2007

Interview of Theopolis Fair, Ph.D.

Theopolis Fair Ph.D.
La Salle University

Matthew Witek
La Salle University

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LaSalle University Oral History Project
Spring 2007

Interviewer: Matthew James Witek of LaSalle University’s Graduate History Department

Interviewee: Dr. Theopolis Fair: Professor of History, LaSalle University

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Narrative Summary

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- Early Development (education, interests, hobbies)
- Community Life
- Undergraduate Experience
- Politics (Civil Rights, Vietnam)

Interview 2: Graduate and Professional Experience
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2 Early Impressions of LaSalle/Philadelphia (students, administrator)
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4 Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society contribution
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Note on Narrative Summary; I have attempted to divide the interviews into two different sections based on time periods, however, many anecdotes and explanations by Dr. Fair inevitably overlap the two periods. This is why assigning specific time locations in the interview would be unsuccessful. Also, for more detailed information on the above topics, refer to the final list of Field Questions.
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Field Notes

1/22/07
This was the first day of the Oral History graduate course. I was fortunate enough to be selected to interview Dr. Fair. Since I first entered the program, I had wanted to take at least one course that he taught. I thought this would be the next best thing. I was very enthusiastic about the opportunity after learning more about it.

2/22/07
I first approached Dr. Fair on Thursday afternoon in his office in the history department. I interrupted his lunch of Cup O’ Noodles. Despite this he was relatively amiable about me dropping in and explaining my intention and the purpose of the Oral History course. His office resembled the typical academics lair- it looked like a library had exploded. We talked a lot about my experience at LaSalle as a graduate student. I also took this opportunity to begin some of my research by asking him personal questions. From the answers that Dr. Fair gave me I knew that he was very open and candid man. He also seemed to be very relaxed. Almost like the cool confidence that a man would have if he had accomplished a lot in his lifetime but didn’t need to brag about it. I left feeling even more excited about the project and began thinking about what sources I could pursue for my research.

2/26/07
On Thursday’s class I presented my research findings. I spoke about his Fulbright Scholarship, his experience with the Civil Rights Movement, and his academic interests. My presentation didn’t seem to be particularly useful in part because I believed that the most valuable information would come from more direct one-on-one time with Dr. Fair. It was very interesting, however, to hear my fellow colleagues discuss their research. It definitely helped me to rethink some of my own approaches.

3/16/07
On Thursday afternoon, I once again stopped by Dr. Fair’s office to talk a little more about the project. This time we talked less about his life experiences and more about mine. I felt much more relaxed in this position. Most likely because I’m more accustomed to professors asking me questions instead of me trying to pry into their lives – a very unnatural position for a student. In fact, Dr. Fair even commented on how I seemed to be more relaxed and comfortable around him that our first meeting. I
knew that this entire experience would reflect this tone we had established.

4/12/07

On this Thursday afternoon I conducted my first session of the interview. Dr. Fair and I had not planned on this specific date, however, when I entered his office and asked him if he would mind that I begin some of the questioning, his response hinted at excitement. I was relieved when he agreed to it and I was immediately relaxed as I began. I sat in a wooden chair that was directly beside his desk with the microphone placed on top of it. I was very confident in my device’s quality and reliability. At the end of the interview, however, the recorder shut off because there was not enough memory on it to record the entire thing. I ended up losing about six and a half minutes of the interview. Other than that, the entire process seemed effortless. There were no distractions such as obnoxious undergrads in the hallway or cell phone interruptions. The acoustics were also more than adequate. I believe that a large part of my relaxed approach was because I had a genuine interest in getting to know more about this man. He had led a very cool life – a hip, urbane, smart, single-man who traveled all over the world on someone else’s bill. I just hope that the recorded interview reflects this mentality. We ended the meeting by Dr. Fair asking if I would like to join him for tea at his home in the city. I was very flattered by the offer and hoped I could take advantage of it.

4/27/07

On this beautiful Friday afternoon in the city, I walked to Dr. Fair’s home at 16th street in Center City. I wasn’t the least bit nervous about the encounter particularly because I was anxious to get to see a more personal side of the man that I was trying to uncover. I tried to maintain that approach throughout the entire interview. On one hand, many of his stories in life were incredibly inspiring and fascinating but I wanted to uncover the value he got from those experiences. Often in my interview, I try to ask follow-up questions that deal with his thoughts, feelings, and reactions to the events that he describes. As I entered his narrow row-house on 16th street right behind the Kimmel Center, he took me to the kitchen and offered me a drink. His hosting skills were consistently sharp during my entire encounter. He suggested that we conduct the interview upstairs in the TV room. The room seemed like an odd mixture of history and modernity. Despite the massive flat-screen television that loomed over the room, there were about a dozen original artworks from northern Europe. They were mostly too dark for me to make out so I was unable to give them the proper art critic’s gaze that I’m usually known for. We both sat in large leather chairs during the interview and once again the acoustics were favorable. I also was pleased that there were no interruptions. In once instance, however, he began searching for something and I had no idea what it was. I first thought that maybe he was reaching for something to show me so I had a long pause of just watching and waiting for him to
find whatever it was he was looking for. Eventually, he pulled out some cough drops and because of the pause, asked if there was anything else. I knew that I should start to wrap it up. I tried to get him to think about how he wants to be remembered. If you listen to his response, you get the impression that he doesn’t plan on going anywhere anytime soon. He seemed to avoid any nostalgic reflections on his life. In his mind, he still has a lot more living to do. Talking to Dr. Fair both off and on the record seem to indicate this. When we were finished I asked him if there was anything I should have done differently and he calmly said, “Nope.” Just as simple and candid as that. I can only hope that the interview reflects Dr. Fair as the simple and yet complex, and the confident and yet humble man that he is.