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Judy Everson Memoir

Everson, Judy

Interview and memoir

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UIS Alumni Sage Society

Everson discusses her experience at Sangamon State University as a professor of English for over 30 years and as an administrator serving on committees to create the university infrastructure in the early years. She came to SSU when it first started because it allowed her and her husband to teach at the same university; other university staff and colleagues included former President Naomi Lynn and Vice-president Wayne Penn.

Interview by Cheryl Peck, 2009

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Narrator: Judy Everson
Date: November 30, 2009
Place: Springfield, Illinois
Interviewer: Cheryl Peck

Q. Good morning. Today is Monday, November the 30th. 2009. Today I will interview Judy Everson, professor emerita of English at the University of Illinois at Springfield. This is Cheryl Peck. I'm going to put it [the microphone] right there.

A. All right.

Q. Judy Everson, professor emerita of English at the University of Illinois at Springfield, thank you for agreeing to do this oral interview with me.

A. You are very welcome.

Q. I'd like to start in the beginning when you came to Sangamon State University, in the very beginning. I'd like for you to first talk about your early impressions of the university.

A. I came to the university before it was a completed campus to interview for a faculty position, which my husband and I were interested in pursuing because at that time we were based in Carbondale, Illinois. He was teaching at SIU [Southern Illinois University], and I could not be interviewed there for a faculty position because they had a nepotism policy, which prevented me as a spouse of a faculty member from being considered for a faculty job. So my husband, Dave, said whenever we can find a university that will interview us separately and yet perhaps employ both of us, I will be willing to leave my tenure track position at SIU.

It turned out that Sangamon State, because it was recruiting its first year faculty, was hiring a very large cohort of about 45. And they needed people in Dave's discipline, which was political science, and in mine, which was a multidisciplinary orientation in American studies. So we found out about this new university, not yet built, still under construction, and we were able to send up our resumés and to be interviewed. This took place in the old Myers building downtown where later the Board of Regents, our governing board, had an office. They may have had their office there then, but that was where we were interviewed separately by the then Vice-president of Academic Affairs, George Cohen, and we were shown plans for the campus.

But at that time, we were not taken out to the campus because there was no campus. The land was there and temporary buildings were going up. We then came back in June 1970, having been hired for a week long curriculum conference. That's when we met our other first-year charter faculty colleagues. And as I recall, we were given a hard hat tour of the campus in conjunction with that week-long stay.

The conference was held at the Holiday Inn, which is no more and has been replaced by the Crowne Plaza out on Dirksen. And we were, I think, taken in a car pool or something of that sort over to the campus. We had to put on hard hats. The temporary buildings are still there, surely not temporary after almost 40 years, so we should call them something else. Anyway, the modular buildings were going up but even to go through them at that time, although classes were to begin in just a couple of months, we had to put on hard hats.

So I remember thinking for the first time in a very concrete way, what a work in progress this university was. It had no physical plant. It had no plantings. It was in the midst of a cornfield on the edge of the less developed part of Springfield. We were part of an experiment. It was really a leap of faith to give up the security that was involved in staying in Carbondale, which while it had many down sides to it, had the virtue of having been there for awhile, of having an actual physical plant, of being a going concern. We were leaving that security, such as it was, and coming to a place that was still more of an idea in everyone's head than a translated reality.

And so I realized at that moment that I toured the complex both that it was going to be brought into some kind of physical reality, but that it wasn't yet one. And that my husband and I would have a major role to play in whether that worked out well or poorly because we were pioneers present at the beginning.

Q. And since it was more of an idea than reality, can you talk about how you contributed to the formation of that idea and what it eventually became in those early days?

A. I was so conscious of being a first year faculty member, first year at SSU because it was the first year it opened and first year because I had never taught full time. I'd taken three years out after working on my doctorate to have our child. So this was my first job as well as being part of a founding faculty. I can remember thinking, "I have an unusual and extraordinary burden." Because I wasn't just joining an institution midstream and helping to keep it afloat, I was responsible, to the degree that I could be, for making sure that the idea survived. And that was an exhilarating but also an exhausting proposition as it got translated into reality because we had a very complex mission.

I think it would have been hard even for people who were already veteran teachers. I can speak best from my own perspective: I was just overwhelmed, yet I felt an acute sense of responsibility if I failed in any of my responsibilities, professional obligations, because I felt so much more was at stake. Since we were brand new, I felt like the mother of a newborn as opposed to the mother of an older child. I felt that this was fateful, and I had a responsibility to fulfill that was keen, and I couldn't take it lightly because so much depended on what each of us did for better or for worse.

Q. And how did that reflect itself both in the classroom and outside the classroom in your other duties?

A. We had such an array of obligations, but it was clear that the most important of those from the very beginning, which marked us as most unusual in 1970, was teaching excellence, instructional excellence in the classroom. So for me this meant having never taught before and being asked to teach not just what might be called conventional courses, but very unconventional courses like public affairs colloquia. I was constantly preparing for class or recovering from class in the sense of correcting papers that had been turned in at the last class, three classes per quarter, and with as many as 20-40 students in a class.

I remember feeling that I was on a treadmill that I couldn't jump off. I had to just keep going. And the only reason I was able to do it, I think, was that I was young and energetic and idealistic. And I found that I loved teaching, and I truly enjoyed the freedom that I had within the classroom to teach in the way I thought best and I enjoyed interacting with my students. And that fueled my ambition to keep up this pace, but I was always torn because that wasn't the only thing we were expected to do.

We were also building the university infrastructure so we served on disciplinary program committees. We served on interdisciplinary program committees. We served on committees for everything because there was no structure there. We, by consensus, built the infrastructure, the entire institutional infrastructure, and it was a tremendous administrative responsibility that fell upon the faculty as well as our overworked administrative team. So there was always a competition between the pressure to perform exceptionally in the classroom, and at the same time, the requirement that we build the systems that eventually would become more routinized, we hoped.

Q. How did that affect you in later years, that sense of ownership you must have felt when other things began to happen there?

A. It was very difficult for me to accept changes that I regarded as betrayals of the early vision of the university at the same time that I understood all too well the reason for the need to change. But I felt in some way when we had to make those changes, we were acknowledging that either the vision we had bought into by coming to the university had been in some way fatally flawed or that our execution of the vision had in some way been fatally flawed if the vision itself was not at fault.

So whenever we had to make an adjustment, it was not only because we needed to do it that we could go forward, but it was because we would look backward and say, "Where did we go wrong that it has come to this?" And I don't think that was as keenly felt by subsequent generations of faculty as by those of us who invested so much in the early formative years of the institution's life.

Q. So in the first decade, can you talk a little bit about... do you remember between 1970 and 1980, some of the highlights of that time?

A. Well, the crisis that I would mention as the most bittersweet for me centered around our need to replace our founding president. He had been responsible for the vision articulated in the blue memo. And he was as brilliant at conceiving an ideal university as attracting faculty to translate that into reality. He was as good at that as he was eventually ineffective in being able to take the institution where it needed to go in the next level of consolidating its gains.

Finally the institution recognized that and I reluctantly recognized it as well. We needed to get him to accept a necessary transition back to a classroom capacity where he, by the way, performed admirably and was respected by his colleagues, I think to a person, for the grace with which he made that very difficult and painful transition. It was as hard on him as it was on all of us. That was a very painful moment, but it concretizes what I was talking about. There was a very real sense, in making that transition in which we said we need something different now if we're going to be able to continue into the next decade.

And we had to do it and there was no way to do it except to usher him out of the role that all of us had come to accept, which was as our father figure in a way. And it was traumatic I think for many of us, even those who felt far earlier and more emphatically than I that the time had come to do it. I came to it somewhat reluctantly and ambivalently but ultimately concluded that for the institution's good, this had to be done, yet it was a very bittersweet moment.

And I take no pride in my personal role in that at all. It was a regrettable step, but I took it because I believed that the institution he had helped to found and create might not survive if he continued as the leader and that its needs were more profound than his. So there's a concrete example.

Q. You said that early on you felt like you were on a treadmill. How long did that continue? Did you eventually... things began to settle down?

A. Yes, there was a sense in which I stayed on a treadmill of sorts, but it was self-generated. But I was able to extricate myself of some of the responsibilities toward the end of the second decade and into the third decade and certainly early into the fourth decade. I was able to pull back from some of the infrastructure building responsibilities because we were a much bigger institution. There were more colleagues to carry the load, and our future was more secure and some systems were in place.

The personal treadmill that I stayed on had to do with the fact that I still held myself to a very high standard of teaching excellence. And our department was small enough, and the interests and needs of our students broad enough, that I was constantly feeling pressure, both internally generated and externally generated, to have new courses available or to revise the courses that I'd already created to respond to changes that needed to be made in the curriculum. So to the very end I was just designing new courses and teaching new courses with the challenges that this necessarily entails.

I never reached a period where I was able to consolidate my gains and simply teach a few courses in rotation. I was constantly feeling that I needed to extend myself, and I'm sure sometimes I overextended myself and wasn't able to be prepared with the kind of depth that I should have had. So does that make sense?

Q. Yes. Over the years, you said early on that you, it was the kind of teaching environment which you... really appealed to you. Did that continue to be true into the later decades?

A. Yes, I was very spoiled because I chose to become tenured in English. I had an opportunity when I was approached by colleagues in communication, history, and English, to consider making one of them my program base because my doctorate was multidisciplinary and I had taught in all three of those programs. My dissertation was essentially a history dissertation, but it was about rhetoric and I had taught in communication. But I determined that my first love was English, or as it was then called Literature.

I was very fortunate that at that point we were only teaching juniors, seniors, and master's level students. The students who came into my classes were normally people who self-selected because they loved to read, they loved to write, and they loved to talk about what they had read and what they had written. And those were things that I loved to do, too. And so I found that invigorating, that conversation that continued from course to course and from semester to semester. That I never lost, and I only hoped that I would be able to recognize the point at which my energy level or my passion for that was compromised in some way so that I would leave before it was no longer the case that I felt it each and every time that I stepped into the classroom.

At the point that I felt I could no longer continue to deliver that, I retired, which was after 31 years of full-time teaching. Maybe I could have held out longer, another year or two, but I would have known it even if my students hadn't guessed it. And I would not have subjected myself or them to that, so I left as soon as I felt I couldn't sustain that any longer. I didn't want to be the kind of faculty member I had occasionally had who missed the opportunity to go when the time was right. I would rather have left a little early than a little late.

Q. In 1995 the university became a campus of the University of Illinois. What do you think would have happened to Sangamon State University had it remained an independent campus with its own governing board?

A. That was another excellent example similar to the one I gave about the need of the campus to exchange its first president for a replacement. For me, and I think for many of us who had been part of the early history of the campus, that was another bittersweet moment. It was bitter because it represented a considered judgment of the powers that be that we were too vulnerable an institution to sustain ourselves over the long run without a change of venue, so to speak.

But it was sweet in that if we did have to change venues, there was probably no better place for us to land than within the University of Illinois system from our perspective, however challenging and however poor of a fit it seemed to the U of I Urbana-Champaign. I was asked to speak at the last commencement for Sangamon State University. They asked a faculty member every year to do this, and I was the one chosen that year.

I remember writing a very short speech in which I tried to recapture the dream that had been Sangamon State. I said that many campuses had missions and visions but that we more than almost any campus I had ever known had been part of a dream and that we were such stuff as dreams were made on, as Shakespeare says in his play, *The Tempest*. And I remember when I said that as I looked out at my colleagues who were seated in the front rows of the auditorium, I saw many nodding heads and even a few handkerchiefs. And that's how I felt and I had to rehearse that speech again and again so that I didn't break down when I said it because it was so heartfelt for me.

Yet as I felt ultimately with Dr. Spencer, the good of the institution surmounted any other good, and I hoped and believed that the change that we were undergoing was necessary to assure us a more viable future. And I would not have clung one moment longer to any discredited or out-of-fashion ideas just because they were the ones I had sweat blood to try to deliver on. I wouldn't have done that at the expense of the institution's long-term viability.

Q. If the university was a child, how would you describe him or her at the age of 40?

A. I often used that biological analogy when I tried to explain the university to people that I knew who had never heard of a place like Sangamon State. I would refer to myself as one of the midwives at the birth of the university and sometimes I would refer to myself as one of its many parents trying to nurture it along. So that's an analogy that came readily to my mind, and I think we went through many of the organic stages of evolution or development.

I think we were a fretful and colicky infant with a lot of special needs, and I think we became a very gawky and awkward adolescent with many problems that tried the patience of people who were running interference for us, both inside and outside the institution. But I think as I see us approaching the age of 40 that by no means are we yet middle aged as institutions go, but I feel that we are past the point where I have to worry about our premature death.

I think our future, our ability to continue progressing and developing, is more assured even in the current budgetary crises than was true in those earlier decades of our evolution. Part is because of the stewardship at the University of Illinois system; part of it is because I think we have just learned a lot from our past and have found ways to move on, not always in ways that I am comfortable with or fully approve.

For example, I find it wrenching to accept the reality that so much of our instruction is done online when to me the joy of teaching at the university was the close contact, the face to face contact between teacher and learner, and between learners and learners in the classroom.

I find it difficult to believe, though I'm maybe too skeptical since I've never taught it this way, that a computer exchange is the same. I know too much about communication, and I know you're nodding now and I can see your face and respond if you look puzzled or if you want to say something, I can respond to that immediately because we're sitting across the table from each other.

And that was the way I interacted with my students. I knew them all by name. I cared about them as individuals. I wanted to be able to watch their reading of what was happening in the classroom and to respond to the moment to moment changes that would occur in the texture of our dialogue. I find it difficult to accept that that has happened in on-line classes. And yet I, at the same time, respect the institution's need now as in the past to modify its practices in order to continue developing and growing. It may grow further away from the institution I thought I was building, but that's the price we pay for progress.

Q. What are some of the traditions that have been kept as a result of the building that you did?

A. Well, here's an example. It has to do with colleagues, not students. One of the things I treasured about the university was that it was small enough that I not only got to know my students as people, not just as numbers or names, but I got to know my colleagues in the same way. And while I didn't know them all equally well and maybe didn't like all of them equally well, truth be told, I came to know many of them from different disciplines in ways that at a larger institution that was more conventionally organized with bigger departments and more self-contained departments, I never would have known.

So yesterday, I was invited to a luncheon party in Champaign by a colleague and dear friend, Rosina Neginsky, and Keith Miller and his wife, Bethany, were there. Now Keith's field is computer science, and I do not even own a computer, as you know, and yet Keith and I were able to sit next to each other at the luncheon and have a marvelous conversation about computer ethics and science fiction and any number of things. And I had dozens of those conversations over my 31 years at the university. I had dozens of those conversations with people in philosophy like Larry Shiner and people in history like Cullom Davis or Bob McGregor and his wife Deb McGregor.

I knew people from all over the Arts and Sciences and considered them friends and, in some cases, co-taught courses with them. That was a marvelous opportunity that the university gave to me, which would have been denied had I gone to any other kind of campus. And I treasure that as I think back and hope that it is still being preserved.

Q. To what extent do you think has the community accepted the university after such an inauspicious beginning?

A. I think as we have become a more traditional and conventional university, it's been easier for the conservative community that Springfield is, at its heart, to accept us. And I would say that from that perspective, we are held in greater esteem than certainly was true in the earlier

and more contentious years of our existence when there was a real misfit in many ways between what the community expected and what we were being asked by our governing boards and by our own interpretation to deliver.

Having said that, I don't think that Springfield has embraced UIS in the same way that I might have wished or would have hoped. I think that the people in our development office who have to go out and raise funds in the community have a bigger challenge than they might otherwise have. Some of our athletic teams may not command the kind of community-wide interest, and some of our resources, like the library, may be under-utilized by people in the community. There are exceptions to this; I think through the auditorium, by and large, and WUIS, we've been able to do some of that. But I think it's been spotty and perhaps that is inevitable.

We are certainly not the only local institution of higher learning; there are five in the community of Springfield and there are many others ringing us, and many people have their first allegiance to their alma mater, which is probably not SSU/UIS for everyone. But I think we've made progress. I don't think we are there yet. I think we have more work to do in that regard, but I have a feeling that our faculty now are better able to carry that message to the community than perhaps we were at the very beginning when the misfit was more apparent and more of a problem.

Q. How would you characterize the leadership of the institution in an overall sense over the four decades?

A. I think it's been a mixed bag. And I speak as someone who in a very modest way was drawn into administrative leadership, so I am part of the problem as much as I was ever part of any solution. By that I mean, I'm referring there to the years that I spent as the Dean of the Arts and Sciences and of the years I spent in the vice-president's office and in what became known as the Chancellor's office.

I think we've been better served by some of our presidents or chancellors than by others. The good news is that I think when we have made a mistake or when there has been a problem that's developed, we have found a way to extricate ourselves institutionally. So I think we have a mixed bag in terms of the top level leadership.

It's always been a challenge for us more at the administrative level than the faculty level to recruit people into the very difficult and demanding responsibilities that a place like ours poses professionally for someone. But I had the good fortune to work closely with Chancellor Lynn and also with Vice-Chancellor Wayne Penn, and I will use them as an example. I will also use Cullom Davis, the first vice-president on whose staff I served, as to me splendid examples of people who rose to those challenges as best they could in very fateful and difficult transitions periods for the university.

We haven't always been able to do that, but I think we've been able to do it often enough. And I'm sure that that same kind of mixed results obtained when you go further down the food

chain to the level of deanships, I think we've had some wonderful success stories and I think we've probably had some that were not as successful.

I think the place where we have fallen down most on the whole has been at the level of programmatic or departmental leadership. And that's because we've never had a traditional departmental structure with chairs, and we've paid a price for that. We've gotten some good things as a result of that, but what we've also gotten are weaker programs without strong leadership unless that just happens to come along. The system isn't designed to cultivate it, and I think many of our programs have struggled without it.

Q. How would you characterize the level of teaching now at the institution?

A. I have no idea. When I left in 2001, I had no intention of ever coming back as a teacher although I visit the campus regularly and follow its interests always. However, only two years into my retirement, the week before fall classes were to start, one of my colleagues, Razak Dahmane, dropped dead of a sudden heart attack. And I was approached by Bill Bloemer, a close personal friend as well as an administrator, who needed someone to step in immediately and cover that course schedule because there was no time to hire someone at the last minute.

So I did return in 2003 and taught a semester then. My last experience of teaching on campus is seven years old and my last full-time experience goes back nine years. What I can tell you is that I remain to be convinced after conversations with many of my younger colleagues who are still at the campus that the heavy emphasis upon on-line instruction is more beneficial than costly in terms of the teacher-student relationship. That's not the only criterion; I'm sure it's more efficient in many ways and it may have its own effectiveness, and I never got to participate in it so I have no idea.

But I've talked to a number of my colleagues who teach that way and to a person, they admit to me that they miss what they've given up. They are the first to say that they have been able to find ways to make it as responsive as possible, but it's impossible to duplicate because teaching is so central to what I came to the university to do and believe I gave my heart and soul to for 31 years. I find it hard to accept that about half of our students are learning in an alternative way. But it could be that it was time for me to leave because I couldn't embrace that kind of teaching and that I would not have been the person who would have been able to carry it off with élan. And it may very well be that younger and less prejudiced and old-fashioned colleagues have been able to do that more brilliantly and creatively than I would have been.

Q. What is your role with the university now?

A. I am active in any way that the university asks me to be, and I contribute every time the university asks me. I contribute annually – modest sums, but they add up over a course of a year. As I do my taxes, they add up to a substantial amount of my retirement income. So I try to put my money where my mouth is and give to the university.

Perhaps the biggest way I was able to do that was when my husband died unexpectedly in 1999. I created a fund to provide library materials for the Capital Scholars program, which we were inaugurating, which I think has been one of our conspicuous successes. I've cited on-line instruction as a concern I have; I'm still thrilled with the way bringing on freshmen and sophomores has worked as a general rule. That's been a happier transition than I could have imagined. And it's been much happier I think than our transition to doctorate level studies, about which I've had grave standards concerns and quality concerns since it was in the discussion phase.

So I give, number one. Number two, I continue to stay very actively involved in supporting the library because I was one of early presidents of the Friends of Brookens Library, and I continue to volunteer and to donate books, and I'm at the library virtually every week that I'm in town. I maintain contact with the staff there and care very much about the integrity of that operation. I have watched the current Dean work hard to adapt to the changing technologies and the changing interests of our student clientele. Of course, I want the library to be traditional, but I also understand its need to change. So I maintain a very close contact with the library.

The third thing I do is that I serve on the SAGE lifetime learning committee with Mary Caroline Mitchell. We put together a series of programs in the fall and the spring showcasing some of our faculty and some of our alumni. It's been very successful. We've been doing it for three years. I coordinated it the first year, and last year Bill Furry coordinated it. This year Larry Shiner is coordinating it. I think it's been a wonderful outreach effort, and so I enjoy being able to stay active in that regard. So those are three ways that I stay in touch with the campus on a regular basis, and I'm still in touch with many of my former colleagues and many of my former students.

Q. Excellent. I'm done with my questions. It's wonderful; I really enjoyed hearing what you had to say about this. I'm going to switch this off now.

A. Ok.

End of Interview

38 minutes 27 seconds