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Howard Brody

February 28, 2003

Fred Honhart,
Interviewer

Honhart: OK, I'm Fred Honhart. It's February 28th, 2003 and I'm here to interview Howard Brody and Howard. Do you have your permission to interview and tape record you?

Brody: Yes, yes.

Honhart

As you can see? Thank you. What I'd like to start out with. Some background for yourself. OK, we talked a little bit and you just said you grow up in Illinois. Where did you grow up and? Go to school.

Brody: Well, I started in the Chicago city and my family sort of moved out with the suburbs until when I was in high school. We lived in McHenry County, which at that time was pretty rural, part of Illinois. But there were more future farmers of America than there were any pre collegiate people at my high school, so it was quite a good experience growing up in that area. And then I came to Michigan State University on a merit scholarship in in 1967. That was when Michigan State was very aggressively recruit. Merit scholars from all over the Midwest, I think that was John Hannah's effort to expand the academic prestige to equal the football prestige, as I recall. And so I came to Michigan State and I was very taken with the program here and stayed on then to go to medical school and did a PhD in philosophy. So I was a student here for 10 years between, 67 and 77 and then went off to do my residency elsewhere in family practice and came back here to work on the faculty and the Department of Family Practice, and then the Center for Ethics and Humanities. So I came back in 1980, and I've been on the faculty since 1980.

Honhart

Now you when you said you went to Med school here, that was human medicine.

Brody

See, I'm sorry. College of human.

Honhart

Medicine, and that was fairly soon after it got started, wasn't it?

Brody

I was, yeah, I was in the first larger group and my class was 80 and the classes before us were around 4045 students and the first class that actually graduated in 1972, and the class I started with graduated in 75, so. And I was sort of around here during the early some of the early days of the college.

Honhart

What got you interested in going to Med school? Had you had that as an idea before you? Came as an undergraduate.

Brody

I did. I came in with kind of a pre Med focus and I did an undergraduate major in biochemistry, so I had been interested in medicine, but I also got very interested in philosophy while I was an undergraduate and that got me started and thinking about medical ethics as a field to go into so. I was able. I think I was really lucky to be at Michigan State because it was one of the few medical schools in the country in the 70s that were flexible enough to allow a student to think about doing a PhD in philosophy at the same time that I was completely. In MD, because most medical schools would have been much too rigid and they would have just laughed at me if I said I wanted to do a philosophy degree.

Honhart

Was there one or more props in the philosophy department that sort of inspired you or got you interested in that?

Brody

Well, there were. It was sort of interesting, I. I would have to say that the Prof who inspired me to get interested in the area was not in the philosophy department. I was actually in human medicine, but Jim Trosko in what was in the Department of Human Development, and he used to teach a course in what was then Justin Moral College called Science and human values. And that was kind of a rudimentary. The course that today we'd call a healthcare ethics course. And I sat in on his course when I was a senior undergrad because I was working in his lab doing a biochem project in his lab, and he introduced me to the Hastings Center, and he was a subscriber to the Hastings Center report when it first started publishing in 1970, which was one of the first two national think tanks in what we now call medical. Ethics and he got me to go to their first conference on teaching medical ethics in 1972, so I was able, as a having completed one year of medical school, to get introduced to the field of medical ethics as it was just kind of getting off the ground across the country. And I met and at that conference, virtually all the stars who were then working in the field of medical ethics. And I came back from that. Saying I really wanted to study this. So in a way the philosophy professors like Martin Benjamin who ended up teaching the first medical ethics undergraduate course on campus. He was kind of coming on board at about the same time, so I was actually learning something about medical ethics at the same time as a couple of the philosophy professors were. So I really had a chance to get in on the ground floor and way that a student hardly ever has a chance to become involved in a in a new area. Relatively new area.

Honhart

How did you find the medical program? Because one of the. Things that particularly early on, I know that they talked about when Andrew Hunt centered up, was about how this was going to be a program for practitioners as opposed to researchers. That was one of their. Buzzwords that they use as far as the focus of the school. How did you? How did you see that in comparison to what you see?

Brody

Other schools? Well, I I guess I'd have to say that obviously you go to medical school in one place. So your ability to compare medical schools really in the trenches is is very limited, but I would have to say that I if if if what I ended up doing the fact that I came back and now have a career in academic medicine. And my focus is relatively more on. Relatively more on academic issues and research and relatively less on day-to-day practice of medicine. I certainly don't feel in any way that I was cheated by the kind of education I got here at Michigan State, and probably that it has a lot to do with the fact that I ended up in the field of family practice, which you whether you're an academic family practice or an

academic or in everyday practice. We're still pretty close to the the broad area of of sort of general medicine. And so an education that focuses on everyday practice is really the ideal for somebody who wants to go into family practice. If you want to do medical ethics, it helps to see the full range of issues in medicine from birth to death, and the one specialty in medicine that actually deals with patients and all those kinds of situations is family practice. So it is, so it all kind of came together. For me, and I think I got to ended up getting food for me was an excellent education. And of course, the focus of the education was relatively new in terms of issues like problem solving in groups rather than just listening to lectures, learning a lot about doctor patient interviewing and Dr. patient interaction at a relatively early stage of one's medical training. So all those aspects of the education here were. Things that I found very congenial.

Honhart

Where'd you do your residency?

Brody

At the University of Virginia.

Honhart

And how did you find that?

Brody

That was a big change. It was definitely a more academic high-powered environment, but it was also a supportive environment in which people kind of looked out for each other. So you didn't have the kind of cutthroat, backstabbing behavior that you tend to imagine. And when you hear stories about some eastern medical centers, so it, it was probably a fairly decent. Place to go to get a different point of view than what I had here in Michigan, but also not to just totally. You know, swim with the sharks as I might have if I go on to, say, Boston or someplace where they tried to do a residency. It was also very supportive of family practice and in those days in the late 70s, a lot of academic medical centers really didn't have any room for family practice in their in their program. So to go to, to have the opportunity to do a family practice residency and learn what I needed to learn my specialty. But also to have an academic environment in which to work in the University of Virginia actually turned out to be one of the better locations for.

Honhart

And then what led you to come back is obviously you must have opportunities to go.

Brody

Elsewhere I looked at several jobs that and the and several people offered me jobs where basically I was offered a job in family practice and I would be essentially 75% in family practice and 25% I would have a research time. And in my research. Time I could do whatever I wanted to, so if I wanted to do medical ethics, I could do that. If I wanted to do research on the lymphocytes and reactions to viruses, I could do that. It was pretty much open. What I might do research. Michigan State was the only institution that offered me a job that was clearly a job that was combining a work and family practice with work in medical ethics under the aegis of what was then called the Medical Humanities program and is now the Center for Ethics and Humanities. So the people who offered me the job at Michigan State knew what I was trained to do and they gave me a job description that matched my train. The other places I applied for a job, none of them had a clue what I was doing, and this idea of you got a PhD in philosophy and you're into ethics and you're also a family doc. They just didn't know what to do with that, that species

of animal. So it seemed clear to me that I would be able to have a kind of environment here at Michigan State and add to that that my wife's family was here in Michigan. The time and. We were just had we just had our first child, so her being closer to her family was a good thing. And so there were several reasons pulling us back to Michigan, but at least part of it was professional.

Honhart

So leading to that, where or how did you come in contact with Ralph?

Brody

Well, I'm I. I couldn't tell you when I first met Ralph. What I would have to tie that in with is in 1972 I had just fairly recently started medical school and I. Only then became aware had been at Michigan State as an undergraduate for four years, and I just started medical school and I then just became aware that through an article that was in, I probably the state news, that there was a Sherlock Holmes group on campus and the head of that was Don Yates in the Spanish department. And or romance languages. And I had to had no clue that there were these these clubs around. I had been a Sherlock Holmes addict ever since junior high school and I had played around with Sherlock Holmes and and and just always had a real strong fascination with Sherlock Holmes. And I was not aware that there was a national group meeting in New York and that there was this local. Network of groups around and it was just like. I don't even know what to compare. It to, but I immediately asked, you know, to become a member of the Greek interpreters of East Lansing. So I assume soon after becoming a Member, I met Ralph and Ralph, of course, had been one of the mainstays of that. And so I met Ralph through that and of course Ralph was working in criminal justice, which was a school that normally I would have had hardly any contact with at all. So and and at that time, several of the people who were who were in the the active in the Greek interpreters were in the School of Criminal Justice. So he he was one of several from that group and. And it's not that surprising that criminologists should be interested in Sherlock Holmes. And historically, doctors have been interested in Sherlock Holmes that a relatively high number of folks who hang out and write books and articles about Sherlock Holmes have been medically trained. And the fact that Doyle himself was medically trained and that Doctor Watson is one of the main characters in the stories means there's always a medical theme. You know, sort of running through the Sherlock Holmes saga so. So both criminologists and doctors, I guess, are attracted, although at that time and still there aren't that many doctors in our local group for reasons I'm not quite sure about. So that was probably How I Met Ralph and and Ralph and I then got probably our closest. Thing was that we both became interested in the question of where Baskerville Hall was located. Was there a? Could you take the topography and the descriptions in the hound of the Baskervilles? That said, Baskerville Hall was 6 miles north of here and four miles South of there, and all these little clues that you might have and from Baskerville. While you take this road and you get to this place and all these things, could you actually find a place on Dartmoor that looks like it was that place? And would there actually be a home there that actually looked like Baskerville Hall, so Ralph and I independently made trips to Dartmoor in which we checked this out. And at home, if I can remember to bring them to you sometime, I have some slides that Ralph took of his trip to Dartmoor which includes him posing with some really weird guy in the pub in the town of Buck Fastly where they were having a great old time talking about their their adventures and. So he did this, this. Sort of preliminary tour and I went and and had a theory that identified a place that hadn't previously been identified as a possibility, and then I wrote a paper about it for the Baker Street Journal, which I mentioned Ralph's work in the paper, and I hope gave him sufficient credit for what he had done while at the same time I gave my own theory and drew a little map showing how I. Reconstructed the events on the Moor so. So we both had our slide shows that we showed to the local group and he and I together presented our slides and and we each sort of debated the relative virtues of our different identifications. So that was probably how I got most involved with Ralph and Arnell and his

wife actually worked in our family practice unit for a while. She was a volunteer who? Worked in our clinic. So I saw her anella and she used to accompany Ralph some of the time, at least to the meeting. So I guess saw her both at our meetings and also. In in in my work at the Family Practice Center. So also it I think there was at least one time I have on on in infrequent occasions I've been able to go to New York, to the Baker St. Irregulars, which is is as you probably know is held as the the Friday as close as possible to January 6th every year.

Honhart
Right.

Brody
And both Ralph and I were at different times, were inducted into officially into the Baker St. So we both have what's called a a investiture or a name that's given us, that's our official sherlockian name and I can't remember the years in which we got our respects. But I do know there was at least one time and what I could have brought to you was one of the group pictures of the Baker, St. Irregulars, that has. Me standing next to Ralph at the meeting. And I know at the time he knew several of the people there. I think his friend Sam Gerber, who was a well known toxicologist, was at that one meeting and he introduced me to Sam and had a lot of conversation. About criminology. Matters and and toxicology and things. I had no knowledge of it all, but he obviously had his little network of people that he was plugged in with as that seemed to be the case wherever Ralph went that he knew this. Group of people.

Honhart
Yes, he did.

Brody
And he was an amazing network guy as far as just just charging right in and meeting everybody and forming friendships and relationships with.

Honhart
Yes, that's one of the constant themes that I've brought into both in these papers and interviews I've done with people. OK. When you were in the. Freak interpreters are Stiller and Greek interpreters. Did was Ralph playing any role at that time? As far as the organization or just act as predominantly as a?

Brody
Member I don't recall that well. First of all, during during most of that time. Don Yates was sort of the head honcho of the group and with Donna's head honcho he really sort of was the organization. So there wasn't really room for anybody else to get involved. I was kind of a dominant personality, so. So then we followed Don. When Don left, it was very, very hard to fill that vacuum. When we had a few people sort of jump in and do different things. And I don't recall that Ralph ever was in an official kind of leadership slot or in that role, but he always was a very active and loyal attendee. So he was always there and he was always had something good to say and would keep the meeting moving along and rolling along nicely. I think what he did do is the the Greek interpreters over the years have been sort of blown hot. Build on guest speakers. There's been periods of time when we've tried to have guest speakers at a lot of our meetings, and then people kind of Max out on guest speakers and we say, well, let's not have any guest speakers. We're tired of that. And then after a while we say, Gee, we haven't any guest speakers for a long time. You know, we should really get some guest speakers. And Ralph, all we seem to have somebody, whether it was a corner of the City of London or whoever might be running through town. That he knew that was that, that he could drag him in as guest speaker. So I think if

anything for a while he was sort of the unofficial guest speaker inviter and organizer. But I know he he was responsible for a number of people coming in to give talks. That had some kind of criminological.

Honhart

That sounds very.

Brody

And again, I think one of the things that's that's fairly typical about Ralph is how slowly I came to know what kind of a reputation and career he had in criminology because he was, he would, would he was not the least bit shy about telling you his opinion on anything. And if any, if you know, if somebody were to mention the assassination of Robert Kennedy. I'm sure he would jump in right away and tell you about the Ballistics and this and that. So it wasn't like he was any kind of shy or retiring person, but he definitely did not seek opportunities to blow his own. And he was was was reasonably reticent about his own accomplishments. And so you could hang around Ralph for a long time and hear Ralph talk about a lot of things and not realized that he himself had done so much. And it was certainly a lot of things about him that I only, you know, learned either after he. Died or or. Right about, you know, within the last few years that I knew him that I found out. About at least some of the I'm sure I know. Only a tiny bit of his whole career, and what I do know is I learned only very gradually, so he wasn't certainly the kind of guy who the first minute you meet at me sort of threw his CV at you in your face. And then as I mentioned to you earlier, before we started taping, I have an uncle who recently passed away in California. Bill Dinstein, my mother's older brother. Who had known Ralph in criminology and he over the years told me a few things about Ralph. Although it's hard for me now to remember exactly what he told me and what I heard elsewhere. But Bill Weinstein had been the the founder of the criminology program at what was then Fresno State University, and my impression was in the 1940s that. People working in 1940s nineteen 50s that it was a fairly small club of people working in criminology and they pretty much knew each other around the country and he certainly knew. Ralph and was part of that network when Ralph was, I think, at one time he interviewed at Michigan State for a position, so he would have seen Ralph here as well as at national meetings and things like that.

Honhart

Right. I had the same reaction you have as far as Ralph, I knew over 20. Years had lunch with him probably three times a week. And I'm finding out all sorts of things that I didn't know about. As I'm going to his papers or talking with his colleagues. So and yes, he certainly had no problem telling you exactly what he thought about anything. But never in a. Rude way. Yeah, yeah, yeah, quite a character. Other thoughts that you may have that you that come to you about Ralph, other than just the work with? The Sherlock Holmes group but.

Brody

Now that really was the context in which I knew him, so that that seemed like that was where our relationship. Was and and. Nothing else particularly comes to mind.

Honhart

OK, well this would be a good point then. You don't have anything else that we can. We can always come back. So yeah. That sounds good.

Speaker

OK.

Honhart

Thank you.

Brody

The story as I recall it with regard to the House and I don't know the name of the House, but it was the house that's at. It's at the corner of the Bend, and Hollett wrote. So it's. It's where Ralph's house is. Farther down around the bend and at the bend is this Frank Lloyd Wright House. And as I understand it, it's one of was supposed to be a subdivision of very affordable. Sort of low cost housing sort of average person. Thing that was designed in the 30s by Frank Lloyd Wright but never became a full blown development because of the depression and a variety of things. And apparently it has a heating system that is embedded in the floor and there's some sort of of, you know, the the hot water or something circulates through the floor and then gives off radiant heat. And the owner of the house developed some problem with this and and nobody had any idea how to fix this, so Ralph took it upon himself to go to New York City and to hunt down an associate of Frank Lloyd Wright. Who had been an apprentice working under Wright in rights later years, and this fellow was now in his 70s or something was just sort of getting, you know, tottering off to the grave. But Ralph grabbed him before he could totally fall into the grave and and so he was able to get from this guy enough information about the way the the system was designed originally. To to provide the clue that was needed for them to go in and do the repairs so that it could be work. So that was just an example of a little bit of detective work, I guess on Ralph's part that and and again I think an example of how he was so willing to jump in and help out somebody and and when you told me your anecdote about how he took the books for Isaac Assam off the sign at the Baker Street. Meeting that again, this was so much like Ralph. I think anytime he could help anybody out and he could see a way that he could do it as well as meet some interesting people in the process. He was was all for it. So that reminded me of of the story when you told me about here taking the Isaac Asimov. Or him taking it for you to New York. Well, great appreciate that.

[Tape ends, no further tapes]