

Rollins College Rollins Scholarship Online

Oral Histories

Archives and Special Collections

6-8-2005

Oral History Interview with Dr. Donald Griffin

Donald Griffin
Rollins College

Wenxian Zhang
Rollins College, wzhang@rollins.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.rollins.edu/oralhist>

Recommended Citation

Griffin, Donald and Zhang, Wenxian, "Oral History Interview with Dr. Donald Griffin" (2005). *Oral Histories*. Paper 8.
<http://scholarship.rollins.edu/oralhist/8>

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives and Special Collections at Rollins Scholarship Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of Rollins Scholarship Online. For more information, please contact wzhang@rollins.edu.

Oral History Interview with Dr. Donald Griffin
(6/8/2005)

Zhang: Good morning. My name is Wenxian Zhang, head of Archives Special Collections. Today is Wednesday, June 8, 2005. Here in this room are Dr. Jack Lane and two students: Lily and Corey. We are going to interview Dr. Don Griffin, who's a professor of physics, for the Rollins oral history project. Dr. Griffin, could you share with us your family background?

Griffin: Well, I was born near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and went to school near Pittsburgh until I was in junior high school. Then my family moved down to Orlando. My dad actually worked with my uncle at a local jewelry they [my uncle] owned. I went to high school here. I was thinking about a number of places [colleges], but a person who actually was my high school English teacher, and he and I became very close friends, and he was a Rollins graduate, and he recommended me to the admissions staff.

Lane: What was his name?

Griffin: Ah, Ed. I'm trying to remember. I think it was Ed Hotaling or something like that. I can't remember his last name now. It's been so many years. But he was a Rollins graduate and he recommended me to the college.

I probably am the only student in the history of Rollins to go to the school on S&H Green stamps. Remember S&H Green stamps? (Laughter) My mother worked for S&H, and they had a competitive national scholarship for which you had to write essays and take tests. I was awarded a scholarship from S&H to attend Rollins; it paid my tuition and in addition gave the College half of my tuition. So they actually made money from me coming here, believe it or not. Of course back then the tuition was like thirteen hundred dollars.

Anyhow, I came here on a full scholarship. And I was here for four years before going off to graduate school. I came here with the idea of going into engineering and even back then we had a pre-engineering program with Columbia; my plans were to go here three years and then go to Columbia for two years for an engineering degree. But once I got here and started experiencing everything with the College, I didn't want to leave, so I stayed for four years and got my degree [with a major in physics].

Zhang: So you actually went to Winter Park High School for four years?

Griffin: Yes. I went to the old Glenridge Junior High School and then Winter Park High for three [years], and I graduated in 1960 from Winter Park.

Zhang: So how was high school life back in the late fifties?

Griffin: Uhm, it was quite different than the kids experience now, we did not have all the pressures. I was heavily involved in athletics and wasn't as good a student as I could've been. I probably spent too many hours doing other things, but did well enough that I could get into, get a nice scholarship to go to college. But I could have been more serious about my high

school career. I played a lot of sports and enjoyed that a lot. When I came to Rollins, when I left high school and came to Rollins, things got a lot more serious for me.

Zhang: So what was your impression of Rollins when you entered in 1960?

Griffin: Believe it or not, we had as strong— In terms of percentages, we had a stronger science program back then than I think than we do now. I graduated— When I graduated from Rollins, I graduated with ten other people with majors in physics, and every one of them but one went to graduate school. So, we had an extremely strong program. The faculty was about the same size as our faculty now in physics, but in chemistry and biology [it was] much smaller than it is now. We were in the old building Jack was in. It was right here on this spot, and the equipment was antiquated. Every time you did an experiment, you had to spend half of your time unloading the shelves and putting things back and taking things down. But we really learned how to do things on our own. I had to build my own equipment. There wasn't stuff in the lab, where you just had to push buttons to do an experiment. You had to build your own. So it was a quite different experience than our students have now. I had some wonderful teachers. I mean, just incredible teachers.

Zhang: Could you share some of them with us?

Griffin: One of my favorite people was Ted Darrah, who was the Dean of the Chapel. He and my dad were great friends because Ted was into clock making and my dad was a clock maker and watchmaker, and so they used to spend hours together on old clocks.

He became my informal advisor. I had an advisor in the sciences, but he was my informal advisor; I went to see him all the time. He was the toughest grader I ever got when I was here. He was as tough as nails but one of the greatest guys I've ever known. And he was one of my favorites. I took a lot of philosophy when I was here and I— There was a faculty member, one of my favorites in philosophy. He was a man named Wendell Stone; he was the dean many times and was professor of philosophy and a wonderful teacher.

But in the sciences, my very favorite was Herb Hellwege. He was just spectacular. He was a great teacher, hard as nails. Demanded so much. You never went into Herb's classes unprepared because if you did, he'd get in your face. But he loved his students and he did everything he could to get them into graduate schools and to promote them and encourage them and everything else. But boy, was he demanding. He was kind of my role model when I came back to teach at Rollins because he just cared so much about his students, but expected a lot of them. When I came back, I had the opportunity to team-teach some courses for non-science majors with Herb, and it was just a great experience.

Lane: What was your relationship with the other students here? Were you a kind of nerd at Rollins?

Griffin: I'm not sure I was a nerd. When I got here, the social life back then, as you remember Jack, was different. Ninety-something percent of the students were in fraternities or sororities. So if you didn't join a fraternity, you essentially had no life outside the classroom. So I did join a fraternity. I didn't get heavily involved. I was secretary and treasurer for a while, but it wasn't my life by any means. It was a place where I could continue to play some

athletics and girls and things like that. So I enjoyed that part of it. The student body was, I would say, very uneven. You had some students who were very good. I graduated with Duane Ackerman, who's now CEO of Bellsouth; he was a physics major with me. We had some excellent. Some of my fraternity brothers were straight 'A' students and on the athletic teams and really very fine students and good people. But there were also some students who were here for all the wrong reasons and many more of them than we have today who were just here to get a piece of paper and leave. They thought their parents would take care of them. We had more of that then. But I tell you, the students I associated with in the sciences I thought were outstanding.

Lane: Very strong science students?

Griffin: Yes. And you know, we had some great kids who went on to very good careers and so that part of it I was pleased with. But it was a different place; much smaller. You knew practically everybody on campus, some of whom I didn't want to know. But overall I had a great experience and I wouldn't trade the diversity of classes and the kinds of teachers I had for everything.

Now when I was here, Jack's department was not one I [was involved with]. I actually enjoyed history in high school, believe it or not. But when I came here, before Jack arrived, the department didn't have a wonderful reputation. He changed a lot when he came here. But he came here in '63, right? Yes.

Lane: So you were here one year (Talking at the same time).

Griffin: (Talking at the same time) I was here one year while you were here.

So, probably one of my disappointments was that social sciences back then weren't as strong as they should've been. But overall I had a wonderful experience here.

I mean the teaching that I got compared to the rest of my career in graduate school; there was no comparison. There was just wonderful teaching and you were close to your faculty, as many of our students are now. And it's something that I never forgot and when I decided on my own career, it had a huge influence on where I wanted to go. I wanted to go to a place that cared about students individually and you had a chance to work with them one-on-one and it wasn't just lecturing in front of a large class.

Zhang: I want to check one thing: so which fraternity organization did you belong to?

Griffin: It's a fraternity called Lambda Chi Alpha, which is no longer on campus. (Laughs) Like many of the others, it (laughs) bit the dust. Actually when I was a student in a fraternity, we were the number one ranked academic fraternity on campus, and so forth. When I came back here, I think they were, yes they were still the Lambda Chi fraternity. But they didn't last long. They were here a couple of years and then I think they were gone. I don't remember the exact time. So many have gone by the wayside over the years.

Lane: Yeah, and up and down academically.

Griffin: Yes, right.

Lane: Where did you go to graduate school?

Griffin: I went to Purdue. I was very interested in my current field of atomic physics and Purdue had a very strong reputation in what is called condensed matter physics and atomic physics back then. So that was one of the, I think I applied to five or six schools, and Purdue gave me a pretty great scholarship so I decided to go there.

Zhang: You mentioned that you were so interested in history and your favorite professor is in chemistry. Why did you decide to major in physics?

Griffin: Well I probably started because my dad thought that engineers make a lot of money and I should therefore become an engineer (laughs). I was always good in science and math. They were subjects that I did very well in. So Dad thought I should cash in on that. When I got here, I had a professor named Dan Thomas, who was my freshman physics teacher and he ended up becoming a vice president in Jacksonville. He was a really fine teacher, and so that got me more interested in physics than before. The person I was probably closest to in physics was a man named John Ross, who retired a number of years ago, because I did research with him every summer and that is what convinced me I wanted to be a physicist. Every summer after my freshman year, I worked all summer in the laboratory. I was married as a senior in college; my wife and I were married in '63. And if it hadn't been for John Ross, we would've starved. He always found me extra work everywhere (laughs). And so forth. He wasn't, in my view, one of the best teachers I had but in terms of being a mentor and a person who I really enjoyed being around and doing research with, he was outstanding. And so when he retired, we tried to do something special for him because he had meant so much to the College over the years.

Zhang: I understand you got married in Knowles Chapel. So is your wife also associated with Rollins?

Griffin: Yes. She was a student here. She and I were married in the chapel. Ted Darrah married us. Our kids were christened in the chapel. My son was married in the chapel; Arnold married them. So we have a very close relationship with—

Zhang: Truly a Rollins family.

Griffin: —the chapel. Yes, Rollins. The chapel has always been very special. It's one of the most beautiful buildings anywhere and it's just a special place for us.

Zhang: Can you tell us about your graduate school experience? I understand you received both your Master's and your Ph.D. from Purdue.

Griffin: Yes, I went there with the intention of going into experimental [physics]. Physics, in general, is very specialized. First of all, you go into a field and then usually sub-field, of that area. The kinds of things you learn in these sub-fields are often quite different than what you learn in other sub-fields. And so after you go through the first couple of years of

course work, which is very mathematical, then you specialize; then you also choose whether you want to be a theorist or and experimentalist. I intended to go into the laboratory and be an experimentalist. And I decided on the basis of, after about a year, half a year of experiments that I really was much more interested in theory and I think my major professor felt that way too (laughs) after I screwed up a couple of things in the laboratory. I wasn't bad, but I wasn't ever going to be a great experimental physicist. I just didn't have the natural talents that one needs, and the hands-on experience [ability]. My major professor, who was an experimentalist, who also did a lot of theory, was a close friend of a classmate that he graduated with from Johns Hopkins; a man by the name of Bob [Robert Duane] Cowan, who was internationally known, but happened to be at Los Alamos National Laboratory.

So, Ken Andrew, who was my major professor, sent me to Los Alamos to spend some time with Bob. He and I worked very well together and he became my major professor at Los Alamos. So all my research, my theoretical research, was done at Los Alamos in New Mexico. It had nothing to do with the fancier bombs or weapons or anything else. It was pure basic research in atomic physics. But Bob was, as I said, internationally known. He wrote probably one of the best books in atomic physics ever, or close to it. And when he was working on his book I was there with him and he used to make me check all the math in all his chapters (laughs). He was a taskmaster, boy! And writing was his thing. I mean, if you screwed up in your writing he was on your case. So I learned to write from Bob Cowan. If I'd write something down that, when we were working on papers together, he thought was not well organized or well written, he would get all over my case and I quickly learned. I thought I was a reasonably good writer when I went out there, but when I came back I was a lot better.

So I had a wonderful experience. I sat in a place where Nobel Prize winners visited regularly. The seminars were by the most famous physicists in the world. I remember sitting in my office one day and Hans Bethe [walked by]; who was a Nobel Prize winning physicist and was involved with the Manhattan Project and was just a wonderful man. After the war, he fought against all the build up of nuclear arms and was just a wonderful man. He came down the hall and I was sitting there in my office and saw him walk by and thought, Oh my God! So I came out in the hallway to see where he went. He went down to Bob Cowan's office. And Bob is one of these people that did all this [work] with computers, and he had computer outputs piled up to the ceiling and there was this little space where he'd work. And Hans saw all this stuff in his office and he said, "Holy cow!" I remember he just said it like that: "Holy cow!" (Laughs) In his German accent. And he said, "Is there any way I can persuade the guards to let me bring a camera in here and take a picture of this; I've never seen anything like it in my life."

But that was the kind of experience I had when I was a graduate student; because the people, and especially in the summer time when I was out there a lot, the people who came to visit were gods of physics and you just wanted to be close to them and hear what they had to say.

So I spent all my research time [at Los Alamos]. I would go out, and my wife was working at Purdue as a secretary to the vice president, couldn't leave. I would go out for periods of times during the year. She would get off in the summer and we would spend the whole summer out there. And so I did that for three years. And they offered me a position at Los Alamos, but my wife told me if I stayed at Los Alamos, I'd stay alone (laughter). She hated the isolation and everything out there, but I loved it. I mean, the camping and the wonderful outdoors, so it was just great for me. When we came to Rollins, I had all this

camping gear. I used to make her go out and camp and she hated it. And so one day I came home and my wife was having a garage sale and she sold all my camping gear (laughter). Sold every bit of it.

Lane: We've had a view of— You were here when President Hugh McKean was here?

Griffin: Yes. No, actually, I—

Lane: —When you were a student?

Griffin: When I was a student, yes. When I came back, no.

Lane: Well we've had views of him from professors and others and presidents. Let's have a view of him from the student's point.

Griffin: I'm not sure I had much of an impression of Hugh. I think I knew him more through my mother-in-law than I did as a student, to be quite honest with you. He and John Tiedtke were heavily involved in community education and music back then, and my mother-in-law used to teach piano and ran the creative arts program back then. And so I used to hear the stories about the administration and John Tiedtke in particular but also Hugh McKean. And so, a couple of times, I would be invited to things. Not because I was a student, but because my mother-in-law was involved with the staff. I think he had an impact on the campus with respect to the art and the emphasis on liberal education that I profited from, but I'm not sure I had much contact with him directly. I don't recall a lot of student [contact]. Maybe he was close to certain students, I don't know. I don't recall a lot of contact with him as a student. He was very involved with every ceremony and we had all our ceremonies in the chapel, they were smaller and more intimate than we have today. So I would see him at those formal things, but I don't remember a lot of it.

Zhang: So you graduated from Purdue in 1970. What made you decide to come back to Rollins? Was it an easy decision?

Griffin: Well, I was either going to go into research, which I loved, or teach. And if I was going to teach, I was going to teach at a small school. I taught a lot at Purdue. Because I thought I wanted to teach, I was able to compete and get a teaching fellowship while I was at Purdue. So I did a lot of teaching; more than most graduate students. That's one of the reasons I was there a little longer. The average in physics is about five or five and a half years; for theory and for experimental about six and a half. And I was there for six, and one of the reasons is that I took more time is that I did more teaching than most of the graduate students did, because I really wanted to do that, I thought. But I taught a lot of courses in which my job there was to screen out students. Purdue had probably one of the top five engineering schools in the country and electrical engineering was their specialty; one of the courses, that these students were put through to see whether they'd go into engineering was modern physics. And guess who taught modern physics. And I was told that a certain percentage was expected not to make it through the course. And that was so foreign to what I thought about teaching. And I just had a terrible time with it. These were guys, a lot of them in the navy, who had come back

to college to get their engineering degrees and their careers depended on it. And I was essentially told to flunk about thirty percent of them. I hated that and then big lecture halls.

I had some good teachers there, but only when I got into the most advanced courses in theory and so forth. And I was in small classes. Most of these men had no interest in teaching. That was something they had to do to keep their contract and that was about it. Their time and effort went into research and I just hated that. So I never had any inclination, even if I would have been able to find a job, to go to a large university. That was my impression. Now maybe some of them are different. But that was the way it was at Purdue.

So I applied to a number of small schools. I applied to Bates and I got an interview there and never went because my wife said, "I won't live there, either." (Laughs) Yeah, and I got an interview at Rollins. And it was like old home week when I came back here. It was just wonderful. And they offered me a position and I took it. It was just that simple.

I also had an opportunity to go to NIST in Washington, which is the National Institute of Standards and Technology. But back then it was the National Bureau of Standards. I was competing for what was a post-doc fellowship. Back then, and it's still true now, that you almost had to have a post-doctoral position before you got a regular research position for permanent. You had to do a couple of years of postdoctoral work. So I was thinking of that.

But I decided to come to Rollins. And for the first three years, I also continued my relationship with Los Alamos. I was a visiting staff member, at Los Alamos for three or four years. I'd go out there every summer and it was wonderful. They would fly myself and my wife and my two dogs out there, give us money for renting a home, rent us a car, and paid me a salary. It was like heaven (laughs). And so we went out there every summer and I did research and then the lab started to getting huge cut backs, and we were not very well liked. They had a program for university professors over the summer time and we were not very popular out there. While all the reductions in staff were going on, they were still running the summer program for faculty of college and universities. So that dried up in the early seventies. But it was great for a while.

Zhang: So how did you make that transition from being a student of Rollins to becoming a teacher at Rollins?

Griffin: Well, first I was kind of uncertain of myself. I mean, I was given the assignments of non-major classes and courses I never thought about teaching before. And my first experience (laughs), I don't know if this should go in the archives or not, but on my first teaching experience, you can drop it if you'd like, I walked into my first class in Bush 114. My office used to be right beside it, and it was a non-major class. And there was a young lady right on the first row whose eyes looked all glassy and she looked out of it. As I started my first discussion, I went to the board to write some things down about myself, my office hours and all these things. And I heard a thump! (Laughs) And I turned around, and she had passed out. And my first day in class, I called (laughs) emergency. They had to come in [to the class], probably a drug overdose, and carried her away in an ambulance (laughs). And that was my first absolute hour of teaching! It started that way. (Laughter) I went home that night and I said, "Honey, I think I may have made a mistake." (Laughter) So that's how I started. It got better from there on.

But my best experiences were actually—I can say that overall the experiences in teaching that I remember the most are the ones in which I team-taught with other faculty

outside of my own department. I taught with Herb Hellwege for a number of years. I taught with Garry Williams a number of times. Barbara Carson, Garry Williams, Steve Nielson, myself had one of the most infamous courses in Holt (laughs). We were trying to teach a course called Creativity (laughs). Oh, what a bomb that was! (Laughs) Barbara Carson was in tears when she read the reviews. She's never seen reviews like this (laughter). We thought it was the greatest course in the world. We planned it all summer and it was to show how creativity in the arts and humanities and the sciences was similar. The students thought that we were trying to judge their creativity; there were a lot of essays and things like that. And they just did not like it. And so there was a plaque that was created by Bob Miller, who was then the dean of Holt, and it had our four names and then surviving this particular course (laughs). Those are the only really bad reviews I ever got but boy, they were something else. But the experience of teaching, it was great.

Lane: And that's important too because, you know, Rollins is just this— You know, faculty likes to try these things and sometimes—

Griffin: —Sometimes they don't work! (Laughs) But Garry and I taught a winter term course on the development of the atomic weapons and we traced atomic physics from last century through this, and *Star Wars*, and all the things we went through. And we just had a wonderful time and students seemed to enjoy it. Those are experiences that I remember the most about teaching.

I love teaching advanced physics courses though; I mean that's my thing. Put me in a class with four or five interested students talking about theory and I'm just in heaven (laughs). I love to do that. Some people may think I'm weird for doing that, but it's just what I love to do. I think I teach with great enthusiasm because I'm so enthusiastic about what I do. And that's why I think scholarship even in a college like this is so important. That, because I do it, I can talk about it from a perspective of a scientist and not somebody who dabbles in it, but somebody who does it. And so I have always felt that a person at this kind of a college has just as much [of a reason to do research] —Not to publish huge numbers of papers and so forth, but to publish and to be involved in their own community and that's always been a very important part [of my career]. And I've just been very lucky that I've had the support to be able to do that over the years. I've had grants from the Department of Energy since 1981. And it's just been so lucky that I can do both what people at big schools do in research, and still teach at a place where teaching is so important and valued. And I wouldn't give that up for anything.

Zhang: So what other courses have you taught over the years? You mentioned quite a few. Very interesting.

Griffin: I've always taught a lot of non-major classes. I find that much more of a pedagogical challenge than teaching a group of majors who already have interest. The students come into those classes often hating you for being there. Here they are taking— She's smiling (referring to Lily; laughter); she knows. They're in there not because they want to be in there but because they have to do this to get their general education satisfied. They remember the experience they had in high school where they were told that science is a bunch of facts that you memorize and regurgitate to a teacher. And my job is to change that. And I take that on as a pedagogical challenge. Now sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't, but I try to teach

physics for those people as a human experience and it's a creative human experience. It's like any other field is. And it's not a bunch of facts. The fact is, that's the last thing science is. It's a process. And so I really focus on that and try my best. Some students buy into that and it changes their attitudes toward what scientists are and what they do, and others don't. And some students I hear from over the years about that experience and some students probably still hated it. (Laughs) But I try my best. So I always enjoy teaching the freshman non-majors courses and I've done a lot of that over the years. For years, I taught a course on energy because we were in the early seventies in the middle of an energy crisis and everybody was wondering where the next barrel of oil was coming from. And so I taught a course in energy, which really allowed me to teach all kinds of physics and relate it to what they were experiencing out there, and so that, I enjoyed that a lot.

Zhang: You mentioned about your grant with the Department of Energy. I understand that throughout the years, you have been involved with doing the research with the students. Can you recall some of them?

Griffin: Actually, that's not right. One of the big problems with doing theoretical physics at a school like this is that students haven't had enough training in physics until they're in their later courses to really contribute. It's been one of my frustrations. So, in terms of student research, most of the stuff I've done [with students] has been more pedagogical than it has been theoretical, because very rarely does the student have the background before they've had some graduate courses to be able to understand the kinds of things we're doing.

Recently, I've tried to engage some students who were computer science students in helping us do some things in the programming areas because we have to program our own computers. And so that's been somewhat successful. But that is probably my greatest frustration. My colleague Tom Moore has been just wonderful in engaging students early because he does experimental work; he changed his field into musical acoustics so he could attract students early.

It's very difficult for me to do that. My research has been mostly with post-doctoral fellows that work here with me and I work with post-docs and graduate students at other universities. But it's very difficult for undergraduate students to do that work. I'm hoping we have a banner year recruiting. We've got some kids. I've got one student coming in this year who is going to be high maintenance. This kid (laughs). Talk about serious, woo! But he is already in probably the last part of his sophomore or early part of his junior year mathematically. So by the time he's a junior, I might be able to get him engaged. I'm hoping that will happen. But I've only had one or two students who were able to get to a point before their senior year where they would be able to do this and so that's been a frustration.

But the research itself is so much fun (laughs). And I just love it. But it is very, very competitive. I mean, I have to publish four or five papers a year or I'm out of business. And so to try to do that while you're teaching at a place like this has really been demanding over the years and as I get older, it gets harder. But that's how you compete for these grants. You're competing against people who are doing research full time in laboratories and in universities. My colleagues at universities might teach one course a semester. Get that! And some of them teach one course a year! And so you're trying to do that and do research at a high level at the same time. But I wouldn't give it up for anything. It's just wonderful.

And I lucked into it! I was an administrator here as Jack knows for five years and when I decided to leave that area, I was contacted by a friend of mine from the GLCA [Great Lakes Colleges Association] that Thad Seymour had [introduced me to]. He wanted to know if I wanted to go to Oakridge National Laboratory to do research and to teach. They had a program at the GLCA that brought students from the colleges of the Midwest and the GLCA to take a course and a seminar and then spend all the rest of their time doing research in the laboratory. And so the faculty that went there, taught the courses, advised the students and worked with them within the seminar. I went up [accepted the offer]. The lab was willing to take me on. I hadn't done any research in about five years. It was hard to do research. I think I published a paper or two, but it was hard doing real research when I was an administrator. And so they were willing to take me on because I was free, it didn't cost them anything. And so I went up there for a year, got engaged with a bunch of people in one group, supporting their experiments. I was doing the theory that supported their experiments. It was like going back to graduate school. I was up until one o'clock every night studying all this stuff I'd forgotten (laughs). But as a result, when I left, they gave me a subcontract to work for them and then it just continued from then on. So, since 1981, I've had either subcontracts or grants from DOE.

Lane: —That was a critical moment when you brought _____ (??) and gone on a few more years. If not it would have taken you years and years _____ (??)

Griffin: I would never catch up. I have a number of colleagues who have done that, gone into administration, stayed there, and they try to keep up a program. But it was hopeless. You just can't because you can't just take a month off and work on something. It's something you have to do all the time, throughout the year. You got to keep it going.

Lane: —Any thoughts about that?

Griffin: —About whether I made the right decision or not? No. My first three years as an administrator were great and they were exciting. The position was called vice provost back then, it's kind of like Dean of the Faculty. But I also had student responsibilities; all the student academic discipline issues I had to handle. So it was actually a broader job. And then I was acting provost for a year. I enjoyed the first three years, but after about three years, I was spending most of my time with the same people over and over again on the same problems. And I'm not sure [had the required] patience— I wasn't patient enough to deal with that over and over again with the same people. And, in the last few years, I'm not sure I had a lot of fun. It was just hard work. I'm very organized, and I can get a lot done in a short period of time, so that skill was very, very useful. But there were people who I respected and I had good relationships with, and there were some people that I had a hard time dealing with over and over again on the same issues. So I'm not sure I had the kinds of personal skills that are required and the patience to work with [certain] people over a long period. I would say it was a good experience.

I went back as the Dean of the Faculty for one year in '93 and that was great because I get to see again all the wonderful things many of our colleagues are doing. That was the best part of that job! The best part of the job wasn't pushing papers or doing budgets, it was seeing a faculty member, who you were helping do something great. And so I had that experience again of seeing what our faculty was achieving; some of them were teaching full time, huge

loads and still publishing that book or getting engaged in a new research project or doing something in pedagogy or something else. That was the fun part.

Budgets and all that stuff, which I did pretty well, that's about as exciting as watching grass grow (laughter). The fact is, watching grass grow is more interesting (laughter). And so, when I went over there the first year, I mean this year that I was over there for a year, they told me one of my main jobs was to [help] cut almost a million dollars out of the arts and science budget. And I found over half of that (laughs) in budgets that weren't done properly (laughs). And so I didn't have to cut any full-time people. We had to cut down on some part-time staff and things like that. But it wasn't anything major. So I was very proud of that, but nobody knew about it. Nobody knew what would've come if we had not been able to find those funds. They thought they had a bigger problem than they did. That was the problem. And I spent a lot of time looking at every budget. I was in there every night and every weekend looking for money [so that we could prevent any cuts].

Lane: I didn't know that.

Griffin: Yes, it was [a chore]; Ed [Cohen], who was in that office just before me, did a lot of the same thing. There were [funds that were simply] in the wrong place and people thought that we had much more of a problem than we actually did. And so we were able to straighten out the budget.

Zhang: So you talked about the budget and I understand you also served for several terms on the finance and service committee.

Griffin: Yes.

Zhang: Could you tell us more about your community service, a background of your work?

Griffin: Oh I've served on about every committee (laughs) on this campus over the years. I think part of your job at a place like this is to support the institution, and service is one of them. One of the things you should do as a faculty member. I've never thought that because I'm now a senior faculty member that I'm exempt from those things. So, yes. Two years I was on the, most recent service was on finance for two years. I was chair for a year. And that really is kind of— It's not exciting work. It's dealing with budgets. You see, a budget, in my view, should be a statement of priorities; that's a hard thing to accomplish, but it should be a statement of where your priorities are. And so in my administrative work and in my service on finance and service, I always try to push that idea, and I think the new president wants to make that come true.

It's a hard thing to accomplish but when you budget, what you really should do is say, what are the priorities for this institution? In my view, the first priorities are always the students. Not the buildings, but the students. You need to have the best student body and the best support you can for your students. And I've always thought a huge chunk of our money [should go for scholarships]. We spend a lot of money on scholarships, don't get me wrong, but I've always thought that that should be the number one thing we use to attract the very best students; students who couldn't afford to come here otherwise and experience what we have.

And the president, the new president is doing that. Rita made it possible. So I have a lot of respect for Rita and what she was able to accomplish here. We now have the campus to attract the best students. And we need support to make that happen, so a lot of it is in that area.

Also, you need to compensate [faculty and staff]. If you want good people, you have to compensate them; so the other issue is how do you appropriately reward faculty and staff who do outstanding jobs. And we're making some in-roads there now because we have things like the Cornell scholars program, a program for outstanding faculty. We have a lot of chairs that are now available that weren't before. So we have a merit system here; it's not always fair because some of the chairs are in certain areas and not in others and so forth, but at least there is a merit system. And I've served. You talk about real service (laughs); serving on the Cornell selection program [committee] for faculty this past year was one of the most demanding experiences I've had in the recent years. It was also one of the most rewarding, because I got to see all the things people were doing again. And we really do have some really good people here, who are doing outstanding things— seeing that again was very rewarding. However, it [the final selections] was a very difficult decision to make, who should receive these things..

So that service, to me, I mean finance and service was fine and I think we accomplished a few things but, in my view, the thing that we do, often do the most good at is things like service on faculty evaluation campus wide, [committees], promoting the right kinds of things for our faculty to achieve and things like that. And then the, those things that are merit awards for faculty. I think that we have an obligation to serve and [we need to] do an outstanding job in those areas.

Zhang: What impressed me very much is that you chaired the faculty evaluation committee and also conducted a lot searches; chaired search committees.

Griffin: And some of those have been successful (laughs) and some of them haven't. Yes, I've done a lot of searches over the years. I'm not sure I'm very good at it because a couple have not worked out. One of the hardest jobs that any faculty member ever has is to try to decide on that person who [is the right fit for the College]. All the people that we interview for these top positions have outstanding credentials. That's not the issue. It's finding the right match. I mean, you can have a person who has been the most effective academic leader a university has had, and if the match isn't right at Rollins, they fail. And so, the biggest difficulty is always trying to figure out who is the right person for the position at this place.

Being an administrator at Rollins is quite different than at many other places. Our faculty has a lot to say about things here and in many places, that's not true. The administration essentially dictates to the faculty; they don't here. Faculty have a lot to say about things, and so you have to have the kind of person who's willing to work with that situation. And there's not a lot of support staff compared to the big university where you have associate deans everywhere. And so these people have to work very hard and some of them just aren't ready for that. So being an administrator at this place; people need to understand how hard it is [to be an effective administrator at this place]; it's a very demanding job, and some people are effective in this kind of [setting and some are not]. They are, [the ones that have failed have been] good people. It's not that they're bad people, it's just that they don't relate too well to this kind of situation. So I've had my ups and downs in searches over the years. You just do your best.

Zhang: Could you tell us about your involvement with professional organizations or with civic organizations?

Griffin: Well, I'm involved in a number of professional organizations. I am on the [editorial] board of the largest European journal in atomic physics, *The Journal of Physics B*. I do a lot of reviewing for them. And also the other physics journal, *Physical Review A*. I'm a fellow of the American Physical Society and the European Institute of Physics, and as such, you are expected to be involved.

Right now, I'm chairman of the education committee for my division of the American Physical Society. What we do is to encourage undergraduates, who are doing research to give papers at national meetings. We select the best students and we finance their trip and give plaques away at the end. I just got back from a meeting two weeks ago where we did that and it was a great experience. Some of these kids are doing just wonderful things as undergraduates. So I enjoy that a lot and I'm going to continue in that capacity.

I get involved in some civic work, usually based on something that I want to do at a particular time. I'm not a real joiner; I'm so busy that I have a hard time spending a lot of time outside the College. If I did much more I would never see my family, so I don't spend a lot of time joining in with civic organizations. I have had a wonderful experience in working with Habitat through the College and I think that's a wonderful organization. I try to get my students involved in it, and that's Thad Seymour, I mean. But I haven't had the kind of involvement I probably should have in the community. I've just been trying to keep essentially a full-time research job going, while teaching and doing the other things that were expected to do here. It's been hard.

Zhang: So over your thirty-five years of teaching career, can you recall some of your students that you will always remember?

Griffin: Oh I have so many of them. The ones—I don't really want to get into names because there's so many of my students [that I remember] and some of them have been—I'll mention one name who I just got the biggest kick out of and she was so special to me, and that was Jill Razor. She was an All-American basketball player here. She was also a pre-med student, and she was in my physics class and she was just so great. I remember students like that. That's just an example. I've had a number of students who are, who have been non-majors, not science majors, that I've been really close to because they were just such wonderful kids and they were trying to do the right things for themselves, and for the college, and for their classmates and so forth.

I've had a lot of good physics students that I've sent on to graduate school and I'm very proud of them. Some of them have Ph.D.'s now. I've had some kids that I've helped turn around. I won't mention this [student's] name, but [he was] one of my favorites ever, and one of my wife's favorite as well. We have students to our home quite a bit, so she gets to meet all of them too. I had this one kid (laughs) who was the biggest goof-off I think I've ever had as a physics major. He used to be late for everything. So talented, and yet he would be late for everything and he'd miss assignments, and I was always on his case.

So one day I was in my office and he—I give oral exams sometimes and students dread them because I can be pretty tough on them; I put them at the board and make them sweat for a while, and then I'll tell them how great they are (laughs). But Chris came for his oral exam

and he was scheduled for eleven o'clock, I'll never forget this. And that was back when I still had knees that I use to play basketball three days a week with faculty. And it meant a lot to me getting out there and playing basketball for an hour.

So Chris shows up; he was supposed to show up at eleven o'clock. And I sit there and no Chris. Eleven thirty rolls around, no Chris. It's five to twelve, and Chris walks into my office. He said, "Oh, I'm so sorry, Dr. Griffin. My alarm didn't go off." I said, "Chris, I've heard that excuse for" back then probably "twenty years and it has no effect on me whatsoever. I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I've got a basketball appointment and I'm going to go play basketball. Usually I'm gone about an hour and a half. You sit here. While I'm gone and while I'm playing and having a great time, I'll think over whether I'm going to give you this exam or not." And I left! (Laughs) And he sat there for an hour and a half. I got back and he's still sitting there. I said, "Well Chris, I've decided I'm going to give you a break and I'm going to give you this exam." So we went down [to the classroom] and after the first five minutes of (laughs) when he was very nervous, he did fine. And I ended up sending him to work with the group that I worked with at Oak Ridge for years. He got his Ph.D. in atomic physics, my field, with one of the great guys, a guy named Tom Gallagher at Virginia. He then went off and did his post-doct[oral] fellowship at the laboratory Aimé Cotton in France.

So that was one I was most proud of because the way he was going, he wasn't going anywhere. And I think just being supportive, but being tough, you [can have an affect]. Those are the ones I remember. And I had another kid who came from Jamaica who I never thought was going to make it, and he ended up going to Washington University in St. Louis and getting his engineering degree. He came here with such a deficit because of the schools in Jamaica were so poor, and we were able to get him through.

Those are the ones I remember the most; not the ones that came in and were already ready to tear up the world, but the ones who matured and developed because of what we do here. Some of those kids wouldn't have made it at a big school. And when you do that with a few students that's what you're most proud of. So, there've been so many I'd hate to mention names.

Zhang: That's really wonderful. Do you remember any, what are some of the most significant or memorable moments over those last thirty-five years?

Griffin: For the college or?

Zhang: For you or for the college, that you experienced.

Griffin: Well, I think, when I first went into administration; I remember that a lot because I was very young. I'd only been on the faculty for five years when I was selected to be vice provost. And, you know, [I had a lot of] enthusiasm. I was going to change the world, kind of thing. I remember that a lot. So the first few years in administration were quite memorable.

And when Thad came, it was a lot more fun. When I worked with the former president, Jack Critchfield, it wasn't so much fun, but when Thad came it was fun. We had some crises, and we got through them, financial and otherwise.

When I went back, and was able to do physics again, after having five years of essentially doing nothing, and I could still do it, I remember that a great deal. I was proud of

myself. I didn't know if I could do it again. And then keeping the grants coming and being recognized by people who I respected from other institutions for the work I was doing. That was memorable.

In terms of the College, there have been so many things: the people that I worked with, the work that I did with Rita over the years. She and I served together on a lot of things. I mean, I served on those search committees with her and when I went back for a year she—I saw her quite often because we had a provost who was having some trouble, and so I worked very closely with her during those periods of time. I remember working, as I said, with Thad on so many things.

One of the most rewarding thing for me, as a faculty member here, is to see how the College has gotten so much better overall. As I say, I always, we always had good science students here and in many ways there were bigger numbers in my discipline back then than there are now. But overall, the student body is wonderful. Students are great to work with and they're getting better. These attempts to give better financial aid to our students and provide more opportunities for students who couldn't afford it otherwise is, I think have been important. So I've just had just, you know, a blur of memories after all these years. Not one particular thing.

Zhang: As a faculty member, you worked under Jack Critchfield and Seymour and Bornstein as the administration. Could you give us your reflections on working with them?

Griffin: Yes, they were all so different. Just so different. Jack, he was much more of a businessman than he was a faculty person. He had very strong opinions on what he expected of faculty and what he wanted to accomplish here, and I'm not sure I was in much agreement with a lot of that. So those were tough times; nothing against him, I just had disagreements with his way of doing things.

Thad was a breath of fresh air. I mean, Thad was a student person from the word 'go.' He loved students and he spent all his time with students. He had some problems with certain faculty members over the years and I tried to understand both sides and work between them. But I loved the guy. I mean he was one of my favorite people and still is. And we became very close friends during that period of time. But there were some things that needed to be done on the academic side that Thad wasn't able to accomplish. I think partially because we didn't have the fundraising back then that we have now.

And then Rita comes in and Rita was far, far different. After all, she came in as the vice president for development for Miami and it wasn't clear how she would interact with either students or faculty. And, I think, for her first three years she struggled with that. She didn't have the personality of Thad, and the students all loved Thad. It was tough on her, you know, coming into a situation where you had this guy who drove around in his old beat up convertible and read poetry and did magic acts with students (laughter). I mean, that's hard to top (laughs)! But she really worked at it and she was successful. I think she really had a good relationship with both students and faculty when she left. And she was so supportive of faculty. I mean, every time, if I get an award or get something, she would call me on the phone and she did that with all my colleagues. And it wasn't phony. She really did value her faculty, she referred to us as her faculty, and she was very good with them. So, it wasn't just all fundraising; and she really went out of her way to try to promote students. And, you know, there were— Like any person who has certain goals and certain strengths, you have to scream

at certain issues. Overall, I think she [did a wonderful job]. I mean, look at this place now and what it was when she came; and the endowment we have and everything else. I mean, none of the things we're talking about doing now would've been possible without Rita Bornstein. There is no doubt.

So we had the right people at the right time. Thad came in and raised the level of expectation. He made contacts with people who were well respected in academic areas, circles, that we didn't have before because Jack wasn't an academic. And Rita came in and built the infrastructure to make things possible, but she also did a lot of other things. I mean, for example, she had colloquium here on the pragmatic liberal arts. It was known all through the, you know, well received all over the country. And so she did a lot of other things like that, and I think her impact has been the most significant of all by far. And I'm hoping that Lewis will, in his own way, will be able to do different things.

Zhang: Yeah, so what will be your view now with President Duncan, with such a strong science background, what will be the future direction of the college?

Griffin: Well, I think the best part of Lewis Duncan is that he is as broadly and liberally educated as anybody I've ever known. His interests are very diverse. He connects it to his science and technology. But I remember sitting there with a lot of skeptical colleagues when he was interviewed on campus and he gave a lot of people a lesson in liberal arts. He told them about the history of it, how it evolved, and why it was different, and why it was so important these days. And he believes in that strongly. Now, whether he has all the other requirements that one needs to be an effective president, it's too early to tell.

He's a wonderful guy, and he's a great physicist, because he and I talk physics and he does know physics. And he's still connected; he does research with people all over the world and he's well known. And he's published in the best journals and he's still an active physicist. He even has a little cubbyhole over in Bush that he hides in when he wants to get away from (laughter) everything. He sneaks in and that's where I see him. You don't see him a lot, but I see him because I'm in my office and he'll come by and say, "Well how's it going today?" on his way to his office. And he hides in there. He has the windows covered so nobody knows he's in there, and he's in there working on his stuff once in a while. So he's still active.

But I think the stuff, the things that he is— Students are clearly his priority. There is no doubt about that. He has spent the first year here trying to understand the student body and where it is, what the culture is and how he can affect it, and how he can improve on things for them. And as a result, he has not had as much contact with faculty and staff, as some people would like. But that's great. I mean he comes down here at night and sits with the kids in the *Sandspur* office and gives them doughnuts, and goes to the basketball games and the soccer games; he is getting to know the student body. And I think he feels that that's the big issue now. He's going to focus on people and not things. He's not going to spend a huge amount of effort and time building new buildings. So our new science building's probably going to wait for a long time. But he's going to invest his money, or the money of the College in people and programs. And so, to me, that's the right thing to do right now, because we have the buildings, and we have the beautiful campus and what we need are things that support our students and improve our student body and continue to improve our faculty. So, I think that's the right thing to do.

Zhang: Great. Now looking back, how do you view your Rollins career?

Griffin: I wouldn't trade it for anything. There are days, like this morning. I have a computer cluster of twenty-six computers that all work together in parallel to solve these big problems we do. My son is a computer engineer. He's a chief network engineer at the University of Florida, and he runs the Florida State Fiber Optics Network, so he's been very successful in that. He's very good at it. And so he built my cluster for me, and he came back last week to rebuild it because we've had some problems. Over the weekend the power failed and my machines were clobbered, so I was actually tearing apart machines and putting them together these last few days. And then I came in this morning and something else blew. Before I came over here, I was trying to figure out how to make things work. So there are days like that when I wished I was just teaching.

But overall, I wouldn't trade it for anything, because I've had this wonderful experience of being able to teach at a college where teaching is important, the most important thing, and where students are the most important thing. And yet I've been able to do research with people all around the country, and keep that going. So, it's kind of a rare thing, and I'm very proud of it, and I wouldn't trade that for anything.

Yes, I look back fondly on my career. I don't know how much longer it's going to last. People keep asking me when I'm going to retire (laughter) and that bothers me (laughter). I'm still going! I'm not crawling around, am I? (Laughter) I came to graduation one year, and I was late! Okay? And so they put the faculty emeriti in the back of the line and they were asking me, "Oh, are you retiring this year?" (Laughter) They were ready to stick me in the back of the line already! So no, I'm not ready to retire yet; I'm going to go a few more years. Students will have to put up with me for a few more years.

Zhang: And that's wonderful. So, what's your view of the college from being a student and then later a faculty member? What is your opinion?

Griffin: Well I, as I said, I think that overall the student body is just tremendously stronger than it was when I came here as a student. We had really good students back then, don't get me wrong, and we still do have very good students, but we had many more of those who aren't here anymore. We still have some students who have talent and when they come here they're going to do as little as they have to to get through, and I wish we didn't have those students. If it was up to me, they wouldn't be here to be quite frank with you. I don't have much use for that. But in a private school with high tuition like Rollins, you're going to have that.

So, I mean, if I had to change something it would be that those students would be encouraged to find another place. But there aren't nearly as many as there used to be, and I've seen a gradual improvement in that every year. And so most of the students I deal with I just think the world of. They're great.

I wish we could do more to improve their life outside the classroom. That's been my frustration since I've been here. The biggest complaint we hear from students who leave this place is that their social life, that is their life outside the classroom, isn't what it should be. And if you want to have a wonderful place for students to experience over four years, it's got to be just more than what happens in the classroom and in the academic buildings. It's got to be what happens in the dormitories. And I still think we have a long way to go there. I don't

think we have developed enough policies that respect those students who are trying to do the right thing. And we often take the easy way out, make judgments that allow students who are doing the right thing to suffer and those who are doing the wrong thing not to suffer. I've been very outspoken about that over the years and I will continue to be outspoken because I care about good students and I want them to have the kind of experience they should have.

But I still think the situation is better than it used to be and all small schools, I mean all schools, have these problems. I remember I worked years ago organizing a workshop in atomic physics at Harvard Smithsonian in Cambridge and this friend of mine and I went up there to get it organized. It was Wednesday night in Harvard Square, and you couldn't get in to eat dinner because the bars were packed. You couldn't get through the bars, and this was Wednesday night, and these were Harvard and MIT and students. And so I'm saying to myself, My God! It starts on Wednesday night at Harvard. I thought it started on Thursday night at Rollins. So, I don't know how you change that. It's not a particularly Rollins problem; it's a national problem— The misuse of alcohol and drugs and other things. And we have to deal with those things. We'd be a better society if we didn't have to, but that's what we have to face. There are frustrations, don't get me wrong. We had a group of faculty members about three years ago. It became known as The Gang of Eleven. I don't know if you remember that, but we had some meetings when we tried to address these issues for students; I think it had a little impact for a little while but it's got to be sustained. But I think if Lewis is able to accomplish what he'd like to accomplish, it will change. That's what I'm hoping.

Zhang: What is your view of the faculty structure over the years?

Griffin: There is a change, and all of it isn't good. We have a much stronger faculty than we used to have overall. There's no doubt about that. Some really good people. As I said when I served on that Cornell committee, I was just so impressed with what our faculty is doing.

What I don't like, that I used to love here, is that we have become very focused on our own departments and our own areas. When I was a student here, that wasn't true. And when I came back as a faculty member, I spent as much time with people in philosophy, and art, and history as I did with people in the sciences. In fact, probably on a social basis, more time. And that's what I really loved; that I could sit and argue with a philosopher or historian— Someone outside of my discipline, and I spent as much time doing that as I did [with those in the sciences]. We are much more focused, because people who are coming from academic institutions today are more focused on their own disciplines and they tend to stay within their disciplines more than we did. And that, to me, is a weakness. I wish we could find ways to break those barriers again. Within my own division, the science division, we met on a regular basis with people in all the departments and talked about issues, and we don't do that much.

So that part is a negative. But in terms of the quality of the faculty, there's no comparison. It's just really quite, quite good. In terms of the students that I see, there are also big changes there.

So as I look back at what's happened with the College over the years, most of it has been really good. I wish [we could regain some of the informal ways in which students and faculty used to meet.] Jack [Lane] will talk about that a lot. About the fact that we used to sit around and have coffee together all the time, and we'd go over to the old mail room, which is now the bookstore, and chat and see students, and it was very informal, but it was great. And

that doesn't happen as much as it should anymore. So that's a missing component. And Rita tried like crazy to solve that problem. She put in a faculty dining room and did all kinds of things, but none of them seemed to work. I don't know if you could change that now. I'm not sure, but it would be nice to do it.

Zhang: Okay, thank you so much.

Griffin: You're welcome!

Zhang: For your time. I really enjoyed the conversation.

Griffin: It was an hour and twenty minutes.

Zhang: Thank you!

Griffin: And boy, she's been typing like crazy!