

Connecticut College

Digital Commons @ Connecticut College

Alumni Oral History Project

Linda Lear Center for Special Collections &
Archives

2024

Sharon Cole '74-Charles Stackhouse '94

Sharon Cole

Charles Stackhouse

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/oralhistory>

Recommended Citation

Cole, Sharon and Stackhouse, Charles, "Sharon Cole '74-Charles Stackhouse '94" (2024). *Alumni Oral History Project*. 31.

<https://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/oralhistory/31>

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Linda Lear Center for Special Collections & Archives at Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Alumni Oral History Project by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. For more information, please contact bpancier@conncoll.edu.

The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

Streaming audio for this oral history is available at
<https://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/oralhistory/31>

Sharon Cole: My name is Sharon Cole and I am class of 1974

Charles Stackhouse: That's a fake name

SC: And I am interviewing

CS: Charles Stackhouse, class of 1994.

SC: I am so used to medical settings, you have to give your birth year, but that's ok. Anyway, so what brought you to Connecticut College?

CS: Great question. You know, I was always going to go to college. You know, it was generational, it was, you know, both of my parents went. I grew up in Fairfield County [Connecticut]. Everybody, for the most part, was going to college somewhere. And usually at-, you know, I grew up in New Canaan, Connecticut, it meant you were also probably under some form of pressure to go to a very good school, right? So, I was a good student. I was a four sport athlete, captain of all my teams. You know, started looking at colleges as early as my-, I think my sophomore year. For some reason early on I was very fixated on Brown University. I think part of the reason I was fixated on Brown is that I had heard that they didn't have a grading system. I was like, "Wow, this is perfect. I'll go to college. I'll study as much as I want but my grade won't matter, or I won't even get graded." Actually, I went to a track event at Brown, I think my junior year, and decided that, yeah, I don't think that Providence is the right place for me. Nothing wrong with Providence. It is a very nice city, but it was very urban or more urban than I would have expected it to be. So I went back and out into, you know, and looked, like you did, college books and guides, which is what we did back then and, you know, I think ultimately, you know, my- I was- I wouldn't say I was hyper-focused but I grew up around a lot of people that were looking at smaller liberal arts colleges, you know the Williamses, and the Amhersts and, you know, the Wellesley, the Smiths, you know, Trinities. You know, so I felt like that was the type of school that I would end up going to. I was always comfortable around lots of people and diversity of people. Like, I spent the first fifteen years of my life in public schools in Stamford, Connecticut, so I was exposed to a very broad range of people in different circumstances and ethnicities and I loved that. And I think think that it's very much built into my DNA that I be comfortable around people and to treat people with, you know, a high level of respect no matter what their backgrounds are, but I- I- I think I was drawn to the academic environment of a smaller school program and, you know, one, it would have to be diverse. You know, I compared- if I look at my final college choices: Trinity College, Bucknell, you know, those probably the two top schools that I was comparing Conn College to at the time. They both felt very white. I mean, Trinity College in particular felt just like a very white school, which is obviously very funny, coming from a very white kid, but, you know, and not that Connecticut College at the time stood out to me as, you know, evidently more diverse, but it just was and it just kind of had a- had a feel about it, that was a little bit more, I think, welcoming, right? It

wouldn't say necessarily to a broader, you know international ... I'm not sure what it was. It just felt like a different place to me. I- I was very close to, you know, Bucknell and Trinity also for sports reasons. I loved the coaches and I- and the schools are very pretty and obviously, you know top-notch schools, probably- probably ranked, you know, ranked at the time higher than Conn. You know, but I visited here on the heels of a visit to Trinity when the weather in Hartford was really bad and, I was talking to my friends about this about an hour ago, like, and, you know, I- I arrived to Conn the next day or a few days later on a day like today and it was- at that point it just became kind of a no-brainer. You know the views of the Sound were just ...

SC: You fell in love with it too.

CS: It is- you know, it is funny. The other funny part of the story though is I did think I was- I do think I was fairly dead set, but I do recall a conversation on the phone with my friend Jerrod. Now, Jerrod and I, we grew up together. He- in high school we went two different directions because we moved to New Canaan. He stayed in Stamford but went to private school- at first in Stamford then ended up in Stamford public schools. But Jerrod and I were very close, currently close friends, and we while- you know he still would live like a mile away from me, even when we moved to New Canaan, and so, I was on the phone with him in my- I think I was in my parents' bathroom on a cordless phone, and I'm like, "Jerrod, what are we going to do?" Like, we had both gotten into Trinity. I think we had both gotten into Bucknell and, like, where are we going to go? And, you know, I don't know who said it first, but we ended up going to Connecticut College together. Jarrod subsequently transferred to Oberlin after his freshman year, still for reasons I'm not entirely sure, but, yeah, it was- I was certainly- if that call was the- I guess the, you know, the final step of the way to get here, that- I was already there. Like, to your point, like, I had fallen in love with the campus. I did like the- I spent the, I think a, day sitting in a class or two. That was an awesome experience. I didn't know anybody else that was here except for one other person. She was the goalie of the soccer team and we attended high school together. So it's not like a I had a ton of first-hand experience, as compared to other schools where, you know, I had a bunch of friends that were at Brown or, you know, and they could bring back their experiences and share them with me. And when I visited those schools, they- I could hang out with them and I had friends there. But, it wasn't enough to-, kind of- there was enough here, the juice here that was very appealing. So, yeah, it was a- in the end it was kind of a no-brainer.

SC: And what did you end up being involved with here for, you know, activities and a major and stuff like that.

CS: So, I came here with the expectation that I would play four years of college soccer and run. I did not like the coach at all. Now, the funny thing about the Trinity-Conn College decision was that I loved the assistant coach at Conn College on the soccer team. Loved him. Eddie, an amazing guy. I mean, like, he recruited me heavily, we had great conversations on the phone back when people did that, great in person. He came down to see me in New Canaan play. I couldn't stand the head coach, so I quit. I did not want to play for him. That August, right before I came to campus, Eddie, the assistant coach, became the head coach at Trinity. Had that

happened a few months earlier, I would have- I would have definitely gone to Trinity. Like, I did like him much- like him that much and soccer was certainly a part of how I thought about spending my four years in college. But, decided not to do that. And I know you mentioned earlier, this is funny, because you mentioned earlier you know, kind of the struggles of, like, an absence of structure or, like, going from, you know, some structure of, you know, family life, right? With a high school that's 9 to 3 or whatever it was and practices from 3 to 7. When I decided to, like, quit, my- my structure just got thrown completely out of whack. So I- I wouldn't- you know, at the time, I don't think I thought of myself as struggling through it, but it was very weird to me, like, to have all this free time and not really know how to fill it very well. And I've always been a very self-motivated person, but still, I mean, if I'm in classes, I don't know, three or four hours a day, that means I've got like, I don't know, fifteen hours of free time. I'm not going to spend all that time studying. So that was- that was a very unusual thing for me to struggle with mentally. It didn't show up in my grades. I feel like I had a good freshman year. But, I can't think of, you know ... I took Calc II, like, my freshman year. I felt like I did ok with that too, but it did kind of throw me for a loop. But I did end up academically, and I ran. I did run my- my freshman and sophomore year. Beyond that I got kind of bored with it and kind of burned out, so I did stop that too. But academically, you know, I got into the Political Science program. Always had a strong affinity for politics generally, was always kind of like a current events nerd. You know, I was the kid, and I can't believe, yeah it's amazing how it kind of just, you know, as off-putting as it can be, it's hard to tune it out if you really are. And I was the kid that kind of grew up watching, like, Roger Mudd on tv. Like I would- I was so tuned into following the news when I was a kid that I would watch the nightly news on my own and I- for a period of time I thought that Roger Mudd was actually a family member of ours. So I always had this interest in politics. And obviously that was- obviously news of the day and like the political, you know, culture. But it was great to be able to learn about it, right? So I remember my first political science class, Comparative Politics, taught, yeah, it was taught by Professor Patrick Ireland, who left to go to University of Denver my junior year, which was very disappointing because I had chosen him as my advisor. Loved him. Young professor, just amazing. So, you know, that obviously had a big impact too. Like, not only did I feel like I had a desire to learn more about it, but it was also very much reinforced by the fact that I had this professor that, you know, just like I absolutely loved. So that became my major and I also minored in History and- no, double minored in it. Double minored in History and in Psychology. So, loved all three areas of academic learning, but definitely the political science experience kind of stuck out to me.

SC: They didn't have minors when I was here.

CS: Is that right? Yeah, I- I- I think I've just come to- I- I think I technically just kind of fell into it my last year because I had take so many classes in Psychology just out of interest. I didn't think much of it, really, at the time. History was always was just something that interested me a lot. Professor Burlingame was my ...

SC: Oh, I know him well.

CS: Just loved the guy so much. Another reason why I kept taking classes.

SC: I was the first person to babysit for his first child.

CS: Oh my God, really?

SC: Yes.

CS: That's amazing.

SC: Because they didn't know any history students. They didn't know to ask for who to babysit. So they asked one of the English professors that I think he sat for who they could trust. And so, I babysat for them the night of the baby's birth. And then they, you know, by then they had found a history major to do the babysitting, but it was really funny.

CS: That's really- and am I wrong in- in- in thinking, because I had her and I think- was- he was married to another professor in the history department.

SC: Yeah. Shirley, I think was her name.

CS: Yeah, what was last ...

SC: Her name was Burlingame also, at least when ...

CS: So they were separated when I had- and- and I kind of remember them talking about each other a little bit, which is a little bit weird, but ... That's really funny, because I ... That is crazy. Yeah, I- I absolutely loved the guy and I was over at the bookstore getting some things for my kids before this and I saw some of his books and I bought many of them way back when, but, yeah. He was really- it's not just that- he was very smart and he had this- obviously this very incredible, you know, knowledge of Lincoln and ... but, also he could- he could host the show on PBS.

SC: They interviewed him on NPR once and I happened to be listening and it was so exciting.

CS: Yes. His voice and- he was like a rockstar. I loved that. I was always going to- I was always going to stick with history classes but there was a- there was definitely a throughline of courses I took through him- with him, like Civil War, I took a psychoanalysis history class with him because some of his early work on Lincoln is really, like, kind of ingrained in a psychological profile of the guy, right, like Jungian, or ... it's just fascinating. So, absolutely loved it. Spent a lot of time in his classes. My political science advisor ended up being Professor Wayne Swanson, who I absolutely loved too. So, I was very fortunate. I mean, I think that the two things do probably elide somewhat, meaning that if you find an area of interest to you and you find a professor or some form of mentor that happens to teach it well, you are probably drawn to

them in some way, right? It's that immediate. So, those- those in particular I felt a very, very strong connection to.

SC: I'm entranced, so entranced listening that I forgot what we were doing.

CS: That's ok.

SC: So, how did your life evolve after you left Conn?

CS: Good question. I didn't really- I think part of the reason I- part of the other reason I think I was drawn to liberal arts in- , as a high school student, was that I- I had no idea what I was going to do in my life. I- I-, you know, if you had asked me at the age of five, seven, ten, twelve, thirt-, whatever, what I wanted to do in my life, I would have given you a different answer every year: astronaut, NFL quarterback, president of the United States. Yeah, I'm sure there were five or six other things. So, I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I felt like liberal arts, and you were saying this earlier, it's not- I think it casts a great light on the- on- on- on-, you know, going through a program like that, is that it does equip you to, you know, think about the world and tackle problems in a very, you know, I guess broad and intelligent ways.

SC: You learn critical thinking in a couple of disciplines.

CS: Yeah.

SC: So, it expands ...

CS: Very much so. But it- but also for certain personalities like mine that didn't really have much of a career, it also creates sort of a quandary, right? :ike, I'm a smart guy, like, I did well in college, like people respond to me. I have lots of great friends here. I had lots of great friends off campus. I was a leader. But, I had no idea what I wanted to do. I- you know, when I graduated college I still didn't know what I wanted to do. And I wasn't- I wasn't too much of an oddball. I mean, back then I think that there were half of us that were, like, maybe headed in- very determined and direct, like, linear path to a career, whether it was in finance or publishing or whatever that might be. Then there was probably another 25% that went straight to, like, graduate school. But then there were, like, 25% of us, like, "I don't know. I just gotta spend the summer thinking about this." Right? So, I- I ended up working in politics, initially. So, I did end up working in politics. I worked in politics on Capitol Hill for a short period of time.

SC: Cool!

CS: Which was fun. And then I worked in election politics for a year too. So, I worked in election politics my last year. In 1996 I ran a campaign for US Congress in North Carolina. We lost. But during that pendency, that two-year period of 94 to 96, I did give- give some thought to like, if this doesn't work out or if I don't- I don't want to stick out a career in politics, I've got- I've got to have a plan B. Or I want to go back to school and- and I did make the determination that it

was likely going to be law school. So, after we lost that campaign I went to law school. There was a period of time that I started a company with my dad but that was - that was a year or two that was kind of a bridge to get through the application process, the - the LSATs. Went to law school, again not really know what the hell I was going to do after law school. Law school was interesting to me because again, it kind of appealed to this liberal arts brain of mine. Like, it's great. Like, I don't - you know, I'll just learn how to think about problems, like case law, I'll just find my way through it. But, I also was in a, you know, in school, because most people that go to law school have a very definite plan for that. You know, I was the one out of a hundred students that was like, you know, the 99 others would go to the library and I would go back to my room and hang out or go to the gym or, like, go out. Because I - I was - I - I did not desire to be, like, a lawyer. I knew that - I knew that I didn't want to be a lawyer. And I wanted that experience to learn some more. I went to law school in New York City and I felt, like, you know, I probably will go into finance. I'll figure it - this out. And, you know, the challenge for me, and I recognize that this is really odd while I was in law school, because I had friends that, you know, in MBA programs at Columbia and NYU. It was, like, wow, they were spending their Wednesday nights and Thursday nights at cocktail hours with, like, Goldman Sachs and, like, Merrill Lynch, and, like, they're networking. And, like, in a structure environment. They're being recruited at these events. I'm going to have to step my game up, because I don't have an - I'm not going to have an MBA after this and they are already talking to, you know, folks that hire at these places. So, I did. I mean, I networked the hell out of New York City when I was there, pretty successfully. I went to go work first for a hedge fund in Connecticut, so I reverse commuted my way up here. And then ultimately just kind of found a career in finance. Like, I - I liked it. I've actually been through several different areas of invest - the investment world and finance. But, during the Great Financial Crisis everything kind of got kind of scattered a bit and I had to really kind of figure out what - what's my career going to be in finance, like, because I worked in structured finance at that time, which was basically structuring derivative products which effectively took down the entire financial system. Like, I don't want to go back into that. You know, because there are huge swathes of people on the trading floor that were no longer working and so it was not a good place to be finding a new job. So I went into asset finance. So I have worked in the asset finance world really for the last fifteen years. And absolutely love it, because I - it appeals to me on an intellectual level. It actually does require, at least early on when I - I actually had to do the down and dirty kind of work, my experience as a, I guess, as a quasi, you know, lawyer or somebody trained to study contracts and negotiate was, like, helpful. So that - that's where it's ultimately, kind of, taken me. But, you know, alongside that, you know, there's the rest of my life, right, which is, you know, I was a serial dater. I, you know, partied a lot. You know, I spent most of my career and life in New York City and living like a, you know a twenty- or thirtysomething in New York City would live and that was a lot of fun too, because, you know - and I think that, you know, the experience here helps with this is that, again, you just - you get - you get - you go to class, you learn, right? You learn what the professor teaches you, you listen to the textbook, but the exposure of being around people that aren't like you, right, and the willingness and receptiveness, I think this comes down to the person individually, but I think that for the most part everybody that I went to college with approached the same way. Like, you learn from other people, right? You learn to listen and you learn to

engage with other people and New York City could not have been a more interesting place for that type of ...

SC: That's true.

CS: And I absolutely loved that, but ultimately did, you know, did settle down, you know, twelve years ago, coming up on twelve years and, you know, now live the quiet suburban life in- outside of New York City.

SC: Sounds good.

CS: Yeah.

SC: You seem like you're quite happy about it. Is there anything about the College today from what you can garner visiting here that you think the students might miss from what you experienced when you were here?

CS: Yeah. Yeah. I mean there are- they've changed the rules here, right? Now I don't know whether that is good or bad. I don't think necessarily deprived them of any, you know, really important experiences. But, you know, it's interesting, I- I- I've stayed pretty close to the College. Like, as I mentioned to you, I, like I- I routinely come to the Reunion. I have friends that, you know, over the years have served on the Alumni Board or Board of Trustees. I've stayed- I've stayed close to that. I think I'm technically the alumni president of my class, right? So, you know, I've had to write nice fundraising letters to my classmates. I've had to write, sadly, like, you know, notes of passing, right, from friends that have, in our class, have passed away. So I've- I've stayed- I've stayed close to it enough, certainly at that level, at the alumni level and certainly have interfaced with, you know, the leadership, I guess, of Conn College over the years. But what was really cool was that right before the pandemic in 2020, I came here to speak and I came here actually I invited-, so I've- I- in my world, right, I most recently or right before my current job I was- I was with an investment firm that basically bought other lending and leasing companies, right? So, you know, we had 20 CEOs that, you know, I worked with, right? So I invited one of our CEOs to come with me to Conn College to, you know, talk with a group of students, primarily I think in the Economics department, right, about what we do and, you know, and how the- and it was amazing. It was absolutely amazing, but it was a great experience to share with the CEO of mine who was a- I think he was one of the youngest Wharton grads in Wharton's history, just genius guy. A little bit more, uh, less progressive than me, so it was interesting to see him interact with a much more progressive, you know, base of students. But what was really cool was that I had- as much as I had been involved with the school I hadn't really engaged much with students at my college in years, right, so directly. And I guess a few things, and this goes back to your question. One is, I think the kids here get as good if not a much broader and interesting education than we did in the classroom. Like, I do think there is a, and maybe this is more from the observation of somebody that hasn't been in academia over the years, but it's amazing. Like, these kids who are absolutely, you know, so incredibly engaged. They were, when I say focused, it's not like they were laser-focused on very

narrow things, they were just focused in on solving problems and thinking about their world in a much broader perspective than, I think, than- than- certainly I did, right, back when I was in college. In college, I liked to think that I was a thoughtful person, but I wasn't very mindful. And it was my fault, but maybe I wasn't, but maybe I wasn't very mindful about, like, how do I solve these things. Like how could I think about- how could I make-, you know, how could I enrich the lives of- of a greater majority of people, or ... Like, I just thought it was really interesting. And then even though these- these- most of these students were kind of in the discipline of economics, they were clearly very interdisciplinarian in how they thought about, you know, and tackled questions and the questions that they asked were so interesting and engaging. So from an academic standpoint, I think they're-, again, from my perspective, they seem to be having a phenomenal experience here. And I have friends whose kids here have- are- I have friends whose kids here are- are currently students and, you know, some have recently graduated and, again, they definitely fall into that category of the same kind of student that I engaged with that night in 2020. Really just amazing, absolutely amazing, and it speaks so well of the campus.

SC: I don't think that there really has to be anything that they're missing.

CS: No, but certainly the- I think- something that has to do with, probably, some of the changes that came about as a result of the pandemic. So I think a lot of those things, whether it's permanently changed the campus or not, I'm not sure. But, yeah, it definitely seems to be a little bit less ... Like, I spoke with friends of mine a short while ago whose daughter graduated two years ago and this is one example, because they'd changed the rules about, you know, whether it's drinking, or bottles or kegs on campus, that kind of nonsense, it's actually has changed the way the kids have engaged with the community and themselves on the campus itself. So, we rarely left campus, like rarely.

SC: Yeah.

CS: Right? But, many kids do now, because if they want to do that now, conspicuously, they've got to go downtown. Like, you and I didn't, right?

SC: No.

CS: I had a car, but I still didn't do it because there was nothing going on. For them, it was more, "this is work, this is kind of where we socialize," right? And I- I think that can be enriching too, because one of the things that I- I didn't like my first week here was, and I don't feel like I'm a snobby person, but my dad and I had lunch, I think after we dropped my stuff off, went downtown, and, you know, the restaurant was awesome, I got fried oysters, they were phenomenal, but the area was crappy, like really crappy. And it was just kind of depressing too, because here you had this campus with mostly, like, you know, very privileged kids, right, and you've got a deteriorating ...

SC: Such big gap.

CS: Huge gap.

SC: And I think- I think that's probably being closed a little bit now, especially with the mayor of New London is an alum- alumnus--I'm sorry, I had to go through my Latin--of the College and they- and there's so much change going on downtown with a thought for keeping affordable housing and stuff in place as well.

CS: Yeah.

SC: So I think that all is for the good.

CS: I agree with that. But that definitely is the change, I think sort of the fabric of the community here a little bit. Not necessarily for the bad, but it's definitely different. In fact, again, I view it as largely positive, because we did feel like, back when we were in school, that this was an island unto itself.

SC: Yeah. It really, that's what it was like. Sadly, we have done our half hour.

CS: Alright. It was awesome.

SC: We could talk forever, but ...

CS: No, it was a pleasure!

SC: But it was a great deal of fun.