TRANSCRIPTION RE:

CSUMB Founding Faculty
Oral History Project 1995-98
Rina Benmayor, Project Director

Interview with Robert Van Spyk, Professor Emeritus,
Telecommunications, Multimedia and Applied Computing,
Science, Technology and Information Resources Center

Interviewer, Rina Benmayor, Professor Emerita
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Narrator: Robert Van Spyk
Interviewer: Rina Benmayor

1   **Benmayor**: Today is February 10, 2020 and this is Rina Benmayor and I'm here with Bob Van

2   Spyk and we are doing our interview over Zoom for the CSUMB Founding Faculty Oral History Project.

3   So, Bob, do we have your permission to record this interview?

4   **Van Spyk:** Yes. Of course.

5   **Benmayor:** Okay. Could we start by asking you to state your name?

6   **Van Spyk:** Bob Van Spyk.

7   **Benmayor:** Okay. And so, Bob, the first question I wanted to ask you was where were you before

8   you came to CSUMB and how did you find out about this University?

9   **Van Spyk:** I was at Hayward State University. I had a dual career between Pacific Bell and

10   Hayward State University so I would go back and forth. My days usually started at 8 and ended at 11 at

11   night. So that's kind of where I was at the time that I saw a very small newspaper article, just a little blurb,

12   that said that folks were thinking about a university here in Fort Ord. And I said, "Oh! Look at that!" In my

13   other lives I used to be an investigative reporter so I started to do some research and I found out that there

14   was in fact already a tiny office on Hilby Street here in Seaside. And so I took a day off and drove up – or

15   down – from Hayward and visited. There were about four staff members there. It was all start up, you

16   know, crazy stuff. And I started to talk with them and that went really well. We had a great time. I came

17   down again the next week just to kind of visit and help out. They were working with an architecture firm

18   to draft the design for the University. It's called a Program Book as you know. That was supposed to end

19   up in a big binder that said, "These are the programs, this is the space that they need, this is the funding that

20   they need, this is how long it will take to fix them up" and so on. It's like a manual about how to put the

21 whole thing in place. And they were running into a problem which I helped them identify. There was no

22 Computer Science program listed. And I thought, "Whoa, that's quaint." But obviously it was early draft

23 stage, right? So I said, "Well, if you want, I could probably help with that." I was not on the payroll. I was a

24 **[3:17]** visitor. So, the next week I came down and showed them a document that I'd written about a

25 telecommunications and computing program. And they said, "Wow, this is great!" It turned out that I had

26 just done the same thing for Contra Costa County, established labs and so on. I'd also just developed the

27 Telecommunications graduate degree at Hayward State, so it wasn't all that hard, right? So they thought it

28 was great and they included it in their document. Later on the next week or two weeks later they said,

29 "Well, we don't know how these labs, for example, for media and so on should be organized. How they

30 should be laid out." And I said, "Well, let me think on it." So I disappeared again. And it turned out that my

31 job at Pacific Bell was Lead Member of Technical Staff, second in charge of one of the largest

32 telecommunications labs here on the West Coast. This is sort of a side career. So again, it wasn't all that

33 hard for me to put some stuff on the paper. So that became a pattern. And I became a part time employee,

34 which I wasn't, I was just a visitor. But I was just like a desk, I was always there. So I had a great time.

35 And it snowballed and the actual program came out in Fall of '94. It was very detailed. I had already

36 decided where the Media complex was going to be. In fact, that was one of the questions I was asked. "If

37 you have all this labs for computers and media and so on, and Distance Learning, which was very

38 important at that time, where should they be?" I'd already picked out Building 3640. So I said, "Well, we

39 need about 15,000 square feet." "Oh, where are we going to find it?" "Well, look at the campus diagrams."

40 They saw one building here. So it all worked out really, really well. It was a tremendous collaborative

41 effort. And so that's how it got started. That was the Fall of '94. I started in the Summer of '94 way before

42 anybody was here, really. And the program came out in the Fall of '94. And I got a call in November to

43 report to the campus in January.

44 **[6:04] Benmayor:** [Laughs] So you never had an interview?

45   **Van Spyk:** Yeah, there were some interviews in between.

46   **Benmayor:** Oh, okay.

47   **Van Spyk:** But I didn't know until later. Of course since I'd been working with them and my

48   background really was almost tailor made for what was required here because of all the different positions.

49   For example, I was an Associate Director of Academic Computing in San Francisco State. So the academic

50   side of the computing house was fine. I'd built computers literally since 1975, as sort of a pastime. Some

51   people golf. Some people ski. I built computers. And that was just how it was. My son today who is a

52   hacker with a big Bay Area company has developed the same way. It's a genetic defect, I think. So that all

53   worked out really well. We got the building.

54   **Benmayor:** So you got the call in November?

55   **[6:59] Van Spyk:** Right. And reporting in January. When I told my wife, I expected to get a solid "No."

56   But she said, "Okay, no problem." We got a big dumpster in front of the house. I threw out half of our

57   belongings, packed up the rest and arrived here in January the 7th of 1995, I think, and later at night in a

58   driving rainstorm. That was a really bad, bad winter, right?

59   **Benmayor:** Oh, yeah. Um hmm.

60   **Van Spyk:** And of course nobody knew who we were. We were able to get to the Director of

61   Housing which was just a temporary – some volunteer did that. And they didn't know who we were and

62   where we were supposed to live. I said, "Well, I've got kids and a wife in a car and what now?" [Chuckles]

63   Well, they finally found a place and that's when we moved in on the campus.

64   **Benmayor:** What street were you on?

65   **Van Spyk:** Wiedemeyer. Yeah. So we settled in. And that's how it all started. One of the things, I

66   use this story with my students as well, to indicate that there's a bunch of lessons I learned from all this,

67   some painful, most of them very nice. One of the lessons that I learned is that, for students to pay attention,

68   which means that you see little things around you, you hear little things, you read, you see them on the

69 street. Anything that captures your attention focus on it, spend some time on it and then let it digest, sort of

70 thing. And that's what happened with that little article that I saw about the campus. You know, I stopped

71 long enough to pay attention to it. That happened again, by the way, and I am digressing, with the Study at

72 Sea Program. I don't know if you remember that?

73   **Benmayor:** I do. I do.

74   **Van Spyk:** Yeah. I saw a little article that said Maritime Academy of Vallejo is becoming part of

75 the CSU system. And since I like the ocean, I have my own sailboat here, I got in touch with them. And I

76 said, "Can I take some classes on your ship?" I was really surprised, they said, "Sure." I said, "Well, when

77 does your ship go out?" They said, "Well, about four months from now." "How long?" "Two months." So I

78 was able to get students, develop curriculum, we all got onboard in June and were gone for two months at a

79 time. Which was a wonderful experience. The students were … they were just different people when they

80 came off the ship.

81   **Benmayor:** Yeah, yeah.

82 **[10:22] Van Spyk:** And the CSU system, of course – not of course – but they decided to document it in a

83 movie that we made and that still has to be online somewhere. A Study at Sea movie. About twenty

84 minutes. For amateur work. It's a really nice thing to look at. So that happened.

85   So it's students paying attention. You know, stop long enough to -

86   **Benmayor:** A-huh. Can I ask you where you saw the initial article? In what newspaper?

87   **Van Spyk:** About the Study at Sea, you mean?

88   **Benmayor:** No, no. About the campus.

89   **Van Spyk:** About the campus. It may have been the *San Jose Mercury*. It may have been that one.

90   **Benmayor:** Right, right. And just backtracking a little bit, what did you get your degree in? Was it

91 Computer Science or ? [Chuckles] Well, we're all interdisciplinary. So, you know.

92   **Van Spyk:** I know. I know. No, I have my degree in Geography.

93   **Benmayor:** Oh. A-huh.

94   **Van Spyk:**   Which has nothing to do with Computer Science. However, my Master's and Ph.D.

95   degree required a lot of computation and there wasn't any software to do what I needed to do. So I wrote

96   software and I learned how to use mainframes and punch machines. So fairly soon I started thinking to use

97   them as a tool. You know, that kind of snowballed over time. So I was almost like forced into other areas.

98   Then later on when I was teaching this material, I was asked by Pacific Bell to be a U.S. representative to

99   the United Nations CCIQT, which is the telecommunications body that they needed representation on. So

100   that's when I started to deepen my knowledge about telecommunications, the telephone networks and all

101   that stuff. In other words, the kind of networks that we're using now, the broadband and so on. So all these

102   things kind of snowballed.

103   **Benmayor:** So were you instrumental or key in all of the broadband and stuff that happened on the

104   campus? And the conversions?

105   **Van Spyk:** Yeah.

106   **Benmayor:** [Chuckles]

107   **Van Spyk:** Obviously there were a lot of people involved, really good people. I do have a role.

108   When I talk to my kids I exaggerate that role. When I talk to normal human beings, I'm a little bit more

109   modest. But yes, for Pacific Bell among the many tasks that I had was to fund university research for the

110   telephone company, leading edge research. So there was a thing called the External Technology Program

111   and I administered that to 12 universities, Stanford and all that. When this started to happen I talked to them

112   and I said, "Can I include CSU Monterey Bay in that program?" And they said, "Sure, we trust you,"

113   which was the first error they made. So they then ended up donating $40,000 and free high speed

114   connectivity and I think even one of the large switches that the campus started with. So that was kind of the

115   way that developed over time.

116   **Benmayor:** What was your motivation to leave Hayward? You obviously had a good job there.

117 And you were working 11 hours a day or something. [Chuckles]

118 **[14:33] Van Spyk:** Yeah, oh, yeah. It was. Sometimes when I walked in the door my family would

119 introduce me to my wife. "Here's that man again." No, they knew me. We had a great time. It's mostly…

120 it's mostly obsession. I tell my students also, another little thing, be obsessed about something. Look at

121 something and recognize it and make it your own and don't stop until it is your own. And that's what

122 happened when I saw the University ad and when I got involved. There was no doubt in my mind that I

123 would follow it through as far as I could do it. Having the ability or cultivating the ability to do that, and

124 you know that from your own career, that when you get hooked on something it's a great source of strength

125 and perseverance. And of course I was kind of getting tired of working the long hours. So I exchanged it

126 for CSUMB. . .

127   **Benmayor:** [Laughs]

128   **Van Spyk:** . . . which you know, the hours were unlimited.

129   **Benmayor:** [Laughs]

130   **Van Spyk:** But I owe a lot of course to my family and my wife because they lived through it. They

131 enjoyed it. So there was a lot of support there. And the kids turned out to be wonderful human beings.

132   **Benmayor:** How old were your kids when you moved here?

133   **Van Spyk:** The oldest was ten, something like that? And then eight. And six. Maybe a little bit

134 older but around that stage.

135   **Benmayor:** So they really grew up here.

136   **Van Spyk:** Yeah, yeah. They ended up at Carmel High school. Excellent school, also. And my son

137 is the hacker. He does all the security and dismantles chips and whatever for this company. My two

138 daughters have Ph.D.'s in the hard sciences. And now do work with startup genetics companies and bio

139 companies. They are the kind of people that say, "Well, Dad, let me explain." And then everything else that

140 they say after that I don't understand.

141   **Benmayor:** [Laughs] That's the way of it, isn't it?

142   **Van Spyk:** They are very nice people. They greatly benefited from being here.

143   **Benmayor:** A-hah. And did you live on Wiedemeyer for long or did you then buy a house?

144   **Van Spyk:** I lived there for two years. We took a hit on the house in Danville so I said to my wife,

145 "Well, I'll never buy a house again" … sort of. But then she found, again, a little article that called her

146 attention. A little For Sale thing in the newspaper. For Sale by Owner. She said, "Let's take a look." And I

147 said, "Okay. Well." So we took a look and it was a house that was empty, had been empty for a while. And

148 we broke in because there was no key. There was no realtor. The owner was very sick, unfortunately. Was

149 in L.A. and wanted to sell immediately. And I said, "Well, yeah, we can do that." Because I had just been

150 bought out by Pacific Bell.

151   **Benmayor:** Ah.

152 **[18:12] Van Spyk:** So it was like a flash of lightening. Three weeks later it was done and we were

153 moving.

154   **Benmayor:** Great.

155   **Van Spyk:** That was fun.

156   **Benmayor:** So you first went to Hilby Street and you hung out with those folks for a few months,

157 right?

158   **Van Spyk:** Yes.

159   **Benmayor:** What was the first time you came onto Fort Ord, onto what was to become the

160 campus?

161   **Van Spyk:** The first time I came to campus?

162   **Benmayor:** Um hmm.

163   **Van Spyk:** That was when I moved. Literally. That one stormy, stormy night. And of course we

164   had to show our documentation at the gate.

165   **Benmayor:** So there was still military at the gate?

166   **Van Spyk:** Yeah, yeah. So that lasted for several months, actually, until the gate closed. But no, it

167   was a military base, which is interesting. And again, I am pretty orthogonal. It's interesting because I also

168   developed a program between the University and the Department of Defense, the building that sits on the

169   edge of campus, that former hospital. So there were a lot of students going back and forth. They were

170   learning, then they'd leave the classroom, they'd go over to the Department of Defense and do things. As a

171   result of that career, I still have my military credentials. So I can go to any base or stay in any base and

172   things like that. So arriving here had way bigger implications for my future than I thought it might, in that

173   regard. That was kind of nice.

174   **Benmayor:** It was a stormy night. And then the next day what was your impression of campus?

175   Were your surprised? Did you feel out of place? I mean what was your emotional response to the physical

176   environment? To the geography.

177   **Van Spyk:** Oh, I can describe that. When I was a small kid, I lived in the Netherlands, as you

178   know. I'm a first generation immigrant, you know? A trunk, $50, off the plane and here you are. But as a

179   little kid I would visit my grandfather who lived in a fishing village. Across from his house was a path that

180   led directly to sand dunes, huge sand dunes all the way to the North Sea. And guess what? In the

181   Wiedemeyer place when you walked out the rear gate what was there? Nothing but sand dunes!

182   **Benmayor:** That's right. [Chuckles]

183   **Van Spyk:** So it was an immediate sort of, "Ah, this is cool." And my kids really enjoyed that.

184   They found all kinds of stuff. Nothing dangerous but it's wonderful to see my kids running out the back

185   door and disappearing in the dunes kind of thing. They came back. So other than that it was a given

186   environment. I didn't have any reaction to it other than that I'm delighted to be here. I had more of a

187   reaction to the buildings. Two-fold. Some of the buildings were Viet Nam War era buildings. You know,

188   the two story buildings, right?

189   **Benmayor:** Um hmm. Um hmm.

190   **Van Spyk:** That you see in all the Viet Nam war movies. And I thought, "I've never seen them live

191   before." I thought, "Oh, look at this. This is really something else!" The other thing was that the buildings

192   that we were working in, and you also remember that, were very cold, and not well equipped for work. The

193   administration finally agreed to give us tables and chairs but it was like a very limited environment. So you

194   had to dress warm, of course. That was not always comfortable for many hours of work. So those are my

195   impressions. I was there and that was it, kind of thing.

196   **[22:29] Benmayor:** So when you came on when did you meet your colleagues and what did you start to

197   do? What were you tasked with doing?

198   **Van Spyk:** Okay. Peter Smith, who was just a tremendous organizer, essentially gave us the charge

199   to build a university.

200   **Benmayor:** [Chuckles]

201   **Van Spyk:** So really specific about that. My colleagues arrived anywhere between February or

202   January and a few months later. So it was kind of spread out that the 12 of us, the initial 12 arrived. I can't

203   remember quite who I met when, but that's where they were. And what was the rest of your question?

204   **Benmayor:** How did you begin to work? What did you do in those initial meetings?

205   **Van Spyk:** Right. We did everything. Of course I had a very fortunate head start, right, because I

206   was a half a year into the process already. So I was ready with the diagrams and the plans and the

207   curriculum. I had a single overview page with I think six or seven disciplines that nobody else was able to

208   start or had an opportunity to start. We were all over tasked. So I decided, "Well, I want to start these six or

209   seven disciplines." So GIS, Computer Science, Telecommunications, Science and Business, actually. And

210   everybody else said, "That's cool. We'll start this, we'll start this." And we divided up the pie and

211   somebody said, "Okay, I'll look at organizations." Another person said, "Okay, I'll look at the technical

212   parts, administration of registration and applications and things of that nature." So it was, as I recall, pretty

213   self-guided. We all brought our own strengths to it. And there was no doubt about who was going to do

214   what. It was completely self-guided. I like that environment. I'm happy in an environment where somebody

215   says, "Go do this thing." So that was the first half year of meetings, almost, that we got together and talked

216   about all the details and worked them out and checked to see how they worked with the Vision which was

217   in fairly constant development at that time, I think. It wasn't quite done yet. We were all hired, as were the

218   next group of faculty, for specific skills, life experiences, being raised poor or having a strong position on

219   particular things like ethics and culture and values and so on. So we complemented each other, I think. At

220   least my colleagues were kind enough to let me think that I complemented them. [Laughter]

221   **Benmayor:** Did you meet Judy Baca in '94? Was she part of those initial -

222   **[26:01] Van Spyk:** Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah.

223   **Benmayor:** I mean before '95. In other words, when you were in Hilby.

224   **Van Spyk:** No. I think I met everybody after that when we arrived on the campus. Luis Valdez, for

225   example, who was sort of the antidote to overwork.

226   **Benmayor:** [Chuckles]

227   **Van Spyk:** He was so cool and deliberate and sort of peaceful that he was able to slow us down

228   some, and development a perspective other than our own anxiety or tiredness or whatever. Phil Esparza

229   And of course Marsha Moroh, who was extremely well spoken and was able to interpret a lot of things that

230   they said that made no sense. And let me see. Well, there were a whole series, as you know.

231   **Benmayor:** So you were put in charge of the whole… or you and Marsha together in terms of

232   Multimedia and Technology? Or? How did that….?

233   **Van Spyk:** I think she developed the Math program primarily. But in terms of all the other six

234   programs that I was working on, the Computer Science she also participated in. But … we diverged. I

235   designed the Media Complex. So I was automatically put in charge as the Director of the Media Complex.

236   And that meant that, "Here's empty buildings, how are you going to work with them?" And so I had to lay

237   out the faculty offices. And lay out the labs. And, you know, I'm not a *buyer* but I had to *buy* the furniture.

238   And I had to *buy* computers. And tables. And lamps.

239   **Benmayor:** And pencils and pens.. . [Laugh]

240   **[28:20] Van Spyk:** And pens, all that stuff. And I was totally out of my depth. But it did eventually occur.

241   And like the faculty offices, there's a little story about that, a little side story. I said that faculty need

242   windows in their offices. The side walls of that building, 3640, were concrete. So I said, "Okay, well let's

243   just cut windows in it and put 'em in." And then somebody said, "Well, there are CSU-wide regulations

244   about how large a faculty office can be, whether it can have windows put in, where you buy the furniture –

245   we had to buy prison furniture it turns out – and so that's when I learned the concept of "degrees of

246   freedom." In other words, degrees of freedom is a mathematical concept, right? But I found that okay, we

247   started with 100% freedom, right? Peter said, Peter promised. . . the President. And it turned out to be not

248   so at all. The courses, for instance. Course numbering. Layouts. Equipment. There were constraints on

249   everything. Now that was logical, obviously, when you run a multi-university system. But I was caught a

250   little bit by surprise. So again, another thing I try to alert my students to is, think about your degrees of

251   freedom. And think about whether or not you want to push those and exceed them or innovate within them.

252   We ended up doing both. For example, I needed a storage place and I couldn't have one because it was too

253   much space that I asked for in that building. So I created a lab and they said, "Okay, labs are good." It was

254   a storage space, of course.

255   **Benmayor:** [Laughs]

256   **Van Spyk:** So that's how it happened. And of course with all the disciplines I ran them for a while

257   but only a short while because you can't do six disciplines. I could do the Computer Science and

258   Telecommunications, stuff like that. I could do a little bit of GIS, but I proposed it only because I think it's

259   very important for data modeling, for data visualization and of course all the Google stuff, that's all GIS

260   stuff. So no, but by and large the building, those particular programs were pretty much in my bailiwick.

261   Obviously, again, you know, that's not a solo effort, right?

262   **Benmayor:** Yeah. And what did you end up teaching? I mean what were the courses that you were

263   in charge of?

264   **Van Spyk:** Um. . . I taught Telecommunications, Technology, Networking, Systems Analysis

265   which was also a different kind of branch. What else. Later on of course a variety of things like Computer

266   Security. But that question brings something else in mind. Another question is, "How did you start

267   teaching? Well, here were empty labs, right? And in empty labs were piles of boxes of computers. So the

268   first classes that my students took in the Fall of '95 were, "Okay, here's a room, here's computers, turn it

269   into a lab!" And so I just walked off and they had to do all the work.

270   **Benmayor:** [Laughs]

271   **Van Spyk:** And then when they were done – and it all worked. You know, these were all smart

272   people, right. Then in the next half of the course or the next part of the course we went to a middle school

273   that was totally without technology, just a few isolated computers. We took a weekend to wire the entire

274   Library so that it became a computer lab. So here were all these people that had never – all these students

275   that had never wired anything, building an entire network including router and network access and things of

276   that nature. So my classes were somewhat applied because I needed labor.

277   **Benmayor:** [Laughs] Well, I'm sure those students will never forget those classes either.

278   **[33:10] Van Spyk:** No, but you could see the kids at the middle school for example, when they first saw

279   the computers come up and they were able to get in and stuff like that, – you can't replace that kind of

280   experience, you know? And of course all the equipment was donated by Pacific Bell. And some funded by

281   the school, because they really didn't have much. It was I think in the Fitch area, Fitch school area.

282   **Benmayor:** Was that a Service Learning class or part of the Service Learning effort?

283   **Van Spyk:** No, that was just part of a regular class. That's the kind of thing that Service Learning

284 of course does.

285   **Benmayor:** Right, right.

286   **Van Spyk:** And it's a very, very good idea to get students into reality.

287   **Benmayor:** I just want to go back to one point before we move on and that was you said that you

288 did have interviews before you were hired.

289   **Van Spyk:** Right.

290   **Benmayor:** Who interviewed you? Do you remember what the interview was like?

291   **Van Spyk:** It was in a hotel here. The Seaside, the beach hotel. I think with different rooms. I don't

292 remember who interviewed me. I suspect it was faculty from San Jose State, because San Jose State was

293 asked to launch the whole project and run it for its first period of time. Peter Smith had just been hired. I

294 don't know if I even met him at that time. Probably did. No. Peter Smith was a telephone interview.

295   **Benmayor:** But you had – I mean you knew Steve Arvizu then obviously.

296   **Van Spyk:** Yeah. Yeah.

297   **Benmayor:** Okay.

298   **Van Spyk:** And did I know him at that time? Yeah, I guess I did.

299   **Benmayor:** From the Hilby time, yeah.

300   **Van Spyk:** Yeah.

301   **Benmayor:** Okay. So you mentioned the Vision and I was wondering what was your impression of

302 that Vision when it finally sort of gelled together and how did you respond to it?

303   **Van Spyk:** I saw it as a contract between the University and the community. And the pieces that I

304 picked out, on a consensus basis, in terms of Technology and Computer Science and Telecommunications

305 and some of the other areas like designing facilities was an unwritten contract between me and the

306 University. So I looked at it very literally in a sense, to the point where the University wanted to be

307 founded in reality, right? So relationships with business were important. So I reserved some of the offices

308 in the Media Complex for business people. So I had a representative, one of the staff members from Sun

309 move into one office for a while. And other representatives from Silicon Graphics move into another office

310 so that students were immediately exposed to people that they could ask all the questions from. So I saw

311 that as important thing. That's why I used my industry experiences to get donations from Silicon Graphics

312 and Sun. Sun Company donated a quarter million dollars worth of their largest Sun system, the entire CPU,

313 all the hard drives, everything associated with it. Pacific Bell donated. Sony allowed us to install a

314 complete professional video lab including cameras, including sound room and so on, at their cost. And oh,

315 CISCO gave us their entire router education, their entire curriculum. Now that's enormous because they

316 had an enormous number of courses that they use for training all of the people across the world on the

317 configuration and the use of their routers. And so they said, "Yeah, you're allowed to use it." That was

318 really amazing as well. So that's the area that I carved out and that I think I was expected to carve out of

319 the Vision and each of us, of course, developed our own part of the Vision. I reread it the other day. I saved

320 a whole bunch of papers on all of this of course because ultimately my kids need to be in awe of all of that.

321   **Benmayor:** [Laughs]

322 **[38:27]Van Spyk:** I think it still does the job. It still does the job. Now, my interpretation was very direct.

323 And it was aimed at everybody in the community. And so I had a fairly comfortable circumference within

324 which I had to spend my time.

325   **Benmayor:** Was the way in which you taught at CSUMB any different from the way in which you

326 taught at Hayward or San Francisco State?

327   **Van Spyk:** Yeah, I think it was. And one of the reasons was is that … I would be somewhere,

328 from time to time, like Geneva, doing the things that I was teaching about. Because I took semesters off. I

329 had always been doing that. So as much as possible I was teaching about the things that I was actually

330 doing. In my field I happen to think that that's important. I also taught more on, as far as possible, on the

331 leading edge. So when security became a main issue, I developed an entire course on Encryption. And the

332 students loved it. The puzzle part of it. They thought it was excellent. Berkeley didn't have that yet at that

333 time and so on. It was much more applied, much more sort of on the leading fringe, if at all possible, and I

334 expected much more independence from the students, which was not always easy because not all the

335 students had been through high schools, for example, that were up to par. So there was a lot of time

336 involved in talking with them. Most classes I hired one or two students out of my own pocket to be

337 Teaching Assistants. That also was a really good experience for them.

338 **Benmayor:** Why did you have to do it out of your own pocket?

339 **[40:52] Van Spyk:** Oh, there was no funding at the University. I think at the time we didn't even

340 recognize the role of Student Assistants. And I had Volunteers but I didn't want just volunteers. I wanted

341 students that were put in a position of responsibility. And it turned out to be extremely well worth it

342 because some of the time that was freed up I could then go around and beat up on industry for more

343 donations. Students, you know, and of course I am talking to the choir, right, but the more responsibility

344 they get the better they do. It's as simple as that. If learning is easy, you're not learning. So it was pretty

345 hard on them. Which was okay.

346 **Benmayor:** In those early days I know that you had to hire a bunch of people. You were in the first

347 group. Do you remember that experience and what was your role in that hiring process?

348 **Van Spyk:** Okay. Well, it involved some fairly clear steps. The ads were written. Again, it was all

349 a consensus kind of thing. And published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and other places. And then

350 we took the day and we gave each day, not 24 hours but we expanded the day to 48 hours, because we got

351 thousands upon thousands of resumes. So, we as a faculty of course came together in groups and spent

352 entire days and evenings going through this. You develop a system. Some resumes were clearly not up to

353 par. Others missed information that was critical. So we – we went through all of them very quickly. Then a

354 slower run, a slower run, a slower run, until we ended up with whatever it was, like 20 or 30 for interviews.

355   Then we had the interviews. We had always an administrator, some faculty and a community member

356   participating in that. Then we'd decided on who was going to be hired. So it was an unbelievable process.

357   While we were teaching.

358   **Benmayor:** Right. [Chuckles] Were you teaching? No, you weren't teaching yet.

359   **Van Spyk:** No. No, no. I'm sorry. While I was buying furniture and cabling.

360   **Benmayor:** There you go.

361   **Van Spyk:** No, we weren't teaching yet. With an applicant pool like that, right, we had some really

362   unique powerful people which was another reward of working in that environment. We got exposed to

363   fantastic people.

364   **Benmayor:** And who did you end up hiring in that round, do you remember?

365   **Van Spyk:** No. I'd have to go down my list because then there was the next round and the next

366   round, right? But yeah, I'd have to look at the list.

367   **Benmayor:** That's all right, I'm just curious. So this culture of working 80 hours a day or 80 hours

368   a week or whatever it was, did that ever let up?

369   **[45:02] Van Spyk:** That's interesting. I hadn't really thought about that. For me it certainly didn't. The

370   reason was that I was, when the University was up and running, I was running the joint program with the

371   Department of Defense, I was working with Cabrillo College, I was working with industry to get donations

372   and funding, and developing new classes like, for example, the Cryptography class and documenting them

373   and so on. So it was difficult to slow down. I didn't slow down until well into the ten year part. And even

374   then. But my family is very patient. My wife raised the kids, you know, without as much help from me as I

375   could have provided in a "normal" job. But, you know, I talked about obsession and that's what it takes to

376   get things done in some areas.

377   **Benmayor:** Do you have any memories about or what was your experience during campus

378   struggles? I know there were several in those early years. How did they affect you?

379   **Van Spyk:** That also is interesting and that is something that I have thought about a great deal

380   because …. Well, those kinds of conflicts are very difficult to sort out. You see them happening and so on.

381   However, for example, the press thought that the University culture had developed in a very unidirectional

382   way and was not as broad as would be expected from a university. I found also -- and you may completely

383   disagree with me on that, it's my own sensitivity having been exposed to World War II Europe kind of

384   issues --, … let me see if I can phrase that. I don't know how to … how to really explain the kind of

385   controversies that existed at that time. They're probably. . .

386   **Benmayor:** But how did they make you feel?

387   **Van Spyk:** Well, it made me feel that I was working increasingly in an environment that had taken

388   a liking to political correctness. There were things that you could say and there were things that you can't

389   say. That's why I made that reference to the War when of course at that time you couldn't say anything

390   because you were shot. That political correctness is something that…that for one reason or another I

391   absolutely can't tolerate. After all, I had read George Orwell, with his wonderful books on the dystopian

392   environment. It was also, I now see, the harbinger of what would infect or affect, whichever, most

393   universities today. Universities have, for example, safe zones where a person can go to in order to not be

394   exposed to comments or criticisms or critical questions, things of that nature. Some universities and I think

395   even Harvard for a while have staff strike teams when a student has been exposed to criticism or

396   discrimination or whatever hurt their feelings, they could go complain and the strike team would go and

397   address the offenders. Well, I taught in Europe for a year. And in Europe academics talk to each other, yell

398   at each other, criticize each other, work as friends and your ideas are not rejected out of hand. You don't

399   have to use a special language. Because don't forget political correctness, and again, you know this all as

400   well, political correctness is just saying something without using the words that are prohibited, without

401   using the trigger words. And I have a whole bunch of examples that are just heartrending. Examples of

402   how students were so thoroughly aware of that as well. And you know, today we would almost say that

403   there was a little slice of Trumpian culture. There's things that you do and things that you don't do. And I

404   didn't agree with that division. So yeah, that was really bad. But you know, as a person you are either

405   sensitive to that or you live with it or you're not sensitive to it. I mean it's just your own adaptation. I was

406   not able to adapt to that very well. Yeah. So.

407   **[51:04] Benmayor:** So when did you actually retire? What year was that?

408   **Van Spyk:** I don't know, 2010 or so? I'd have to look it up.

409   **Benmayor:** Did you retire or did you FERP?

410   **Van Spyk:** I FERP'd, yeah. That was a really wonderful part of the program to be able to do that.

411   **Benmayor:** Yeah.

412   **Van Spyk:** So I could continue to run the Department of Defense part of the student interaction, for

413   example. I continued some of the work on the Media Complex and on the various wonderful committees,

414   that we all served so fondly. But in general I think I've come out of it with a pot of stew that is still

415   brewing. In other words, new insights are still occurring today when I see something or I see something

416   that the students do. I still know a bunch of them. Or my kids do. And I say, "Ah, look at it this way." That

417   turned out to be another value that certainly contributed to my life, the whole experience.

418   **Benmayor:** Why did you decide to retire?

419   **Van Spyk:** I retired at the age of 69 and I thought that was enough. Yeah. And I retired from the

420   military at the age of 70, I think. So actually it's not that long ago. So I don't know. It was enough. I'd done

421   my job. And … it was harder and harder to keep up. Don't forget that young whipper snapper faculty were

422   being hired and they were pretty quick on their feet. You know?

423   **Benmayor:** Yeah.

424   **Van Spyk:** So…yeah.

425   **Benmayor:** So looking back what would you say are your greatest accomplishments? Or what do

426   you feel your greatest accomplishments and your legacy on the campus would be?

427 **[53:34] Van Spyk:** Well, again, at the risk of being immodest, which I don't care about, I think I

428 established a basis, and this was really much of what we did was solo, right, actually? Because we had too

429 many things going on. I established the Media Complex with an integration of Telecommunications,

430 Multimedia and Computing that is still that way, that's still a strong focus. I established the first stirrings

431 of the Business School, also related and they are still living in the same building today. I established a

432 baseline of technology that was better than any other CSU campus, and I've been to most of them, in terms

433 of what the faculty and the students could expect. We have, for example, a wonderful video conferencing

434 facility with a huge screen. Ancient technology. So my greatest gratification is to be able to see that that

435 foundation was solid. That that foundation made it ready for the future. And that foundation still exists

436 today. That's really cool. You know?

437   **Benmayor:** Yeah. It is.

438   **Van Spyk:** That's just something that not many people get to experience. So yeah, warts and all, it

439 was an amazing experience. I still remember one of my colleagues teaching karate and a bunch of faculty

440 joined in his class and we did karate. We hurt ourselves more than other people. But….

441   **Benmayor:** [Chuckles]

442   **Van Spyk:** And when we first arrived Steve Arvizu wanted to test our mettle so he took us on an

443 Outward Bound survival experience. So when I came back after a week, my wife said, "So, what did you

444 do?" I said, "Well, we survived in the Puget Sound for a week on a boat."

445   **Benmayor:** You went all the way up to Puget Sound?

446   **Van Spyk:** We flew up.

447   **Benmayor:** Oh.

448   **Van Spyk:** And then took a vehicle to Anacortes, and that's where we got into a 12-person

449 rowboat, essentially like a regular ancient rowboat, and we took off. And we lived from island to island and

450 sometimes slept in the boat, and that was it.

451   **Benmayor:** You were with students or was it just faculty?

452   **Van Spyk:** No. That was with faculty and staff. Steve was there. Jim May was there, who was one

453   of the first hires as well. I never understood before then that you could actually row while you're sleeping.

454   **Benmayor:** [Laughs]

455   **Van Spyk:** You can't … you can't not remember those kinds of experiences.

456   **Benmayor:** Right, right.

457   **Van Spyk:** But we were a crazy people then, essentially. We had our disagreements but essentially

458   we had a right to have them because we were crazy people with the kind of freedoms that we, you know,

459   still have. So I look at it this way. When I look back on that I say that hindsight is a magnifier, a

460   magnifying glass. Foresight is a telescope. And that's how I see the situation, the way I had to operate into

461   the future and the way that I operate now backwards, where everything is magnified and kind of becomes

462   clearer. So yeah, I can't imagine my life without that experience. You know?

463   **[57:47] Benmayor:** Yeah. Yeah. A lot of times some people say well, did you ever during that time say

464   "What did I do? Why am I here?" Did you ever question the decision that you made?

465   **Van Spyk:** Oh, every morning.

466   **Benmayor:** [Laughs]

467   **Van Spyk:** With the equipment donations, for example, there was an immense struggle involved

468   because the equipment sometimes arrived, enormous batches of really state-of-the-art stuff, and it wasn't

469   necessarily immediately utilized. And I recognized later, well I had to move fast because of the beginning

470   status of the University, but I was a little bit too early for what the University could accommodate in terms

471   of curriculum and the use of the equipment. I probably was a little bit too late for budget cycles that would

472   pay for programmers to run this equipment and maintenance people to maintain the equipment. So I took

473   advantage of the early beginnings which was very well known and many companies wanted to be involved

474   but that cost, because I was too early for the curriculum and a little bit too late for the budget cycle. So you

475   live with that. You do the best you can. It worked out. You know.

476   **Benmayor:** But you – you don't have any regrets, from what I'm hearing, you don't have any

477   regrets about coming here.

478   **Van Spyk:** Oh, no. Oh, no. I wouldn't have missed it for the world. Absolutely not. I met so many

479   good colleagues. I had so many opportunities to do things, to get things done. Met so many students from

480   really struggling, poorer students that didn't know where they were going or where they were coming from

481   to very sophisticated students who became my TA's, of course. And when I meet them, still, they say, "Oh,

482   yeah, remember?" And they bring up all kinds of memories that I had even probably forgot in most cases.

483   So, no, it's an absolutely "once in a lifetime" experience and I felt that I was 100% ready for it because of

484   all the other things that I'd been doing all along. Which is another thing that I communicated with my

485   students. Your life may appear random. Because you could do this, you could do that and there is conflict

486   between your tasks and your jobs and so on, but in the end you will find that your nature has directed you

487   to something that actually coagulates pretty well, that comes together pretty well. So it's almost like a Luis

488   Valdez, "Relax, you'll be fine."

489   **Benmayor:** [Laughs] That's lovely. That's really lovely and it's true. I understand that. So is there

490   anything that you'd like to add that I haven't asked you about that you think is important?

491   **Van Spyk:** No. I think … another achievement, by the way, is that Study at Sea Program.

492   **Benmayor:** Talk a little bit about that.

493   **[1:01:29] Van Spyk:** Well, I described how I got to it. And here is a 500 foot former Navy ship that all

494   these Maritime Academy students had to go on trips with for their training. And they had excess capacity to

495   some extent. So, I developed over a short period of time a relationship with the Academy up north in

496   Vallejo. They agreed to let me have a group of students and teach Meteorology and Communications and

497   Oceanography. Those were the three things that I was teaching at that time.

498   **Benmayor:** How many students did you take?

499   **Van Spyk:** The first group was about 14. Yeah. And these were the kind of students … I'll see if I

500   can characterize them. They were the kind of students that said, "Oh, this sounds great. This sounds new.

501   This sounds really scary and I don't care." We had one person that had mobility difficulties. We had

502   another person who couldn't swim. And guess what? This person started to take swimming lessons, ended

503   up being able to swim and could come. There were those kinds of things. So, we got onboard of the ship.

504   I'd seen the ship. I'd been onboard a couple of times. But other than that. between you and me and the lamp

505   post, I didn't know much about ocean going ships even though we were supposed to run the thing, right? I

506   mean that's what it's all about. So we settled in and started up our classes and the students took turns

507   steering the ship and working with engineers forecasting the ship's weather. In that first trip in 2000, I

508   think, all student communication - there was no email, which was wonderful. There was no Internet, even

509   more wonderful because they were isolated. What do you do? Well, you can be with yourself. Go look out

510   the port at the ocean. So I installed an amateur radio system and that then allowed people to talk to home.

511   That then allowed students to send email via the amateur radio system. By the way, on one of those trips

512   my son accompanied me as a student. He and I got our amateur radio call signs -- there is only one letter

513   difference. So our license is almost identical because we got the licenses for radio at the same time. So

514   that's another fun thing. So it was something that was probably more daunting to most people, maybe

515   myself included, than most other things that you could be doing. Because you were out there in the ocean.

516   Were you going to be sick? Would you get food poisoning? Would you get too tired? Would you fall

517   overboard? What are all these countries about. You know?

518   **Benmayor:** Where did you go?

519   **[1:03:13] Van Spyk:** One tour we went to the Pacific, the South Pacific including New Zealand and

520   Australia. Another tour, we went to Hawaii and then straight across. Another tour we went through the

521   Panama Canal to New Orleans. So this was two-ocean voyaging with the ship. We experienced all the

522 different ports, all the different facilities. Got on land in Peru and Chile and New Zealand. And in fact, I

523 still have a tattoo from Nukuhiva. Nukuhiva is an island that would fit in your backyard, has a population

524 of 400, but it has a well known Pacific Island tattoo artist. So I was … I was sucked into that. And it was

525 just a wonderful experience altogether. Yeah.

526   **Benmayor:** That's lovely.

527   **Van Spyk:** So, you know, you can't beat that.

528   **Benmayor:** I know. We were all very envious of you taking off and having this adventure.

529 [Chuckles] I actually once thought, "Well maybe. Would I go on something like that?" And then I thought,

530 "Oh, no, probably not."

531   **Van Spyk:** Yeah, it was -

532   **Benmayor:** I get seasick in other words. [Chuckles]

533   **Van Spyk:** Well, I trained my students not to get seasick. To some extent that worked. I had them

534 do visualization exercises where they perceived motion as a warm, comforting blanket.

535   **Benmayor:** Hmm.

536   **Van Spyk:** In other words, when you are experiencing that motion, think of it not as a negative.

537 Think of it as a comforting position that you are in. You are being rocked. You are being held. You are

538 being warm. And that reduced the anxiety and that therefore also reduced the seasickness. So that's what

539 the experience was like. And also, like I said before, for my students they knew that I felt that if studying is

540 easy you're not learning. And they experienced that as well.

541   **Benmayor:** Well, with that, Bob, I want to thank you very much for contributing to the Project. It's

542 been lovely speaking with you after all these years of not seeing you.

543   **Van Spyk:** Yeah.

544   **Benmayor:** And I always remember you as a smiling person on the campus. So that was unusual.

545   **[1:08:38]**

546 **[1:08:04] Van Spyk:** Well, thank you so much for running this program. And I hope that … that this

547 might lead to the old guard, all of us getting together from time to time. Because I think that the University

548 has not tapped on us, tapped us as a resource as much as it might have in funding drives or other things. So

549 maybe this is a good platform to promote the reintegration of retired faculty or about to retire faculty. I

550 have a former very old professor that I studied with that was a good example at the University of Oregon.

551 He retired and they just stuck him in an office they maintained. And guess what? Students that had

552 questions or wanted to shoot the breeze or whatever, they went to the old guy. And I thought, "Yeah, that's

553 really a continued value to the student body." Because I don't know of any of us that wouldn't be interested

554 in spending our time supporting the University, supporting the students, lending a shoulder to somebody

555 who is having a hard time in particular, because they don't want to necessarily talk to their own faculty but

556 some other person.

557 **Benmayor:** Right.

558 **Van Spyk:** I hope that at some point indeed what you are doing could be of great value in that

559 respect as well, yeah.

560 <div align="center">(END OF RECORDING)</div>

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