

**Oral History Interviews, Reunion Weekend 2008**

**Interview with Jim Freim, class of 1968  
Interviewed by Julia Stringfellow  
John G. Strange Commons, Main Hall  
Interview #5 for June 21, 2008**

**Start [00:00:00]**

**1. Could you please state your name?**

Jim Freim.

**2. What year did you graduate from Lawrence?**

1968.

**3. What did you get your degree in?**

Physics.

**4. Why did you choose to attend Lawrence?**

It chose me. My ex's father was on the Board here. I had no money to go to school, and they suggested I apply here, and I did quite late, and it was the only school I applied to. And they took me, gave me a job, a scholarship.

**Wonderful, your father was on the Board of Trustees?**

No, my ex's father was.

**5. What were your first impressions of Lawrence?**

To me, it was like an okay college. I didn't really know, because I didn't apply to any other colleges. My opinion of the college has changed over the years for the better. Every time I'm back, I'm just totally impressed. The liberal arts education I had here was totally instrumental and has influenced the rest of my life. I went on and received a Ph.D. in Mechanical, Nuclear, and Fusion Engineering. I taught, and I was the professor the students did not want to get, because in addition to technical, they needed to know how to write and how to speak.

**6. And Lawrence prepared you for that. What were the different dorms that you lived in while you were a student here?**

Only Plantz, I got married when I was a freshman and lived above Conkey's Bookstore.

**7. What were some of the organizations that you were involved in while you were a student here?**

I did a little bit of track and cross country. I was also working off-campus trying to support the family, so it was a difficult go.

**8. Were there any activities such as Homecoming or going to Convocations or things like that that you were involved in while you were a student?**

I remember the Convocations, I really enjoyed those. It was a very unique feature. I particularly remember the one with John Kenneth Galbraith, with Curtis Tarr. They were both the same height; Curtis Tarr was 6'9", and Galbraith was 6'9", and he said, "This is the first person we've had I haven't had to look down to."

**9. Were the Convocations required to attend?**

No, some of them you could, the beginning of the year like Matriculation, then some of the others where they had the guest speakers, but those were quite enjoyable. I usually tried to go to those, those were a nice feature. The small class sizes, unbelievable, the professors seemed like they truly cared about the students.

**10. Who were some of the professors who had a strong influence on you, obviously Physics professors?**

One of them who is no longer here is Dr. Phelps, and I'd describe him as a loose hanger. He didn't fit with Dr. Cook and Brackenridge and Brandenberger. He was just totally off the wall, and he was incredible. In fact we became close friends, and we went canoeing up in Canada together.

Cook is pretty structured, very organized, and I like him a lot. He was instrumental for me because of the following reason. I was so overwhelmed trying to make it here, trying to raise a family, I had children, an outside job, and in the middle of one of his classes I was going, "Oh geez," ten minutes and I get up and walk to the door and said, "This is 104. This is the right class." And I go back in and say, "I can't do this." I walked out and I quit. I quit, I said, "I've had it, I can't do this. I quit." I went down to Bahn Motors and became a Volkswagen mechanic. Dr. Cook owned a Volkswagen, and he called me once, and then he brought his car down. I worked on it, he called me after that. It was really his encouragement that I came back to Lawrence. So I came back in the summer, so that summer and the next three semesters I had to make up what I missed which was almost a year. So I took a double course load, I took my Junior and Senior year in one year and graduated with my class. And Cook was responsible for me coming back.

Smalley, I took Russian as my language and my literature in Russian, and Smalley was just different and amazing. I liked him a lot. The only guy I know who wanted to own an elephant and have it at his house.

**You don't forget that.**

No.

**11. Do you remember who your Freshman Studies professor was, what books you had to read for Freshman Studies?**

Yes, Curtis Tarr was, he taught Freshman Studies, that's who I had. He was also my advisor, and he was the one, I didn't end up going to Vietnam, I was married, I had a family, and I get this notice. I was ready to go to Canada, but I went to Curtis Tarr and said, "Is there anything you can do?" He said, "Well, I'll write a letter." He was being interviewed for the Selective Service job, Lewis B. Hershey was the Selective Service director, Curtis Tarr was being interviewed for that job when he wrote the letter to Lewis B. Hershey. The next thing I knew, I was out and Curtis Tarr left and became the Selective Service director, now what a quirk of fate.

[00:06:17]

**12. Given that this was the late 1960s and so many turbulent things were going on in the country, how did this affect the Lawrence students? I know that there were protests on campus, and what sorts of things were going on in that regard?**

Well really the protests, I think the groups were organized, we tried to have sit-ins, the SDS students, Students for a Democratic Society, there was an attempt to get that really going, there was a lot of backlash of "get the ROTC off this campus." We didn't go so far as other campuses where they barricaded themselves into rooms and dorms and took over the buildings like they did in other universities like Cornell, you had the black militia with guns. We didn't go that far here, but there was an outspoken cry against the war, "stop the war."

**13. How did the faculty and administration interact with that? Were they in support of that?**

It was almost noncommittal I thought. They tried to stay out of it, and I don't know if that was just a directive from up above, or they had no opinion. It was probably that they could not voice an opinion, at least get involved with the students' activities.

**14. What was the relationship like between Lawrence and the community of Appleton? Did it seem like a strong relationship? Did a lot of Appleton residents come on campus for Lawrence events?**

I don't think I could say. I think it's probably more of a love relationship than a love/hate relationship, because the university is not that large. And some other communities where I've taught was love/hate, because they had such a tremendous influence on the

community, that if something happened at the university, it affected the community. And that's not the case here.

**15. Was the Union the center of socialization here at Lawrence, or what were the popular hangout places for students?**

The Marc, gyms, the Union down the hill, down the hill behind the Union, and we had Ralph the rent-a-cop.

**16. Who was that?**

Well, there was no security service, but there was some guy, I called him Ralph the rent-a-cop. It was like somebody they hired on weekends. You'd see he was standing in bushes and jump out. He was trying to observe stuff and catch people, and then he'd come out of the bushes. So the hangouts were, they were all typically off-campus or some other place because you were not supposed to have women in your dorm, or if you did, your door had to be cracked. I can't remember how many feet you had to have on the floor. Was it three, I can't remember. It wasn't four, maybe it was three, maybe it was at least one.

**17. Do you happen to remember Ralph's last name?**

No, I don't know who he was, nobody knew who he was, that was just what everyone called him. He didn't have a vehicle, I think he had a little moped if anything, because that was the security, that was it. There was no security, that was something we didn't worry about. We played a lot of practical jokes on different people, the advisors, they just had in the dorm. We had one guy, his name was Court, and he was a one-legged swimmer, and he was quite good. At one time we stole his leg, he was dating a campus girl. We collected this newspaper for weeks and weeks and weeks, and then take the newspaper and wad it up and throw it in the room, throw it in the room. So when he opened the door, the whole room was full of newspaper. I don't know why he was picked on. And then one time there was an opening in Plantz Hall, a small opening, we took his entire room, dismantled it, and put it back together on the roof. Of course, a one-legged guy has trouble climbing up there. I diverted there from your question.

[00:10:55]

**18. In addition to Lawrence influencing you to go on to get a Ph.D. and continue in Physics, what were some of the other ways that Lawrence has influenced you, after graduating from here?**

It gives you an entirely different perspective. When I was here, Fred Phelps said, "Here, why don't you apply for this?" This was a fellowship to go to graduate school, and it was a fellowship in nuclear engineering. I was going, "no way, I'm coming from podunk nowheresville, and I'm competing against people from MIT, Berkeley, Cal Tech." He said, "No, no, fill it out, give it a try." I'm going, "Okay." I don't know what letters Tarr

wrote, or what Phelps wrote, but I got this fellowship coming from this school. And I was so proud.

But I used it when I was teaching to give the students a broader base, and some of my engineering students learned more about writing, more about grammar, more about composition, more about self-confidence and speaking than I learned in the English department. And then when I was working, the same thing, I tried to engender this broad view of the world and education with all the people that worked for me. So it's affected me throughout, and I've continued, I'm back writing again, and that's a direct influence from here. It's always a challenge, and life to me is a continual process. It's always a challenge, it's always new things, and that's Lawrence's fault.

**19. I was going to ask, when you started here as a freshman, Milwaukee-Downer had just merged with Lawrence. How did the consolidation affect life at Lawrence?**

You wouldn't have known. It was just integration, and you really didn't know, so there was no impact, I thought.

**20. Coming back to Lawrence as an alumnus, and coming back to campus throughout the years as an alum, how has Lawrence stayed the same and how has it changed?**

I think the way it stays the same is the history that the University has and preserves. We're sitting in Main Hall. There's that picture on the wall from 1859, see that's the history, that's the thing that gives it the anchor, the saneness, the anchor, the stability that holds the university together while it has a chance to grow. And the next building that we build here is going to be on a barge on the river, they're going to have to go across the road. Seeing everything that is being done and improving the university is absolutely great. I love the place, I love what they do, I love the aim.

**21. Are there any other stories you'd like to add?**

About whom?

**About your time here at Lawrence. Anything else you can think of?**

I could tell you stories forever. It was just a great experience, and I highly recommend this school to several high school students or other people.

**End [00:14:34]**