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Benjamin Panciera-Mark Litvin '73

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Benjamin Panciera: My name is Ben Panciera. Today is June 3rd, 2023 and today we are talking to

Mark Litvin: Mark Litvin from the class of 1973. I started here as a freshman in the fall of 1969.

BP: And why did you start here as a freshman in the fall of 1969? What made you come to Connecticut College?

ML: I went to a boarding school where I was at the top of my class and told I could go to any college I wanted. So I applied to two colleges and I didn't get in, which goes to the topic that I really felt was important for everyone to kind of build into their theory about what happened back then. And of course it was very embarrassing, this was a pretty elite private school, Middlesex, and they were embarrassed. So, they started calling around and they called to a few colleges that were going coed including Connecticut College. And they said -- and of course I felt devastated for a number of reasons, but obviously I wanted to go to college. And they said, "Well, Connecticut College is still accepting men. Are you interested?" And I said, "Sure, I'll go talk to them." And I came here and I think it was Jane Bredesen, who interviewed-- I interviewed with and she said, "Well, we'd love to have you." And I said, "Where do I sign?" because the main-- a big issue that I think affected all of us in different ways was the Vietnam War and I think that the impact of the Vietnam War on college attendance and on what happened during that era, the Vietnam War was a major influencer because the draft had just started and if you had a low number, you were going to Vietnam. And so if you decided that that was not a just war, which many of us believed, and weren't going to do that, you either had to go to Canada or, you know burn your draft card or be in college until that exemption was eliminated. So, you know, I didn't have a great number, but there was no way I was going to risk being called in the draft, so there was no question that I was going to be in college in the fall of 1969. And Connecticut College was so welcoming that I thought, "Take me! I'm yours!" because after rejection, you know, especially unexpected rejection, it was emotional. I think we all probably had similar weird stories that brought us here.

BP: Was there anything that struck you particularly when you came to campus or were you just-- were you looking for any port in a storm?

ML: What struck me was the friendliness, the sort of warmth and friendliness that I felt from the admissions team and it was a beautiful campus. It was relatively small. The boarding school I went to I had a graduating class of 48, so I wasn't necessarily looking for a large college and I was-- frankly, it was beautiful. It was the first I went after I was in my secondary struggle and I said, "I'm done. I'm ready." I didn't really shop. I felt I found a place that will take me. It's nice looking and why not? I was coming from a boarding school that was all male and I was thinking it would be a little weird, but, you know, why not? And so I took a chance.

BP: That must have been some kind of whiplash. How many men were in that class?

ML: Twenty. We all lived in the first floor of Larrabee and it was kind of wild. You know, someone was mentioning something called the C Book? I don't remember a rule book, ever. And I certainly don't remember ever being concerned about following any rule. And no one ever told me you can't do that, it's not in the rules. So, it was funny that, you know, there was this one track of tradition that affected all the women and then there were the guys who were like, "What the hell? Who are these guys and what are you doing here?" It was very curious. The professors also welcomed us, which made-- which once I got into it was really great. I could skip 101 classes because they wanted male voices in their advanced classes. That was a sociology class. My senior year they were very flexible. I actually got employed, I worked in the theater my whole career and I worked at the ADF for four summers while I was here and I got hired by one of the dance companies before I graduated. So that-- this is great, you know, I said, "I'm leaving school." And they said, "Over our dead bodies." I got someone to take that work, which was about six weeks of the semester and make it into an independent study. So I was able to get all of my goals met and it-- I really appreciated the flexibility that people had with our education. Also, the Human Ecology degree was just started and I thought that was a great idea and that's what I majored in, even though I never practiced.

BP: Was there anything that surprised you when you got to campus?

ML: You know, having been in boarding school, things like dormitory living, dormitory eating, you know, that kind of-- the routines. I was practiced. So, none of that typical freshman schlock applied to me. I found that it was-- you had to readjust your behaviors and expectations a little bit. For example, if you were taught to be a polite male, you would hold the door open for a female who was entering. We learned very quickly that if you held the door for a female, you would never go anywhere. So, you know, we had to drop that kind of pretense and, you know, it was-- I was surprised-- there were extremes in the older, the seniors, juniors, there was a lot of dislike for us in some of those older classes where they thought they were going to a women's school, but the younger ones, and even many of the older ones, were so welcoming, it just felt great. It really did.

BP: You said you-- so first year you said you were in Larrabee. Were you in Larrabee all four years?

ML: Three years. I lived off campus the fourth year.

BP: Ok. So what was the-- what was the environment in Larrabee like?

ML: It was-- it was-- you know, I don't-- I don't remember. It wasn't particularly wild. It wasn't like, you know, the place was trashed. We were all doing our own things, but it was pretty calm, relaxed, but people, you know were in and out, couples in and out, everybody was in and out all

the time. And it was pretty loose in terms of, you know, the regimen of dormitory living. It was pretty loose.

BP: So, human ecology, how did you end up in human ecology?

Well, of course my parents always thought I was going to be a doctor and I knew right away when I didn't get into Harvard to follow their path, maybe that wasn't what I wanted to do and I certainly didn't like the sight of blood. So, I looked at all the different majors and I thought maybe Psychology. I took an intro to psychology and it didn't really gel with me. And, it's-- Human Ecology sounded interesting, because the whole ecological movement was just in its early stages. I mean, not really early, but early relative to the general public's awareness of how badly we've treated our earth. The human ecology aspect, I thought what a great idea, because it led me into thinking that maybe I would go into something like regional planning or city planning and since I have a kind of mathematical mind, it seemed like it might be an interesting path. I really enjoyed the sort of soft sciences, which were essentially-- Ecology-- Ecology major plus some soft sciences, which made it the Human Ecology. And, I was scientific-- I was more a scientific kind of person. Math, science, not literature. So, it seemed like, it's new, it's interesting, it's certainly going to be the future issue, so why not?

BP: I think I know what the answer to this next question is going to be, but, so what professors stood out to you.

ML: Well, Niering and Goodwin, of course. Goodwin in particular, because he was a gentleman. And even back then he was old. Niering was so bright but he was such a jerk that it was really hard to take classes from him. We would take our Botany class in the Arboretum and he would bring us to the first specimen he wanted to show us and then he made us run to the next specimen because he had so much he wanted to teach us that we didn't have enough time if we didn't run from location to location. I thought it's nice that he wants to teach us this much, but, you know, we didn't have to run. Yeah, I found him hard, but bright and really interesting and Goodwin was really good. There was another professor who I had one class with that has stuck with me and that was Tom Havens, who I think taught history. And he taught a special course called Nationalism and Modernization, which, for the first time I felt I was taking a class that was really fascinating, that was an intellectually challenging topic, and it actually was reflective of what was happening in the world, the globalization of the-- of industry, the reduction of borders, and how nationalism and that tendency were so at odds. It was a fascinating course and I remember that one particularly well. But one other course, chemistry. I took chemistry with a woman and I can't remember her name except she had really, like, bug eyes. I never got a single experiment correct and it was like I was in a-- I was lost for the entire semester until in the end and in the last two weeks it came together and I realized she was really quite brilliant in the way she taught chemistry. Those were my memories.

BP: How important were extracurriculars to you? Were you involved ...

ML: That was key. I think the only-- I mean, I was-- I was part of the 60s 70s, I won't say Hippy Generation. I needed a-- I wanted a job because in that era, everybody smoked pot. I couldn't ask my parents for pot money, so I-- I decided I needed to find a job. And I tried house-- I tried one thing and it was stupid. But then I noticed that they were offering jobs at the theater. So I went down and the tech director there at the time, Fred Grimsby, hired me on the spot because he was, "A Guy! This is great! You can lug shit around." So, immediately my freshman year I started working in the theater. And I worked there all four years. I lit some of the musicals. I lit a lot of the dance companies and then I started working at ADF in the summers. Not my freshman summer, but sophomore and then actually one past my senior year-- for four years. And that got me very interested in lighting and stage managing. And, as I said, I had a dance company hire me even before I graduated. So-- and I thought they were offering me an 18-week tour in the fall of '73 that included eight weeks in Europe and, you know, I'm a graduating kid, I don't have any money, but I'm thinking, "Hey, 18 weeks, including eight weeks in Europe? A paid vacation." Right? So, I took the job and that tour was terrible. And I thought, I'll take the job and then I'll proceed with my real life, thinking I was going to go into Urban Planning, maybe go to UPenn for a master's degree in that. But I quit that job because it was awful. We drove everywhere. We drove cross-country five times in that 18 weeks. I mean, it was awful, so I said, "No, I'm not doing this." But then I thought, instead of going back to my real-- what would be my real life, I kept going. And I ended up having a career in the theater. I did that kind of work for ten years and then I ran a-- I was a finance director and then I was a managing director to two major New York institutions and retired in 2018 just in time to avoid Covid. So, my timing worked out really well.

BP: That kind of takes up my next question, which is about life after Conn. But how do you think that your experience at Conn really kind of guided the way that you pursued your career and the rest of your life?

ML: Interestingly, it wasn't the sort of intellectual pursuits. It was really all about what was happening in the theater and what I was learning about the craft of making theater and my ability, because there were so few of us interested, my ability to, like, try stuff. I tried lighting design. I tried stage managing or set ... All that stuff, I had an open field. In any other school that had a developed theater program, that never would have happened. So, interestingly, the void that existed in terms of the theater was perfect for me as a innocent to go in and learn everything I could because it was there for me to take. So, Connecticut College in that way was very instrumental.

BP: Yeah. What were some of the, kind of, issues and controversies on campus when you were here?

ML: Obviously, the war.

BP: The war.

ML: The war. And we were protesting all the time. Everybody was protesting everything. There was like a-- I think we called for a day of, you know, no classes and everyone was taking all that stuff very seriously, going to Washington. So that permeated a lot of what happened here. I'm sorry, ask the question again.

BP: Oh, about issues and controversies on campus, things that kind of really-- Anything that divided the campus? Was coeducation still a live issue or once the campus went coed ...

ML: If it was, it wasn't brought up to me. You know, maybe others had-- maybe other women had issue with it, coeducating, I didn't. No, you know, once I started working in the theater, what happens in that world is you get very isolated. You get very insular and you know really well all the people you're interacting with, but, outside of that very small circle, you're sort of oblivious to the rest of the world. And unfortunately, until I stopped touring, I was pretty much oblivious to the rest of the world.

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

ML: You know, there's only one-- not any-- out of '73, I would say no. One classmate I've been in touch with, one schoolmate, a fellow named Ted Chapin who graduated, I think, the class ahead of me, he and I were working together in the theater, you know, he'd direct, I'd light, and I've been in touch with him since over a variety of things. In particular once I started my last two jobs were the Public Theater right after Joe Papp died, I started there because everybody was leaving and then I worked at New York City Center for 17 years and particularly City Center, he was on the board. So we, you know, we were reunited as it were and we've been in touch regularly for a long time.

BP: Thinking about the experience of students today, is there something from their experience today that you wish you could have had. Conversely, is there something in their experience that you had that you think they are missing?

ML: Good question. I think students today have a lot more opportunity to investigate wider areas of interest. I think colleges are diversifying their curriculum in a way to be more attractive to individuals and-- or trying to be very specific in certain ways about attracting individuals. So I think there is a growth in curriculum-- in the curriculum and in studies that benefit the students of today. But I think, also, students of today don't have the level of curiosity, and maybe this is just a personal thing. I taught at Adelphi many years ago and I was appalled at the level of student work. I was teaching lighting design in the theater department, but I would give them old Renaissance paintings and say, "Describe the light in the work." They couldn't write a sentence. It was really awful. And I worry that today, with different ways of teaching math and science and English, I hope that they still are taught sort of basic intellectual skills that will survive a crash of their computer or, you know, if they can't find it on Google, they'll have other ways of finding information. I think, unfortunately, the automation of our society is, I think, negatively affecting our succeeding generations in that they are taking away the need for a lot of skills that we just had to have as a sort of basis on which to grow our life.

BP: So is there anything that I should have asked you?

ML: Well, no, I don't think so. We had a great time, we really did. And there was a certain-- t was also part of the era: the early 70s. Everybody was exploring. Everybody-- you know, you'd take LSD, you'd expand your mind, Timothy Leary. You know, all that-- there was so many societal changes going on, I guess, I felt that here I was able to experience them. Not necessarily granted by the College, but because we were just let loose and maybe it was just wherever I went it would have been the same, but I don't think so. There was something very free and open about here at that time for me.

BP: The last person I talked to said that he was told when he came here, I don't remember whether it was part of the tour or a student, it was a review he'd read, that it was the kind of place where you could expand of wings without the fear of falling.

ML: Yes, I think that's-- that's reasonable. That's absolutely reasonable and I think it's true. Very supportive, as I said. The faculty was supportive. Most of the students were thrilled we were here. I mean the kind of parties we had that we can't talk about, but they were great. And, you know, the College was learning too at the same time. So I think they let us loose a little bit, because they wanted to see what would happen, almost experimentally.

BP: Yeah, of course they were flying blind in this too.

ML: Exactly, exactly. So, I think-- now interestingly one of the class of '83 said to me, "You know, guys, the first guys came here because they thought it would be easy to get dates?" Which, I think, was the furthest thing from anybody's mind when they decided to come here. So a person from my class, or from an older class, said to me they were always told that that first class were independent thinkers, that they were looking for people who were willing to take a chance on something new, and that's how they picked them. Which certainly isn't people looking for a date. I just thought that was the funniest thing. It's, I mean, certainly you could go out with any-- you could date whenever you wanted, but that wasn't really the purpose.

BP: Well, thanks for spending some time with us.

ML: My pleasure.

BP: This was really great.

ML: Good, good, ok, great.