

Richard Perkins Interview #9

6/7/2013

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Notes

The archival original of this interview is in two parts. For ease of use by researchers, the two parts have been edited into one video file and subsequently one audio file and one transcript. This transcript has also been lightly edited by TCC Archivist A.J. Demeter to match the style of the others from this project and to remedy name spelling, misheard/missing words, and other minor corrections, 12/2024.

Content Note

This interview contains use of an outdated and now considered offensive word for developmental disabilities on pages 19 and 22, describes abuse and neglect in a care facility with a mention of sexual assault on page 22.

Summary

In this interview with original biology faculty member Richard Perkins, he discusses his work with various students throughout his career at Mount Tahoma High School, TCC, McNeil Island Federal Penitentiary, the Puyallup reservation college, and teaching on a Fulbright Exchange in England. He describes the development of his teaching philosophy, including his move away from midterms and final exams, the importance of biology education as a way of understanding life and all forms of life. In particular, he describes the various projects students voted on and designed throughout the years in his class for non-majors, "Contemporary Biological Problems," including ecological preservation of China Lake and Snake Lake, the creation of a campus recycling program, working with developmentally disabled students at the Rainier School in Buckley (WA), and building the campus nature trail. He briefly touches on other pieces of TCC history including the early days, Black student activism in the sixties, and the 1973 faculty strike.

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Interview

INTERVIEWER RACHEL PAYNE: Would you please say and spell your name?

RICHARD PERKINS: Richard Perkins. R-I-C-H-A-R-D P-E-R-K-I-N-S.

INTERVIEWER: And when did you first get involved with TCC and in what role?

00:00:14

PERKINS: I was contacted in 1963 or '64, and asked if I would work on setting up the biology department at TCC. And do the ordering for the microscopes and the equipment that we would need, at the TCC science building.

INTERVIEWER: So who contacted you?

00:00:43

PERKINS: Well I think it was Tom Ford, but I'm not sure, it was somebody from the central school district. I was teaching at Mount Tahoma High School at the time, and so then when it came time to actually do the hiring, I was there, I had my master's degree, and was asked if I would take the job as the initial biology teacher at TCC when it first opened in 1965.

INTERVIEWER: So you started out as a faculty, or did you also have an administrative role?

00:01:29

PERKINS: No, well, since I was the only department person there, I was the department chairman as well, teaching biology.

INTERVIEWER: And can you describe the climate in our country when TCC was founded?

00:01:45

PERKINS: In general there was a lot of social unrest. The Black population, there was a lot of unrest when we first opened. And proceeded on into '67, '68.

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk a little bit about how the community college system came to be established at that time? Why was it during the mid-sixties did they decide they needed to establish a community college system?

00:02:21

PERKINS: I think that Tacoma School District was looking for a way to expand their programs. They had the vocational school, Bates Vocational School, connected with the school district. And I think they wanted to provide an educational opportunity for the students in this area, without having to go to the University of Washington to get their first two years of education.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And so it was started by the Tacoma Schools?

PERKINS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: And then at what point was it taken over by the state?

00:02:57

PERKINS: I think it was 1967, when the state separated it from the Tacoma School District, '67, '68.

INTERVIEWER: So how did that go?

00:03:09

PERKINS: Actually from our standpoint, here, it went very smoothly. I think that Tacoma School District was a bit unhappy with the loss of, almost like a right arm. But, but we still worked very closely with the school district, and with Bates. So, even though said we were under the state, we still had a close relationship.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you. So why did you decide to come to TCC, instead of staying at Mount Tahoma, for instance?

00:03:47

PERKINS: Number one is, I really believe in the community college system. I felt that I could offer something to the community. And would have more freedom in education than I had teaching at the high school level, even though I had a great position there. I was three years at Mount Tahoma just after it opened.

INTERVIEWER: And what was the mission of the college at the time that it opened?

00:04:23

PERKINS: I can tell you that the first building built on this campus, in the center of the campus, was the library. Our whole philosophy was, we wanted to provide education here. The student center came later on, that was not going to be the hub. Sports was not going to be the hub. A

viable, two-year program, which could be transferred to any other university or college, was the primary goal here.

INTERVIEWER: And so how long did you stay at the college?

00:05:03

PERKINS: 25 years until I retired in 1991. I had a total of thirty years of teaching, and felt that it was time for some young individuals to come in and for me to retire.

INTERVIEWER: So what was your next step? Did you teach part-time for a while? Or did you just quit cold turkey--

00:05:25

PERKINS: No, I did not teach here. I did teach at the Indian college, with the Puyallup Indians for a short time. But I also started a couple other private businesses, that I still am involved with to this day.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And so, can you talk a little bit about the campus as it is now and what's changed at the college?

00:05:55

PERKINS: It'd be easier to talk about what hasn't changed than what has changed.

INTERVIEWER: Go ahead.

PERKINS: When I first started here the science building, for example, wasn't even completed. I had to teach laboratories at night at Hunt Junior High School, for the first year. Our offices were portables down on the corner of 19th and Mildred. The whole structure the campus was very different. And we were very limited in the number of students we had at the time. And we had total room for all of them at that time, and then it grew.

INTERVIEWER: How many students did we start out with?

00:06:50

PERKINS: I'm sorry, I can't give you that figure. I can tell you there were 25 of us though, on the initial staff and faculty, and administrative staff.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Alright so now we're going to start getting to your individual questions. And again, some of them will be a little bit repetitive, but you know, if you can just talk for the camera here. So you were a biology instructor, it says here you obtained a Bachelor of Science from University of Puget Sound (UPS), is that right?

PERKINS: Correct.

INTERVIEWER: And you started at TCC in 1965--

PERKINS: I also completed a master's degree at UPS. Master of Science at UPS.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, okay. So let's see here.

PERKINS: With both majors in biology and education. So... And I felt that that was very important, to have an education degree at the college level. Not just coming and doing research.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. So, are you local to Tacoma, did you go to high school here yourself?

00:08:04

PERKINS: Yes, I have lived in Tacoma since I was about eight years old. That was 71 years ago. I went to Washington Elementary, Mason, Stadium. And so, other than the time I spent in the army and the year I spent in England, I have been in Tacoma. I can tell you, there were two things, when I graduated with teaching degree, that I did not want. One was to teach in Tacoma. The other was to teach junior high school. My first job was Hunt Junior High School in Tacoma. And had no regrets.

INTERVIEWER: [Laughs] Okay. So when did you join the army?

00:08:50

PERKINS: After one year at the University of Washington, the Korean War was on, I had gone to college on someone else's motivation, not mine. They suggested I do something that I wanted to do. That wasn't an option during the Korean War, I was going to be drafted so I enlisted for three years and became a laboratory technician. So I got a science background there.

INTERVIEWER: Did you go overseas?

00:09:20

PERKINS: No. I went to a foreign country, I was stationed in Texas for a year and a half. But I was a laboratory technician, and so when I got out of the army, I was able to work as a laboratory technician while I went to college.

INTERVIEWER: Is that how you became interested in science and biology?

PERKINS: Yes, yeah. Actually I've always been interested in science and biology, especially natural history type biology. But I also, because of my laboratory technician training, I taught microbiology here to nursing students. So it fit in beautifully.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And so, you say you've always been interested in science and biology. When did you first feel like you wanted to become a teacher?

00:10:22

PERKINS: Probably while I was still in college. A degree in biology and 50 cents allows you to get a cup of coffee at that time. And so I needed a vocation, and I had always been interested in sales and, and I felt that, to be a good teacher you have to be able to sell your subject.

INTERVIEWER: And so you said you started at Hunt Junior High in Tacoma. Why'd you decide to leave Hunt?

00:10:54

PERKINS: I was offered a job at the high school. Well, I have to say I left Hunt to go back to get my master's degree, for a year. And I was called by the individual who hired in the Tacoma district, and asked if I would take the job at Mount Tahoma, because it was one that just opened.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And what attracted you to TCC, this new college that really hadn't even really been opened yet?

PERKINS: It just looked like a great opportunity, to use my talents as a teacher and my background in biology, that I could expand more than I could in high school.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And so you arrived at the college basically as it was opening. So you were not only involved with the first year of instruction, but with actually setting things up is that right?

PERKINS: Correct, yes.

INTERVIEWER: So were you involved in like the design of the lab that you were going to use or anything like that?

PERKINS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Oh okay. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

00:12:02

PERKINS: Actually, it was pretty basic. I just wanted to make sure that there was room for the students to work in groups, small groups of four, tables. I wanted to make sure that there was preparation rooms. And the, I got chewed out a number of times for spending as much money as I did on microscopes, because I thought that was very important every student have their own microscope. And the president of the college reminded me often that I had spent a lot of money on microscopes.

INTERVIEWER: So how many students were you planning to have in a class? What would have been your class size in the beginning?

00:12:47

PERKINS: The laboratory I limited to just 24. I established a limit of about 75 in my lectures. Because, my philosophy in teaching was I wanted to know the names of every student, and I was a non-traditional teacher. I did not give midterms. I did not give finals. I gave quizzes because I wanted the students to understand *why* things happened. And understand biology, rather than memorize and regurgitate to get a grade.

INTERVIEWER: And so did that change at all? Did we stay with those small class sizes basically or did your class sizes get a little bit bigger through the years, or what happened?

PERKINS: No. I was able to limit it to 75 in the lecture hall. And again, 24, I designed the labs to handle 24 students, so we would have multiple, we would have four, three, or four different labs per class.

INTERVIEWER: And that's been one of the distinctive differences you might say between community college and say a University of Washington or one of the larger four-year schools. How do you feel that that effects instruction?

PERKINS: Well, number one, at the University of Washington my first year of chemistry, I was not Richard Perkins. I was number 453 in the lecture hall. In those days you didn't have to take a test. You could pay, we had individuals in the dorms you could pay to take the test for you,

because all they had to do was put down your seat number. And the instructor had no idea who was in the class, who took the test. I've vowed I would never do that in my teaching. That my door was always open to students. Instead of a final I had a conference with every student at the end of the quarter. They had to write a self-evaluation which I read while they were there. And I gave them my evaluation of what they had done.

INTERVIEWER: So what was it like to be a part of the very first group of faculty at TCC?

00:15:16

PERKINS: Absolutely wonderful! Exciting. We were a very unified group. We had some fantastic parties on the side. But we pulled together. We had great leadership with Tom Ford. And, it was just a really exciting time for all of us.

INTERVIEWER: What was the first class you taught TCC?

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PERKINS: I tried to specialize more in biology for non-majors, because most of the students that came here were not going to major in biology. They were interested in a science credit. So I tried to set up classes that would be for non-majors. And we had one class for majors. Small class. But most of it was for non-majors. And I expanded that to a program that I called "Contemporary Biological Sciences," where the students decided what areas they wanted to study. And they all had to do projects in there. We had some great projects! For example, we started a recycling program here on campus. Which the students started, and then turned over to the student government to run. I had two young women set up a map in Braille of the campus. They actually built Styrofoam buildings, so that a blind person could feel the shape of the building and the location of the building on campus. And so that was available for all blind students coming in on campus. Another project the students started was saving the nature area, which we now call China Lake, over on 19th Street. The students went to the Metro [Parks] district, made a presentation that they should buy it, and set it up as a nature center, which did happen.

INTERVIEWER: Are you talking about China Lake or Snake Lake?

PERKINS: I'm talking about China Lake, for that one. I was on the founding committee though that established Snake Lake, also. And I also was on the founding board of Northwest Trek. So I was very involved in the natural history of this area.

INTERVIEWER: So how did it happen that Metro Parks took over Northwest Trek, which was so far away from Tacoma?

00:18:00

PERKINS: It's in their district, number one. When we first started it, we were going to run it, as a board. In fact, one year I was chairman of the board. And we did administer the park, but because it's so far, it is a destination park. And we could only break even, we didn't have any extra money to do any advancing. So we then went to the Parks District and suggest that they tie it in with Point Defiance Zoo, which they did. They then took it over and have run it ever since.

INTERVIEWER: So was your relationship with Metro Parks, was that something that you also kind of used in the classroom? I mean did you take your students to Snake Lake, or China Lake, or Northwest Trek?

00:18:53

PERKINS: Regularly. We went on field trips. Like I was saying, we used to go to China Lake before it was taken over by the city. We did studies on the habitat there. And then we did regular field trips to Snake Lake when it first opened.

INTERVIEWER: How about our own campus, I mean, we really use a comparatively small percentage of the land that we have here. There's that what we call the "Back 40" in back. How did that come about?

00:19:24

PERKINS: Well, we started a, or we built a nature trail out behind the gymnasium. The students in the class got out, and we actually made a trail around. We then got an outfit that had chopped up trees, that brought in chips. The students then spread them over the trail. We had a nature trail right here. Dr.... not Russ Clark, I'll think of it... Paul [Jacobson], set up a community garden. And, our class then said, we would like to glean everything at the end of the growing season in September. So my students then went out and they dug up potatoes that were left, or carrots, or whatever, and turned it all over to the food banks in Tacoma.

INTERVIEWER: So then that trail, now, that circles the Back 40, that's the same one that you and your students set up?

PERKINS: Yep.

INTERVIEWER: Oh okay great. Alright. And so, you said that you had a separate class for biology majors, a smaller group, and then mostly you were focusing on the non-majors.

PERKINS: Correct.

INTERVIEWER: How did you set up that curriculum, how did that work?

00:20:58

PERKINS: Number one, I told my students I would not kill animals for them to cut them up. We were studying life. And so I would use live mice in the classroom rather than cutting up a dead frog. I didn't feel that dissection was necessary for non-majors. So a lot of the classes that I had instead of cutting up and dissecting, they mated a pair of mice that they had to take care of all quarter. We were able to do genetic studies on them. They did trapping. So it was a very good learning situation. We went on a lot of field trips. We used to go down to Point Defiance, along the waterfront, where they would collect organisms and so on.

INTERVIEWER: So you basically set your own curriculum or was there a committee that approved things or how did that work?

PERKINS: I pretty much had free hand. For the first few years.

INTERVIEWER: How about with the majors? Was that the same situation?

PERKINS: No. They had to be able to transfer into a majors program at a four-year school, and so was important that they had a very, very good background, and understanding. So we did more chemistry. They were expected to learn the chemistry, the biology. Also, anatomy, physiology.

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INTERVIEWER: So did you have some sort of articulation agreement with the University of Washington or the University of Puget Sound, right at the beginning, where if they took your biology courses they could use that as the first part of a biology major?

PERKINS: No. I knew what was required at the four-year schools, and so I based my curriculum on that.

INTERVIEWER: And at what point did the more formal arrangements start to come into play?

PERKINS: More formal what?

INTERVIEWER: So, now for instance, we have some pretty tight agreements with some of the other colleges. Like, if you take this particular biology class, this counts as a requirement toward

such and such program. You know, or for such and such pathway to a program at UW, or something like that.

PERKINS: I think that that was established by our students going to the school and finding that they fit in. For example my microbiology class, which was a 200 level class, transferred directly across as a 300 level class at the University of Washington. Because what I taught, they were teaching, and they felt that was sufficient. And, so, I think that, because of what we were providing, the schools just accepted it. There was no written, to my knowledge there was no written agreement.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have any discussions with your colleagues at these other four-year universities, or did some of your students come back and tell you this is working, or this is great, or something like that?

PERKINS: Well we got statistics back from these schools. And not being involved in administration, I was not directly involved in the communication, with the schools.

00:23:32

INTERVIEWER: What building was your first class located in?

PERKINS: The science building. Which is, I don't even, 12? Building 12 was the science building? I think...

INTERVIEWER: It's all changed [laughs].

PERKINS: It's all changed now! I noticed they're gutting the building. Gutting buildings and redoing them. But we had a little greenhouse, on the end of it. It was right next to the faculty building 9, that I was in. Like I said the first year the labs were not completed, so I would go over to Mount Tahoma at night, and offer labs over there. Or I mean, Hunt Junior High School.

INTERVIEWER: Were your microscopes there, in the Hunt lab?

PERKINS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: You keep them locked up or something?

PERKINS: Yeah, because I had made sure that there were microscopes there when I was teaching at Hunt Junior High School, a number of years before.

INTERVIEWER: Alright, how did the campus look when you first arrived? In terms of like the facilities in the landscaping, what did it look like back then?

00:25:43

PERKINS: New. Spread out. There was a lot of concern about the buildings being so far apart and separated from one another. That people said, well this is more like a California campus, rather than a Northwest.

INTERVIEWER: Right. I've actually noticed that looking at the old photos, that they were very far apart for the size they were, and the fact that there wasn't very much of anything in between them. Do you know why that decision was made?

PERKINS: I was not involved with that, the architect had free hand, I think. And I'm sure that Tom Ford, and some of the others from the city of Tacoma, administrative staff, were the ones that made that decision.

INTERVIEWER: And, so was there plenty of parking back then? Did people drive onto campus? Or, was there a bus depot here yet, or anything?

PERKINS: No. Heavens no. That didn't come until a lot later. There was parking, because we were small, there was plenty of parking.

INTERVIEWER: And so what would you say have been the biggest changes on the campus? You know, since the beginning?

00:27:03

PERKINS: Probably the number of students that are here, and the expansion of the buildings, such as the science building were in right now. And the new health building that's going in. And I think that shows progress, that they are keeping up with technology. As technology improves, the education should improve with it.

00:27:40

INTERVIEWER: What was the first permanent building that went up at TCC, and why is this significant?

PERKINS: I think was the library. And again, as I said before, the whole philosophy here was education. And, the campus grew around the library.

INTERVIEWER: And Pierce College went up around same time, what was the first building that went up there?

PERKINS: Student Union Building. They were more interested in attracting high school students. See, the average age of our students the first year was 27. We had mature students that came here, and they came for an education. When Pierce College opened they wanted to attract more of the kids that were interested in partying, and social life. That was not our philosophy the first year.

00:28:42

INTERVIEWER: And so, it sounds like biology was one of the original programs offered, what were some of the others that were the original programs of the college?

PERKINS: Chemistry, physics, geology. Dr. Jack Hyde taught geology the first year. And Paul Steadman taught chemistry the first year. And, Russ Clark taught physics. Russ Clark had been my physics teacher at Stadium High School, when I was a senior. He had just gotten out of the military, and started teaching when I first met him.

00:29:28

INTERVIEWER: I think you already answered, let's see... How have the course offerings and the programs developed over the last five decades?

PERKINS: By demand more than anything. And part of it came about because of instructors having a particular interest in a subject. For example, my wife and I used to teach a backpacking class here at night. Because this is a community college, not a university. And we tried to provide things that people in the community could use.

INTERVIEWER: Was the backpacking class, was that a credit class, or was that more like a continuing education class?

PERKINS: It was a continuing ed class.

INTERVIEWER: So we had continuing ed from the beginning, or?

PERKINS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: And who is in charge of that, originally?

PERKINS: Can't tell you, I don't know! I just said, this would be a neat thing to do, and so we set it up and ran it.

INTERVIEWER: So did you go on like overnight hikes or something?

PERKINS: We spent a major part of the quarter talking about backpacking and the equipment and so on. And then the last, at the end of the quarter, we took a weekend backpack trip. Either up in the Olympic Mountains or out at the ocean. It was a great experience for us and for the students.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, and it sounds like you've gone on a lot of field trips with your credit class students too.

PERKINS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Have some of those destinations changed over the years in Washington, or have most of them been protected by state park status, or something like that?

PERKINS: Well, we used to go up to the mountain that blew its top off.

INTERVIEWER: Mount St Helens?

PERKINS: Yeah. And that has changed significantly. But, most of the field trips were local, or we would take a back pack trip out, my ecology class, I would take out to the ocean, there was a trail, three miles out, three miles down the beach, then three miles back. We go out and spend one night, on a backpack trip. And where the students could experience nature, because... And that was national park. And, sometimes we would go up in the Olympic National Park on field trips.

00:32:15

INTERVIEWER: So, it sounds, would it be accurate to say that you taught mostly non-majors over the years, for biology, or has it been...?

PERKINS: Yes. Most of it was, the micro was for health majors, so that would be [inaudible]. I liked the non-major biology. And hired new people in here that took over those classes. The majors classes.

INTERVIEWER: So what do you think are the most important principles of biology for a non-major to understand?

PERKINS: Vocabulary.

INTERVIEWER: And why is that?

PERKINS: The first thing I would do in the class is say, does anybody here speak a foreign language? And I always had one, for example, someone who would say "I speak Spanish." So I

would say, say something to me in Spanish but do not use any Spanish vocabulary. They look at me like I was some kind of an idiot, and would finally say, "I can't." And I would say you're right. In order to communicate in Spanish you have to know Spanish vocabulary. And the name of this class is biology. In order for us to communicate, in biology, you've got to learn to speak biology. That's the only real requirement that I have in this class. Because with that, we can then understand biology. But if we can't speak it, there's no way we can understand it.

00:34:06

INTERVIEWER: And why do you feel biology is a critical part of a liberal arts-type or just general education?

PERKINS: Because we're all alive. We are biology. We're surrounded by biology. And it is absolutely essential that people have an understanding of life, and the process of life. And... the danger of destroying life. The number of birds, for example, that have become extinct. The number of organisms today that are becoming extinct because of the expansion of people. People need to understand about life.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, I mean, and planetary conditions have changed quite a bit even since you first started teaching. If you were sitting up in intro to biology class now would be different than the one you first started or would it be about the same?

PERKINS: For non-majors?

INTERVIEWER: Mhmm.

PERKINS: It wouldn't change. Talked about the same things then. We talk about population. And the problems created by expanding populations without controls. In the old days, populations were controlled by war, famine, and disease. Now, wars don't kill lots of people. Disease, we have all kinds of ways of protecting people from disease. People live much, much longer than they used to. So, we've lost a lot of the old population controls. Because of that, every population of organisms will grow until it reaches a point where can no longer be supported, and then will drop off. My philosophy was that people must understand that, and either we control our population or nature will do it for us.

00:36:16

INTERVIEWER: Okay. So, early on it sounds like there was a really heavy focus on academics at TCC. Did this change later when the technical programs came, or was there still a heavy focus on academics?

PERKINS: They still were, the academics were important. The basic foundation. For understanding and being able to communicate in the languages of technology. Doctors are doctors because they can speak doctor. Nurses are nurses because they can speak nurse. And, in order to do that, you have to have the fundamentals of education.

INTERVIEWER: And do you remember, why was it that the technical programs started being offered, I think it was in the early eighties, maybe?

PERKINS: Oh, we had them way before that.

INTERVIEWER: Why did they start offering technical programs when we had Bates and Clover Park already?

PERKINS: I guess I don't understand the question, because we had vocational programs here from the very beginning.

INTERVIEWER: Oh did we? What vocational programs to be having the beginning?

PERKINS: Well, early on, we had the nursing program, started here.

INTERVIEWER: What time did that start, you remember?

00:37:32

PERKINS: I can't tell you exactly. I know that in '67 I was teaching microbiology to nursing students at St Joe. And then they closed that program. They stopped offering the nursing program, the three-year nursing program at Tacoma General Hospital. And so shortly after that they started the program here. But... I think it is absolutely essential that we are able to combine general education with vocation. Because we don't spend 24 hours a day in our vocation. And so we must have some understanding of art, and music, and history, because of the other hours that we're not in our vocation. That's why I, since we retired, we travel regularly. And we travel to meet people and understand their culture. And their differences.

INTERVIEWER: So you don't feel the focus of even a community college should be just to get a job?

PERKINS: Absolutely not, no. It's to make a well-rounded individual, so that they have an appreciation of art, some appreciation of music. You might not like some forms of music, but one needs to understand that it does exist and that it has a place.

00:39:23

INTERVIEWER: So, you said that the student center wasn't built until later on. What was the student social life like when you first started, and how did it change through the years?

PERKINS: Most of our students, they came here, took their classes, and left. Like I said the average age was 27 years of age, in the early years. So that, they didn't come to this campus to socialize, they came here to get an education. That's the way I was, when I went back to school after the army, I was married, I had a full-time job, I was going to school, I didn't have time for social things. I get comments from the alumni thing from UPS, "What clubs did you belong to, and who did you know, and who were your friends there," I didn't have time for that. And a lot of the students that came here the first few years were exactly the same way.

INTERVIEWER: But it sounds like we did have, like for instance, the student newspaper right from the very beginning. How was that distributed, and how did that affect maybe like politics and stuff on campus?

PERKINS: I'm sorry, I can't tell you.

INTERVIEWER: You don't remember, okay.

PERKINS: No.

00:40:53

INTERVIEWER: That's fine. So, even if we didn't have necessarily official student groups right at the beginning, we did have some issues, you know, in the sixties—

PERKINS: Oh absolutely.

INTERVIEWER: --like the racial issues and stuff, can you speak to any of that? Did that affect instruction at all?

PERKINS: I don't know, you probably heard about our rock. It was painted nightly. And then repainted the next day. There was a lot of legitimate complaints about racial harassment. I think that we made big steps in hiring Blacks, more Blacks on campus. And tried to reduce the frictions. People have a great difficulty understanding anyone who is different than what they are. And accepting them. And as a biologist, I think that's important that they learn that we all are different. We all have personalities that are different, and we have to learn to accept someone who is different.

INTERVIEWER: Did those tensions sometimes carry over into the classrooms? Or was that something that happened mostly outside of class?

PERKINS: Mostly outside of class. I had a number of students from Saudi Arabia, one of my students was a Saudi prince. Who married a Saudi, and *she* came over to live over here, and was in my classes also. Got to be very good friends with them, and was invited to go to Saudi Arabia with them. And I spent a month in Saudi Arabia with them, which was a fantastic experience! And I think that people like Carl Brown, did a fantastic job in integrating, integration. And the program that we had for individuals that had to learn English as a second language. Spent a lot of time on that. And then, in the classroom we had to then deal with that also. I had to alter my program for the blind in biology. They could not see through a microscope. So we had to find ways for them to be able to visualize it without actually seeing it.

00:43:40

INTERVIEWER: So for students that did have special needs of that kind, did you separate classes or did you take an integrated approach?

PERKINS: They were all integrated. There were no separate, in biology anyway. No. I make sure that they were integrated right into the program. I had, one of my greatest students was a deaf gentleman, who was put at Rainier School at Buckley, for the mentally retarded. Until at age 5, about age 5 he was put out there, and was there until about 11, when someone all of a sudden decided this individual isn't retarded, he just can't hear. And he came, was my advisee, in my biology class. And he said Mr. Perkins, I did not earn my high school diploma, they put me in and just moved me through, I want to earn my degree here at TCC. Which he did. He majored in English, he went on to graduate with a Bachelor's degree in English. And married a deaf woman, had a child. And came back and we've talked many times. So, fantastic experiences like that made teaching something to look forward to everyday.

00:45:10

INTERVIEWER: So how did you feel about, it sounds like then... Has the differences in the degrees of preparation of your students, has that been a part of teaching from the beginning, or, did you feel like students had a basic level of preparedness to take your class?

PERKINS: It varied greatly. Many of the students that would come to my class got by with memorization and regurgitation. They hated me, because I didn't teach that way. They had to learn to think, not just memorize and regurgitate. And some of them had very little background in biology, but most of them had some. They were alive! They were living, they were biology. So, I tried to start where they were, rather than up at a higher level.

00:46:11

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me a little bit more about how you and your students in the making China Lake into a park? Was there a reason you did that? Was it going to be developed or something, or drained?

PERKINS: It was being dug out, it's a peat bog. It was owned by Fircrest Golf Course, at the time, and leased out to a gentleman who was digging out the peat and selling it. And we felt that it was an area that needed to be maintained as a natural area. And it was being changed. We saw the property up above it, by Highway 16, as someone coming in and getting that property, and building in the area. And I just thought it was important to maintain some natural greenbelt. And so the students did a survey of what was there, what could be done, and made a presentation to the Parks Department. And, by the way, it was the first nature center established by a Metropolitan Park Board in United States at the time.

INTERVIEWER: China Lake was?

PERKINS: China Lake.

INTERVIEWER: But they don't have one there any more, do they?

PERKINS: Oh yes.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, they do?

PERKINS: Now, it's a natural area. There are no buildings. It's not like the Snake Lake, which is not called Snake Lake anymore, because too many people are afraid of snakes.

INTERVIEWER: What's it called now?

PERKINS: Now it's the Tacoma Nature Center [interviewer laughs]. There were not a lot of snakes there. The meandering water in the lake there, that's why it was called Snake Lake. It is a runoff of the natural storm drains from the whole north end of Tacoma. It goes into one end of the lake and goes out the other end.

INTERVIEWER: So were your students involved with safeguarding that area too?

PERKINS: No. There were a group of educators and naturalists that were interested, they were going to build 16 right through it. And fill it in, and put Highway 16 right through the middle of it. And we said you can't do that. And they said watch us. And we said watch *us*. And they built the bridge over it, they did not block it. And so then we set out to save the whole area, maintain the natural area. We got the Park Board again to buy the upper part of Snake Lake. And, we started out going for a city-- they used to get block grants every year. And we came up

with a budget of \$200,000 to do the whole park, including the building, we designed a building, and what we wanted, and the trails, and so on. Could do it for \$200,000 in 1974. And the city said, well, tell you what, we'll give you \$100,000 this year, you come back next year, we'll give you the other \$100,000. Well, we went on with the planning. At the end of the first year, they said well we changed our priorities, you can't have the second \$100,000. So there we were with 100,000 not enough to build the buildings, not do anything. So we went to the state. And this was just a small group of us, educators. And, the state said well, we'll give you the matching money but you can't build any buildings. So, that's how it came about. We were able to build the parking lot, the trails, two bridges over the lake, and went from there.

00:50:42

INTERVIEWER: And you and your students started a recycling program on campus, is that right?

PERKINS: Yes, right at the very beginning.

INTERVIEWER: At the very beginning of the college. So has that been continuous since the college opened?

PERKINS: No. Once we turned it over to the student government, it disappeared.

INTERVIEWER: So how did that work back in the early days? Did you work with the Tacoma landfill to sort the recycling, or what happened to it after you collected it back then?

PERKINS: We set up recycling centers and then it would be picked up and go through the landfill.

INTERVIEWER: So the Tacoma landfill did recycling even back then? That right?

PERKINS: Oh, yes. Yep.

INTERVIEWER: Interesting.

PERKINS: And we'd been interested, I tried to involve students in the community. And, like I said, in my contemporary biological problems class, my students got to vote on what subjects we would study in there.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And what were some popular topics?

PERKINS: ...Sex education was one of them. Another was, we used to, I would take them on field trips up to Rainier School at Buckley. Where the students then would pair up with one of the residents there. And the residents would give them a tour of Buckley and then we'd have

lunch with them. And that was when we talked about retardation in class. But the sky was the limit, if the students were interested and could related to biology, we talked about it.

INTERVIEWER: Interesting. And is that school still open at Buckley? It's closed isn't it?

00:52:36

PERKINS: No, it's still open. It's changed immensely. When I first started going up there, the profoundly retarded were put into a bare, open room and they spent their time in there. They defecated on the floor, rubbed it on the walls. It was very, very poor conditions. The young man that I told you was a deaf and up there, I asked him if he would like to go back and visit, and see how it has changed. He said, "I don't think that I can do that." He said, "I was raped there, by a male attendant. That hill that's right by it, I just knew that California was just on the other side. They kept trying, I knew if I got over to the other side of the hill I'd be in California and free. Every time they would catch me and bring me back and punish me." And I said, well it's really changed and I will make arrangements to take you up if you would like to go back. And so, a couple of weeks later he came in and said I think I'd like to go back. So we went back up together and he saw that things *were* different, than when he was there. Which was really important.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think triggered that whole change in special education in such a kind of quick time frame in this country?

PERKINS: I'm sorry, didn't understand.

INTERVIEWER: I mean it wasn't just that school that changed, I mean the whole approach to teaching children with special needs kind of changed. Why do you think that was?

PERKINS: I think trying to get them more mainstream, into society. Not only for their benefit but for the students that did not have a disability. So that they could understand that the people with disabilities are human too. And they play a very important role. And if we're going to accept people, we must understand them.

INTERVIEWER: And do you think that the college has done a fairly good job over the years of accommodating people with disabilities?

PERKINS: Yes, I think so.

INTERVIEWER: It sounds like that was maybe part of the plan from the beginning with the "stepless college" and everything?

PERKINS: Yes, I think so. One of the big disadvantages of this campus is it was too spread out. And that didn't make it easier for people with disabilities. My wife and I do a lot of work with TACID, which is adjacent to the college here. We volunteer over there regularly, and work with people with disabilities. Because it's so important that we understand, that they're human too.

INTERVIEWER: And when was TACID formed?

PERKINS: ...I'm sorry I don't remember the date. I just remember that we've been involved with them since the early nineties.

00:55:52

INTERVIEWER: Alright. Let's see. Let's talk little bit about the faculty strike of 1973. Were you involved with that?

PERKINS: Yes. I would not go out on strike, I would not walk the picket line. I did not believe in that. I did feel that, though, the administration at that time was not serving the needs of the students. So, I accepted the strike. But I would not walk the picket line, I worked outside of it. I honored the strike as being something that was important to make changes here on campus. And changes were made.

INTERVIEWER: What changes did you feel were needed? What instigated the strike?

PERKINS: The students had more say in what went on, it was not a dictatorship. Tom was a fantastic individual, but he reached a point where... he lost sight of the overall vision I think. And I loved him as an individual. I have a great respect for him, but I disagreed with him from an educational standpoint.

INTERVIEWER: But it sounds like after the strike, would you say that things improved?

PERKINS: Yes. Immensely. Faculty had more input, students had more input after that.

INTERVIEWER: So did students support the strike?

PERKINS: I'm sorry?

INTERVIEWER: Did students support the strike?

PERKINS: Yes. In general. It was not easy for them, it was not easy for the faculty. It was a hard decision to make. But like I said, I at the time, felt that there were other ways of protesting than the strike. So I would not walk the picket line.

00:58:07

INTERVIEWER: Hmm, okay. So I think we kind of answered the question about whether it led to changes at TCC. What other conflicts have occurred at TCC during your time here? Besides the strike? Has there generally been agreement, or have there been some other times of conflict?

PERKINS: Very little conflict. [Laughs] I hired a biology teacher that was really a great teacher. But he was a little different. He would go up to a family where there were a number of children, and lecture them on population control. He also said what he thought, and I can still hear him, he went to Tom Ford's office one day and was *really* berating Tom, and Tom got so angry he bit the stem off his pipe [laughs]. I don't think he ever lived that down! Mr. Shapiro then left after a couple more years, and moved to a different community college [laughs]. But he was a great teacher, he just felt very strongly about populations and so on.

00:59:39

INTERVIEWER: So we're going to just talk a little bit at the end here, we'll talk about teaching just a bit. So, what is your teaching philosophy?

PERKINS: Well I think I said before. I left for year and worked on my doctorate down at Oregon State, where our entire careers were based on midterms and finals. So when I came back, I vowed I would never give another midterm or final. I gave nothing but quizzes, I gave two a week. The students knew what day they were going to be, they were ten-minute quizzes. And if they came in late they had the rest of the ten minutes, if they didn't show up, there was no make ups. No exceptions, for any reason. But I threw out three quizzes at the end of the quarter. So if they didn't feel like taking a quiz, they didn't have to, they could just throw that out. They knew that had that option. I wanted, I felt that I had something to offer, and that their being in class was important. I did not accept that they were playing basketball, that was a good excuse for not showing up to my class. Or if they're too tired from practice, that was not an excuse. Now, if they wanted to miss the quizzes, they had three of them they could throw out. The other thing, instead of students taking a midterm or final, at the end they wrote a self-evaluation. They then came into my office and sat down. Reached the point where I was asked to leave the faculty building. A petition was taken against me to leave the faculty building because I was seeing too many students in my office, and disrupting the faculty building.

INTERVIEWER: Did you leave?

PERKINS: Pardon?

INTERVIEWER: Did you leave the faculty building?

PERKINS: I left long enough to go talk to the president. And said, what kind of a school are we running here, where the secretary started this petition because it was disrupting her building? I stayed, she left. And I continued seeing students, because I felt it was very important that we have a conversation about what they had done, what they felt they had done and what I felt they had done. From an education standpoint.

INTERVIEWER: So how did you initially evaluate students then, did you initially have tests and then you moved onto this self-evaluation format?

PERKINS: Yeah. I started out with giving a regular test. I even tried developing a multiple-choice test where the question would be worth 10 points, and they could get 10 points if they knew exactly what the answer was, or if they weren't sure the answer between A & C they could give them each at least 5 points. Students hated that. Because they had to think. And they said would you please stop giving these kinds of tests. And it wasn't until I went back to school myself and realized the pressures of midterms and finals, that I changed my philosophy of teaching. I also ran a program here, a couple of summers, for able and gifted students, high school students from the community, which was fabulous, called Project Galaxy.

INTERVIEWER: How long did that last?

PERKINS: Just two summers. And the summer before I had been involved in Project Prometheus down in Southern Oregon College, for able and gifted students in south Oregon, southern Oregon. And so I decided that'd be a great one to offer here, in this community. Which we did and it was wonderful.

INTERVIEWER: So was it sort of a precursor to something like Running Start, or, did they get college credit for those classes or?

PERKINS: No, it was just an open learning for able and gifted people, that teachers would recommend from the Tacoma school district as being gifted.

01:04:45

INTERVIEWER: So why did you want to teach at McNeil? Did you teach at McNeil?

PERKINS: Yes, I taught there when it first started offering. I'd go over at night. Fantastic experience. And I made some changes over there. Had a student that was the brightest student I've ever had in class. He went from a GED there to a master's degree in three years. He got turned onto education. And part of it was because of my class, and we became very good friends. I was able to help him get an early release. And he went on to the University of Washington and got his doctorate degree. Married a woman that he met there, had children.

Now this individual was head of a very large drug operation. He had a fortress in Colorado, he had an army. And dealers would come in and buy drugs from him. He was brilliant but, he hadn't got turned on to education. And once he got turned on to education there was no stopping him.

INTERVIEWER: Was he able to teach... after?

PERKINS: No, he got, actually he got a doctorate in psychology, and worked with individuals, sex offenders. But he used to come down and talk to my class, about how important it is to get turned on to education. First car that he bought after he got a job, the license plate said "EARNED." He said, I've never earned money before, I always did it illegally. But it was a fabulous experience over there.

INTERVIEWER: What were some of the challenges of teaching inmates? Were there any special challenges or was it just like teaching a regular classroom?

PERKINS: Like teaching regular classes. Most of the students there, didn't have a lot of other things to do than study. And, it's a culture, just like any other culture, there at the prison. And, we had great discussions.

INTERVIEWER: Were you able to set up labs and things like that?

PERKINS: No, no. It was strictly a lecture. They did not have the facilities for a laboratory. So I offered like a contemporary biological problems class.

01:07:50

INTERVIEWER: Okay, I think is really the last of the formal questions. In what ways do you think you've made the largest impact on students?

PERKINS: Getting them to think and get involved. I've had students call me up and say, "I remember when we went to the Park Board. What a great thing." Students said, "I remember the animals that you had in your laboratory. I now have a love for biology that I didn't have before." So I think that I made a difference. You never know, how you've touched peoples' lives. But I've probably had 10,000 students over my career. I belong to a service club right now. One of the individuals there was a student of mine at Mount Tahoma High School. I just ran into another individual recently that made the comment "Oh! Mr. Perkins!" He recognized me, I didn't recognize him. "I had your class, like in, 1966!" he said [laughs]. Now, after all these years, he said, "I went on and got my degree." But, so we do have an impact. Teachers can only do so much. But, there was never a day when I did not look forward to coming here. And I think the Fulbright exchange to England had a great impact on me also.

01:09:56

INTERVIEWER: When did you do that?

PERKINS: In 1982. I taught in an English grammar school, which was grades 6 through 12. And all boys. One of the things that really stands out in my mind about that is I had, I was talking one day, and I used the term "vitamin." And one of the lads raised his hand and said, "Sir! Sir! You're wrong!" And I said, let's stop right here. No, I am not wrong, I am different. In the United States, we pronounce the word: "vita-min." You pronounce it: "vit-a-min." You are not wrong, you are different than I. And we need to accept the idea that we are different, not wrong. And that's what the Fulbright cultural exchange is all about.

INTERVIEWER: So what part of Great Britain were you in, when you were teaching that?

PERKINS: York. York, England. We lived in Bishopthorpe. Great experience for me, to travel. Every weekend we would travel around England. Went up to Scotland and over to the Lake District. A wonderful learning experience. We did, Christmas, we traveled to Europe. Spent Christmas Eve at midnight mass with the Pope. And St. Peter's. New Year's Eve in... Venice. Or not Venice, Vienna, Austria.

INTERVIEWER: So that was an exchange? So someone came over also and taught here?

PERKINS: Yes. We traded houses, we traded cars, we traded jobs. And it was a win-win situation.

INTERVIEWER: Was that a fairly common practice? Or was that pretty unusual?

PERKINS: Well, I'm not sure how long they had actually run the Fulbright program for the exchange. And I'm not sure that it still is being done. But it was, at the time, there were individuals that went to a number of different countries. I just was fortunate in getting to go to England. But I applied for it, and was accepted into the program. And the school here was great in allowing me to do that.

01:12:44

INTERVIEWER: And you probably had a significant number of international students in your classes, did you, over the years? Or not?

PERKINS: Over here?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

PERKINS: Oh, absolutely.

INTERVIEWER: And how did that work out?

PERKINS: Great, great. I'd look forward to them. And again, being able to have them come into my office, and sit and talk. And when they had a problem, they knew that they could come in and we could discuss it. Because, there were things they didn't understand. And it was important that I be able to help them understand, and to fit into the system. I taught at the Indian college, I told you, as part time, after I retired. The greatest problem that I had was the students would come in and say, "well, I didn't come because I'm on Indian time." I said this is education, we've got to live on education time, when we're doing this. I respect your Indian time, and I understand your cultures. But if you're going to go on and get a degree and education you need to accept the time frame of the education. And if class starts at 8 o'clock, then you're expected to be there at 8 o'clock. Not out fishing, or whatever you choose to do because it's your Indian time. And it's the same way, but I found, most foreign students were here, their parents were insistent they get an education. And they were great students.

01:14:37

INTERVIEWER: So is there anything else that you would like to add, elaborate, or clarify at this time?

PERKINS: I think you've done a great job asking the questions. I just know that when this school started, we had a great faculty that pulled together. And, it has evolved into a very, very important segment of this community. And, facilities like you have here, were not even *thought* of as a possibility. The technology in those days has changed, but it is important that they do change, because technology is changing. And for a person to go out into the world they've got to be aware of that technology. And the simple little things like a droid [pulls out cell phone]. I was raised in the days where we had a telephone that we would crank, and it was on a party line. And to come from that to this [holds up phone], where I can touch this and see my whole yard with the cameras that are in my yard, any place in United States that I get cell service. I was up in Alaska, and I could see my yard, from Alaska.

INTERVIEWER: And some teaching has moved online too, how do you think about that?

PERKINS: I have mixed emotions about that. I think that the interaction is greater in the classroom. I saw microbiology online. I don't know how they could possibly teach a proper micro class without having a laboratory. Where the students can actually grow bacteria and see bacteria. And understand the importance of the lab. Because when they go into a working situation, that is a lab. And they need that experience, I think. I had two young women walk

into my lab one summer, micro lab, barefoot. And after I came down off the ceiling [interviewer laughs] I escorted them out with a bottle of phenol, and said, don't you *ever* come back into this room with bare feet. With the possibility of broken glass, with all the bacteria we raise in here. You just don't do that. And you don't get that kind of experience over the internet.

INTERVIEWER: [Laughs] I suppose not.

PERKINS: Yeah. And so, I think the internet is important, and yes it provides opportunities, but I think that a one-on-one teacher/student relationship is extremely important.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, great. Well thank you so much for coming in.

PERKINS: Oh, thank you.

INTERVIEWER: [Laughs] It was a lot of fun.