

Hugh Lowry interviewed by Max Steinbaum on February 27, 2024

Max Steinbaum: The point of this oral history interview is to get your story of how the Mary Washington Frisbee club started. I and whatever other information about Mary Washington you have. Our project is about place based history on campus, and I think Frisbee golf and Frisbee definitely plays a big part in that. It will be a lot of you talking and not as much of me asking questions.

Hugh Lowry: Darn it.

MS: Before I start, um, are you okay with me using this video for this project?

HL: Yes.

MS: Okay.

HL: I wasn't sure. I had to sleep on it, but I don't think it's gonna end up on CNN or. Yeah.

MS: And we'll let you know throughout all the steps of the project.

HL: Right. Cool.

MS: What originally drew you to Mary Washington college?

HL: It was here. It was a good school. I knew that my sister went there for a short time. And I got to know some people. Originally I went to Germanna community college for two years because I was poor. And then I worked for the city of Fredericksburg for a year so that I would be less poor and got enough money to pay my way into Mary Washington as a townie and just fell in love with it, met all wonderful people.

MS: That's incredible. How was your experience as a townie different from other students' experience on campus?

HL: At times, I felt like I was missing out on things because they had, you know, roommates and suitemates, and they just walked down the stairs and they were there. They didn't get on a bicycle and pedal in, and they didn't have to think about ordinary things.

But one thing I learned is that on campus, students love to have a friend who's a townie. I could tell them about the Parthenon restaurant. I could tell them about Carl's Ice Cream. I knew the area, and I had a car and sort of not much of one, but I would encourage anybody who lives on campus anywhere, find a townie, make a friend, help include them in what you do, and they will know the territory.

MS: Absolutely. And then a couple other questions about your Mary Washington experience. What did you major in, and where did that take you?

HL: Getting a degree in a major in English and philosophy. Double major. Made it so that I could become a house painter and a cook at Sammy T's restaurant. Open doors like you just don't understand. I made no use of my degree except to enjoy the hell out of it. I still do.

MS: That's incredible to hear, talking about. Can you tell me about the birth of the Mary Washington College Frisbee Club and your involvement in it?

HL: From just before becoming a student? I would carry frisbees up there and a handful of students who wanted to join in and always said, 'let's go, let's go.' And we just played catch on Ball Circle and we didn't have games, competitions, rules until John Pickerel came to town and he was an economics teacher. That doesn't make him a bad person. It's not a high recommendation, but he loved competitive games and taught us rules for ultimate DDC. And a couple of his good friends came down from the Chicago area to put on a show and then he, John, and two of them, John Connolly, Alan Blake, and Mitch Sproul went out and set up a Frisbee golf course.

And it was big fun to have that winding around the campus. The campus is a beautiful place for a Frisbee golf course until the administration says 'you can't do that.' It's much later in the story, but it's understandable and wise that they said, you can't do this anymore, because the actual discs changed. They went from being rounded edges to beveled edges and weighed a lot more and could clearly break glass. And since you were throwing at, trying not to hit the buildings, but often did anyway, it was good that they made the tournament clear out because that was even worse than having students just playing the course.

But John thought it would be a good idea to say they're doing Frisbee tournaments now, overall tournaments. And so he began working on that with Eric Wooten, who was a mainstay, and me and one or two others, Shannon Elder, the best Frisbee player no one's ever heard of. And so we began playing ultimate and setting up for the Frisbee tournament. And I was listed as the interim head coach because we, before we were a club, but then John got us established as a club, and then I graduated and Randy Kirby took over as the first real president. But now there was a club, and it had some standing and some credibility and a lot of skeptical looks from the powers that be.

But that led to the first tournament and that really established us as a club and this area as a big time frisbee haven. But it was the times on Ball Circle with both sexes, both, you know, and some townies coming in and just playing catch. The idea of the circle sort of went away because we had so many people that we would actually form two lines over here, two lines over there, so that you'd have eight frisbees going at once, just throwing to anybody and everybody. And sometimes you had two frisbees coming at you. That's okay. There wasn't any. No demerits for not catching. You just had more fun if you did.

MS: I think you were touching on this a little bit, but can you tell me a little bit about the Frisbee Club's reaction to the banning of Frisbee on campus?

HL: We wrote a few letters. We whined. And the ban was just that you could play in this area and that area and that area provided nothing else was going on. And it was. But they weren't wrong to do it. They just, they didn't get in the spirit of the thing. But most of the teachers didn't mind it.

Most of the, sometimes the officers. One time I was playing freestyle, so that's throw and spin and jam and jump and hot dog with Eric Wooten. And we were in ACL ballroom because it was cold and rainy outside. So we're up in this open area, not doing any harm.

Four times the officer said, 'sorry guys, we're going to close up the building now, so you have to leave.' And we went, 'oh, okay.' And another time a different officer came up and said, 'what the hell do you think you're doing?' And Eric did not take it in stride. Then I got kicked off campus because I wasn't a student anymore. And the president didn't want: 'Mr. Lowry, We don't want former students treating the campus like their personal playground. So your permission to be on campus is suspended.' So I wasn't allowed on campus. That didn't last too long.

I finally wrote a letter that said, 'my goodness, you must have more against me than this one little infraction. So I'm going to get in touch with my lawyer and demand to know what's on my record.' And then he died. I don't think my letter killed Mr. Woodard. But his replacement said, 'provisionally, you're being reinstated on campus, you may be on the grounds of Mary Washington.' And I went, 'oh, good.' But if I'd done anything else wrong, I'd have been off again. So I was pretty well behaved after that. I probably traveled a long way. From your initial question. If you have to go back to it, I'll understand.

MS: That's the intention.

HL: Okay.

MS: Whatever stories come, even if it's unexpected, it'll lead me down other rabbit holes of research. Thank you. I wonder if I can find those letters. I found the letters from president Anderson or I forget which president it was.

HL: Yeah, President Anderson. I certainly got one from A. Ray Merchant. He was a good man, but he was in that vice principal hatchet position that you get in high school. It's like, you gotta come down on this. 'I do. Yeah, okay. Yeah, I'll do it. That's what I'll do.' And then Anderson said, 'okay, you can be reinstated.' I'm not sure. They might be in this collection of things. I left those here because there's a lot of stuff about the history of the frisbee. I don't know when you would want me to look through them with you or wait till a break and look through them, but whatever you want to.

MS: After this interview would be perfect. One other question on the tangent. After the banning of frisbee on campus, were you involved in the planning of the modern iteration of the Virginia state's tournament?

HL: Yes. Eric Olsen would have been, but I think he might have been away at school. But Eric Wooten, and his now wife Bonnie, and a few others of us went out to St. Clair Brooks park, which abuts Pratt Park. And we found mostly good stuff at Pratt Park and set up most of a Frisbee golf course. And then other people did even more. Brian Stableford, who didn't go to Mary Wash, his brother, both his brothers did, worked hard on their course with some friends of his. And as far as I'm concerned, he became the golf pro of that golf course because he did a lot

of work and even built some lasting things which make the course cooler than it otherwise would be. It's not in the sense of what a really well designed golf course is.

It's poor because we worked with what's there. Half the problem is half the course is over there, and half the course is over there. So there's a three quarter of a mile walk from hole 18 to hole one, which is okay if you start on hole one. But if you're starting all 18 holes at once because you have 84 people to get through at the same time. One group in the morning, one in the afternoon, it can lead to some slowdowns, some tired people. But yeah, it was fun to be part of that initial and help with maintenance, but other people took that over in a bigger way than I did. Yeah.

MS: I have this other lead, this other story I'm trying to look at. Which is how campus has changed over time.

HL: Well, you couldn't play any of the original golf courses anymore. They tear down buildings and put up buildings. It's still gorgeous. On a personal note, I feel a little bit sad for the prospective students who come here and see this beautiful campus and then wake up to big machines doing big jobs. And you can't be on Ball Circle for a year. You can't be on Westmoreland Circle because they put up a temporary building in all these beautiful places.

And you go, 'this is not as beautiful. This is all fenced off.' There are construction workers here first thing in the morning until dark. And you go, 'it's supposed to be quieter than this. I could have gone to VCU and gone to school in the middle of a city if that's what I wanted.' But I guess it's partly that it never gets done. It's always in the act of becoming a great existential concept,

but not good in a college space where you go, I just want my beautiful, quiet college space. And they cut down my flowering. What's it called? Flowering, big flower. What's Magnolia? Oh, is it flowering Magnolia? That's where I would hang my frisbee bag and sit and read until somebody came along and said, 'do you want to play Frisbee?' I said, 'sure.'

MS: Is that the infamous one on Ball Circle?

HL: Mm hmm. Yeah, it got to a point. We dominated Ball Circle so much that a real nice guy came over and said, 'look, I enjoy playing Frisbee and. But the guys in this dorm got challenged by the guys in that dorm to pick up football game. Do you think it would be okay if we used Ball Circle?' He asked me and I said, 'I will warn everybody who comes to play Frisbee with me that at some point we're going to leave you the field.' And he said, 'thanks.' I was like, 'wow, I just seem to have been appointed to some position without even an election.' So that was fun.

Yeah. The school has gotten better and better in a lot of ways. It is a little bit more integrated into the community, which I like. And offering programs and outreach and stuff. It's a little hard to give up on what you thought was the cozy, intimate atmosphere of what it used to be. But on the other hand, it's become its own world. And it used to be called a suitcase campus. And that meant that many, many, many students left every weekend because they had to go to UVA or Charlottesville or home for fun because it was such a dead town.

And it was 90% female. Around the time I started going there, there was only one piece of one dorm. When I started there that was all male, one wing of Ann Carter Lee, Ball Circle, and Ball

dorm. I also objected to the fact that as soon as it was 10% male, they started referring to the women as co eds. I said, 'co-ed? No, it's the guys who are the co-eds.' I mean, wait a second. 'How come half the people running for office are the male students?' Just like that.

But it's been fun to be tangential, to have it that close for so long and on good terms with a lot of the professors, although they're really old and they're dying. I'm old and they're just older. Old, older than me. But it's a cool school. It's doing all right. Certainly. It's surviving. It's like how many things have to change to survive. Yeah. And we did field an ultimate team. Very proudly represented our school for a little while before we moved it off campus, too. Just because we've only got three students left on the ultimate team. It's really not the college team anymore. But at the very first scrimmage that we went to with other teams in '78 as a warm up for the first April Fools ultimate tournament, which has been going on forever.

Three carloads of us went down to UVA and played against the UVA team and a team from DC. And it was ugly, rainy, muddy, um, but huge fun. And in between games, somebody said, 'so where's your team from?' I said, 'Mary Washington College.' They said, 'oh, don't you mean Martha Washington?' 'No, our school's named after George Washington's mother.' And it made me go, 'why hadn't I ever thought about that before?' And then as we went out, as we went out to play the next game, somebody said, we're playing The Mothers next.

There it is. Thank you, lord. We needed a name. And ultimate teams are a lot like garage bands. Every three years, they have a new name, new people. The Mothers still exist as The Mothers and still pretty bad. Our motto was born to lose. 'Ave Imperator, morituri te salutant,' we had on

our flag. 'We who are about to die, salute you,' but usually get the Spirit of the Game award. Yeah, very, very happy to have had that. Also, last, I still know a lot of the people on the team, including Larry Hinkle, who teaches up at the college, now teaches ukulele construction. So The Mothers has been a very good experience for me and a lot of people. And we had the people who got really good and left, as opposed to the people who were pretty good and stayed. But they found happiness in winning more than in losing, I guess I can understand it.

MS: One last kind of tangent I'm trying to look at. Being a townie, what can you tell me about campus cruising?

HL: They blocked off that road. I don't think you can do it anymore. Oh, you mean from back when that was a thing?

MS: Yes.

HL: Yeah, well, when I worked for the city, we got told my crew and I to stop driving the city truck, which had no business on the road through the campus. It was hard to hide in a big orange truck loaded with concrete fixings on the back. Yes, it certainly was a thing. And I spent more time on a bicycle in the short time that I, once I was a student. I wasn't cruising anymore. But trying to blend in on a bicycle was a lot better than a hopped up Camaro. But yeah, people certainly did, which is why it was funny.

At one point someone said, 'you know, the guys who go to Mary Washington are getting stigmatized as being gay.' I said, 'how in the world does that make any sense?' And he said, 'I don't know, I just heard someone, 'oh, are you one of the gay guys from Mary Washington?'' 'If I am, it's my business. And so I won't even answer that. I'm not throwing anybody under the bus just so that you think different of me.' I was like, 'oh, what a good answer. I gotta remember that.'

MS: And to wrap it all up, what skills has the Frisbee in Virginia states and working with them, um, developing the team, what has that brought you in life?

HL: Pain, suffering, broken bones. No, it's a great network of friends. The tournament's wonderful. We have people coming in from California. There'll probably be a couple people from Hawaii this time. We've had a few international people come. We set up Shelter H and deliver lunches on Friday and breakfast and lunch Saturday and Sunday. And people come and mill about.

It's like watching a high school reunion or something, but every year, people come and play. There are some very good players at different things. But it helped me realize what really matters is the people, and not. It's an excuse to get together rather than. And there are people who definitely want to compete. They want to win this or that. And it's a venue for some people to set records. I'll keep talking while you do whatever you're doing. It's sort of a dying enterprise, the overall tournament.

At this point, you can go to a Frisbee golf tournament and win money. There are enough advertising dollars to be had by those people. It's not that they're professional golfers, but given the choice of coming here and winning \$40 and a cute plaque or going someplace where there's a \$10,000 purse to be split out, people organize their time differently if what they love is golf. And our tournament doesn't have ultimate, it usually comes two weeks after April Fool's tournament, which is held here, when, although we have been kicked out of it, I wasn't there, but my van was, and it was driving across the field, holding up The Mother's flag. And I said, 'you people, you have to leave. This is my hometown. Good. Go home.' So we have DDC, which is a fun game. And because that's not on ESPN, and it's not a big deal, there's no money in it.