

Interview with Dave Bartlett

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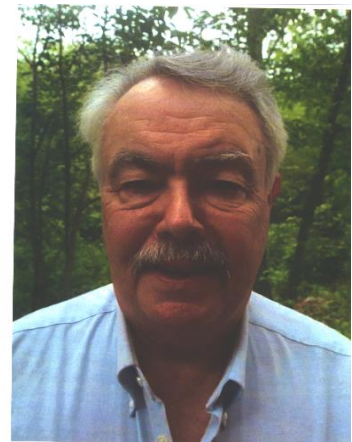
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Pogue: This is Philip Pogue. We're on the campus of South Suburban Community College. It's in South Holland, Illinois. We are going to be talking to Dave Bartlett about the history of Thornton Community College which was the predecessor of South Suburban. It is May 23rd, 2013. This is part of the Illinois Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Community College Project. Dave, thank you for being part of our project. Could you give us some background about yourself?

Bartlett: Okay, I was born in Peoria in 1939. I grew up in Allentown, Illinois, a small community between Peoria and Bloomington. I graduated from Deer Creek Mackinaw High School in '57. Like most students, I was steered into math and science and when I graduated from high school I took an apprenticeship at Caterpillar Tractor Company. I worked there for a few months until the first Eisenhower recession got me. Then I went next door and got a job with ABC. I worked there for a few months and again I was laid off. Could find no work. So I joined the Army. I was sent to Fort Leonard Wood for drafting school and from there I was sent to Frankfort, Germany, where I spent the rest of my Army time. I worked as a draftsman in V Corps Headquarters in Frankfort.



While I was in the service, I took some college classes, especially in history and political science. The main reason I took the classes was to get out of guard duty. I surprised myself by getting an A in political science and so I felt maybe I could survive in college. When I got out of the Army, we were in the middle of the second Eisenhower recession. Again there's no work. Caterpillar had promised me a job after my service time, but they were already laid off past the four year seniority that I had accumulated. So I decided to go to college.

I went to Illinois State. There I came under the influence of Helen Cavanaugh who was an excellent historian. She was the closest thing to a drill sergeant that I've ever seen in education but she was demanding. She took me under her wing and I gained my historical background. I graduated in '64 and took a job at Washington High School teaching high school and went to school summers and nights and finished up my Master's degree.

Another influential person I had was E. A. Lichty who was Mr. Community College and who is instrumental in the master plan of '65. He taught me about "democracy's college" and how this was a place that I should go. Again, his name on my resume helped me get my job at Thornton Junior College. I signed on in '67 at Thornton Junior College and I've been here ever since. Retired in 2001, and I've been teaching courses until last summer and working on the Historical Walls Project.

While at South Suburban, I continued my education. In the early days they used to give teachers money for going to school in the summer. I had a grant to go to Roosevelt University where I studied under the famous sociologist St. Clair Drake in a program called The African American Experience where we were exposed to history, music, culture, and politics of the African American in the United States.

The next summer I was sent to Washington, D.C. to American University where we were in a program called The Urban Experience. Basically, we went to class in the morning and then visited different congressmen or senators or news media or community institutions in the D.C. area. That was during the period of [the war in] Vietnam and so if we wanted our dose of tear gas, all we had to do was go down to the Mall and experience that on weekends.¹

¹ During the Vietnam war there were many demonstrations opposing it. The police often had to use tear gas to disperse crowds when they became too unruly. [Ed.]

I took classes also in the early years at Purdue Calumet. Again they were excellent in history. Eventually when Illinois State started their VA [Veterans Administration] program, I started taking classes there. I loved taking classes but I never got around to writing a dissertation, so I did everything but the dissertation.

Probably the most important thing that ever happened to my career at South Suburban was Doctor Fonte in about 1991. A conversation we had led to his creation of a liaison. He called it a Cultural or History Liaison where I was to get involved and make contact with all the historical societies in the area and also maybe the state historical society, and basically be his liaison to the groups. You know he felt that he needed to focus on the business community but he was also interested in history and the culture of the community and he wanted me to be his liaison. Also out of that came our Historical Walls Project where we dedicated a historical wall to every community in the college district. Our first one was Harvey in '92. We were a year late in getting to their centennial, but again, that was our first wall. Then we basically did about a wall a year since then. So we have a wall dedicated to every community in the college district and I think that is what makes South Suburban rather unique.

Pogue: And tied to that question on the historic wall, when you have it for each district, what is included in there?

Bartlett: Everything we can find. We like to find horses. If the community goes back that far, we like to have pictures of horses. Pictures of early cars, motorcycles. One of my favorite ones is a motorcycle policeman in Dixmoor who was patrolling Sibley Boulevard when it was a dirt road and pursuing people on his motorcycle. We have pictures of politicians. One thing I like to do is show the connection between the college and the community. So whenever possible, I include people who were students at the college, sometimes using their college yearbook photograph on the wall. We have ads, political ads, and memorabilia. We try to get a city seal or something. In some cases the community doesn't have a city seal so we had a contest where the art students created a seal for them which was then approved by the village. I like to focus on policemen and firemen who have died in the line of duty. So our walls are sometimes a memorial to those who have fallen. Military. We have a member of East Hazel Crest American Legion Post and so for the East Hazel Crest wall we have a whole collage of veterans from East Hazel Crest. Probably the outstanding feature of East Hazel Crest Wall is the completeness of our memorial to veterans.

Pogue: You also talked about E.A. Lichty...

Bartlett: E. A. right, Lichty.

Pogue: About "democratic college." What was he talking about?

Bartlett: That community college is a place where students can get a second chance. So a lot of us weren't that great of students in high school. We thought more about girls than academics. Some people could not get into a regular college but as they mature, they realize the importance of education, and the community college is a place where you can go. So E. A. Lichty's classes taught me about the nature of the community college student. The average age was going to be higher. They'd be more mature and at the same time you're going to have the typical college student fresh out of high school. So you have to deal with a rather diverse student body. But the basic message that Lichty had was, this was a place where students could get a second chance. They might have flunked out before, but the community college would take them in and with their maturity they could go on to achieve.

One of the programs that the college had years ago...Bob Marshall was a counselor and eventually became head of the counselling department. Then he was even president of the college for a period of time. He developed a returning adults program where he brought in students, adults who had not finished their high school degrees. Got their GEDs and got them started in college. Again some of my best students were those returning adults. People who were happy for a second chance and the fact that the community college was a place where they could get that chance. They couldn't get it at the U of I [University of Illinois] or any other college, but at a community college they could get a second chance.

Pogue: Well as far as South Suburban, how did it come about, because you had Thornton Junior College start in 1927?

Bartlett: Correct. Again the first community college in the country was of course Joliet in 1901. So you had a movement out of the University of Chicago led by President Harper who felt that the high schools, the better high schools, could handle the job of teaching undergraduates, especially the first two years. They would leave that basic education to the high schools in a fifth and a sixth year and then students could transfer to places like the University of Chicago and pursue their major. Again the movement developed slowly. Chicago I believe was the first one to develop, but in 1927 Thornton was the second one. Superintendent McVey was instrumental in convincing the public that our students should be given this local opportunity for education. Again Thornton High School was the leading high school in the area in the '20s and it was just natural then that a community or a junior college would develop out of that.

Pogue: As far as the major events for Thornton, what were they?

Bartlett: Well, we had a history of labor conflict. So when I came in '67, I was a member of the IEA [Illinois Education Association]. I tried to get our faculty to join the IEA and they basically thought that was for high school people. We had a big happy family here and there was no reason for any type of outside organization. They felt their faculty senate was perfectly capable of handling

things. And so then we had President Dalby come in. President Dalby is really the founder of our union. He came in with a military background and decided that he really didn't need faculty input. We'd been basically a liberal arts type college where the faculty ran everything and the administration just took care of the details. A lot of faculty did not like this loss of power and so it was the senior faculty then who dashed out and joined the most militant organization they could find. If the Teamsters had been organizing college teachers, they would have joined the Teamsters. But the AFL-CIO was the one they picked up.

The AFL-CIO was Local 1600 and was busy in Chicago. They were confronting the administration there and so our faculty then decided that this was the group to stand up to President Dalby. As a result, we soon had a strike. In that strike the basic result was that the president was fired. He wasn't fired immediately. He was allowed to serve out his term, but the direction of the school was put into Byron Keyes's hands.

President Dalby was sent to the empty shell of the new campus which was being built in South Holland to direct the construction. We had four strikes in ten years, the last one lasting six and half weeks made community college history. Again that fourth strike... No one wins in a strike. You just lose less. Again the result was the president was released. Since then we've had labor peace. President Fonte came in and we had a different board of directors. Eventually Frank Zuccarelli became board chair. Frank I first met in our first strike in '75 when the Vets' Club came out and supported the faculty. Again, between Zuccarelli and Fonte, they basically operated on respect for the faculty. They were hard negotiators. I was on the negotiating team a number of times, but they were fair. We always knew that we were being treated with respect and fairness and that we were being compensated to the ability of the district. Since then there's been labor peace Again, I think it's due to the more enlightened administration and the better direction from the board.

Pogue: As far as the tuition, how did that work for the college?

Bartlett: Well, originally it was free. I think after ten years or so it was free for students in district. One thing about Thornton Junior College, it attracted students from the entire area. When you go back into the old yearbooks, you'll see many communities, including communities that are now in other college districts, especially Chicago Heights. A lot of students were coming from that area in the early years, and from Blue Island, and even from Chicago even though Chicago had a system. And we were getting southern Illinois. So eventually they started modest tuition increases and eventually it rose over the years. With the master plan of '65, the state was to provide a third of the cost, the taxpayers a third, and the student tuition would be a third. Over the years the states has reneged upon their part. We have had difficulty in passing referendum. In fact, after the original referendum established the college, we

were not able to pass a referendum. And so the tuition has had to increase to cover that fact.

Pogue: Now you started at the college when it was at Thornton.

Bartlett: Correct, right. We were in the high school.

Pogue: Physically was that handled where you had nine through fourteen grades?

Bartlett: Yes. Physically we were separated from the high school. During the Second World War they built some temporary buildings. One was a Quonset hut² and the other sort of like a barracks building called Annex B and Annex C. Then they brought in some mobile units. So we were north of the high school but the library was in the third floor of the high school and the faculty lounge and our mail room was on the third floor. There were a few classrooms on the third floor but most of us were north of the building in the Quonset huts or the temporary buildings.

Pogue: Were there any conflicts by having high school and college students together?

Bartlett: The main conflict in the early years was racial. Every spring the first good day of spring the black and white students would decide they couldn't get along. They would start the fight which would spill out onto Broadway in front of the school. The police would be called and then the black and white students who'd been fighting with each other would unite against the police. The police would chase them north into the college area and again the college students would sometimes get agitated. So that caused us some problems. But after two straight years of Spring riots, the college decided to prematurely move to South Holland. It'd already acquired the land and they decided to build temporary buildings along State Street and west of State Street along Route 6. So they had twenty-one wooden barracks-type buildings where we moved, I believe, in 1971. '70 or '71. Then the main building was being built and I was one of the first faculty members to move into the new building.

Pogue: How did the various wars impact the community college?

Bartlett: Well, during the Second World War a lot of the men were drafted or busy working overtime in the local industry. So the population was heavily female, and some programs were diminished during that period. They did start an aviation program that developed during that time period. The Vietnam War I'm most familiar with. Basically we were getting a lot of returning veterans. There was an active anti-war movement on campus. They often met in Harlan Park just north of the college and had rallies there. They were peaceful rallies,

² Quonset huts were ubiquitous in WWII as temporary shelters for many uses. A cross section of one is a half circle, a metal roof with wide corrugation, quickly available and easily erected. Many continued to be useful long after the war. At the time of this interview, there is one on South Chatham Road; it was originally part of the original Springfield, IL. Airport. It has served many businesses since then. [Ed.]

but again, the war was on their minds. Of course, the students that had not been in the service yet, male students, were very good students because they were afraid that if they didn't keep their grades up, they would be drafted.

Pogue: The Community College Act of '65 that you talked about earlier, how did it impact Thornton?

Bartlett: Well, it led to the division of the college from the high school. So before that time the college and the high school were controlled by the same board. The superintendent was also the president of the college. President Logsdon then reacted to the law by seeing that this was implemented. Then since his loyalties were divided, he didn't know whether to go with the college or the high school. So he retired to Florida where he was then teaching at a university in Florida. But it was his wisdom to see that the college be much better off separated from the high school. Again, the master plan gave financial inducements for colleges to separate and become independent.

Pogue: The issue of sports: How did that involve Thornton and then Suburban?

Bartlett: Well starting with the early days I believe they had basketball and when I came, there was a rather active golf program and a very active P.E. [Physical Education] program. We still have very good basketball teams, both male and female, that do quite well. Football has been abolished and over the years they've tried to introduce soccer periodically. But probably what hurt the most was the deemphasizing of P.E. For some reason they decided that P.E. was not really necessary and so some of the P.E. coaches were then reassigned, teaching academic subjects. No one was laid off or fired but definitely the emphasis upon physical activity was reduced. Again, you know physical activity and education is important. At one time under Martha Wetzel we had the largest weight training program for women in the country. Martha Wetzel developed that program basically at the request of the nursing department. That nurses found that they were suffering injuries as a result of having to lift heavy patients. Martha's role then was to teach these students how to lift properly so that they wouldn't ruin their backs in trying to help a patient. She was one of the characters of the college. She was a person that the administration was afraid of. She ran her P.E. classes with discipline, but she gave the students what they needed to protect their backs and their longevity as nurses, basically open to all women.

In '77 I had a motorcycle accident and my leg was broken in three places. Martha Wetzel came to the hospital and showed me how to use my cast as a weight so my leg would not atrophy. Then when I came back to work, as soon as I was able she insisted that I come over and work out with one of her classes. I did. I got my leg back by working out in the women's weight training class. Again Martha was one of the pearls of this institution. She claimed the reason I didn't limp was because I'd taken her weight training advice.

Pogue: Going to this transition from the original campus at Thornton High School to South Holland, was there any controversy moving it from one community to another?

Bartlett: Not that I know of. As I said, from my perspective the main reason was to avoid the problems they were having in Harvey being that close to the high school where the high school students being less mature were more inclined to enjoy a riot. Again, we had already purchased the property. The plans were in process for building the new building. We just moved prematurely earlier than was anticipated to avoid the problems at the high school.

Pogue: And then from the time that the move was made in 1971, '72 to '88, was this still named Thornton Community or Junior College?

Bartlett: Well, originally when I started, it was Thornton Junior College. Then I believe, (I'm not sure of the dates now but they're in the records here) we changed from Thornton Junior College to Community College. Then later on under President Dalby, he decided that because we were being confused with Thornton High School and Thornton South and all these other schools that we should have our own name. He suggested South Suburban College. The board agreed with him and approved it. Earlier than that President Dalby had suggested changing the name. He was suggesting Bremen since Bremen Township had joined Thornton Township. He thought Bremen would have been a classy liberal arts sounding name for this college. Of course he did not survive the strike of '75 and so that idea was dead. When President Fonte suggested changing the name, I reminded him that the last President who tried to change the name was no longer with us.

Pogue: How many square miles would be in South Suburban then?

Bartlett: Pat has prepared that figure for me but I...

Pogue: Well let me jump and ask this question. What school districts now make up South Suburban?

Bartlett: Well 205 was the basis and then they added the Bremen and the Thornton Sectional System. Thornton and Bremen Townships are the basis for the college now.

Pogue: And as far as enrollment goes, how has that changed over the years?

Bartlett: Well starting small to growing to what we have now, about 16,000 full-time enrollment. So it's increased over the years.

Pogue: As far as this particular site goes, what buildings make up this campus?

Bartlett: Well we have the main campus now which is on State Street. The original design had a gym going out toward State Street with a swimming pool. As the

main building was completed, some people thought perhaps it's a little extravagant having a swimming pool for a community college. We could use the high school swimming pool if we needed to. Also, I think in the original plan there was a plan for a racquetball court. Some people thought that was just going to be a country club for the faculty and so that part of the building was never completed. Instead they built a separate building a few hundred yards away from the college which is a gym. It doesn't match the style of the original building but it serves its purpose. Also, under President Fonte, was developed a western campus which opened in '92. It's right along I-57. It's called UCC College I think. I forget the exact name. But anyway, University and College Center. They rent out space to many of the other colleges. So a student can come and get their first two years here with us and then their last two years they can be taking courses from Loyola and DePaul and other schools. Also of course, being a two year college, our emphasis is in preparing students to transfer.

Pogue: What type of programs are available currently at the college?

Bartlett: Okay, there's a lot of different ones: court reporting, medical assistant, medical records, associate degree in nursing, occupational therapy, paralegal, pharmacy technician, substance abuse. There are many programs. With the arrangements we have, when a student wants a program that we don't have, they can go to neighboring colleges if they have the program and take the program and pay them just the same tuition that they would pay at South Suburban. And again students from other schools can come here, take our programs.

Pogue: As far as the demographic now of the college, could you describe that?

Bartlett: Well it's changed over the years. Now I believe it's maybe fifty-seven percent black, twenty five percent white, seven percent Latino. The college ratio composition has changed. What hasn't changed is the nature of the student. We've always attracted students who were a first generation college student, primarily from working class families. Again, that hasn't changed. Probably as the area has declined economically, we have more students who are suffering from poverty and are in need of financial aid. Again, we have a very active South Suburban College Foundation which raises money for providing scholarships for these students. I have great admiration for what the foundation has been doing to help our students who do need the help.

Pogue: When you started, you talked about the tuition being free and now with the state funding for community colleges being really slashed, that leaves only the property tax and the tuition. You indicated that the referendums are difficult to pass. That leaves you tuition.

Bartlett: That's right.

Pogue: Then you talked about the fact that a lot of students are coming with economic challenges themselves. The state also has really hit the MAP [Monetary Award Program] funding with a major decline. So how are the students able to finance their tuition?

Bartlett: Again, like many community colleges, most of our students work. Some are working on campus. There's always been an effort to place them. UPS [United Parcel Service] comes here to recruit and so there are a lot of community businesses that hire our students part time.

Pogue: As to the community needs from the college, what are they?

Bartlett: One thing they need is of course a low-cost place for their students to go. Again, the college has been able to fulfill that function. The average age is twenty-nine and many of them cannot go off to a university or college out of the area. So again they can get their first two years here. Then Governors State is close by and they can do the last two years at Governors State. Governors State is now even offering some masters programs and some doctorate programs. South Suburban has been a feeder for our older students. Again, Governors State is the place to go. For some of the younger students then they may go off to Illinois State U or Northern [Illinois] or Western [Illinois] or Southern [Illinois] or to private schools. So we've had students who have gone on to the University of Chicago and Harvard. I think the college does provide that.

Also it works with local businesses, trying to come up with programs that are going to help the businesses. One of the things that was set up by the Master Plan was that it did not necessarily have to be a liberal arts education. It could be more directed toward getting a job and an occupation. I know some of the older faculty members back in the '60s were quite upset with that switch from a liberal arts emphasis—which the college had been up until the sixties—to this technical training. But definitely, the technical training meets the needs of our local businesses.

Pogue: As to state and federal laws that are impacting the community college here, what are a few that are significant?

Bartlett: The most significant ones are the ones that deal with money. That's always the case. But the Civil Rights Legislation. The college has never had a problem with that. They've been a place where blacks and Hispanics and Asians... At one time we were attracting a large group of—I guess they'd be called Arab—but they were coming out of Chicago and they found that South Suburban was a more compatible place for them than the city colleges of Chicago. I don't know what the reason was, but we did have a large Middle Eastern group here at one time during the '70s.

Pogue: Now that South Suburban is an independent community college (not part of the high school), how does it work with partnering with the high schools that are in this district?

Bartlett: Well, we still encourage the high schools to send us their students. In some cases we have students coming here; they're still in high school but they're allowed to come here and take courses from the college. For a high school junior they're given a free class or something to take, you know. Often they come in the summertime. Take a class free from the college to get them sort of thinking of coming to South Suburban.

Pogue: The issues, or the biggest challenges right now for South Suburban. What would they be?

Bartlett: Again, it's money. (laughs) It's always money. The declining state funding and just meeting the needs of a changing economy. A declining locally. So the college has done remarkably well considering the obstacles that we've faced. Again, we've had a board that has been frugal. At the same time funding: many programs are expensive—that's always a problem—that certain fields require a lot of money for the number of students that are served. But again, this is an administrative problem that the administration has to deal with: how to get the maximum amount of good out of a limited budget.

Pogue: As we talk to community colleges, sometimes they offer programs because of unique industry in their area. For example, a community college district may house a lot of prisons, so they're working with even inmates as well as training for work in the prison system. Others may have a certain type of industry like a General Tire or some other kind of company. Does that have an impact here at South Suburban?

Bartlett: Not that I know especially. We have had a good relationship with a lot of the business community. If you notice in the atrium, that fountain there goes back to the Thornton Quarry Material Services. President Fonte was very good at getting businesses to show their support of their college. What he did with Material Services was, he asked them for a fountain which is in that atrium. That atrium used to be an open air atrium and he put a roof over it and had quarry stone in a very attractive fountain. That stone goes back four hundred million years. The Thornton Quarry is just a couple miles south of us as it crosses I-80; I-80 bisects that quarry.

I was just down there at the bottom of that quarry just this week. The waste disposal, or what do you call it? Water reclamation. There's a deep tunnel. We visited the deep tunnel in Chicago on 130th Street and then came out to the Thornton Quarry. Went down into the bottom of the quarry and we could see the tunnels that they are preparing. So eventually the flood waters from the southern part of the city [Chicago] and the south suburbs will flow into the Thornton Quarry. Rather than releasing the water into the lake as we

do now when you have a terrible storm, the water will be sent into the quarry and then it will be processed as time goes by. But rather than coming up in the basements, it's going to end up in the quarry. That is scheduled to be completed in 2015. In fact, there's a shaft right out in front of the college that goes down into that deep tunnel. That was constructed a number of years ago.

Pogue: As we kind of conclude our interview, what is the mission of South Suburban?

Bartlett: Basically to provide an education for students beyond high school, whether it be a liberal arts approach or a more technical job-oriented approach. I think the college has done a great job of taking students from where they are and again trying to get them to their goals, whether it is to get a job or to go on to a university. Some of our best students are the students who are in their twenties and thirties, who have maybe flunked out of school or decided not to go to school, have families now, and they come back. Especially, I notice it with the nurses. The nurses don't have many electives to take but sometimes they would take a history class. They would be the best student because they are in a rigorous program where they have to pass their state board. They're used to working hard and so they don't treat history any differently from a nursing course. They come in and they work to the maximum of their capacity. I think the college has always done a very good job. The figures that I've seen is that when our students transfer to another school, their grade point average does not drop. In some cases they are better than the native students at that junior year. They've always tried to prepare the student to go on to a four year college or a more technical approach.

Pogue: Our last question ties with you personally. You were influenced at Illinois State on this idea of a democratic kind of college and being motivated with some people you felt were mentors to you. What has been your experience then, working so many years at both Thornton and now South Suburban?

Bartlett: I've had a good career. Good students. A good and bad administration. We ran out the bad. Just kept the good. Very good board. I found, you know, what Lichty said was correct, that this was "democracy's college." This is the place where you can make a difference. I taught in high school. In many ways I enjoyed teaching high school better than college because in college the students were too serious. High school, they were trying to make you laugh and keep you from teaching. Your biggest problem was keeping a straight face. In the college, one of my early years I found the students too serious and that they were there to learn and not to be entertained. But overall I'm very thankful for the basis that Doctor Cavanaugh gave me and that Doctor Lichty gave me. Their names on my credentials got me in here because they were known by our college. They gave me my foot in the door and I stayed ever since.

Pogue: Well the last question then ties to this theme. Where do you think South Suburban will be in the next decade?

Bartlett: I think it'll continue the way it's going. I know Don Manning, the present president, is struggling with maintaining standards at a time when some students are not prepared for college. You've always had this remedial. The reading program is focused on making sure the students are able to read and comprehend. I see a continuation of this. I know that they're struggling with the nursing program right now and they're addressing it. Again, the health field to me is sort of an unending place and again, our students need to be given what they need to survive in that changing environment. The problem is that some of these areas are so expensive to run.

Sometimes those of us in the liberal arts felt we were being short changed in resources because the money seemed to be going to the more expensive programs. We still couldn't get MAPS when we needed MAPS. The expensive programs had all the high tech stuff. The college is going to survive, again, with the attitude of the board of respecting the faculty and giving the faculty freedom to do what they see is professionally... You know, give them a free hand professionally and things worked out.

I've been happy with the way the college has treated me and especially with my role as historical liaison. Then that evolved into what they call the College Historian. I'll show you around the walls. Again, that's one of my achievements. That's expensive. President Fonte when he started, said, "We'll do one a semester." So we did one which was fairly cheap because we didn't know what we were doing, you know; we had a lot of the stuff already. So the second one, Tinley Park, was where we did it the right way. We started matting and framing. After Tinley Park, he said to me, "You've got to slow down. I can't afford it. This is coming out of the president's budget." The Wall Project comes out of the president's budget. Some presidents haven't liked that, but President Fonte believed in history and showing your connection to the community. Under President Marshall he had me put it through the board so that the next generation of presidents would be bound by the board decision to support these walls. I found that it was very good because it wasn't just what I was teaching in the classroom.

One of the first things I would do in the class was find out where the students were from. Then as we went through history, especially later American History, I could point out things in their communities that are still there or they may have heard of. But I try to relate it to each community by focusing on the students. Of course, then the students would bring me information on their communities and their families which I could then, in some cases, incorporate into the walls. I used the walls as a teaching tool. When we got to a community, I could point out to them that such and such a thing was on there.

During the depression,³ there's a lot of evidence of the depression still here. If you go into the village of Thornton, the concrete posts for naming the streets are still there. In the Forest Reserve there's remnants of the old CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] Camp which was later a prisoner of war camp and after that a Girl Scout Camp. The students would often bring me pictures and things of their history. I just find that the administration... Again, President Fonte is one of the characters here I think really shaped the college. His idea was, you have a new building and it's rather barren and we need to have places where it's more identifiable. So these historical walls would also be landmarks for getting around the college.

Another person that we haven't mentioned is Cleland Cofer, "Ma" Cofer. When you go down to the student center, "Ma" Cofer's picture is there. "Ma" Cofer was here for maybe nine or ten years. She was probably the poorest paid person on the staff and probably the most influential. "Ma" Cofer was a little black woman who was maybe five feet tall, but she ran the student center with an iron fist. The students wouldn't talk back to her. They'd say, "Yes, Ma." I'd go over to the student center before class and I'd say, "Ma, it's time for my history class." She'd go over to the pinochle table and my students would be there. She'd take the deck of cards. She says, "Get to class." (laughs) They would go. She had a tremendous... She was sort of the symbol of the college, you know. This was her home. You take care of the student center like your home. It's not to be abused. And so when they messed it up, she'd lock the doors and they cleaned it up. Which would happen sometimes, when they would get too excited or celebrating something or other; they would make a mess and "Ma" would make them clean it up.

When she died—she died prematurely—then the students wanted to do something. I think Frank Zuccarelli might have been student president at the time. I'm not sure what his position was, but they went to the board and they said, "We would like the student center named for 'Ma' Cofer." The board says, "No. We have a policy. You have to be nationally known to have any part of the building named for you, like Al Kindig⁴ or someone like that." Frank Zuccarelli says, "Well 'Ma' Cofer knew every student here. Our students are all over the country. Therefore 'Ma' Cofer is nationally known." The board then authorized a portrait that was painted for her. The student center is still named after her. There were many characters here but she was one of the key ones. She helped the faculty by getting the students in the right frame of mind, you know. They were here to study not to play pinochle. She was just good for the college. Like I said, she was the poorest paid person here, but she was the most influential. Even the president called her "Ma".

³ Probably referring to the "Great Depression" which followed the severe crash of the stock market in late 1929, lasting through most of the 1930's up to WWII.

⁴ Music Educator, Performing Arts Center

Pogue: Well thank you very much, Dave, for giving us an in-depth look at, first Thornton Community College, and then it's now named South Suburban. I appreciate all that and your work for those years with the community college system.

Bartlett: Okay.

(end of interview)