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Benjamin Panciera: So what made you decide to come to Connecticut College?

Nat Damon: Conn was the ... okay so I got a list from my high school college counselor and my father and I took a look at all the fifteen schools on that list in the summer of 1988 and, so it was a really wonderful father-son roadtrip, leaving from Boston and heading down to- as far south as Washington, D.C. and then east- westward to Ohio and up through New York State and then back through Connecticut. Conn was not on that list and I was- yet in my lap in the car was the Fiske Guide to Colleges and I was just kind of thumbing through it after looking at all these other liberal arts colleges and it was- and then I came across Connecticut College and I just read the profile about it and I was like, "Dad, why aren't we looking at this school?" And he said, "Well it's not too late, we could just add it, you know, to our return home, swing through New London after we look at Trinity." And we did. And the thing that stood out in the Fiske guide was that there was a quote at the end of the description of the college where a student said, "Connecticut College is a place where I can spread my wings without fear of falling." And I thought that that was such a great way of kind of presenting- of articulating what I was looking for from college, what I hoped to find at college: a place where I could take risks and spread my wings in a supportive community. And so we get to Conn, and this is August '88, and it's a pouring, pouring rainy day. It's like the end of the end of the month. It's ... and I absolutely fell in love with the campus regardless of the fact that it was ...

BP: Even in the ... even in the ...

ND: Even in the rain. It was just gorgeous and I felt the spirit. I think it's more because I could feel the spirit of the College even though, you know, it was ... it wasn't a normal day where everybody would be outside on Harkness Green. So, anyhow ... long story short or short story long, I applied early to Conn and got in and was thrilled so ...

BP: Yeah, you applied early so you didn't even really think about any other place.

ND: No, didn't and I knew if I got in I had to come here, so I was excited when I got in.

BP: Yeah, yeah. Once you got here was there anything about the campus, about campus life, about the campus culture that surprised you?

ND: It was supportive, certainly a place where you could take risks and spread your wings. And I found it to be extremely laid back in the sense of ... okay, so I think about this now as a much older man looking back at my experience at Conn, particularly arriving as a 18-year-old freshman boy, I look back and I'm really amazed by how laid back the culture was in terms of just coed bathrooms, you know, my student advisor was a sophomore and she lived in a room just two doors down from me, coed floors in other words. You could eat where you want, you really, your time was your own, and you had that- it felt like such a privilege but it came with the

Honor Code, exams, you know, the Honor Pledge. It all ... but all that came with a sense of expectation that- and a trust that we would honor this culture, this very relaxed and trust- trust-building trust-built culture. So I really felt that and I especially think about that now. I just look back on it and I can't believe that we had coed bathrooms. I couldn't believe that.

BP: Did you, I mean, do you have any awareness of that culture? I mean, I always wonder what kids think, you know, what high school kids are thinking when they think about college and even- even kind of like imagine what- I mean you have a fixed notion in your head of what college life is going to be like, but to what extent do you appreciate, like, a trust-building culture or something like that. Was that something you were expecting you were going to find, or ... and also what was your high school experience like? Was that a more reg- a more traditionalist, regimented, such that college completely turned that on its head?

ND: Yeah, I mean walking backwards from your questions, I would say it definitely turned it on its head. I mean I didn't go to a traditional high school either, but it's still- just by the nature of it being a high school, there are more rules and regulations, like you didn't just want to break the rules. And you came home to your- for me, I came home to my parents' house every night and I was the oldest of three brothers and, so, you know, I had- I felt like I didn't want to break rules necessarily, that the rules were there to be broken, or not broken. And then to have the rules kind of, not taken away, but they were kind of in the air that we were breathing. They weren't, like, explicitly set; this is the way you behave at college, at Conn; kind of communicated to me a relational trust that was expected from the get-go. And I think that, you know, so juxtaposing it with my high school experience, I definitely think it was a real, a really wide bridge I crossed with- but not alone. I think that the support was in place also in terms of, like I said, my student advisor, she was amazing in terms of guiding me through course choices and whatnot. And then once I selected an advisor a year later, two advisors, academic advisors, I really felt like I was in good hands. So, yeah, I mean it's- it's- it was a place where I was able to do that, to grow in so many different ways. Like I joined CoCoBeaux. I was a singer. I joined the crew team. I rowed. I did a lot of community service work while I here. No doubt it made me who I am today, profoundly.

BP: What was your residential experience like? What- where did you live?

ND: I lived in Windham freshman year, right in the middle of campus and with a window looking south, right just toward the Sound. Beautiful. And then I lived in Branford twice. I was a student advisor in Branford as a sophomore and then I was a house fellow in Branford as a senior, so again, central campus. Without a view, but I had the quad there with Plant and ... what's the other dorm? There's Branford ...

BP: Blackstone.

ND: Blackstone, thank you and, anyway, so that was my residential- I lived in the Plex junior year. That was forgettable. I was in Park.

BP: What- what did you major in?

ND: Psychology and American Studies, so two advisors, two- double major.

BP: Yeah, did you have any classes or any professors stand out from that?

ND: Yeah, Jefferson Singer was my advisor ...

BP: Oh, was he here already?

ND: Yeah, he was here. He must have been 26. Incredible. And Cathy Stock was my advisor from American Studies, who also must have been 26 when she started. Both, just powerhouse, incredible professors that believed in me in such a way, I was like, "Yeah, I will work for you, with you."

BP: It's amazing. You got them like both at the very beginning of their careers and they've become such institutions here.

ND: It's incredible. It's incredible. I'm so happy to know that.

BP: We were actually kind of expecting, when the- I don't think it's actually going to happen, but I think there was some anticipation that Jefferson might be interim president here. There was some early on- I think the trustees want to go in a different direction for entirely understandable reasons, but ... But, no, that's- that's really remarkable to catch two long-timers right at the beginning. You mentioned a bunch of stuff, the extracurriculars you were involved in. What role did extracurriculars play in your education here?

ND: A profound enough role that in the summer after freshman year I got a letter from Dean Brown saying that you have to quit something because your GPA is tragically low. So, actually I ended up having to quit crew, which really was tough. But, it was either crew or CoCoBeaux and I made the choice to quit crew and I wish so much that I didn't have to make that choice, that I worked harder, particularly my freshman spring. But, I get it and yeah.

BP: But it's great that you could continue CoCoBeaux. I mean, there's such an amazing a capella culture here going right back to the beginning of the College.

ND: That's right, that's right. Right to the beginning. Schwiffs, Connchords.

BP: Yeah, I've always wondered where that- I mean, I suspect part of that is kind of Yale connections from the College's early days because a capella was really big at Yale, but just the fact that they've been able to maintain that all these years and it's been so central to so many people. Like even people who may not have thought of themselves as really musical throw themselves into a capella. That was your- you had the same, the same sense?

ND: Yes, yes, yeah. For sure. It's a wonderful factor to the living environment here at Conn. It's just the concerts in Harkness Chapel, a capella concerts and otherwise, which was really like- It was really part of the culture, I think, yeah.

BP: What was campus climate like? Any particular controversies, issues that dominated campus discussions?

ND: Climate change. Al Gore's book came out in '88, I'm pretty sure it was '88. I know that at Conn we were talking about climate a lot, particularly the greenhouse effect and the hole in the ozone layer, so it was definitely on our minds, even back then. CISLA was just launched, so international studies, that kind of interdisciplinary approach to curriculum and socially, the Rodney King verdict, the LA riots happened in '92 and I remember very well the protest and the marches here and that being, kind of, the first thing I think about when I think about activism at Conn.

BP: Yeah, what forms did that activism take? Was it demonstrations on campus? Were people, you know, going to Hartford or downtown? What was ...

ND: Yeah, definitely on campus, just throngs of people at like 7 in the morning gathering together in protest of overt racism, you know as a result of the Rodney King riots and there was definitely- I think a march went down to New London as well. There were definitely marches in New London that we were involved with.

BP: Can you talk a little bit about your life after Conn and ways in which your campus experience might have shaped your life?

ND: For sure, yeah, my career's been in education and the relationships that I had with my professors informed how I was as a teacher, you know in K-12 environments and what I really reinforced as an administrator at the schools that I worked at in a more administrative level. I absolutely hold the teacher-student relationship, the professor-student relationship, in the highest regard because of my experience at Conn, anecdotally. You know, it was that sense of belief that these professors had in me and had in other students that I think Conn is exceptional at. I think that that remains the case today. Because I just- when I come back here – I come back three times a year for board meetings – what I see in terms of the relationship, what I really hear when I hear professors share about what it's like to work at Conn, what I really hear is, it's about the students, it's about our relationship with them, it's just watching them grow, and shedding a tear when they get acknowledged for something – it doesn't have to be a Fulbright, but maybe it is, a Watson, maybe it is. It's that recognition when they know that that student came into Conn not having any idea what she wanted to be when she grows up and knowing that because of the relationships with the professors and their peers they were able to spread their wings without fear of falling. So, I think that that's- and that's- if there's a way to keep focusing on that element of the College as we, as Conn continues to move ahead in the liberal arts marketplace, if there is at all a way to be able to really communicate how special and how

vital the instructional delivery, the relational pedagogy is here, it would really be amazing. I think it would truly be apart in a way. It's just so intentional.

BP: Was teaching something that you knew you were going to be interested in before you came here or was that a seed that was really planted here?

ND: Well, my dad was a teacher, but it didn't mean that I wanted necessarily to be a teacher myself. But ...

BP: My mother was a teacher and I knew I didn't want to be a teacher.

ND: Right, there we go. I mean, it's- for me it happened really organically and, yeah, and I do really think that Conn serves and continues to serve for me as a model of what should lie at the core of any strong liberal arts college, particularly liberal arts, you know. We don't have a business school, business major. We offer business classes or economics, finance, all that. That's important, particularly in this day and age when I think that many, many students or parents are looking for a return on the investment that's more quantitative and more visible. Yet, I think Conn is really in a position to capitalize on the critical thinking skills that develop when you have a curriculum that is as unique and creative as Conn's is and you have a dynamic where the students and the teachers are truly seen by each other and achieve amazing things.

BP: Do you still keep in touch with your classmates?

ND: Yeah, quite a few. Yes.

BP: Are you still- are you still in the area?

ND: No, I'm in- I'm in Los Angeles, but, no but- and I've got- we do have a condo in Boston because I grew up there and we're closer to my parents and it just serves as a really nice kind of toehold to where I grew up. And so that's really important to me, that we have a little footprint back home.

BP: But there are active student- active alumni groups in Southern California, that you're ...

ND: There are, there are, yes. It's growing, which is nice.

BP: Yeah, I mean, I know student recruiting down there has really kicked up a notch, in the last couple years at least.

ND: I hope it continues.

BP: Thinking about the College today, is there something from, kind of, current students' experience that you wish that you could have had and, conversely, is there's something from your experience that you think students today are missing?

ND: Well, I think today students, and this is not necessarily related to Conn, but I think that there's just a real tendency and temptation for all of us in society to be drawn into our devices in a way that may interfere with forging natural connections with each other and ... I don't see it with Conn so much when I come back and visit. I actually don't see the whole stereotypical, you know, three kids on a bench and they're all on their phones, but technology is certainly around in a way that could- that could interrupt the connections, the human connection. If there was something that Conn has—the experience of being at Conn today has—that we didn't have back when I was at Conn thirty years ago, I would say that, I mean, it is a far more diverse campus today than it was when I was there. And, not to say that we didn't have any diversity, we certainly had, you know, a diverse class, but not to the extent visibly that you see today and I think that it is a fact that a more diverse student body and faculty creates an environment for more enriching discussions, because you're gaining perspectives that you would not hear or be exposed to otherwise. And you're also gaining some friction that can come with that as well and if it's in an environment where you can feel trusted that you can share a perspective that may be different, but not threatened by, then that's an amazing classroom culture to grow up in, or to be in college- college culture to be in. I think that the diversity, in terms of- I think it was really hard to be gay at Conn back when I was there, for sure. It was really tucked away.

BP: I think it was hard to be gay everywhere.

ND: Yeah, I was about to say, like this was the time of ACT-UP, real activism, but not- it was very easy not to be activist as well, to let the others do that work. And at a small college where you may not be comfortable to come out yet just makes it more uncomfortable not to come out, just because it's a small college. So I think that that's something that I- I don't know what it's like to be gay at Conn today, but I can imagine just by looking at flyers and posters, whatnot, here in the library, I'm like, "Alright, it's definitely more visible here than it was 30 years ago."

BP: Alright, is there anything that I haven't asked you that I should have asked you?

ND: No, I mean you can ask me ... this can go on and on and on because my love for the College is forever, but I love this opportunity. It was a very serendipitous walk from Cro to the library where I ran into somebody, a classmate of mine who was like, "Come with me. Be interviewed. Become part of the permanent archive."

BP: No, and these are such a great- I mean, we don't have, you know it's one of my real frustrations is that we have so little documentation of the student experience prior to ... 2000? 1990? Because that just wasn't the focus of the Archives. It was the institutional history. And so it's actually- and students were not necessarily considered part of the institutional history. So it's being able to get that perspective, it's been, like really, really valuable to us.

ND: It's awesome. This is really great. It's a great project.

BP: Well, thanks so much for taking half an hour to come and talk to us.

ND: Thank you.