

DOROTHY FRAYER

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Jeff Charnley,
Interviewer

Charnley: Today is Saturday, April 13th, year 2002. We are in the Union Building on the campus of Michigan State University. I am Jeff Charnley interviewing Dr. Dorothy Frayer. This interview is part of the MSU Sesquicentennial Oral History Project, commemorating the 150th anniversary of the university coming up in 2005. Dr. Frayer is on campus here this weekend attending the first reunion of the Alumni Distinguished Scholars Program and recognizing the founding of the Honors College in 1956. She is one of the inaugural class of the Alumni Distinguished Scholars Program.

You can see we are using a tape recorder for this session. Do you give us permission to record the interview?

Frayer: Yes, I do.

Charnley: I'd like to start with a little about your family and personal background before you came to college. Where were you born and raised and where did you go to high school?

Frayer: I was born in Detroit and I went to high school initially at McKenzie High School in the city of Detroit. My senior year my family moved and I was in Rudford [phonetic] Union High School in Rudford Township, Michigan.

Charnley: That was a suburb just outside of Detroit?

Framer: Yes.

Charnley: Why did you choose Michigan State for your university?

Framer: Because I won the Alumni Distinguished Scholarship. [laughs] I guess you probably weren't there this morning when I gave a little personal history, but in any event, my mother and father had not gone even to high school, and they felt that you didn't need to go to college, because if you just worked hard, you could make it in life. It was not because I was a woman, because my two older brothers did not go to college either. They were, however, very poor. That was a part of it, but also the feeling that wasn't necessary.

When we moved to Rudford Township and I went to Rudford Union, my mother insisted—I don't remember my dad saying anything, but my mother says, "Take cooking, sewing, and typing so you can make your way in life." Well, I still can't cook or sew, but I can type, which is good because I do a lot of work with computers. But in any event, I did take a couple college prep classes just because I loved to learn. So I took physics, and the particular teacher we had was unusually prepared for someone in that type of high school. He had his doctorate and had lived in Brazil and things like that, and was far more cosmopolitan than most.

Charnley: Who was that?

Frayer: Sidney Quigley [phonetic]. He not only made learning very interesting and was very practical—I have a picture of myself, we were doing pressure cooking of stew or something to get the whole idea of pressure and so on. But I was also a laboratory assistant in physics and he invited us to his home in Ann Arbor. I was from a gritty suburb of Detroit, and Ann Arbor was always considered pretty exotic. We went there, and his dog was named, I believe, Veralata [phonetic], which meant something like “She tips over garbage cans,” in Portuguese. I had clam chowder for the first time in my life, which I thought was pretty exotic, and he took us to see *Pygmalion*. We thought, “Who is this guy George Bernard Shaw?” You realize that this was before *My Fair Lady*, so we got the early version.

In any event, Dr. Quigley insisted that every student compete in what they called Science Talent Search Science Talent Search as a condition of taking the class. So I did, and I don’t know how they’re doing screening in recent years, but that year being the first year, they took finalists from other competitions like General Motors and National Merit, and in my case Westinghouse Science Talent Search. So I received a letter asking if I would be interested in coming to campus and competing for the scholarship.

You should know that I was working at a Chrysler-Plymouth dealer during high school, at first sending out cards reminding people to get their oil changed and later moving up to doing parts replacement warranties, which were in the days of typewriters and carbons, so they had eight copies. That was in the mid-fifties when they developed more modern body lines and they all leaked, so we had a lot of warranty work. I was promoted to being a car biller, and that’s what my full-time job was to be because I wasn’t going to college.

I read that it’s in February—I don’t know if that first year whether it was in February or not, but it was certainly in early spring, we came up to this campus. I had to make a decision

because there was a scholarship that would have paid for some night classes at Wayne State University in the evenings, and that, as it turned out, was the same weekend. But I decided I'd never been on a college campus and I probably never would, so I wanted to come to Michigan State so I could see a college campus. I came up for the weekend, and I couldn't understand why they treated us so nicely. I sort of jokingly said this morning, "I would say that they wined and dined except, of course, they wouldn't have wined us since the campus was dry."

Then I took the infamous test, but I didn't know it was infamous. I just assumed I didn't understand it. One of the epiphanies I had was one question was about base eight. I was smart enough to realize that there was a whole world of mathematics I obviously hadn't heard about. I don't think I got the question right, but nevertheless, that was an epiphany for me. By the time the weekend was ended and there was a farewell luncheon, I actually cried because I would never go to college.

On Mother's Day of that year, Bob Tole [phonetic], who was the head of the development office, called me. This is ironic in the way we travel and communicate these days. But he was in Detroit for Mother's Day, and he asked if he could be the one to call me and tell me that I won the scholarship. So I actually got the call on Mother's Day. Of course I accepted, and for me it was a definite setting up a different life than I would have had otherwise.

Charnley: You talked a little bit about that first visit, but when you came that fall for your admission, what do you remember? What sticks in your mind?

Frayer: I don't know that I remember specifically when I first arrived on campus, although I do remember specifically that we packed the station wagon high with belongings. Since I work on a college campus now, it's amusing because it hasn't changed one lick all these years.

But in any event, in my freshman year some of the things I do recall. I lived in Mason Hall, for one thing. It was interesting because one of the other ADS persons and I who were on the planning committee were comparing notes when we were on campus last July, and we were discussing the fact that we may have lived in the same room in Mason Hall. Keira [phonetic] took us on a tour of campus and stopped in Mason, and we went in and discovered that in fact—it's sort of on a half floor, so I was on what was one and a half and the other was on a half, so we were right up and down from one another. Not at the same time, of course, because no one was here in 1956 but me.

Another thing that happened that year is that I was named for Tower Guard, and that was very influential. We got to meet in the carillon and had private concerts. I still remember the songs that were made up about Tower Guard, or for Tower Guard; I don't know which way. But in any event, part of that was that we did service for the campus and we read to the blind. I do remember particular people that we read to and so on.

I think that one of the observations that someone made this morning—they came up to me after I spoke. She was a spouse who was with her husband who was an ADSer. She said it really brought home to her something that her husband had been saying, and that is, at least at that time—I really can't speak to it now—that for such a large institution, it was really very personal. She went to Wellesley [College], I believe, and said she just couldn't imagine that we had such personal memories and interaction with faculty and things like that. That certainly was

the case, but it was partly because of ADS, the Honors College, and Tower Guard and things like that.

One of the recollections that I talked about this morning was I gather that Honors College was in the works my freshman year but it didn't officially exist, and I certainly didn't know that's what people were talking about. It seemed to be through a grapevine. I'm not sure quite how this happened, but some kids said that they were invited to go over to Stanley Idzerda's home. We trooped over there, and I was thinking, "I can't talk to a college professor," and was pretty intimidated, actually. So we got up to the door and sort of tentatively knocked, and the door flew open and he placed an infant in my arms and closed the door. And I said, "Well, that was disarming!" [laughs] It's interesting, I asked him today, "I recall you had six children." He said, "At that time." He was still in the process of having more. [laughs] But he placed the youngest in my arms and it was sort of funny. Even before Honors College began, I did have that kind of interaction with Stan Idzerda, so that was pretty special as well.

Charnley: What did you study?

Fraye: Chemistry. I was a pre-med. I suppose that amounts to a minor in biology. I did take a great deal of biology as well. I actually finished the number of credits for graduation in three years, but I had so many of the labs and sequential things, I couldn't have actually gotten the degree in four years, so I did some graduate work my senior year, together with the undergraduate work. I also won an undergrad National Science Foundation research grant. At that time they didn't have as much undergraduate research, but under the National Science

Foundation grant I worked personally with a chemistry professor and developed my own project and things like that, which is now more common, but in that day it really wasn't.

Charnley: Were there any professors that were your mentors either officially or unofficially?

Framer: Probably primarily Dr. Idzerda from a personal point of view. Certainly at the time I had chemistry professors, but I don't know that I knew them as much on a personal basis. For example, Beulah Heddal [phonetic] was, I believe, sponsor/advisor to Tower Guard at that time, and I got to know her very well and she was always someone that was always part of my life here as well. Interestingly enough, because she's here right now, is Gwen Norrell. I had worked two summers, I guess while I was in graduate school. I did my master's here as well as my bachelor's. I did the testing for new freshman during summer orientation, and she was the head of the testing center, but only this weekend did I discover that she had anything to do with the test, the infamous test.

Charnley: She wrote a lot of it.

Framer: She certainly did. To my knowledge, she never told me that when I knew her, so I thought that was kind of interesting.

Charnley: Did you have any contact with President [John A.] Hannah?

Framer: Very much. Interestingly enough, I think other times as well, but most commonly because I would get all As and they always had dinners for all A students. I just considered him a very accessible person, because particularly at that time in my life I wasn't one that took things for granted, and to meet with a president wasn't something I would just say, "Oh yeah, meeting with John tonight," or something like that. But I recall one statement he made—and remember we were on term system then, so I might go to three dinners a year, for the most part. He once made the comment that, "It's really odd, they just seem to always serve ham with raisin sauce at these events." [laughs]

Charnley: Were you involved in other activities? You mentioned Tower Guard?

Framer: I was intercollegiate debate and I was in—when you look up my list in the yearbook, it's incredible. I don't know where I ever—you have to understand that chemistry and biology were time-intensive activities because you had all the labs. I was on Student Judiciary. I was very active in my church. I was president of the Lutheran Student Association and we formed an ecumenical group that encompassed most of the town and congregations, and that was called the Council for Christian Work, and I was president of that and founding person. So I really spent a fair amount of time involved in the church, and it was interesting because almost all of the people that were active, I guess you would say, in that Student Association of Lutherans were in fact four-point-type people. So we were studying all sorts of things like existentialism, so our outside activity was very different from chemistry and biology, but on the other hand, was really very scholarly. So that was kind of an interesting thing as well.

Charnley: Very interesting. In your experiences, how would you say that your Michigan State education influenced your later life's work?

Framer: Perhaps in some respects more in the extracurricular in some respects, in that, for example, I was in intercollegiate debate and I do think that the communication skills that I perhaps developed—I probably had some before, but certainly that was helpful, certainly was important in my future life. By the way, I was a chemistry major, but I never went into chemistry. I did an internship one summer at Dow Chemical, but then beyond that, my master's is in counseling from Michigan State, actually counseling and personnel work in higher education. It was kind of ironic, because from an NSF undergraduate research grant, at the end of the year you had to fill out this form saying how this has affected you, etc. "Has it affected you?" "Yes." "How has it affected you? What are you doing next year?" "Going into counseling." [laughs]

I was actually a pre-med, and I think that there are two pieces of that. There's the interpersonal or helping, as well as the scientific part of it. Along the way I'd come to see that, the one part, and also that's a context of time because to be a woman physician at that time required a very assertive, aggressive person, and I don't think that's who I am. I'm not so sure if I were going through school today that wouldn't be the path I would have chosen.

Charnley: What was your association with the Honors College on campus?

Framer: It was founded the year I became a sophomore, and I might be in error on this, I don't know, but it was my impression that at that time you had to be a sophomore to be in Honors

College. However, it's confused with the fact that it was founded when I was a sophomore, so that could be a misimpression. I really don't know that for sure.

Charnley: Admission was dependent on performance in the first year, rather than the ACT.

Framer: I think so, but I wouldn't swear to that. I'm aware that now that's the case, but of course it's a little confusing, because if I'd come a year later, it would have been clearer to me whether you could have gotten in as a freshman, but since there wasn't an Honors College till then, they didn't have a big choice in that. I do believe it was required to be that.

I have to say that some of the other activities on campus, such as the performances, were important. I recalled this morning one of the cases—my roommate freshman year was a senior, and she had a much broader experience than I had, in that her father had been an Army doctor and they were from a wealthier family. For example, she took me to see the Royal Danish Ballet at MSU Auditorium, and I would have to say that she more or less dragged me. I wasn't into popular music, but I'd never been exposed to any classical cultural as well. In my mind—I know this isn't true—but in my mind this man just jumped from one side of the stage to the other, and I went, "Ah!" Well, ironically, through the years I've been very much interested in ballet and was privileged to live for nine years in New York, and literally saw, at one point it was twenty-two different companies in the world, one almost every week. But I think the opening to other aspects of culture is very much, and that wasn't from my chemistry class.

Charnley: Blending of the arts and sciences.

Framer: Yes. In other words, some of the opportunities that came to me that were somewhat outside. That isn't to say that what I did in class wasn't important, but I think as I look at myself as a whole human being, some of the other experiences were probably equally influential.

Charnley: I know our problem is with time today. This is just kind of a concluding question. In looking back on your career at Michigan State, is there anything that stands out the most in your memory?

Framer: I think in some respects there was this sense that I was chosen, probably because of the Distinguished scholarship, but it was reinforced by other things along the way. I think that that, together with the experiences I had here, and it was interesting, even in Tower Guard, the song I mentioned, "We're called forth to service and leadership," and I think I've always felt that, the giving back, not specifically to Michigan State, although I've tried to do that as well, but to give back in many ways. I'm on nonprofit boards and things like that, and I think that's been my ethos. I work currently at a Catholic university, and it's very overtly into mission, but I don't know that it would have been so obvious to people at Michigan State, in general, that that was sort of an expectation or a conclusion that everyone would reach. It was for me.

Charnley: I want to thank you for your time, on behalf of the project, and also appreciate your insight.

Framer: Thank you.

Charnley: Thank you very much.

[End of interview]

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