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Mary Beth Phillips

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Oral History Interview with Mary Beth Phillips

The Ames Library, April 8th, 2014

Abby Szunyogh: My name is Abby Szunyogh and I am here on April 8th, 2014 with Mary Beth Phillips for the IWU Ames Archives oral history program. So Mary Beth, if you wouldn't mind stating your name and your affiliation with the university?

Mary Beth Phillips: I'm Mary Beth Phillips, and I am an administrative assistant to the Vice President for business and finance. I've been with the university for 27 years and three months.

Szunyogh: That's exciting. How did you choose to come to Illinois Wesleyan?

Phillips: We moved in town in November of '86 and I called the university and talked to Yvonne Bjorklund who was secretary to the VP in those days and also the only HR employee, and asked her if there was any need for a secretary in those days. And in fact, she asked me to come in, and they had a person at the President's office who was not used to university ways and needed help. And so I came to work on January 5th, 1987 for half a day in the President's office. Two weeks later, Yvonne asked me to come and work in the VP's office for the other half of the day. So I began full time work in about the third or second week of January 1987. Half a day in the President's office, and half a day in the Vice President's office.

Szunyogh: Okay. Are there any other positions you've held on campus?

Phillips: No.

Szunyogh: No. So you worked first for the Vice President and President's office. And then now you work for the Business and Finance office?

Phillips: Mm. It's the same office, the Vice President of the—

Szunyogh: Oh!

Phillips: —University for Business and Finance.

Szunyogh: Okay.

Phillips: So for five years I worked half a day in the President's office and a half a day in the Vice President for Business and Finance office. And then after that five years Yvonne moved to full time for HR, and I took her position with Ken Browning as the Vice President for Business and Finance then.

Szunyogh: Okay. So you went on full time with the Vice President's office?

Phillips: Yes, in 1992.

Szunyogh: Okay. How—I can imagine working in the same office for-for so long, you’ve probably seen some changes in the university and the office itself. What are some changes that you’ve noticed?

Phillips: Well first of all, in the President’s office I worked under three different Presidents. [Chuckles]

Szunyogh: Oh, yeah.

Phillips: I came under Wayne Anderson and he was there for a year. And then Wendell Hess who just passed away was interim President for one year. And then Minor Myers came and I worked for him for three years before I went full time with the Vice President. So those were changes. Big changes.

Szunyogh: Yeah. What do you think of some of the philosophical and physical changes you’ve noticed on campus?

Phillips: Well, once I started full time with Ken Browning in the Vice President’s—his office, we began building. And so I have kept records for all the buildings beginning with the Natatorium and then of course the Shirk Center and Sigma Chi and Hattie Rust and all the buildings since then, I’ve kept the records for them. And now they’re in the archival files somewhere.

Szunyogh: Yeah, that’s exciting. Those are a lot of big buildings. They have a large presence on the campus.

Phillips: Yes, the library here, as well. This was an exciting building. Watching it go up and making the plans and everything.

Szunyogh: Yeah. When I went to the-the IWU Women’s Council Summit this year there was a woman who said that starting the renovations—creating Hansen-the Hansen Student Center was kind of student-led. How did that—were you involved in that at all?

Phillips: As far as just keeping the records, yes.

Szunyogh: Okay.

Phillips: Yeah, the records record-involve all the way from the architectural plans and the contracts and choosing the contractor and the building manager and all that, yes, all those records were kept, and of course all the bills that came in for the construction and all. So it made my job very, very interesting as well as then in the Vice President for Business and Finance office, we always dealt with buying all the houses and we had to buy many houses—

Szunyogh: Oh!

Phillips: —for the building of this library. About two streets' worth.

Szunyogh: Oh wow.

Phillips: So there was a lot of work with that.

Szunyogh: Yeah. I never really thought about the fact that there were probably houses here before. [Chuckles]

Phillips: Yeah. As well as all the other houses that-where buildings are today like the Shirk Center.

Szunyogh: Mhm. Oh I just had a question and it popped out of my mind. Oh! What were some of the reasons you decided to stay at Wesleyan?

Phillips: You know, I came with the thought that I would just work a few years while my sons were in college and then graduate school and they ended up both getting PhD's. So that stretched out a little longer than it just seemed like the thing to do. I enjoyed the work and we were living here, and so why not? But I never thought in a million years I'd be here this long.

Szunyogh: Yeah. What were some of your favorite aspects of your job and the community?

Phillips: I think the variety, and of course I really loved working for Minor. We just clicked. I loved his correspondence and we just agreed on punctuation and—

[Phillips and Szunyogh laugh]

Phillips: —so forth and he was just such an interesting person to work for. And then of course when I moved downstairs, a lot of people probably don't realize this but HR was in the Vice President's office down there. So I also had a lot of HR responsibilities—giving typing tests, giving materials, giving brief rundowns on benefits that type of thing as long as HR remained there. They did not move out of the VP's office until...I don't know, maybe 12, 14 years ago? I've lost track...to their own office, yeah. So it was very busy in those days because I had the VP's work as well as the HR.

Szunyogh: Having worked under three different Presidents and worked for Ken Browning, what were some of the differences in working for those various people?

Phillips: In the Vice President's office I've been very fortunate because I worked under Ken Browning until 2004, from '98 till 2004. He retired, and Dan Klotzbach became the VP for Business and Finance. And so he's been here ten years. He kept saying that he wanted me to be here till he retired but I told him I didn't want to be in a wheelchair.

[Phillips and Szunyogh laugh]

Phillips: So both had been great persons to work for. I enjoyed it very much. And then there was never any boredom in the President's office because of constantly changing the first couple three years. Minor's a very interesting person to work for. I don't know if you know that much about him, but he was—had varied interests. He played piano, organ, the harpsichord, he collected everything you could think of. And he was always calling Sotheby's and bidding on something. And just a very interesting person, did things first class. When he was inaugurated, he had a horse-drawn carriage around the Quad in the campus.

Szunyogh: Wow.

Phillips: Yeah.

Szunyogh: That's pretty awesome. That's pretty-very different. [Laughs] I like that. Do you have any favorite stories or memories in particular?

Phillips: I can tell you a very interesting story for Minor. About 35 years ago, my husband bought this family Bible from the used book store. And in the back of it was the Swift family genealogy. It was—we know the person that bought it, he bought it with a library, from a whole library out East.

Szunyogh: Okay.

Phillips: And we carried that thing around for—it was 1801, and we carried it around for all those years. And my husband was cleaning some of his books and he asked our sons if they wanted it, no one in our family wanted it.

[Szunyogh laughs]

Phillips: So he said well, Minor collects books in 18th century, but this is 1801 so maybe he'd like it. So he brought it up to the office one day and showed it to Minor and he showed him in the back the Swift family genealogy and Minor said, 'wow, I know that family. It's a family of attorneys, and yeah, I'd like to look at this.' So my husband gave it to him, and my husband went on to Chicago—he had business that day in Chicago, and I was downstairs working in those days, and Minor came down that afternoon, and he said, 'your husband has absolutely spooked me.' I said, 'well, what do you mean?' Well, he said, 'here's my family history.' And he opened the Bible to the back of the Bible and he said, 'this is not the Swift family of attorneys that I knew. This family was related to me through my aunt.' And he showed me how it went.

Szunyogh: That's amazing.

Phillips: And that was an amazing story, yes.

Szunyogh: Yeah! That's incredible. I love stuff like that.

Phillips: Yeah, yeah.

Szunyogh: That's too great. What kind of reputation have you encountered from others about Illinois Wesleyan? And have you noticed it change over time at all?

Phillips: Reputation of the university?

Szunyogh: Mhm.

Phillips: Oh...I think I'm very traditional, and since this university was founded as a church-related school I have-I've seen slippage from the church over the years. And this is not new to Illinois Wesleyan. I mean when Harvard was founded, there was chapel every day. The students all attended and you know where that is today. And so you see it so often in colleges and universities. And I suppose it's—happens in people's lives too so I've definitely seen the slippage away from the connection with the church.

Szunyogh: Mhm. [Pause] What are-what do you think stand out as the biggest changes you've seen here, kind of along the lines of, I guess ideals that Wesleyan has held or—what's the word—it used to be very connected to the Methodist church and now that's changed. Are there any other sort of philosophical—I'm at a loss for words right now—I guess, not standards—I guess policies or connections that the university used to have that they no longer have or both positive and negative changes you've noticed?

Phillips: I can't say that I'm that connected with everyday life with the students because—in fact I—the business office people back by the windows connect with students every day. And I would only see them if they had some business with the VP or with HR in those days. So I don't know that I can really comment on that.

Szunyogh: Okay. I was just curious. Mostly I just thought well, I mean, even though the university has kind of grown away from its direct connection to the Methodist church, I know we have a lot of student-led campus organizations—

Phillips: Yes, I-I—and I'm happy about that. I know there's a lot of Christian student-led groups and that's-that's great and that's even better than having one focus. So I think that's really good and I think that there's also a lot of student-led activities for help in various areas in society which is very good, yeah.

Szunyogh: Mhm. Yeah, I think that as a university we have students who are very passionate about the things that they care about.

Phillips: Helping the people less fortunate and all, yes.

Szunyogh: Yeah. Yeah. I know I'm part of DRL, which is one of the Christian ministries on campus, and then I'm part of APO which is the service fraternity. It's—they're great places.

Phillips: And that's-that's very heartening because again, I don't always get to hear about those things unless it's in the weekly paper or whatever. But yeah, I think that's very, you can say

that's a positive thing that there are so many students in student-led Christian groups and also service groups, yeah.

Szunyogh: Mhm, yeah. I know the—do you know very much about the Action Resource Center that started here?

Phillips: No, I just know that they've started. I don't know a lot about it yet.

Szunyogh: I know that they're helping kind of spearhead a lot of community—

Phillips: Activity.

Szunyogh: —activities, yeah, and organizations—supporting community organizations and I don't know a whole lot about that personally but I know a lot of my friends are involved with that and it sounds like it's a really cool program.

Phillips: That's great.

Szunyogh: So, yeah. Are there any other staff and—yeah, are there any other staff or even faculty members that have stuck out in your memory other than the Presidents and Vice Presidents?

Phillips: Oh, many. I'd hate to start naming them because I'm sure—

[Szunyogh laughs]

Phillips: —I would leave somebody out!

Szunyogh: Well that's okay.

Phillips: But yeah, there's been some fantastic staff people through the years. And we've lost a few to death not too many for the 27 years that I've been. That really impacts you when you work with the people every day. But there's just been some wonderful people. Of course I also worked for Max Starkey. He was Controller for so many years. And one of the interesting things, Max wrote out all his spreadsheets by hand on the old green sheets. And so I put his first spreadsheet on the computer.

[Phillips and Szunyogh laugh]

Phillips: But he never really got with the computer. He still, to the end of his days—and he did pass away shortly after he retired. He retired just two or three years when he passed away. But he never got past the handwritten spreadsheets.

Szunyogh: Yeah. [Laughs]

Phillips: How he had time for it, I don't know—

Szunyogh: [Laughs] yeah.

Phillips: —because it's so much slower than a computer.

Szunyogh: Yeah. A computer's very fast.

Phillips: But he had worked here for over forty years. He started—

Szunyogh: Wow.

Phillips: —right after he graduated and worked here till around 2000, I believe, and as you know the Max Starkey Award is given from his family in his honor.

Szunyogh: Yeah. [Pause]

Phillips: Speaking of controllers, I've worked—they weren't my main boss, but I did work for three different controllers through the years Max Starkey, and then Lou Ann Fillingham was controller after Max, and then she left, and about eight or nine years ago John Bryant became Controller. So I've worked for three different controllers. Lou Ann now works for the State of Illinois in their retirement fund. She manages some of the funds for faculty, for academics. And I think it's more in the-probably the state area. She commutes from Bloomington to Champaign every week.

Szunyogh: Oh really!

Phillips: Yes.

Szunyogh: That's a long commute.

Phillips: Yeah.

Szunyogh: Well, I mean, I guess it's not too bad. But still, pretty far.

Phillips: And she had her little boy when she was controller here. Always remember she called 45 minutes after he was born to tell us.

[Phillips and Szunyogh laugh]

Phillips: And now he is a sophomore at the University of Illinois and he's in math and actuarial science. And he's just in the second year but he's doing his second year of interning at State Farm—

Szunyogh: Hm!

Phillips: —in actuarial science. So from birth to now a Sophomore at the University of Illinois.

Szunyogh: That's exciting. What would you say is something you would like people to know in the future about your time here in the position that you were involved?

Phillips: That I've thoroughly enjoyed my time here and the positions I've held and that the spread of the work is so interesting. And I just feel blessed to have been here.

Szunyogh: That's great. Is there anything else you would like to add? Anything that comes to mind I didn't cover?

Phillips: I'll probably think of it later.

[Phillips and Szunyogh laugh]

Szunyogh: I think that's how it always works. I know, I'm like that too. I'll probably think of questions later that I should've asked. But I guess if you don't have anything else you'd like to add, we talked about when you got started here, 1987, and starting to work full-time in '92, and—

Phillips: No, I started in 1987 to work full time.

Szunyogh: Oh!

Phillips: Yeah. Just two weeks after I started.

Szunyogh: Oh, and then full-time just for the Vice President in '92. Right?

Phillips: Yes.

Szunyogh: Okay, that's what I meant.

Phillips: Yup.

Szunyogh: Yeah, sorry.

Phillips: Yeah, I didn't have my split shift—

Szunyogh: Yeah, yeah.

Phillips: —till I needed to.

Szunyogh: Okay, yeah. And then we talked a little about the building of the Shirk and the Fort Natatorium and Ames Library.

Phillips: All the buildings since then.

Szunyogh: Yeah, pretty much, yeah.

Phillips: The office building, of course we had renovations and among those buildings too.

Szunyogh: Yeah.

Phillips: Major renovations. A couple in Memorial Center, Buck Hall, and all the buildings and we've got pictures of the buildings that'd been built since Dan Klotzbach has been here on the wall in the Business Office right now. We just took down the ones—all the buildings that were built during Ken Browning's tenure.

Szunyogh: Oh wow.

Phillips: And so-so CLA, everything since the Chapel. I was not here when the Chapel was built.

Szunyogh: Okay.

Phillips: Everything that's been built since '87, yeah.

Szunyogh: There are a lot of buildings—

Phillips: A lot.

Szunyogh: —that have been built here in really not a very long amount of time.

Phillips: Yes, right. You're exactly right.

Szunyogh: Yeah. Well, I think that's it. Yeah. Thank you so much.

Phillips: You're welcome.