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Anne Zachary '93-Alan Cohen '83

Anne Zachary

Alan Cohen

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Anne Zachary: Today is June 3rd, 2023. My name is Anne Zachary. I graduated from Connecticut College in 1993 and today I am here speaking with ...

Alan Cohen: Alan Cohen, class of '83.

AZ: Okay, hi, Alan, so I am going to start with our prescribed question, Why did you decide to come to Connecticut College?

AC: So, I didn't know a lot about Connecticut College. I-- I was raised in New York City, Staten Island in fact, and my high school counselor didn't know a lot about Connecticut College, but I did a lot of the research on my own and it looked like a really solid liberal-- liberal arts college and I wanted the New England college experience.

AZ: Why?

AC: There's really just something appealing about-- about the ivy-covered walls and the beautiful-- the beautiful weather and it just seemed like really smart people went to liberal arts colleges and I wanted to be among those.

AZ: Did you do a tour of the campus beforehand?

AC: I did. You know, I had been accepted to a number of schools and my parents took me to every school I had applied to and then did a campus tour. And interestingly, when I was a student here, when I was a senior, I was an admissions-- admissions counselor. So I had a good experience being interviewed and I actually wanted to do that too when I was a student.

AZ: Ah, that's wonderful. Yes, you were, I guess a senior interviewer is what they call them.

AC: Senior interviewer.

AZ: Awesome. What was that-- can you tell us more about that experience?

AC: It was great. It was-- it was-- well, I, truth be told, I did want a campus job. I did want to make some money. I did not get chosen as a house fellow, which was a super bummer.

AZ: Me neither.

AC: Booo!

AZ: Senior interviewer, though. You got that.

AC: Senior interviewer, and so, I love-- I love meeting new people, talking to people, promoting things and promoting the school and have the opportunity to meet some cool students and try to fill the class up with great people.

AZ: What kind of people, do you think, when you were interviewing them, what kind of people did you think, "I want them here," or, maybe, "They should go to Vassar."

AC: Oh, that's a good question and it's so long ago I have to really search back. There were definitely-- there were kids that I interviewed who I knew Connecticut College was the place where they really wanted to go. I think if they-- if they communicated to me that they wanted to go and they could be very clear about what about the College they-- they were really impressed by, then-- then they got to the head of the-- just the ones that it seemed like they were kind of-- it was kind of rote, either hadn't prepared much at all or their enthusiasm for the school wasn't compelling. I guess that's how I made my selection, but I don't remember interviewing a lot of duds, either. There was-- it was-- it was a good group that I got to interview.

AZ: How many-- do you remember about how many interviews you conducted?

AC: Oh, gosh, no I don't. It was a lot, but ...

AZ: How often?

AC: I don't-- I really don't remember. Forty years ago, wow. I don't-- a couple of days, probably a couple of hours a week. I don't think it was a huge-- a huge lift, but I was using a set of muscles that was probably unfamiliar, but there was a way that-- we were-- we were trying to do it in a certain way.

AZ: How long did each interview last?

AC: I'm thinking like-- like an hour.

AZ: Oh wow, that's significant.

AC: Yeah. Or, or even if that wasn't what was allocated, that's probably what I wanted to take.

AZ: Did-- did the parents attend with the prospectives?

AC: Yes, generally yes. I remember meeting parents and taking their-- taking their child away for an hour.

AZ: Okay, no, that was the question.

AC: The parents didn't-- they didn't sit in the interview.

AZ: Okay, yes, because there are some-- I know there are some where it does happen. And I know it is not recommended.

AC: I don't remember that. I don't remember them, the parents, being in the interviews. No.

AZ: Okay, that's, well, good, I suppose. What was your major?

AC: I was an English literature and Theater major. So, I had a dual major and then I did-- I did a self-designed internship at the Goodspeed Opera House, the-- East Haddam, where I worked as a publicity intern and for that theater.

AZ: Oh, that's terrific. I was a-- I did the p.r. for a theater company for four years. Yeah.

AC: Oh, wow. Very cool, very cool. Small world.

AZ: Yeah, indeed. Who knows, probably crossed paths with some of the same people at some point. And what do you do now?

AC: So, I am semi-retired and I had-- I had a whole bunch of careers, but the-- over the past fifteen years I've run my own executive coaching and leadership development company. And so I coach high potentials in major corporations and then I do a lot of DEI training in companies and small businesses. And then prior to that I worked in public relations and marketing, and so I-- so my-- probably first decade after college I was working at in public relations, some in entertainment, theater, and some for media companies and publishing.

AZ: And do you think that, you know, studying English and Theater at Conn prepared you for your career? Is it something completely different that you're doing than what you studied? What kind of crossover ...

AC: I think-- I think it was a perfect-- it was a perfect choice of majors. I also think that I was incredibly self-directed, which is-- I think the people who do best here are the people who are self-directed in that way, in that I chose excellent advisors, both in English and in Theater. There was Robley Evans for English and ...

AZ: I had him!

AC: Wasn't he the best? Yeah, and Linda Evans [i.e. Herr], who was the head of the Theater Department, she was my advisor.

AZ: Yeah, she wasn't here when I-- I was here.

AC: She was-- she was amazing.

AZ: They're all, wait, both Evans.

AC: Linda, oh gosh, Linda Herr. H-E-R-R.

AZ: Oh yeah. She was here. Okay, I never had her, but she-- she was here.

AC: She was great.

AZ: No, Linda Evans was the star of Dynasty.

AC: That's right, that's where my head goes. So-- So, I-- I focused a lot on theater, on plays, on reading plays, so a lot-- a lot of drama-- dramatic, oh gosh I'm losing my words today, dramatic literature. The works of Tennessee Williams. So, studying that and then performing was-- was great, also working behind the scenes, shows, doing publicity-- I did a lot of publicity work for the Theater Department, and so I had a very well-rounded experience here. I-- I wish in hindsight that I had done more performance, more performing. I did, you know, I did the big shows here. I wish there had been more musical theater, because that's my first love. And-- And-- but, I was well prepared to-- I went to NYU for a semester and studied a lot of theater criticism and so I was-- I was ready when I got out to do publicity in the theater and to work in the theater. And I did for-- a high point of my professional career was I was head of communications for the Broadway League, so I did Tony Awards.

AZ: Oh, that's fantastic.

AC: So, I had ...

AZ: We probably do know a number-- a number of the same people, you know, actually.

AC: Awesome. Did you work in New York City?

AZ: I did-- I did not, but, you know, I worked in Pittsburgh, but, you know, for a theater company that had a school, knew people that went on to New York. Do you know Michael Burowski?

AC: Yes!

AZ: Class of '92.

AC: Absolutely. I know Michael very well.

AZ: And Jeff Finn?

AC: And Jeff Finn, who is now heading up Kennedy Center. Yeah, very-- yeah, when I worked at the Broadway League I was-- I was the liaison between all of the shows and the producers, so I-- that's where I knew Michael Burowski, as a theater publicist.

AZ: I-- I knew him from here. Yeah, he was a year ahead of me. We went to the-- we went to the Sophomore Formal together. It was my Sophomore Formal. He was a junior at the time.

AC: Very cool. Small world, small world.

AZ: Well, not really. We all went to the same college.

AC: Right. It's the only world that I know though and we all went here. Here's a funny little story, so my first real job-job, it was a project, a publicity-- a publicity project, and I was hired by a Connecticut College alum, who ...

AZ: Who was that?

AC: Jonathon Diamond, who was one of-- he was one of-- one of the first-- maybe the first class of men, graduates, and [I] didn't know at the time that he was a graduate and he didn't know that I was a graduate either until he saw my resume, so it was like the old, you know, old boy network that worked in that instance.

AZ: Wow. So you said something, you wish you had performed more when you were here. Is there anything else that you would have done differently in your college experience?

AC: Ahh, hindsight, yeah.

AZ: You should see the look on his face, people. Glad I asked that question.

AC: What's that expression about youth is wasted on the young? Now I-- at 61 I have so many interesting hobbies and things that I'm pursuing and-- and they-- and I didn't pursue those things in college, whether I didn't really have the interest or I was interested in other things. Now, I wish, like, I had taken studio art classes because I-- I do a lot of art now. I wish I had taken psychology because that would have been really helpful in my work as a coach. I wish that I had really taken my study, Spanish study, more seriously. The Spanish lab is so great, all the languages are great here. I live in Miami now where-- where being-- having greater fluency in Spanish would have been ...

AZ: Absolutely.

AC: So I-- I just think that there were-- it's a great place. Again, it's like back to being self-directed, I-- there's so much here and a lot of it-- I have dreams at times about going back to college and really-- and being, today, and just, just grabbing at everything.

AZ: Do you ever have nightmares about going back to college? I do. I love my time at Conn, I want to make that very clear, but I still have the dream that I-- that I have not submitted a paper or it's the end of the semester and I have not attended the class.

AC: Right. No, more like dreams about, like, that I should have gone to Harvard, you know, going to Harvard now, like I was going back to college now. But I-- my-- I-- I-- so many of my experiences were positive here and I, you know, I really did take advantage of a lot of things here. I was dorm president, and just really ...

AZ: What dorm?

AC: Which dorm would that-- I think that would have been, gosh, boy. It was in a quad. No, it was in-- it was in the freshman-- in the freshman dorms, so ...

AZ: We didn't have freshman dorms when I was here.

AC: Yeah, no, I don't know that-- I'll remember. Because I lived down there.

AZ: He's pointing south.

AC: For two years.

AZ: Freeman? JA? Harkness?

AC: No, the other direction.

AZ: The Plex?

AC: I lived in the Plex.

AZ: That's north.

AC: Two years. North. Oh gosh. My sense of direction's not-- I didn't study Directions in college. But, yeah, so I got to do-- I-- I think there were social-- there were, and we can get into this, it gets a little heavier, there were social-- there were social challenges here. You know, not being out and in the 80s, you know, against sort of the backdrop of AIDS and all that, there was a lot of hiding and so I was not out on campus. And so I was-- I-- I struggled. You know, I dated women on campus, but I knew that I was gay. I didn't have-- I didn't-- I didn't feel comfortable coming out and so I did have kind of a secret life. And, you know, in hindsight I probably could have come out. I think my friends here would have been supportive, but for whatever the reason, I didn't feel safe to and-- and that-- I'm very ...

AZ: It was-- it was a very different time in our country, in our culture.

AC: Very different, yeah.

AZ: Well, I can imagine that you would not have felt safe.

AC: Yeah, and I'm really-- I'm heartened that this campus now has become such a welcoming place too where students and non-binary ...

AZ: Have you been to the LGBTQIA Center?

AC: I didn't. I was last time. So, that- that's really-- that's very affirming. And-- but I didn't even really know who other other gay people on campus-- I never went to a gay meeting here. I did hide out.

AZ: They had them?

AC: They did. They had-- they had meetings. I was too scared to go, so-- I told this story so many times. I would-- I would hide in the-- in the shrubbery to see who was going in and out and I never saw anyone go in and out and I later found out that I was at the wrong entrance. There again is that sense of direction. But-- but in more recent years, I obviously know people who went to college who were gay, so I-- I-- it is-- it is a shame, but, you know, it's different today.

AZ: Now when we-- before we came in you were asking, "Do you want me to, you know, say positive things?" and you said, "No, say whatever," and what I said was, "Well you're here at the Reunion. You're asking to be interviewed. That kind of indicates a lot of positivity." And is that your experience? It sounds like it has been.

AC: I think so. I think so. And I also think that as, I can't speak for everyone, but I think as we become older, have these moments in our lives where we reflect back on who we were and what we're becoming, so there's a kind of soft spot that I have for college. It's a very special time in a person's life, first time that you're living independently, first time that you have kinds of responsibilities and, yeah, was it perfect? No, but-- but I had good friends when I was here. I lost touch with some of them, which, you know, as much as I tried to stay in touch. And, you know, I think I learned some really good social skills. I think I ...

AZ: Like what?

AC: I think I learned how to engage with people, how to be inclusive of people who were not-- who were different from me, how to-- I think I have pretty good social awareness, I can read the room pretty well. Some of that is just innate from my upbringing, but I think it was further developed here, and I think, creatively, I had lots of opportunities. I directed a production of *Lysistrata* here, super cool, outside, outdoors in the environment.

AZ: When was this?

AC: It wasn't a-- it wasn't a main campus production. It was something smaller.

AZ: This is when you were at school?

AC: Yeah. When I, yeah, musical theater, I wish there had been more, but I had a good-- really good time performing, and, you know, you learn a lot of social ...

AZ: Did you take any dance classes?

AC: I did a lot of dance classes with Peter Dimuro and, gosh, I can't remember some of the other people, but I did after college ...

AZ: Martha Myers?

AC: Martha Myers, yes, and I studied dance for-- for a few years after college. I let that go.

AZ: Did you take any voice classes?

AC: I did not and that's actually another-- that's missing. That's something that I would redo. I was one of-- one of the original members of the Co Co Beaux, so I was-- I joined I-- I believe my freshman year and then Tom Bates was in the group. He was one of the founders, so that was great. I came back five years ago for the 35th reunion, and I can get very sentimental about that, because the-- the-- so, we all, all the years jammed together and the younger fellows, the more recent graduates thanked us, acknowledged us for starting the group and for us it was such a beautiful thing to see these-- these guys carrying the tradition, and really, they were so-- so much talent and so different, what's changed in the music, and their-- so the sophistication, in terms of writing their own music and beat boxing and all of that cool stuff, and rap, which we didn't do. We were standard, like, barber shop. So, that was great, that was great. I think, you were talking about social skills, also I think I did begin to develop my, or refine, my leadership skills. I was a leader in high school, president of this and that, but what I got here to really-- to really learn what it meant to lead, to stand up for things you believed in, to-- and to create that kind of inclusivity, so that-- that was-- I think you get that, you know, a lot of opportunities, just for that on a smaller campus.

AZ: Okay, so here's the-- the hypothetical, or maybe it's not hypothetical for you, I don't know. Let's say that you have at least seven figures to donate to this campus. What would it go to?

AC: I would-- theater. I would actually really build out the musical theater program here. It would be to rival the-- the best-- the best schools that have really strong performing arts. I don't know ...

AZ: That's your answer.

AC: Yeah, I don't know that-- I don't know that when people think of Connecticut College they think of theater. I still think they think of dance, you know, the dance festival was here, it was a million years ago, but-- and I don't know how many small liberal arts colleges are really known

for their incredible theater departments, but, or musical theater particularly, but wouldn't it be incredible to be a leader in that way. And, you know, I think-- I think it's harder because you've got, you know, you've got a smaller student population so you're probably going to have to less, like, kids coming in with, really, that really raw talent. You know they're going off to schools, bigger schools, where there are theater programs, but I think it's-- they could-- they could be recruiting for this and giving scholarships and really expanding the program. That would be-- that would be cool.

AZ: I've been looking around, it looks like there actually is space to expand. I never would have thought that. I was just down-- Have you been down to the waterfront?

AC: No, no.

AZ: Yeah, I was just down there before coming here and, wow, it is steep, it is steep to go way down there. But, yeah, check it if you have the opportunity.

AC: Yeah, that would be great.

AZ: Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you wanted to talk about?

AC: Yeah, it was funny, I was meeting some of my co-- some of my classmates and interesting, there-- there were a few of them who were Jewish sitting around the table and I'm Jewish and we were both reminiscing about how few Jewish people we knew on campus and so I am wondering how that has changed. Part of-- ironically, part of the appeal of Connecticut College for me was that-- that-- that I sort of pretended to be a WASP. It was like, I don't know, it was just in high school I saw myself going to a WASPier school. You know, all of that-- but then I got, you know, then I got here and I realized that, you know, there really aren't-- there really weren't a lot of Jewish kids and so I don't know why I have more of an affinity for being more of a WASPier, I'm putting that in air quotes, yeah, but I don't know why there were, you know the school just wasn't attracting more Jewish kids. As I've gotten older I've become much more-- I have a much greater affinity to my Jewish heritage.

AZ: Yeah, I remember during freshman orientation when I was here they had-- I mean, I guess basically they would-- they might do the same thing today, you know, they had a DEI panel, I guess they didn't call it that then, you know what I'm calling it now, different populations, you know minority populations represented including the gay and lesbian population, which is what they said at the time, you know the school that they were representing here. The Jewish population, you know, was-- you know was represented, you know, as well.

AC: I don't recall there being, like, a Hillel House. There may have been, I don't know.

AZ: There-- I don't think there was, I mean, I know that the, you know, the Shabbat-- is it Shabbat, I don't know if I'm correctly ...

AC: Shabbat.

AZ: Thank you, you know, were on Friday nights. I remember the chapel, the Jews got it on Friday, the Catholics got it on Saturday, and the Protestants got it on Sunday.

AC: I do think that I had friends who were more-- who-- who were a little more observant than I in college, but I definitely felt-- I definitely felt like a minority. It didn't bother me. It so banal in hindsight, "Oh, that's interesting." If there had been more Jewish representation here, might I have, you know, might have I spent a little more time discovering my Jewish-- my Jewish orientation.

AZ: All right, interesting to know. All right, I think we are probably out of time. Well, nice to meet you and actually Alan and I had lunch together today, at the same table, not knowing that we were going to be doing this.

AC: You got to meet my spouse.

AZ: I did, yeah. What did you say his name was?

AC: Barry.

AZ: Barry, okay.

AC: We've been together going on 36 years.

AZ: Congratulations, that's wonderful. All right, well thank you very much. I'll see you in five years.

AC: Yes.

AZ: Bye-bye.