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## Ba Win

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**Simon's Rock Oral History Project**

Interviewee: **U Ba Win**

Co-Dean of Student Life (1979 - 1984); Provost (1984 -1987); Provost and Dean of Students (1987 - 2004); Dean of the College (2005-2006); Vice-President of Early College Policies and Programs (2006 - present)

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*Scholarly use of the recording and transcript of the interview with **U Ba Win** is **unrestricted**.  
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**Selected excerpts from the Oral History Project interview. The full transcript may be restricted. To request access please contact the [Simon's Rock College Archives](#).**

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Oral History interview with U Ba Win

November 23, 2015

Hall College Center, Bard College at Simon's Rock, Great Barrington, Massachusetts

"I'd been here all of two weeks at the time, and [Doreen Young] had a talk for the incoming freshman class. [There was] a slide of a Japanese painting. Kind of characteristically, it was not a painting filled with stuff, it was a spare looking painting. She knew how to elicit a response from the group. And then she said, right towards the end, "Do you know, if the painter had added two more lines, the painting would not have been this good? It would have spoiled the effect." She said, "The painter had to exercise restraint." And it was like a bomb. She was telling young people, sixteen year old people, who are just filled with life, that there is virtue to restraint, to not doing the next thing."

"Mr. [George] Gilder was invited to do a talk and it happened in the Lecture Center. It was a packed house. [...] At the end of the talk, in the questions part, a number of students had come really, really well prepared. And they asked questions but it was not the usual pedestrian question. They would ask something detailed and Gilder would kind of treat it like some common response. But then the student would say "look, the statistics, Mr. Gilder, are these" and blah blah and blah blah and contradict him right there. And then, out of nowhere-- you could not see it-- on the PA system, came a whole bunch of absolutely ridiculous things that Mr. Reagan had said, in his own voice. These were taped snippets, one after another. Bob Ackerman, who was then the head of the school, was beside himself. He had this distinguished guest and then on the audio system were these authentic, not made up, Mr. Reagan quotes saying absolutely foolish things. And the guests didn't know what to do at first but after a while people began to laugh and it kind of ended in a, you know, confused mess. Because Bob was saying "Unplug it! Unplug it!" but there was nothing to unplug! [...] It was a brilliant and cerebral joke. It wasn't drowning and insulting him by saying lousy things. It was bringing up things that were incontrovertible and doing it in such a clever way. I was so proud!"

"[Leon Botstein] felt that all of college should not be like a Chinese restaurant menu, something from column A, something from column B, and so on. There ought to be a unifying intellectual experience. And yes, I will be arbitrary by saying we should read this, this, and this and not that, that, and that, but the works are not carved in stone. It's just important to have everyone do the same thing. Over time you can change what that thing comprises of, but he said it ought to be possible to have a campus-wide conversation about it."

“Pat Sharpe, who was the academic dean, said to me ‘Ba Win, I need you to teach freshman seminar.’ Me? What are you talking about? I haven’t read any of these books, you know? But what had happened was, someone who had committed to teaching it left. And suddenly we had a section with nobody to teach it. I furiously read. I was one week ahead of my class all the time-- because I’d have to read it two, three times. Then as it happened, Pat [Sharpe]’s class met at ten o’clock. And my class met at one o’clock or something like that. So I would go to Pat’s class and sit with the students and listen. Because I had read the stuff, hear kinds of questions that got raised and the way Pat would discuss it. And then I’d go to my class, heart in my mouth, and go-- you know, it worked out. Because I would say to them “I don’t know. I’m new to it too. But the working idea is that I know how to read and I know how to think and together we can figure it out.” And do you know, it was the most exciting-- it was more exciting than any class I ever had at Kalamazoo College. Because there, the specialists talked and we took notes. And here, Simon’s Rock, as you know from your own experience, there are some really unusual people here. Quirky, imaginative, willing to just-- burst out with whatever comes to mind. And sometimes it’s totally foolish and we all have a good laugh. And sometimes it’s jaw-dropping. How did you find this? I read the same thing and that never occurred to me! So it was-- I became a believer.”

“Oh, I loved [Livingston Hall] to pieces. I used to spend Wednesday mornings with him, from about 8:30 to 10:00. Livy was about 6’6”, very tall man, but by the time I met him, he was stooped. And he was such a thoughtful person. I would talk to him about whatever was bothering me with my work. And if a question came up, his frequent response was, “Well, let me think.” And we’d go into this thirty seconds of quiet where he would-- he always was cogitating. He would think through, and he would never tell me what to do. He would say “Well, there are many ways to look at it,” and he would trot them out. He was such a nice person. He was a one-man scholarship bank. In my time, in just the years that I knew him, probably about thirty kids had their-- the tuitions that they owed that they couldn’t pay-- taken care of. [...] It was never formal-- nobody ever announced it, I certainly wouldn’t talk about it. But if it came to my attention that somebody needed help, I brought it to him. He’d just write a check. He was a very, very generous man.”