

**Narrator:** Claudia Gorbman  
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**Interviewed by:** Charles Williams  
**Place:** Tacoma, Washington

**Charles Williams: So, this is Charles Williams, and this is the University of Washington Tacoma oral history project. April 5. And we are in TLB 210. And this is an interview with Claudia Gorbman. So, Claudia, maybe you could tell us a little bit about your background before you came to UW Tacoma.**

Claudia Gorbman: Okay. First of all, really glad to be part of this project. I think it's a great thing you're doing. I got a PhD in French at University of Washington, at Seattle. And my first job was at Indiana University, where I taught for 15 years. And really early on there I ended up teaching film most of the time, since that was my true love. I had been very active in Seattle in the Seattle Film Society and taking as many film courses as possible as a graduate student, which was hardly any. Um, so, I naturally segued into a job at Indiana in the Comparative Literature department teaching film and also literature, but film was my real love. So there I was in exile for 15 years in the Midwest. No mountains, no oceans, and my older sister told me, "Did you know about these new branch campuses starting up at the University of Washington?" "No." She said, "Well, it might be too late to apply." But I did. It turned out it was too late, but some secretary in some office said, "Please, go ahead and apply anyway. We'll accept your late application." So I scrambled like crazy, because I really loved the Northwest and wanted to end up back here. So everything worked out.

**CW: So you were tenured at Indiana?**

CG: I was tenured, yes. And it was quite a gamble to apply to this brand new place. Didn't know if it would exist in a year or two. So basically I took a year's leave of absence once I got offered the job at the UW branch campuses. So I did take a year's leave of absence with the possible intention of going back to Bloomington. In December of 1990, that first year, Indiana asked me to declare whether I was coming back to Indiana or not. If I wasn't, they would hire somebody else. So I said, "Oh yeah, I'm coming back." Then, in May of 1991, we were having this, some wonderful get-together of the faculty as usual—we were quite a bonded group by then—and I was having so much fun. And I realized, I don't want to go back to Indiana. So I had a long heart-to-heart talk with my father, who was a professor. And he said, "You should go back to Indiana. You know, that's a reputable place. You don't know what's gonna happen with these branch campuses." So I thought about it and thought about it. Everybody was telling me to go back to Indiana except, of course, my heart. So, at the last minute, I called my senior colleague in Bloomington, Indiana, and said, "Would I be in legal trouble if I stayed here instead of return to Indiana?" And he said, "No, no." British fellow, Harry Geduld. "If that's where you want to go, you can stay." So I did.

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**CW: So what was the position that you were hired for?**

CG: Associate professor in liberal studies. And the idea was to teach film courses, but the emphasis was on this interdisciplinary approach. So I taught a literature course or two. I loved team-teaching with people, which I suppose we'll get into in a minute. But yeah, I was an associate professor of liberal studies.

**CW: And did it appeal to you—the sense of the interdisciplinary nature of the position? As far as a space where it would be possible to do the film work, or?**

CG: Well I was never a strict disciplinarian, so to speak. And the idea of teaching at a place where there would be no majors in my field, at least for a while—where I had to rethink what it meant to teach film to people who weren't planning to be film majors; what it meant to somehow integrate what I did with the real world and concerns of an excited, idealistic group of colleagues—really was part of the reason that I found it so easy and relieving to stay here. It was really a new kind of intellectual journey for me that was happening.

**CW: Could you say a little more about the interviewing and hiring process itself?**

CG: Yeah. We were interviewed in waves—does the word waves come up?

**CW: The word waves has come up.**

CG: Yes, so we were interviewed in waves, not knowing which new branch campus we were destined for. And it was clear that what they were looking for was not only people who could teach their discipline in a way that didn't require five million prerequisites and great specialist knowledge—in other words, teach the foundations and the relevant-to-life parts of any discipline—but people who could get along with each other. And you could see in your fellow interviewees some prickly people, who I'm sure got eliminated immediately. They needed 12 people at each campus who could work productively with each other and hammer out a school, an entire university, together, which is a pretty awesome project.

So those interviews were very interesting. We all went to each other's—or we were asked to go to each other's—fake teaching sessions. I remember I went to Mike Honey's, and there he was, with his guitar; Mike Allen, doing some kind of theatrical presentation. And it was really a lot of fun. Seeing different styles of teaching, trying to determine who my future colleagues would be. I really wanted to go to Bothell, because my parents—who were one of the reasons I moved back to the Northwest—they lived in Seattle. And the Bothell campus seemed to be closer to Seattle. So I was keeping an eye out for Bothell. But I was told very clearly, a week or two later, when I was offered the job, that it was Tacoma only. So I readjusted my thinking pretty quickly. Anyway, those waves were fascinating experiences.

**CW: You alluded to a little bit of this, but so you have this faculty that's all been hired together. Can you talk a little bit about the process of figuring out the direction of the university, the curriculum, and the kind of community that emerged?**

CG: Well it all happened really at that meeting in the spring of—what was it—1990? In a hotel? The Sheraton, was it? Yes, the Sheraton. You're going to also have to fill me in on the name of Jack, the dean, the original guy—Jack somebody. Keating! Thank you. So, **Jack Keating** was responsible for kind of keeping us all on track to hammer out a curriculum. But I'd say that the job—the intellectual job—of figuring out a curriculum was pretty much left to the original founding faculty members. Especially somebody like me, coming from a specialized research institution, where I had been rewarded for 15 years for the brilliant specializing that I was doing, it was ... you know, I've said this before, but it was really quite a journey for me to figure out—What should a student, who knows nothing about film studies, know? And what is a curriculum that helps that student know something and also helps that student think better and write better and reason better. And what kind of film teaching would help that student make connections between film and the other courses she or he was taking?

So it was that kind of thinking that was going on in that planning, that monumental planning, weekend. And I think, I may be wrong, but I think we were talking about team-teaching, which turned out to be one of the most productive aspects of my earlier years at UW Tacoma. Because there you really by necessity, being an interdisciplinary person, you are somehow figuring out how to communicate with somebody in a different field about some topic that has to make sense to students. And they can't be thinking, "Well, mom is saying this about this situation in the world, and dad is saying this. And which one of them am I going to please by writing in their disciplinary emphases? So, sort of thinking about what team teaching meant, I believe, was taking place already at the beginning at that meeting.

**CW: It was a pretty substantial part of the overall curriculum for a while?**

CG: Absolutely. Yeah. I mean, remember, the people who were hired were all experienced teachers at other universities but interested in this undertaking because they could be idealistic about it. What do we really want education to be like, now that we 12 can get our midst on it? That was a pretty exciting time. And I remember the ring leaders, at least in my memory of it, were **Mike Kalton**, **Rob Crawford**. I think those two were the most insistent and convincing about really rethinking education and interdisciplinarity.

**CW: So you mentioned already that there was a ... there was obviously a certain kind of sense of shared spirit of people who wanted to be creative or excited about the opportunity and also that some of the more prickly interview candidates didn't end up in the ranks of the faculty. So it was a pretty tight knit community? It worked out pretty well with the ... between the faculty members?**

CG: Uh, I think in general it was a pretty tight-knit community. There were, there was one problem person who left after a year or so. But I remember, even that first weekend in the spring of 1990, we all went out to dinner. Was it Chinese? Was it Thai? I don't remember. But we were all at one table. Imagine the whole faculty of a university all at one table. Right? And we were having a great time. So there was a pretty quick bonding process, and the sense of shared mission that kept things pretty wonderfully idealistic and interesting for at least three or four years until we started hiring more people, who came in, hadn't been in on that original excitement, and who were kind of hanging onto their little disciplinary specialty. And you know, little by little this became a bureaucratic institution that it is now. But those first few years were anything but bureaucratic.

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**CW: I also know that, I think ten of the faculty were men. Was that ever something that felt problematic or anything like that?**

CG: You know, it didn't, really. As a woman, I'm always hyper sensitive to how power works in conversations and in actions. And I had been in a very conservative comparative literature department at Indiana University. Old German guys. I mean, imagine anything more patriarchal than that kind of setup. So in general I found that I was treated as, you know, one of the guys, and the other female faculty member that I recall was **Judy Stevens-Long**, whom everybody looked up to. She was a really, a force of nature. Very, very outspoken. Very funny. Very fun. And very smart. So I really didn't feel any of that male privilege. Certainly not to the extent that I did at my previous job. So that's something that I've always been pretty appreciative of at this place.

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**CW: So you've given some sense of this already, but interested to hear a little bit more about as the campus started to develop, including the move to the permanent location, did it retain for you still for a while a strong sense of being a distinctive place?**

CG: Yes. I mean of course after the first year, especially, a job is always a grind, and there were a lot of grindy things about UW Tacoma, those first few years. Teaching a film course of course you need films, right? I brought my collection of video tapes from my years at Bloomington, and that's what I used. You know, there was just no other source of films for me to use. There was no library with anything in it. So that was a limitation. I remember the room that I most often taught in—by the way, using a TV set to show the films from a video player. That was the film screenings—it had these big, square columns in the room, so there were vast areas behind which students couldn't sit, because they wouldn't be able to see the prof or the films.

There were no kind of resources. It took awhile for the writing resource center—whatever it was called at the time—to get going professionally, which happened when **Beth Kalikoff** was hired.

And there were a lot of problems. I remember a student sitting in the front row, who reeked of alcohol. It was just more Wild West than it became. It was just much more of a pioneering place. I remember when a second building was opened up to classes. That was a great relief—right? That we could actually have enough room to teach in. But I think all of those limitations also increased the bonding of the faculty that was there. I don't know if anybody had told you this story yet, but Deb—the first librarian? The main librarian.

**Justin Wadland: Deborah Sunday.**

CG: Yes, **Deb Sunday**. In December of the first year, I said, "Well, how's the library coming along, Deb? Like, how many books do we have?" And she said something like 47. So imagine teaching at a place where there's really no resources at all. It was fun, and it was exciting. And the students understood that this was not normal but it gave everybody the opportunity to do things that they wouldn't be able to do anywhere else.

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**CW: So what were the students like in the early years?**

CG: They were great, aside from the odd alcoholic and stuff, they were great. So many of them were older students who hadn't ever finished their degrees, so they came back to this frontier town of a new school. And they were articulate, they had a sense of irony—because you have irony as you get older. When you're a young student, you don't understand irony. Because you haven't lived enough. So they picked up a lot that subsequent—you know, especially in my later years at UWT—you had to explain more. For example, ironic moments in films. So this was, it was a very exciting time. There was a huge gap between students who really were very, very ill prepared to be at any college or university at all and students who had begun college elsewhere in other times and who had a life and a job and family and perhaps night classes here and there. So there was an enormous gap that you sometimes didn't know quite where to teach to. But there were some students who were just absolutely terrific. And again, they were also in on this small town feel of the place. This place with columns in the way of your sight. This university on two floors of an office building. There was a real sense of adventure and team spirit, I think. At least that's how I remember it.

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**CW: So, you've talked a little bit about teaching film here. We were also interested to know a bit did the place have an effect on your research or how you thought about the research side of your career?**

CG: Interestingly, it didn't have much of an effect on my research. I was ... one of the main reasons I was hesitant to stay at UW Tacoma rather than return to Indiana that first year was that I was very, very attached to my reputation as a growing scholar. And if I had to do it all over

again, I would teach and do research in an entirely different way. I was sort of stuck in a more or less elitist model of university education. So I pretty much stuck to my mode of doing research and writing that I had developed at Indiana, 'cause I was afraid of losing out on the national and international scope of my work and my participation in conferences and things like that.

And it's really only in the last ten years, that is, my last years of teaching and my subsequent years as a "retired person," that I've become much, much more involved with real life community issues that have anything to do with my academic life. So I regret that a great deal. But this job allowed me to continue to do my more traditional kinds of research as well as to do the teaching, which was such a different environment than at Indiana.

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**CW: As the campus continues to grow, one of the things that I think you were involved in from the beginning was the Global Honors program? Can you say a bit about how that came about and what the aims were, and how it worked out?**

CG: Yeah. It was actually started by Bill Richardson I think a year before he left. And so it was his vision that kick started the program, and he envisioned an honors program that would straddle all of the programs on campus, that was international in scope, and that strongly encouraged UWT students to study abroad, if for only two weeks. And I thought that that was a fantastic idea, and it continued some of that idealism that had been lost since the place was founded, and so I was very glad to take it over.

The main obstacles ... there were two main obstacles to growing the program during the years that I headed it. One was that a lot of the brightest students were just too poor to be able to afford study abroad, even with the money and tuition breaks that I was able to cobble together from various sources on campus. That was one. And the other was a growing campus with demands for money everywhere was not terribly willing to fund a program that was drawing faculty members from its various other academic units. So, I struggled and did as much institutionalizing as I could and fell in love with all of the Global Honors students in those first few years. And I think the best possible thing happened to it, which was that I handed it over to **Divya McMillin**, who really has been so brilliant and aggressive about finding funding sources, making partnerships with various institutions and people in the community, and really making it not only a viable academic program but broadening the whole global scope of education on campus. But it was really fun to do. It was an incredible amount of work in those first few years, when I was basically inventing the curriculum and cajoling faculty members and their chairs to allow them to teach and to teach, again, really interdisciplinary courses for a totally interdisciplinary bunch of students in Honors. So it was fun.

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**CW: So how did it kind of—as you've said before—tie into the kind of Wild West under resourced but a lot of the sense of freedom to pursue things?**

CG: Absolutely. Yeah. You know, I hadn't thought about that before, but it was a way to preserve that kind of educational idealism that made me so happy to be here in the beginning.

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**CW: So maybe one of the other questions related to the gradual shift towards a more traditional institution, or just institutionalizing is what was the relationship like with the ... between the faculty and the administration?**

CG: Depends on which year of administration you're talking about. We've had some enlightened chancellors and deans, and we've had some real duds. [Chuckles.] I don't know if I'm allowed to say that, but some people who made us really depressed to be on campus. For me the great moment was **Deborah Friedman** for two-and-a-half years, who had a vision, who executed it, who was always enormously pro-faculty and pro-student, and who had a kind of strength of will to counteract a lot of entrenched stuff on campus to make things happen. You know, when I think of what she did in terms of art for the campus—what else? You know, just anything you think about that she put her mind to was tremendously changed for the better while she was here. So that was a terrible loss to have her leave us. And before her, **Pat Spakes** meant well but was not a positive person. I remember accompanying her to various community dinners when she was there as the chancellor and I was there as the head of Global Honors, and she was just an unhappy person. And I think that unhappiness spread to the campus. You know, and middle management is also so important that you just feel like your drudgery is suddenly gone, and you're in the best place possible in the universe, depending what dean is telling you what about your job and about your unit and about the vision for the future of the University. So, I think it's been a real up-and-down relationship between faculty and administration. And it really depends on the tone that set—even more than the budget that exists—really.

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**CW: How would you characterize the relationship with UW Seattle and Bothell?**

CG: Well, that's a very interesting question. Isn't it? It's been a fraught relationship, and it's also been a very productive relationship. We are the University of Washington. The University of Washington is very happy to have us, but from the very beginning, there's been a lot of ... sort of doubt and even mistrust on the part of Tacoma faculty, of being swallowed up emotionally as well as bureaucratically by the main campus. And, you know, if I'm a psychologist here, how beholden am I in terms of curriculum as well as other kinds of resources to the mother psychology department at University of Washington Seattle?

I happen to be the retired faculty representative this year on the tri-campus—committee for tri-campus policy—whatever it's called. And there's been a big push in the last couple of years to define "the whole U." What does that mean? What does that mean for student opportunities? Is there a desire for UWT students to take courses at Seattle? Is there a desire for Seattle students to take some kind of specialized course from some extra special person here at Tacoma? I don't think the answers to those questions are clear, and that there always be a tension between our desire for independence here and our desire to be part of all of the opportunities and riches that the main campus enjoys. I personally have always been much more pro-whole U, even though realistically I see that the students, whom this is all about and for, really don't do that much commuting between campuses to take advantage of the various educational opportunities at different places. So, I'm not sure how to answer that question beyond that.

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**CW: You've touched on this already a little bit. But what's your sense been over the years on the relationship between UW Tacoma and Tacoma and the wider South Sound?**

CG: Since I lived in Seattle the whole time and maintained my kind of elitist research program, I did not value the University's connection to the community as much as I should have. If I had to do it all over again, I would a very different person in that connection. The main connection I had with the community was—well, there were several, of course—not that I had anything against Tacoma in any way. The Tacoma Film Society is something that we founded fairly early on in the 1990s. And that was, I'd say the two UWT faculty most responsible for that were **Anthony D'Costa** and me, and his wife, **Janette Rawlings**. And **Beckie Etheridge**, who worked here for many years, media in the Library. And that was terrific. We had regular screenings in the Tacoma little theater, which became our main home. And we tried to bring films to Tacoma that would otherwise not be seen, certainly not in the movie theaters. And some of our most successful screenings were—for kids, I remember a huge, unruly, wonderful crowd for *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. But we also brought a silent film called *His People*, a Jewish silent film much like *The Jazz Singer*, which came out a year later and was a sound film. And a colleague of mine from the East Coast came out and accompanied the film. We also had two more screenings, one in Seattle and one in Mercer Island, for him to play, which made it worth his while to come. And the entire Jewish community of Tacoma came to that screening. And it was wonderful. It was a beautiful thing.

So, the Tacoma Film Society had its ups and downs. We were a really dedicated bunch. And then, really, the fact of DVDs and the easy availability of anything on video just made it not practical to try to have public screenings of stuff that people could get anyway. But it was a lot of fun while it lasted. I also was a judge at the first Tacoma Film Festival, which was also a lot of fun. But really, there weren't too many ways for me as a film specialist to connect with the Tacoma community.



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**CW: So, looking back over the years, what would you say was the most rewarding about being a professor at UW Tacoma? And what stand out looking back in terms of frustrations?**

CG: What a hard question. You're asking me to sum up a life. "What was the best thing in your life?" "What was the most rewarding thing?" [Chuckles.] For me, it's always people, isn't it? You know? It's just the people who were part of this enterprise and the provocations and nudgings and proddings of my teaching, which had started out pretty traditional. And you can't use traditional teaching with non-traditional students. So I did a lot of work on my teach, and I am conscious of never having become a really great teacher. I was always ... each year, I would be the favorite teacher of two or three really great students, and otherwise I got okay teaching reviews but nothing special. I don't know why that is, but it's something that kept me working at it constantly. I couldn't change my personality. I couldn't have certain student-run activities because there was too much I wanted to teach them. And so, I was constantly in this dilemma. My spouse can tell you that I would spout about it all the time. You know. "Why didn't they like this?" Or, "What should I have done when they hated this given film?" Or, "Where should I have taken this?" Or, you know, those questions that a teacher who cares asks.

So, the growth that I had as a teacher, I think, was an enormous part about what I appreciate about being here. That sense of camaraderie and inventing a new university. You know. How many people get to do that? I think that that excitement I've had in moderate amounts in the past, in the distant past—I was in the first graduating class of Nathan Hale High School in Seattle in 1965. It started in 1963, and I was the senior class president, so there was that sense of a frontier, you know, at that time as well. I also felt that feeling, the first ... well, in 1981, when I went to direct a study abroad program in Paris. I've never done this. How do you do this? What do you do? What do you rely on? Right?

So, UWT is certainly the most enormous adventure of that kind that I've had. Really, having no precedent to rely on, and inventing the seed of a whole university was a pretty huge and wonderful thing to do. I've already talked about some of the frustrations. And a lot of the frustrations were, you know, imposed by budget stuff, and budget worries, and other bureaucratic worries, which, I think, as a small place, we were much more vulnerable to, because we were all of the committees. And we were everything that was affected by budget and administration personnel who were annoying and things like that. That might answer your question.

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**CW: Thinking about that sense of excitement and both individually and collectively, the group of faculty who came in at the beginning, how much has the University stayed true to what you think you all hoped it would become?**

CG: Not much. Not much. And I think we all knew it, that at a certain point when an entity gets big it as to rationalize, it has to form departments and it has to have a bigger administrative structure, and all of that means—unless you have a truly amazing administration—it usually means drudgery, disappointment, accommodating, compromising—all the things that I know you're very familiar with. And I think it's very difficult to have a real vision. That's why each time, and there've been many times over the years, each time, somebody from on high says, "Develop a vision statement" for the campus, for the program, for the department, for the school, each time that happens, it's harder and harder to do it, because everybody has different visions. I think my disappointment started growing when social sciences and sciences started edging out humanities. And that's one of my bigger disappointments—that humanities has not thrived at UWT, as it's thriving less and less on a national level as well. It's undervalued as something that is part of an important education as education gets more and more technocratic and geared toward instant results.

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**CW: You were definitely, I recall you often raising the need to expand our music curriculum, which was very, very minimal.**

CG: Has it expanded?

**CW: Not consistently. There have been, I think, things that have happened and then not sustained.**

CG: Yeah, you know, we all listen to music all day, whether we intend to or not. You know, whether you're watching television or watching something on the web, there's music there. There's music everywhere except on this campus. It's the biggest hole in the soul of this campus that is imaginable. I don't know why it's the case.

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**CW: So some of the things that you were describing, as far as the trajectories, just scale ... but also you suggested maybe larger shifts in the culture around higher education?**

CG: Um-hmm. Oh, definitely. Yeah. I mean, I on social media see what is happening to colleagues at other universities. And they're all complaining about the same thing—the undervaluing of a humanities education. You know. As if that isn't important to the developing soul and mind of anybody who's becoming an adult, concerned about the world. Yeah.

**CW: Maybe we could finish with any thoughts you might have in terms of likely future direction of the campus?**

CG: No, I would like to know what you think the future direction of the campus would be. And is it possible, under the sort of administrative structure there is now?

**CW: Yeah, I think we're definitely struggling with how to recognize the distinctive, exciting things at the heart of this campus and figure out what they would look like as the campus grows. At the same time I think there have definitely been some appealing dimensions to the growth—just the access, and the diversity of students—so there's something desirable about continuing to build, but it's really hard to do that in a way which doesn't run into some of the complications you're describing.**

CG: Let me just tell you a story about the liquified natural gas project on the tidelands. That is just about completed—the construction—which has not been permitted, right? The clean air board hasn't issued its permits yet. But Puget Sound Energy has built this enormous, eyesore anyway. When I became aware that this is happening, I thought, "Oh my god, where is UWT?" Where are the rational minds of this city and this metropolitan area? Where are they? Is anybody speaking out from UW Tacoma? I didn't see any evidence of that. And we're supposed to be the intellectual leaders of the region, right?

This thing is encroaching on the lands and **water rights** of the **Puyallup Tribe**. It is a danger. There are scientists who have written letters to the Tacoma City Council, the Board of the Port of Tacoma—scientists showing what all of the problems are. The dangers to the air, and the water, and the land—the land being, you know, this junk land that was shipped over from the Asarco plant many years ago. The pollution that is involved in fracking the gas that's sent to this facility is now a proven fact by all scientists, except I haven't heard from any scientist at UWT. There are so many things to be said about what a not only misguided but evil plan this thing is. And I've heard nothing from this university. Why is that? Is it because everybody's so caught up in the development of the bureaucracy and teaching their own little courses that they're not paying attention to this? I don't understand. I really don't understand it. And I don't know there have been other issues like that that I, too, was blind to as a faculty member so busy with my little, you know, things that I had to do. But this is something—if that plant explodes, and many of these plants have in the last 50 years, then UWT is in the blast zone. It could be completely obliterated by an explosion of this thing.

So, I don't know where all the great minds of the University of Washington Tacoma are. I have more to say but it can't be recorded—[laughs]—about people I have tried to talk to, people on this campus I have tried to talk to about that project. But I am concerned about the quality of community leadership that UWT has taken. And I'm concerned about its relation to the community in a real way, rather than corporate sponsorship of research in the future.

**CW: Should we finish there?**

CG: Yeah.

**CW: Thanks very much.**

CG: My pleasure.