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Warren Johnson

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Illinois Wesleyan University

Max Polisky 2013

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Oral History Interview with Warren Johnson
Hansen Student Center, June 25, 2013

Max Polisky: Good afternoon. This is Max Polisky, a recent Illinois Wesleyan University alumni of this year, 2013, yeah, 2013. I almost slipped up there. Today I'm here with—

Warren Johnson: Warren Johnson.

Polisky: And we are currently in the TV room in Hansen Student Center. Today is—what's today's date—today is June 25th, 2013. Alright we are here with Warren Johnson. Warren, thank you so much for doing the interview today.

Johnson: Sure.

Polisky: We're just going to kind of ask you some simple questions. I figured I'd start with—this year is the retirement year, huh? Right. So what's going through your head? How are you feeling?

Johnson: At first, I've been off since May 29th. And the first couple weeks, I kind of felt like I was on vacation.

Polisky: Hm!

Johnson: And now it's starting to settle in that, hey, I don't have to get up and go to work anymore.

Polisky: And has that been a very—is that a very change of pace compared to what you've been—I mean what you've been doing at Wesleyan?

Johnson: Right now I'm unbelievable busy. I have a lot of flowers, and vegetable garden also, and I do all the yard work at home. We have a large yard. My wife used to do because of me working a lot. She used to do a lot of the things outside. Now it's my duty to take that over and I've always planted the flowers and done things like that. And so it's really my hobby and so I've really, really been busy.

Polisky: Oh that's great. And so tell me about your title at Wesleyan. What was your job exactly?

Johnson: The last twenty years, I was assistant manager of maintenance.

Polisky: Very cool. And how-how does that—can you tell me a little bit about the job? Like what kind of things you did and—

Johnson: Okay.

Polisky: —what your job responsibilities were.

Johnson: Okay. I had several responsibilities. When the supervisor was gone, then I was in charge of the—all the maintenance crew, which consisted of the locksmith, plumber, electrician, and carpenter, and maintenance guys. And I would be over them and making sure that the different things got repaired

and so on on campus. My duties as far as the things on the campus, I was in charge of homecoming and commencement, as far as Connie Vale with homecoming would contact me, and I would work with her. And I would do all of the setups and things for homecoming. Likewise, for commencement, I work through Susan Bassi and that took all of that responsibility off of our supervisor, and he was free then to see that the other things got done on campus and that was just my responsibility. Plus, all of these setups that we have—when I first started here, we had very few people coming in and using the university facilities. And now we have somebody here almost weekly, almost every weekend, and I was in charge of all of those, making sure their banners were up and the setups were done and things like that.

Polisky: Wow, great. And why do you think that you're finding more and more people now in the facilities compared to years past?

Johnson: I'm not too sure why. I think the university has made more of an outreach in the community. And so now the community uses the facilities a lot more than what we did in the past.

Polisky: And what do you think of that? Do you think that's great for the university that they're choosing to do—?

Johnson: Oh yeah, sure. It really gets the name of the university out. It really does.

Polisky: And so what was the typical work week like? Was it very steady? Was it very—could it be very spontaneous, a little bit?

Johnson: Very spontaneous. You never knew what was going to happen next. And that was the—probably one of the biggest joys about working here, was—you did not have a set regimen, that this had to be done, and so on and so forth. There was just something different all the time.

Polisky: And did you find—was it challenging? Did it ever get challenging at times? Where, sometimes things would happen and you'd just be very tired, or were you always ready? Or how would you describe that? Was it a challenge for you?

Johnson: At some times it was challenging...along the way. We...especially when we had some emergencies, and we had a few emergencies, a couple fires in some buildings while I was here, some storms that went through, that—unexpected, which caused damage—water damage, coming through the roofs and things like that. Some of those—some of those things were a challenge.

Polisky: And so Warren, I want to ask you a little bit more about how you came to Wesleyan. I mean, first off, I mean, I want to take a step back and actually look at the fact so you're retiring. So that means someone's got to replace you. So what kind of things—how does someone get into the field that you did? So the next person that'd be taking your place—what do they—what kind of qualifications do they have? What kind of—what kind of experiences do you need to be able to do your job?

Johnson: To do the job that I have, you need experience around buildings, repair of buildings, things like this. When I graduated from high school, from Ottawa Township High School in 1962, and I worked—we

lived on a farm and I worked with my dad until the spring of 1963 which was one year—was going to—we were in the process of purchasing more ground and was going to stay on the farm, and then believe it or not, I-I decided, after meeting my wife, who lived down here, I started dating her, and I decided I wanted to leave home. And so I moved from Ottawa to Bloomington. And I started working at Funk Brothers Seed Company loading seed corn out of the Quonset shed down here by the soccer fields in the spring of 1963. That was my very first job from not working for dad.

Polisky: Hm.

Johnson: And from there, I worked there from March until May, and then I got laid off but I started working for a contractor here in Bloomington building houses and got into the building trades that way, and worked for him for five or six years building houses all over the Bloomington-Normal area, and then went from there to Eureka College and became the maintenance supervisor of Eureka College.

Polisky: Wow. And how did you—so how come Eureka? Where'd you—how'd you find Eureka? It was just—?

Johnson: I had a friend who was in charge of the buildings and grounds there. And while I was working for that contractor here in town, he approached me and wanted to know if I would be interested in working over there, and so I took a tour of the campus, and then my wife and I, we went over there and went around the little town of Eureka, and kind of liked the smaller town rather than Bloomington-Normal, so we moved over there and I took the job over there.

Polisky: And how did that transition—so you—what year was Eureka? That you first went to Eureka?

Johnson: I went to Eureka in 1967, spring of 1967.

Polisky: And what did you hear about Wesleyan?

Johnson: While I was at Eureka College, they—we had two children then, and I had no—they did not offer health insurance, no retirement plan, or anything like that. And I just—they just couldn't pay me enough. And so I had another friend who'd started a furniture store in Eureka, and so I went with him, bought a store near Eureka College, I took my vacation from Eureka College, went to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and went through Armstrong Flooring's installation school for two weeks, learning how to install vinyl floors, and then I started working at that furniture store for—I worked there till 1980. And then, from there, they were going to close, because of a recession era that we had back there in the early 80's and-and I went—the office gal from the furniture store's husband was a large farmer up around Washburn, Illinois, and I just mentioned to her one day, did they need any help on the farm, and she came back the next day and said yes.

Polisky: Huh!

Johnson: And so I went and worked on a hog farm for three years.

Polisky: Wow.

Johnson: And then I saw an ad in the paper that Illinois Wesleyan was advertising for a maintenance person. And I answered that ad in June of 1983. And I started working down here then August 21st—

Polisky: Wow.

Johnson: —1983.

Polisky: So holy cow. And so how would you describe Illinois Wesleyan back then? Would you—was it—would you describe it as—has it changed a lot since how it is now?

[Johnson laughs]

Johnson: Oh boy. [Laughs] When I first came on campus in 1983, well, in the last thirty years, it's unbelievable the changes that have happened on this campus. But I remember going with the locksmith as his helper, and we were going to lockdown three or four computers in Sherff Hall, which was the science building—

Polisky: Hm!

Johnson: —at that time. Those were the only computers on this campus thirty years ago.

Polisky: So four—you said three or four computers?

Johnson: Yeah.

Polisky: Wow.

Johnson: That's—

[Polisky laughs]

Johnson: —and so technology-wise it's unbelievable how things have progressed in the last thirty years. And that's—while I was here, of course more computers were added all over campus. Then they eventually remodeled Buck Hall and turned it into the computer building, and now it's basically obsolete. In a sense, no students had computers when I started here. Then of course they started bringing in their gigantic computers and putting it in their rooms.

[Polisky laughs]

Johnson: Now they have their little smartphones. [Laughs]

Polisky: Looks like you got one right there! Exactly! [Laughs]

Johnson: So that has been a big change. And then building-wise, the chapel had just been completed when I started.

Polisky: Oh wow.

Johnson: And that was the only new building and then after that, Fort Natatorium and then the Shirk Center and then the science building and then remodeling Sherff Hall into the CLA building and the new library and the welcome center and just on and on. Rust House—

Polisky: Wow.

Johnson: —all of those things are over the last thirty years. And in the process of all of that, they tore down over 100 houses—

Polisky: Really!

Johnson: —around here, around-around the campus area. In fact, just last week, last Wednesday, I was over at St. Francis having some x-rays done, walking down the hallway with a nurse, who was middle-aged, and I just—I don't know how the conversation was, but I mentioned Illinois Wesleyan, and—oh, I'd told her I'd just retired, is how that worked out. And, where'd you retire from? Illinois Wesleyan. Well, I went to school there. 1982 to 1986. So I told her, I said, well I started working there in 1983. So you were there—

Polisky: Wow.

Johnson: —when I started working there. And she said yes, but she stayed—we—there was a couple great big, two-story houses down here on Kelsey Street, which was a street that goes in that parking lot on the other side of the tennis courts but right by the tennis courts, that's where a couple big two-story houses. We bought the houses, and for a few years, we remodeled them, and students lived in the houses. And so she told me, I lived in one of those houses. I said—

Polisky: No kidding! [Laughs]

Johnson: Well. We remodeled that house so you could live in it!

Polisky: Wow!

[Johnson and Polisky laugh]

Polisky: Was her mind totally blown?

Johnson: Yeah! [Laughs]

Polisky: Yeah?

Johnson: And she said she hasn't been on campus in a few years now, and well, you need to come back to go through the new library and the welcome center and places like that.

Polisky: Wow. That's kind of hard for me to imagine, especially going back, because coming here we had Ames Library, we've had Hansen Student Center. I mean I couldn't imagine campus without those buildings.

Johnson: Yeah.

Polisky: You know? It's kind of hard to imagine. And now the newcomers with State Farm Hall!

Johnson: Yeah.

Polisky: I can't imagine—

Johnson: Yeah.

Polisky: Because it's like, oh man, they're lucky! It's like what would we do that for that building!

[Johnson laughs]

Polisky: But, oh man, Warren, that's-that's really cool. And—I kind of want to ask you some more fun questions—er, I don't know if I—we were joking a little bit before about the Dodd's window.

Johnson: Hm.

Polisky: What kind of crazy—back to your job and everything. What kind of crazy—do you have like a craziest story? Like the craziest thing that you've had to do on the job?

Johnson: I have to think just a little bit. We always said down to shop, we need to write books.

[Johnson and Polisky laugh]

Johnson: Some of the requests that we had to do or were requested for us to do...we—one thing I noticed, there was several years that I also—one of my responsibilities was, as far as maintenance, in the maintenance area, I was the first one, that Security would call after hours for emergencies. One thing, so unbelievable, I would be in here like at 1 o'clock in the morning, because something broke, or maybe a student—back then we were getting—we would take—remove students from elevators, stuff like that.

Polisky: Hm.

Johnson: Now they don't do that anymore, the elevator company does it, but I've been in here for many, many things. It's unbelievable, the students that are still up at night, 1:30, 2 o'clock in the morning, just walking around this campus. You would think they would be in bed [chuckles] or studying or something—

[Johnson and Polisky chuckle]

Polisky: You would think so, yeah!

Johnson: That's one thing I said, wow, when do those kids study?

[Johnson and Polisky laugh]

Johnson: But I'm not too sure—I would have to think more about some of the craziest things that I've done. But there's been so, so many. So, so many.

Polisky: But you mentioned that Dodd's window one—I wish we had that under recording when we were joking earlier. But would you like to talk about that experience maybe?

Johnson: Well, to give you another one about Dodd's windows, and this was before you were here, students from Dolan somehow got a hold of these surgical bands. And then we had these old time windows that opened up, and they left a steel bar then in the middle of the window. They would crank open, and then the steel bar would be there. And they would tie these bands on from the outside of the window over here at the hinge area to that center bar, and then rigged up a little pouch thing on these surgical bands and would pull them back into the room and put a water balloon in them, and shoot them over the parking lot to Dodd's Hall, and they would bust windows out of Dodd's Hall with those water balloons.

Polisky: Wow.

Johnson: And we always said if they would hit a student in the back of the head down on the ground, they'd probably kill them! [Chuckles]

Polisky: Oh my god!

Johnson: I mean the force of that balloon hitting the window would just break those big plate glass picture window—the big windows.

Polisky: The big suite ones?

Johnson: Over the lounges. They would break that.

[Johnson and Polisky chuckle]

Polisky: Oh my god!

Johnson: And we had one-one whole spring of that before they put a stop to it, and—

Polisky: Was this recent? Was this—?

Johnson: Oh this—we've had those new windows in Dolan for quite a few years. This was probably at least twenty years ago, maybe. They also—out the South end of the windows of the hallway, they would shoot those water balloons all the way down the street onto the roof of the Fiji house.

Polisky: They could make it from Dolan to Fiji?

Johnson: Yes.

Polisky: That's possible? With—

Johnson: Yes.

Polisky: —balloons?

Johnson: Yes. With those—

Polisky: [Chuckles] Wow!

Johnson: —water balloons.

Polisky: That's so dangerous. It's like you said, that-that—

Johnson: Yeah!

Polisky: —could kill somebody!

Johnson: Yes!

[Johnson and Polisky laugh]

Polisky: Holy cow.

Johnson: Yeah.

Polisky: Wow.

Johnson: But yeah, we—I got called in one night, in Dolan Hall, really, really windy, and like 12 o'clock, 1 o'clock in the morning, and a student had thrown a end table through one of the big plate glass windows in the lounge, fourth floor, on the east side here of Dodd's Hall. That was not a fun night. We were fighting the wind and a great big ladder, and plywood going up on the outside with another fellow helping me, and bolting it on to secure the window so the rest of the glass wouldn't fall out, because it was over an entryway into Dodds Hall. I remember another time, which was just a terrible, terrible night. We had—this was probably about fifteen years ago. We had a water main break outside, on the—right on the South end of the bridge at the science building. There's a main water main there for the city, because there used to be houses down the street there. And this—they left the water lines in because it feeds other places going to east here off of Main Street. And anyway, it broke and ruptured, and shooting water way up in the air, and then the city was out here, and it took them forever to figure out where to shut it off at, and finally got it shut off, but all of this water rushed South, down the bank there, in next to the windows of the Davidson Room in Memorial Center, and the force of the water busted those windows out, and then all this water rushed in Memorial Center, and flooded the bottom of the Memorial Center. There was like six or eight inches of water—

Polisky: Wow.

Johnson: It went rushing in the building, down the steps into the Phoenix area—

Polisky: Wow.

Johnson: —and the green room down there. Just like a waterfall—

[Johnson and Polisky chuckle]

Johnson: —going down there. And-and when I got in here, oh we had a whole big crew of people in here, but when I got in here, I was walking through water way over ankle deep—

Polisky: Wow.

Johnson: —down in the green room, in the Phoenix area.

Polisky: And what was that procedure like, getting the water out and everything?

Johnson: Oh it was just so terrible. And then of course water like that left mud everywhere. Left mud everywhere. The kitchen area of the Memorial Center, everything. I think for several days, they had prepared food to come in because they could not use the kitchen there to prepare food for the students. They had stuff brought in, cold-cold lunches, is what they had.

Polisky: Wow.

Johnson: Yeah. So there's been some experiences like that that you'll never forget.

Polisky: Yeah, I was going to say—

[Johnson laughs]

Polisky: —holy cow! That makes you happy to retire a bit.

[Johnson and Polisky laugh]

Polisky: I guess, if there is anything, so you mentioned the water balloons and things like that, I mean, so I'm a recent graduate, so I-I-I had seen some crazy stuff, broken windows, but I had never seen anything like the water balloons. I mean how would you describe today's Wesleyan students with the Wesleyan student of twenty years ago?

Johnson: Really there's...there's not that much change. There's still some vandalism. And I wonder sometimes if-if it's probably not just blatant vandalism, but kids just like to do stuff, and not realizing that you're going to break something, or damage something, just having fun, and normally when something like that happens, it doesn't end in...not what they expected. And so I think it's probably about the same.

Polisky: Mhm. And Warren, can I ask you, I don't want to get into too sappy of a question but I thought I'd ask, since your time at Illinois Wesleyan, what—what was the biggest impact on your life working here?

Johnson: I think the biggest impact on me was the people. The faculty, and the staff, and working with them, we just have such good people around here. And I knew when I retired and left here, I was going to miss being around people like that. So far, I-I-I have had times where I just thought and meditated since I've been retired, just a few weeks here now, that so-and-so is doing this, right now. I know they

are, because they've always done this, at this time of the day and so on, and I know they are. Some of the people have really, really made an impact on me. While I worked here, I had a massive heart attack.

Polisky: I didn't know that.

Johnson: And in fact, it was like about one week after President Minor Myers moved in, when they moved in the house up there, I and another fellow were working in the house as they were unloading the truck. They needed some more shelving built in the closet, and we were busy building shelves so they could put stuff away, and I worked up there about a week, and then right after that, I had this massive heart attack, and President Myers had only been here one week, maybe two weeks at the most, and when I had the heart attack I was actually out in the hospital, getting a stress test at St. Joe Hospital, here in town, had a heart attack and at that time they didn't do much heart-wise here in Bloomington-Normal, so they took me over to St. Francis in Peoria. And I was over there for two weeks but while I was over there, I got a card from our new president, and it was not a typed out card, it was a written card. He took time, after being here only two weeks, after only meeting me two or three times working there in his house, he took time out, and wrote me this note to encourage me, and that he was thinking about me, and signed it himself, and I thought, wow—

Polisky: Wow.

Johnson: He's only—he took time out of his day, and I know he had to be terribly busy, just being on campus that soon. But he took time out of his day to think about me, and to write me that note, and that made a big, big impression on me.

Polisky: And so these are—these are connections that you think you're going to have for the rest of your life?

Johnson: Yes, yes.

Polisky: That's terrific. Well Warren, is there anything you'd like to add? Am I missing anything?

Johnson: No. I think we've covered quite a bit here.

Polisky: Great, Warren. I think other than that, that's it. Thank you so much for your time.

Johnson: Great.

Polisky: Yeah!

Johnson: Great.