

Interview of Dr. James A. Butler
By Nyomi M. Gonzalez
Philadelphia, PA
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[Part one of our interview was recorded on March 26, 2012]

Audio File 1:

Gonzalez: Nyomi Gonzalez here with Dr. James Butler, on April 2, 2012, in his office in Olney Hall RM 161. Do I have your permission to record Dr. Butler?

Butler: Yes, that would be fine.

Gonzalez: Ok. Thank you again for sitting down with me. I was just looking up some information on [the] Honors Program here at La Salle and I know that you were a big part of that. So I just wanted to discuss that a little bit. I know that it was established in 1963, which was the year that you started here at La Salle.

Butler: Yeah, I started in [19]63. I don't know exactly when it got going that was – I didn't pay much attention to it. I know from reading later things that uh, Brother Daniel Burke, who became the President of La Salle, was then the Vice President for Academic Affairs and he was very interested in it. So I – I don't remember applying for anything. I remember when I came, that you were just assigned to a class. So I was assigned to a class that was actually called Honors English, [it] was taught Charles Kelly [*moves in chair*] who – I don't know if he was – I don't think he was then Chair of English, but he soon became the Chair of English. And I – I remember I had an Honors Class in Calculus. I had no choice in that, I was just given – I took two sections – two semesters of Calculus when I was here as well. I guess the History course, I think was an Honors course too. And maybe the Philosophy – the – but I didn't have any sense, because at that stage I'd never taken any other classes at La Salle, whether they were souped up classes or not, I had no idea. The Charles Kelly class had maybe fourteen, fifteen people in [it] – I think I may have mentioned the last time, when he died, I cleared out the office and I saw that there were – in the Honors English class there were three B's, nine C's and two D's. So we were put through our paces in that. The paper I wrote for that class as a freshman eventually became the first thing I had published. And I think I may have got a B on it from Charles Kelly. So even though it was a publishable piece, he didn't think it was quite up to snuff to get an A for that. The second year I did this, Brother Patrick Ellis came here from Miami and he was – he later became President, and he was a larger than life man, both in weight and in presence. And he was [*cough*] absolutely dynamite [non?], he was a tremendous after dinner speaker. And I had him for Sophomore English. When we did Romeo & Juliet, he played – so he assigned the roles, but he assigned himself Romeo, Juliet, Mercutio and I played Second Messenger, which – so, he took all the big roles. But I really learned a lot in that course, that was a really good course. The – and as soon as he came, it took a different format in some way. There were a number of people from off campus who came in to give lectures – or to give courses. So, there's a famous Sociologist at Penn now dead, E. Digby Baltzell, and he taught one here. There was a guy, can't

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remember his name, who taught a course and – it was great, sometimes these courses met in their homes, sometimes they met here, sometimes they met one at Swarthmore. This guy took all the money he was paid for teaching the course and bought an African mask. I just thought I was in a – the realm of a different, a different class of people. I had a Yeats course from a great Yeatsian, Lester Connor, who taught at Chestnut Hill. Probably the best one I had was from Helen North, who taught at Swarthmore. So, everyday we'd drive – every once a week we'd drive out to Swarthmore and, I think we met in her home, as I remember. And she actually became quite important to me later on because when I applied to Cornell, Helen North from Swarthmore wrote and the other person who wrote was Daniel Burke. So, he was the President of the University here, and Helen North had just published a book at Cornell. So, I suspect Cornell was a bit befuddled when – there were only two letters of recommendation to submit and one came from – not only from my institution – did not come from my institution but it came from somebody who wasn't in my field. She died, probably two, three months ago. So – but she was somebody I stayed in contact with. She was also on La Salle's Board of Trustees. So, it really was once Brother Patrick Ellis got here, had a space in part of what is now the counseling center, where you'd gather. And – so, I think from that point on the thing was really running. When Brother Patrick Ellis began to move up in the hierarchy of the institution, John Grady from Economics became the Director of it and I think he did it for almost thirty years. And I think I – when I came back I started to teach in the program maybe four, five years in. There was – the distinguishing mark of the program is something called “The Honors Triple” freshman course. It provides coordinated courses in History, Philosophy, and Literature. So, I started teaching in that – must be in the mid [19]70s or so. And I taught lots of courses – I taught that lots of time in the Triple. And there were upper-level seminars, I taught several of those. I taught courses on the Belfield property, Charles Willson Peale's house across the street. I taught a course called, *Frankenstein's Children*, about movies and books that were riffs on *Frankenstein*. I taught some courses on Philadelphia Literature. [I] taught a Yeats course – Yeats and Blake course. So, I taught in that a good bit. John Grady died, I guess about three or four years ago and when he died I actually – I was the one who called the Provost and told him that John Grady had died. He did it for so long and had absolute loyalty among [the] students and it was – his funeral was in the chapel here and it completely filled the chapel with people standing. They played the Notre Dame “Fight Song” as the recessional, since he had been at Notre Dame. When I called the Provost to say he had died, the Provost said to me, “Oh my God! What are we going to do?! Who are we going to get to do it? Will you do it?” And I said, “I guess.” [laughs] So, that's how I became the Director of it [the Honors Program]. And I did – it wasn't something I was – I guess I was 65 at the time and I was thinking of becoming partially retired, which I am now. So I didn't want to do it for very long, so I said I'd do it for a year. And then they were kind of between what they wanted to do with it so I did it for one more year after that. But then the present – the man who was Provost, Rich Nigro, became the Director of it. It's a great program. It's the – I mean, you end up with very good teachers. We take people in the freshman course on trips; last night – or last Saturday we took them to the Orchestra, free. So, they go on maybe ten, eleven trips. We take them to New York sometimes to the – we don't have – what we don't have is as many people from outside the university coming in to give courses. But, it's very – it's a very good program. And it's one of the flagship programs of the institution. Mostly composed of people who have won pretty high level scholarships here, especially the Christian Brother's

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Scholarship. So, it's something I was a student in and taught in and directed. So, it's you know – a big chunk of my life is connected with the Honors Program. And I'm teaching in it now. The – I'm just teaching one course and directing the Undergrad Research Program. And the one course I teach is in the Honors Program. So, about – I have fifteen students I guess. And so when I'm teaching – the Philosopher is teaching 20th century Philosophy, the Historian is talking about WWI, and I'm teaching the literature of – the poets of WWI. So the students get a very well rounded sense from history, philosophy and literature in coordinated courses what's going on. So, I like it.

Gonzalez: Would you like more outside people to come in and give lectures and teach classes?

Butler: The – I think there's – when I was a student here there weren't as many people doing research as there are now. So, I think among the La Salle population, the faculty – there are lots of people doing some cutting edge stuff here and more people publishing and investigating. So, I think that the faculty in some ways is – I'm not saying its better, it's different in some ways. So, what those outside people did I think we basically can do with the people who are here now. But on the other hand when somebody comes in it is exciting – it's exciting to students. And we do have a couple of people like that, there's a man named Dave McShane, a former student of mine who's connected with the Mural Arts Program. So, he has a La Salle degree but he's not on the faculty. But he comes in and teaches a drawing course. So, there's some – still some of that going on. So no – I don't think we have to go back to a great number of outside people coming in, but it's nice to occasionally have somebody new shake us all up, give us new ideas.

Gonzalez: How has the subject and the structure of the courses changed since it first started in the [19]60s?

Butler: In the [19]60s it – I think they thought of the courses as Honors sections of a regularly given course. So that the course I had with Charles Kelly was a writing course where they just took people with fairly high SATs and jammed them all together in the course. But it was still kind of the standard writing course. And the same thing with the History course and the Calculus course, they were – again the people taking it had perhaps higher SATs in Math and in – so that you might be able to advance more quickly within the course. But there were Honors sections of regular courses. And the – I think under John Grady these became not Honors sections of regularly given courses but courses that were particularly designed for Honors students. So this – the triple is part of that. And then the upper-level courses are – under Patrick Ellis and under John Grady and the two years I did it, you just – you know, you talk to faculty and they'd come up with some idea for a course that was not in the curriculum. And the nice thing administratively is that usually when you do that in a college you have to go through all these committees to offer a course. And the Honors Director basically says, "Let it be" and there is a course. I was talking to Mike Prushan, in Chemistry for example, and he said "Do you know why Napoleon lost in Russia?" And I said, "Well, I suppose the Russians had something to do with it." He said, "Nope. Their buttons were made out of Zinc and when it gets cold Zinc molecules shatter and their buttons fell off and their coats fell open and they froze to death." And

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I said, “You got anymore stories like that?” He said, “I’ve got lots of them!” So I said could – “How about doing a course next semester in it?” He said, “Ok!” So – I mean – and that sort of thing I think – it’s exciting for him you know, because he’s teaching something brand new that he’s interested in. And then it’s exciting for students too. So the Honors Program can be pretty nimble in doing courses in climate change or – and some of the Honors courses now are travel study courses so you could go off to and study South American economics, for example and go off to Peru for a – as a travel study trip. So, we’ve had a couple of travel study courses in it [the Honors Program]. So its – yeah I think that’s basically the way things differ in the terms of structure of the courses. The capstone in the Honors Course is to do an individual project, working with a faculty member. And again that’s – so it puts a lot of responsibility at the end on students to take charge of their own education and to design some things for themselves.

Gonzalez: And they can choose the subject matter and everything for their capstone?

Butler: They do. So, they work with a faculty member of their discipline or whatever discipline they’re doing the project in. But then they all meet together and they present the results of their research to – within the class as well, so its – they’re not all working in the same field but they have a sense of presenting the – lots of people be involved in research and it – so it gets them interested in things outside their field. So it enables them as seniors to narrow, very particularly to what they want to work on but be aware of all these other things that people are working on, because they’re all in a general course together talking about how to do research, how to present research.

Gonzalez: Ok. What did you, I guess, bring to the Honors Program when you were Director? Though, you know, for a short time.

Butler: One thing I was pretty sure I didn’t want to not want to do, is I did not [*sigh*] – well, when I met with the Provost, I said, “I’m very happy with this, I’m happy with what John Grady did. I’m especially loyal to his memory and I don’t want to change anything.” And then I went back and something came up that I had no idea what John would’ve done with it and maybe it hadn’t even come up in – and within a week, I’d made a number of decisions that he may – that I know he wouldn’t have made quite in the same way. So, but I – so on kind of the big things, I don’t think I changed anything at all. And I didn’t really want to do that. I think we needed some wider study to think – and the people who came in to the program had been promised a certain kind of thing by John Grady, and it seemed to me unfair to make any change there; that the change would have to be made a little later in the program, if you wanted to make some changes there. Because they came in to the program, they saw what the Juniors and Seniors were doing, they had expectations that this was what would happen to them and I wanted to make sure in fact that that happened. But having said that, it – I mean there were certainly some courses I – there [are] new courses to put in, the one I described to you before about, we call that one I think, *Consumer Chemistry*, or Chemistry in – *Molecules in History*, yeah that was the title of that particular course. So the – so in kind of the big things, there were very little change. In the – the

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freshmen go on various trips to do things – lab experiences they’re called, Humanities Labs. So I have some ideas for some that John Grady didn’t do. And – so we did a couple of other things other than the kinds of things that he had done. And I had my batch of friends off campus for giving lectures. So, I relied on them. So that – John had a different set of people. But, for me it was a hard job to do because John did the job for I think it was 39 years or something like that. I might have the number wrong. But when I moved in to his office, every corner was piled, sometimes knee high with paper. And that was worse than having no records whatsoever, because you couldn’t find anything. And of course he ran it out of his head, because he’d been doing it for so long. So, that in some ways things that he – well maybe one of my accomplishments with this is that things that ran out of his head, tended to get written down. And they didn’t get written down by my creating them, I – in one case for example, I did not know what the requirements were for Speech Language Hearing People in Honors. So, I wrote an email to a student I’d had as a freshman and I said, “I don’t know what you’re required to do in Honors. Can you come over and tell me?” Because it wasn’t written down. So she was – she came over and she said, “You take this, this, this, this, and this. You don’t do that. You don’t take thirteen courses, you take eight or nine, whatever. That’s what you do.” I said, “Could you say that more slowly? I’m trying to copy this down here.” *[laughs]* And I think people were very helpful in that way. So we – but John died in the summer and he had already recruited the class coming in. And I think that was a little bit of a challenge. Because they were very bright students with scholarships who had lots of options and they came in expecting to be working with a Director who is now dead and I wanted to make sure that they did not feel that they were abandoned or cheated. And that class will be graduating this year. And I don’t think anybody has that feeling. I think that’s worked pretty well. It was a little bit easier for the next year because those people knew they’d be working with me; at least for the first year of things. And then the next batch in, before the job was taken over by Richard Nigro, he was involved in recruiting that class somewhat as well. And as Provost, he – since he ran the whole institution, he’s certainly a man who can run the component parts of it with the Honors Program. So it, it was fun to do. But I did not see my particular role there to make changes. I was pretty happy with the way things were running.

Gonzalez: Ok. I know that you started here at La Salle interested in Math and wound up graduating with a degree in English.

Butler: Yes, well. I was never actually a major in Math. But I wasn’t – I had higher Math SATs than I did Verbal SATs. I will not speak ill of too many teachers, but the one – the math teacher I had in high school, I really disliked. One of my deficiencies in Math is I never took a Trig course. *[moves in chair]* I can’t say it’s ruined my life but I did have Calculus there. The – I took – I had a great teacher for the Calculus course, Brother Yew Albright, who was very interested in Jane Austen, besides being a Math teacher. And who was kind of a[n] all around guy, with lots of interests. It – yeah I think my interests were always in English but I flirted with Math. *[cough]* I did well – actually I did better in the Calculus course than I did in the English course – my freshman English classes. But, I think one day it came to me what I liked about it. And everybody else in the Calculus course wanted to know, or was thinking about, what do we do with this. And I did not have the slightest interest in that. I thought this is just so beautiful; the

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Calculus and the mathematics of it and shapes moving in space. It's so beautiful, I didn't give a damn what you could do with it. It was just so beautiful. And then I thought that either is going to push me in to being a theoretical mathematician and contemplating numbers moving around in space [*laughs*] and that sort of thing. And that didn't seem like what I really wanted to do. So I – I think I could take that, that interest just in the beauty of what's going on outside and think of it more in terms of literature. So, it's as I say, it's not I dropped out of Math because I couldn't do it, I could, but I was not interested in what you could do with it. It – the practical sides of Math didn't appeal to me at all. So I became an impractical English major. In those days it wasn't that impractical by chance of history. The – because of the way the baby boomer generation was, you know operating – there was so many, by the time I got out of graduate school, my particular year, there were – because there were so many people with PhD's getting out that year, it was a little tricky finding a job. But, you needed many more people because there were more children of baby boomers going to college. And at the moment it's very difficult in my field and in lots of fields in higher education because college populations are slightly – I mean the overall population is more, but it's – the kind of finances of higher education are such there's just hardly enough faculty and more depending on very large sections to teach them sometimes – to teach students sometimes.

Gonzalez: Do you find at least currently in La Salle that the English Department has less majors than they did before or more majors?

Butler: We have fewer. I think when I was chair we had, and again these are guesses, but I think we had about 250[students] and I think we're below a hundred [students] now. So it's a much smaller population. And the – a number of the people – we used to send lots of people to graduate school in English. That certainly wasn't the only thing we did. We also prepared people for – lots of people went and got jobs in Public Relations. And we have some people who are doing very well in Corporate America with English Major skills. But lots of people did go to graduate school. But usually we'd have – sometimes we'd have, oh eight, ten, twelve a year. And some years, now we have almost none who go in to a standard Literature PhD program. That's not the only way to major in English program, but that's one way. One way to major in – or a better way to say that is, that we have made some shifts because the demographics now is not toward – aimed at preparing people for graduate school particularly. We've put lots more writing courses in, lots more kinds of writing courses in; writing for business and industry. Lots of courses involving computers, and computer design and desktop publishing – editing and publishing using computers as well. So the – I think we've changed with the times. And the program itself – again, we do teach all of the literature courses but we also teach a whole batch of practical courses which were not there before in the preceding curriculum.

Gonzalez: I know you mentioned just a second ago that you were Chair of the English Department.

Butler: Yes. Funny, I can't give you the exact dates for that but it was – I think I did it for about fifteen years or so. And after [*cough*] Charles Kelly was chair then John Keenan, now dead was chair, good friend, very good friend. And for a number of years I was Assistant Chair when he

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did it. A couple of times he was on leave then I would be acting Chair. *[cough]* So I became Chair after John Keenan and I was followed by Kevin Harty. So, unlike some departments at La Salle, where Chairs tend to turn over quickly *[cough]* I think we've had a group of people who have been Chair for a dozen or more years; Kevin Harty I think is probably coming up on that if not passed that as well. So the – and I'm not sure that will continue in the future either in the English Department. Its – part of it is, that people in – back in the old days, which are not that far ago, the people you would hire to teaching – I was hired here with a PhD when I was 26. And by and large that doesn't happen in higher education anymore. With people getting – most of the people we hire with new PhDs are in their mid-30s. And that's partly because there's less money to support people in graduate school, so they do much more teaching. And I, for better or worse, taught just one course at Cornell and it was a four year program. And some of the schools, at that time would be three year program beyond the B.A. to get a PhD. And you wouldn't teach at all. And that's partly because, at least the thought then was, that we needed lots – we had to get people out quickly because there was such a great demand for teachers of English. It actually began to fall apart pretty much about the year in which I looked – I looked in 1971. And it was quite – the job market began to collapse in some ways right about that time. And what was happening was a slight drop perhaps in the number of people going to college. But that so many people had been produced by graduate schools in anticipation of this that there were too many people for jobs. So the – at Cornell, when I started, the lowest of the low, Assistant Professors, would do job placement. By the time I was leaving, maybe the top name in the field was calling his friends and trying to get jobs for people. I had – for me to be hired in the convention, the Modern Language Association, which is the big hiring convention in December. I had three interviews, one was with a Vermont School, one was with a school in Boston, that I went in and they were – I knew I wasn't going to like it because the Chair there had a tape recorder. And when I went in I said, "Hello." He said, "Just a moment. Just a moment." And he spoke in to the tape recorder, "Appearance...satisfactory." *[laughs]* This place wasn't gonna work for me. And I forget where the other interview was. But I ran in to Charles Kelly in a bar. And I did not know La Salle was looking, but anyway I was not hired here – at that time I had just come back from England with a wife and two children. So, we came back in mid-August or so or early August, mid-August; so I had a wife with two children, maybe a hundred, a hundred fifty dollars in the bank and no job. But I was hired by La Salle, I don't know whether they called me or I called them, but I remember walking through Olney Hall, which is also 1971 – which was, two or three weeks before school we still had some construction going on and people working in it. And I was very happy to have a job. Even if I – usually people would've been hired in December and I wasn't hired until the very end of August. So it, it was a very lucky thing and a very near thing. *[Be]* cause I – at that stage I would've had to do something, something else. I probably would've tried to get back in to journalism, which I had worked for before with the Catholic Standard and Times.

Gonzalez: How has the English Department changed since you *[cleared throat]* excuse me, you came back as a teacher and then became a Chair. How did that kind of changed?

Butler: Many more women teachers. We hired very good women at the start, some of whom left us for higher jobs. One became a *[cough]* national director of a group in Washington, D.C. So,

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lot's more women. The – we used to have – almost, well maybe half the degrees in the Department used to be Penn and Temple degrees and now they're scattered all over the place, we have much more diversity, which I think we – and that's partly a consequence of the job market, we have more choice now. So, and that's good because it gets lots of different perspectives in to teaching. The curriculum as I say is a bit more, in some cases a bit more practically oriented. The – right before the – in the period after I was hired and before I became Chair, we started a communication program. And that became a very, very big program. Its one of the largest majors on campus now. And it split from English when I became Chair. It seemed a logical time to do that, because it was a change. So that John Keenan though, was Chair of English and Communication Arts. And it split and they eventually went down the hill, down to south campus in their own building. And so they – so, when they left they took a fair number of majors with them. But we still – still in English, we had over two hundred majors. And again, this was amicable. Nobody – I think, increasingly they wanted to do their own thing. And so it became hard to administer this, because there were, in some cases, doing different things. So, before I became Chair, was the rise of communication and as I became Chair they split so that we could re-created the English major just as an English major. But as I say, and I guess, under both John Keenan and under – when I was Director – the Chair – we added lots of courses that were responding to new technologies. And inevitably the number of Literature classes declined somewhat in that process.

Gonzalez: How did you, kind of deal with that kind of stress? Becoming Chair of the Department, then having to deal with all these changes.

Butler: I didn't feel very much stress with it really. I thought it was fun to do; you know, it was fun to come in to work because there were things to be done. So it wasn't just taking something over that you know, is put in place and you go in and you just sort of – occasionally make sure all the nuts and bolt are tight and the thing is still operating; that we were creating something new without Communication within it. And the other thing, somebody – we went to some retire party couple years ago, and I go to a lot of retirement parties these days. but somebody gave a long speech and somebody else gave a long speech and one guy from Science got up and said, "I only want to deliver one sentence." I said, "Ok." And he said, "It's all about the students," and sat down. And I thought, that's kind of stuck with me there, or whatever. I think for the most – I mean again, administration you have to deal with money, and you have to deal with people getting reimbursed for conventions and all that – but if you can walk in and say, "It's all about the students." I think, at least in my head, at least in my memory, I think most of what I did was talk to students. And that part of it – as a chair you really, because you have the authority to change things or to change requirements in some ways, not the university ones but the departmental ones, so if somebody comes in and said, "My dream is to do XYZ. But I can't do it within the confines, the requirements of the program that is required of me." And you know, you look the kid in the eye and you look in to your conscience and say, ok you and I are gonna build a major out of – you tell me what courses you want to take and why and we'll put it together and we will make it possible for you to do what you want to do. And I think the other thing is, in terms of being a chair, there – the students sometimes sort of get bumped around in the system somehow. And if they have a sense there's actually somebody there who's going to talk to them

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about things, so that there are – again there are too many of these to give any particular example. You end up with – talking to people about the death of their dog, you know, the death of their mother. So that, some of this you sort through and say, I really think we might want to talk to somebody in the Counseling Center. But some it's just, sort of being there and we – I had one woman come in, who I've never seen in my life before and I've never seen again, she came down and sat down in my office and she was sobbing the whole time. So, I'm pulling tissues out and passing them to her and she's sobbing and sobbing and sobbing. And I said to her, "Would you like to talk to somebody in the Counseling Center?" And she goes, "Yes, Yes," nodding. And I pull out more tissues. So I say, "Ok, I'll walk you over." So I walked her over and she's sobbing all the way. I said, "This is... I'm sorry I don't know your name." And she told me, and I said "This is so and so and I think she should see somebody right away." Which is the code for, she's gotta see somebody right away *[laughs]* And I never saw her again, never knew her name, but I think I performed a service. So, and there's, I don't know, just lots of stories of that sort. So that part of it – you know, and this no claim to any great, you know, I've made significant changes in peoples lives. But I think when there are sometimes some minor things that you have the power as Chair to tweak this a little bit to – I mean we all feel like we're caught in bureaucracy sometimes. And when one becomes the bureaucracy, and when you have the power such as is it in academic life to do something that's right, even if it's against the rules. At some level either – and especially in being Director of the Honors Program, the same thing obtained because basically there's a separate curriculum in Honors. And if a kid said, look what I wanna do when I graduate is XXX but I can't get this course because of the number of requirements. I said, well, the hell with the requirements, just do what you wanna do here. And we'll make – and nobody will be the wiser. So there's plenty of people who graduated in Honors who, at the time I did it, who didn't fulfill all the requirements. But they fulfilled the right requirements for their lives needed, but they may not have fulfilled the requirements that were in the book.

Gonzalez: Do you still keep in touch with a lot of your previous students?

Butler: Yeah, I've – inevitably you know, as they sort of get married and you know, their lives become more complicated some of them drop away. But I still get Christmas cards from people I had, 20, 25 years ago. I got a card – at one point the – a guy – *[it was]* signed by two former students – they were in a bar and she was reading a novel by the poet Philip Larkin and the guy leaned over and said, "I like Philip Larkin too," which sounds like a pretty good pick up line at the bar, whatever. And she said, "I like the fiction, not the poetry of Larkin." He said, "I do too! Have you read the *Girl in Winter*? Have you read...? Have you read...?" And they sent me a picture of their wedding. And then they sent me pictures of their baby *[laughs]* So, I don't claim credit for all of that, but on the other hand they both read Philip Larkin so they – in different courses with me, so they connected. Yeah, there's a lot of people I stay in touch with. I guess the oldest one is a woman I taught in 1972 or so. And I'm in touch with her by email or by – or seeing her 15 times a year probably.

Gonzalez: Have any of them come back to La Salle? Or expressed any kind of ...?

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Butler: Oh yeah. I see them at reunions. Sometimes people just wander by, wander in, sit down. I am terrible with faces and names so they sometimes have to remind me – but as soon as they say their name I usually remember them pretty well. And one of the few advantages to age, I'm finding they're fewer than I thought there might be, but one of the advantages to age is you tend to remember things that are further back better than what happened this morning. So, that I'm usually pretty good at remembering what's there. I will – I don't know if this is the close of this part of asking that question, but I'll tell you one story that is the exact opposite of what you ask. I was in a mall and a woman came up with her mother. And the mother said, "This is Dr. Butler. He's the one I've told you so much about!" And so, I swell with pride at what I have done for this young lady. And the girl continued, "I've told you so much about him. Yes, it is him. He's the bastard who gave me my only B!" *[laughs]* So, I laughed. She didn't, but I laughed. So, I was on exhibit for the other side or something else at that moment. But – at least she had a memory of me; it's nice to be remembered even if it's for being the only bastard who gave her the only B. *[laughs]*

Gonzalez: I used to have teachers that you know, would only give me the B. And now that I'm in grad school a B is really all I need at this point.

Butler: Right.

Gonzalez: It's not that bad of a grade.

Butler: No. But if it was the only one you ever got...

Gonzalez: Yeah, maybe you would remember them.

Butler: The mother thought I had spotted a perfect – what would have been an other wise perfect record.

Gonzalez: Aw. Again I guess it's still nice to be remembered.

Butler: *[laughs]* Yes. Right.

Gonzalez: Too bad it wasn't for – it was for that.

Butler: *[laughs]* Yes, but most of the people who – most of the people have happy memories I think. Or at least the ones who don't, I don't see very much.

Gonzalez: Now how has the Department changed since you left the – being a Chair?

Butler: I think the process toward, *[cough]* again of having fewer people majoring in the literature side of things and more people – well, we have lots of double majors now and we have lots of minors now. So, many more than when I was chair. That was – not odd but relatively

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unusual. The *[cough]* things I guess all humanities departments fight against is becoming what is called Service Departments. That is we're servicing the – we teach the core requirements, the kind of traditional things you take in college; Math, Religion, Philosophy, History, etc. But I think all those areas are finding fewer majors than they did in the past. I think we are doing somewhat better because the writing and communication side of things we do are pretty much valuable whatever field one ends up in. But there's no doubt that the education side – this secondary ed[ucation] English side of it, the jobs are harder to come by in that particular field. And – again it's easy to be, at this particular moment, when we're talking – when the U.S. has been in a recession – a pretty good recession for a number of years. But I think that's – it's been a general movement. Where there's a – in all municipalities and all secondary ed[ucation], there's attempts to save money. And so there [are] fewer jobs out there for, I think people in secondary ed and there's definitely fewer jobs, as we've been talking about, for people teaching College English. So it's been – I don't think we're just a Service Department, I think we sometimes become the second major for people who are in other areas or we get many of our majors from people who are – do not sign up as English Majors when they come in, but come to us from other departments. They decide the things that they want to do, they can do just as much in the English Department. So, I think it's been those kinds of changes. The – I think Kevin Harty, our present Chair, has been very creative in putting together some double majors and some alternate programs so – when I said that I, in some cases came in to, both with Honors and with [the] English Department, things that were running very well and they were relatively stable in terms of the outer pressures on the university. At the moment these seem to be changing very quickly. So, almost all universities are having a financial difficulty. And so I've managed things in decline and managed things in expansion and it's a hell of a lot more fun to do this in expansion than it is to do it in decline. You feel better about your day when you go home, saying “Hey, we built a lot of new things!” In decline, you go home and say “Well, I've managed to stave off oblivion for another couple of days.” *[laughs]* So – and we're not near that, but it's a different kind of management that you have to do when things are – when the economy is so tight. And one worries in a way about present 18, 20 year olds what – it comes as no surprise to you to hear about the market being tight for all kinds of jobs. So its – so, in my life I – I feel in a way very lucky that I – the things that I wanted to do were possible to do kind of economically and philosophically and the ways in which universities and things were operating there. That's not to say that in a different environment, I wouldn't have had a good bit of fun as well. But the – well, I'm falling in to the kind of danger of everybody that say, that what one has lived through is the golden age when nothing can be better, and I don't want to say that. But I do say that economically, at the present time, economically – even for sentiment, my feeling politically, seems the country is in a different place than it was before. The – I guess coming out of the war and coming out of the – in to the [19]50s and [19]60s there was a sense that all things were possible. And *[cough]* from what I am reading is rightly or wrong – right thing or a wrong thing, I don't hear that as much from say, opinion polls now. I hear it from some political leaders but not from others. And I guess I want that John F. Kennedy whatever call to all things are possible. And I'd like to believe that's still true.

Gonzalez: Do you think the current political atmosphere has really influenced people who do or don't go to college? And maybe what they do or don't major in?

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Butler: Yes. The – in thinking of terms of support for higher education, certainly in Pennsylvania there used to be much more support for higher education than there is now. And I think – I forget what they were called, Institutional Advancement Grants or something of that sort, depending upon how many people with student aid would go to various universities. So the – so I think that's, in terms of education, that's certainly a problem as well. The – in both public and higher education there are problems, in slightly different ways. *[clears throat]* and the – it seems – the people I knew in the [19]60s coming out, did not come out with very much debt. And the amount of debt that people come out of college with now seems crushing in some cases. And – yes, I notice your smile *[laughs]* Do you feel crushed?

Gonzalez: I'm already crushed. *[laughs]*

Butler: And I saw this I guess with my last daughter, with her student loans or whatever. *[It]* Seems people are paying this in to their 40s or 50s sometimes. That's – its – and I think because of that, obviously because of that amount of debt, it – sometimes it's harder for students to take chances. And I guess in my generation I had the feeling that when you didn't have as much invested or you didn't have – look forward to saying I have 20 or 30 years to pay back the debt that college was going to be. You took chances, and if the chance didn't work out, well too bad. But you weren't – you're kind of life wasn't locked in to having to pay for – because you wanted to make a change in the kinds of things you wanted to do. One could live a little more provisionally or didn't have to come to as firm decisions as early on in your life about what one wanted to do, one could change from Math to English if one wanted too. And that becomes harder under the present high cost of college – high relative cost in terms of GDP and family income and those things. And clearly college as a technology is extremely expensive these days. And if you're going to run college education, you have to be cutting edge; you have to have the latest technology. So that it's – that wasn't there before, it was basically – well, taking La Salle it was basically Christian Brothers who – a lot of Christian Brothers – who did not have to get very good salaries particularly because they weren't taking care of families necessarily. And so they're good things and bad things about any change. And all of higher education, the money part of things is becoming so much more complicated.

Gonzalez: Does La Salle, particularly the English Department or the Honors Program kind of prepare students to try and think outside of the box and prepare them for the kind of issues they're going to face when they graduate.

Butler: One likes to think so but one doesn't know. I mean, as a faculty member one's not always sure what's in or what's outside the box, or how big the box is or what the box is going to look like. The – I think no one would have predicted – well at least few would have predicted twenty years ago the changes that the internet and email and everything has produced. The office we're sitting in has lots of books around and that's not gonna happen ten years from now. So its – this is not the way, the mode in which things are going – it's becoming less and less now. I know lots of people who have tossed all their books *[laughs]* yeah it's just on – it's all in electronic form. So, maybe they'll be not as many books and just one's Kindle sitting there and the Cloud

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[laughs] and whatever there. But I think I'm less afraid of the technology that I can foresee for the future than what I can't see. And – so what's sort of here now – are the beginnings here now, ok I find this useful and have some idea what's going to happen. But it's whatever technologies out there that's going to change the world that I have no idea about that's scary to me. And – so – but we'll see what happens with it.

Gonzalez: Have you noticed an upsurge of English and Communications double majors, to try and keep up with the changing technology?

Butler: Well, I think yes. There [are] a fair number of English and Communications double majors. It's a little tricky to do with terms of total number of credits. To get in a core curriculum and to get in ten or twelve or thirteen courses from each discipline, that's hard to do. But there are a number of students who are doing that. The – I think the future of some of the traditional humanities might well be with minors as well. And so we built some minors where people can take six courses and do that. The – I think we also say to students, if you can't get the six courses for a minor because the requirements of other disciplines nothing magic happens to you between five and six courses for a minor. So, take the five and just say you have a strong concentration in [it] and as long as you don't use the word minor. The – I think the ability to communicate whether it's in electronic form, whatever, is not going to go away. So that part of things is not going to disappear nor is the – I have the sense that sometimes in stories, and fiction and poetry, one finds out a good bit about oneself and a good bit about one's world and a good bit about historically, relationships with others. I had a talk once with a guy who ran the emergency – he scheduled the emergency room at a local hospital. And I said, just in passing, "Well, that sounds like an interesting job." He said, "Very interesting job." And I said, "Yeah, does sound interesting. Doesn't sound like you use your English degree particularly in it." He said, "Oh, no, no, no, no, no. I use it all the time." He said, "When I graduated from here I knew very little about the different kinds of people I was going to have to deal with." He said, "Doctors and nurses, people who are ill." He said, "What I knew about them, about people, my world that I came from was very small – when I knew about people I had found in books, and it had a much wider world to teach me how to relate to people, because I read so much. So that kind of knowledge one had of the great diversity of personalities. I haven't met many of those people but I met them in books. And so when I started meeting them and scheduling the emergency room I at least know something about their personalities or what they were like." So again, it's hard to put like a – hang a magic number on that, saying I'm taking an accounting course and this is a one on one connection to what I'm going to do, in terms of my profession.

Gonzalez: Now, when the English Department and Communications separated, how did the students react?

Butler: I think the Communications *[laughs]* I think the Communications majors were very excited, "Hey, our own program!" And I think the English people were just sort of blasé *[laughs]* I didn't get any feeling necessarily one way or another. The separation sounds like it's – it's not like we divided the silver at that stage, although we did have to decide which courses, in some

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cases would go to various departments. Something like Journalism, for example, whether that stayed in English or whether it would go to Communication. And so – in the beginning, I mean, a certain extent now I think the people in the English Department think it's probably a good idea for people to take some courses in the Communications Department. And I think people in Communication think the same thing. So the – so some of the people in Communications Department have degrees in English and there are people teaching courses here that have Communication backgrounds. So it – and some of the things directly overlap; film is taught in Communication and film is taught in English as well. So it – that part of it whether you're, in either field, some of the things are quite similar. But I didn't have any sense there was any particular antagonism there – it was a friendly, friendly split. It might be more difficult if something like that were to happen now in a Department, because at that stage English was doing very well and Communication was doing very well. If *[cough]* Communication was doing very well, and English only had ten or fifteen majors, that would've been catastrophic. But we were doing very well and the Communication was doing the same. Some of La Salle, has been – the movement has been the other way, to consolidate departments. So we have a department of Geology and Physics at the moment, so not separate departments. *[cough]* So in some cases, its – I think the environment science might be part of that as well. So that – there's two pressures there to operate that way. And I wonder if in the future, what's going to happen is – that they'll be – there's pressure to create new programs for students. *[cough]* But some stage, but you can't really hire lots of new faculty for those new programs, so you have to do it with what's here. So, I wonder if in the future there's going to be more consolidation of departments, rather than splitting of departments apart.

Gonzalez: Do you think the English and Communications Department might be consolidated?

Butler: I think not because, again Communications is booming and so – and we might be seen as the poor relative who went off and now is coming back, cap in hand and saying take care of me. So, I don't think that would quite be in the offing. *[cough]* There's some smaller colleges, where there would be a department of History and Language – History and English, something of that sort. Or Philosophy and Theology, that would be a – and Religion, *[cough]* that might be another possible way to consolidate things. But it's hard to know, I'm not sure exactly what that kind of future will hold.

Gonzalez: Ok...

Butler: Yeah, I do feel again, in speaking of the golden age that we talk about for what the past is, but most of my career here was spent at a time where English was – and there are demographic reasons and there's also some societal reasons, when English was booming. And I feel very lucky to have taught under those particular circumstances. The game is a little bit different now and I wish everyone the best in the future and – but I'm very grateful – I had my little corner of teaching, when I did, because it enabled me to do the things that I love to do.

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