- is there anything about the college experience today that you wish you could have had?

MP: No, there's nothing that I wish I could have had because I thoroughly loved it, but I think today's young people miss out on having to be self-sufficient and responsible for themselves. No, that's not- it's that- you know they're able to be in touch with everybody, ask for anything, whether it's directions or money or whatever. I have some grandchildren—we have twenty grandchildren—I have some who have much more than enough and have a freewheeling college experience and I have some who are truly scholarship students who are doing very, very well. I have a young grandson working on a PhD at University of Pennsylvania in psychotherapy or, you know, and he's been largely responsible. So, that's what I see. I don't think they have a chance to be lonely.

BP: A chance to be bored.

MP: No. And those are very healthy things to have to live through. I- I don't mean that as a criticism. I don't know, you can't change it. I mean these ...

BP: It's what life is now.

MP: It's what life is. I think everybody's missing the chance to grow with being alone, grow with not having quite as much as you might like to have. And not having the opportunity to be grateful for the good times. Does that make sense?

BP: Yeah, I understand. Well, thank you very much.