4-4-2007

Interview of Bernhardt Blumenthal, Ph.D.

Bernhardt Blumenthal Ph.D.
La Salle University

Derek Casey
La Salle University

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Recommended Citation

Blumenthal, Bernhardt Ph.D. and Casey, Derek, "Interview of Bernhardt Blumenthal, Ph.D." (2007). All Oral Histories. 25.
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Field Notes

Narrator: Dr. Bernhardt Blumenthal
Interviewer: Derek Casey
Date: April 4, 2007, 7:30 PM
Location: Dr. Blumenthal’s office in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, 2nd Floor, Olney Hall, La Salle University.

Dr. Blumenthal is a La Salle graduate of the class of 1955 where he majored in German. After graduating from La Salle he earned his master’s in German from Northwestern University, earned a Fulbright scholarship to study in Germany for a year and returned to begin his doctorate in German Literature at Princeton University. Upon graduation from Princeton in 1963 he was hired by La Salle to begin his career as a professor of German language and literature. In 1969 he became the Director of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures and holds that position today.

Dr. Blumenthal’s office is located on the second floor of Olney Hall which is one floor below the History Department. As you enter the Foreign Language Department his office is behind the secretary’s office to the left. Typical of the office of most college professors, his office is full of books on shelves, on a table, filing cabinets and on his desk. The office is a bit chaotic looking and it appears that it is organized in a manner that perhaps only Dr. Blumenthal knows. Upon first viewing the office it appears messy. On the wall just by the doorway hangs a photograph of J. William Fulbright who once visited La Salle.

I had corresponded with Dr. Blumenthal via email to arrange the interview time and place. We corresponded five times and settled on Wednesday, April 4, 2007 at 7:30 PM to conduct the interview. Dr. Blumenthal had indicated that an evening would be better than an afternoon. It seemed logical because Olney hall is a building with tiled walls and floors that can be very loud when the building is full. Upon our arranged interview time
there were few people in the building and thus we were not disturbed at all during the interview by external noise. However, when I entered Dr. Blumenthal’s office at the arranged time he told me that he had a long day and wanted to “get the interview over with.” He appeared tired and I wanted to just begin the interview right away while still had his attention. Dr. Blumenthal is a lean man who looks far younger than his age, with dark, blazer and khakis. He still maintains a strong Philadelphia accent in his speech and never tries to use complex vocabulary. He speaks in a manner that belies his education and status. One would not suspect by speaking to the man casually that he is a prominent academic. As the interviewer I felt very comfortable in front of this highly accomplished man and was not made to feel I was in the presence of greatness.

My goal in the interview was to find about Dr. Blumenthal’s background; to gather biographical information on a professor known to be value his privacy, to ask questions pertaining to his education, his interest in German philosophy and language and to gain insight on how La Salle has changed over the years. In addition, I soon discovered that Dr. Blumenthal is actively involved in setting up some new programs through his department and in cooperation with the Political Science and History Department. The new programs, one in “Critical Languages” in which students study Chinese, Russian and Farsi and the other program, a certificate program in intelligence and security with a concentration in Eastern European area studies is intended to appeal to students who may pursue careers in the CIA, FBI or in the State Department. When discussing these new programs Dr. Blumenthal was very animated and spoke in greater detail about these programs than on any other topic during the interview.

There were no problems in arranging the interview. Our emails flowed smoothly and on only one occasion did I manage to drop by Dr. Blumenthal’s office to introduce myself to him before class in early March. The only amusing faux pas I noticed was that he kept referring to me as “Casey” thinking that this was my first name. Even in spite of my writing “Derek Casey” at the end of my emails. At the end of the interview when he said, “Thanks for coming by Casey,” for a moment I wanted to correct him but decided it
might create an awkward moment if I did. So I just let it go. As far as he is concerned he was interviewed by a graduate student named Casey.

I began the interview as soon as possible and turned on the digital voice recorder after asking for permission to record and asking him to sign the legal release. Dr. Blumenthal gave rather short responses to my initial questions. I was concerned in the first five minutes or so that I may run through my list of questions within a half an hour. Fortunately, I did ask questions that aroused his interest and he elaborated in great detail on many subjects.

The recorder never malfunctioned but I did grow concerned near the end of the interview when Dr. Blumenthal was making some points and rather than ticking off each point on a finger he tapped his desk right next to the recorder which I thought would end up possibly drowning out his voice. Fortunately that did not occur although you can clearly hear him tapping the desk in the portion of the interview.

I felt the interview went well overall but in reflection I did realize that I made some errors that I regret. To begin with I asked him before turning the recorder on for permission to record the interview. It didn’t hit me that I had made this mistake until listening to the recording in my car on the way home. Second, I never asked for his date of birth. Two obvious mistakes that leave me feeling disappointed. On the other hand there was no awkwardness while interview took place. The interview was smooth and the transition from one question to the next went as planned. The experience turned out to be a rewarding one and I felt as though I walked away with an interesting interview that covers the major academic and professional themes of Dr. Blumenthal’s career.