

Sarah Bills - Interview #18

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Note

This transcript has been lightly edited by TCC Archivist A. Demeter to remedy name spelling, misheard/missing words, and other minor corrections, 4/1/2024.

Summary

In this interview Sarah Bills speaks about her years here at Tacoma Community College as a basketball player, student senator, and Student Body President. She also covers topics such as what the college was like during her time here, using her degree, identifying as a community college graduate, and possible stigmas associated with TCC.

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Interview

INTERVIEWER SHAWN JENNISON: Let's... Can you say and spell your name and then the years that you were here?

SARAH: Sarah Bills. S-A-R-A-H B-I-L-L-S. And I was here from 1995 to 1998.

INTERVIEWER: Okay cool. So let's talk about when you came to TCC, what brought you here? Why did you come-- why did you choose TCC?

SARAH: Well, I knew I was going to go to a community college, wherever we moved because I was a military brat. And we moved here in November of 94, and then they had the tuition waver scholarship available, so I applied for that, and I received it, so then I had my foot in the door. And then I saw the application for the Stage Student Access to Growth and Earning, so I thought that looked like fun, and I applied for that and then received that. That's kind of what brought me here.

INTERVIEWER: You say you needed to go to community college, why a community college not four-year or something else?

SARAH: Well I knew that I'd want to party, ha, and not focus on my education, so I thought that would be the best way. You know, live at home, go to school, maybe stay more focused, and then transfer to a four-year afterwards.

INTERVIEWER: That's pretty adult of you to know yourself that well as a teenager.

SARAH: Yeah [both laugh]. I knew it. And I'd seen too many people go away to school and mess up somehow and come back. So I just didn't want to do that.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, that's an expensive mistake, too [laughs]. Good for you. So you came here, you got involved with Stage and student programs. What was your experience like at first, and what was your first memory that you have, your first day? Do you remember your first day? Or do you remember your first week here on campus? I mean, what happened?

SARAH: I think it made it easier being part of the program Stage because we got acclimated here. Just came in here and met as a group, kind of got to get to know each other, did a lot of teambuilding. And so it kind of made it nice, because I knew about the campus instead of just coming here and starting my first day and not knowing where anything was. And it was also kind of nice because we had a place to go between classes and, you know, get some work done. Just do some bonding.

INTERVIEWER: So kind of being part of that, do you think that was a critical thing for you? I mean was that really... Was that something you wanted to do from the very beginning?

SARAH: Yeah, I think so. And I think it worked really well because we got to take a lot of leadership training, and I've been able to use that now in what I do now. That's helped me a lot. And then just meeting people, I was able to meet a lot of people. I joined the basketball team my first year I was here too. Didn't like it too much, but I did like it. I mean it was good, but it wasn't what I, you know, it wasn't high school anymore. So it was a little different, more strict.

But it was just kind of... I think a nice stepping stone to what the future was going to be. Got to meet a lot of great people. Got to meet Anita King, or, it was Martin Luther King's daughter. Got to meet her when she came and did a speech here. So it was pretty good.

INTERVIEWER: That's great, sounds good. What were facilities like? You step on campus, 1995. What was it like?

SARAH: Definitely not what it is now, I mean just coming back and seeing, I mean just the buildings are bigger, more modern. Back then there were much smaller, several different buildings, so you had to walk. Most of your classes were spread across campus. It was much older, definitely older than it is now.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of feeling did it have? Did you say, okay, this is kind of like high school, or this is definitely college? Was it a little bit of both?

SARAH: I think just being part of the student programs, it was probably a little bit of both. Just because we had the camaraderie, I got to know people. I was here on campus a lot more than, say, if I probably just came to class and left. So I guess it would kind of be a little bit of both.

INTERVIEWER: Did you really enjoy the social part, and the training part of student programs?

SARAH: Oh yeah I loved it [laughs]. I totally loved it. It was more my alley. Like I said, it kind of kept me focused a little bit, just because we had to have good grades stay in the program. Just going on retreats, and doing all the fun things. And just being part of it, because you know we got to go river rafting, trips to Leavenworth, and that sort of thing. So it was kind of neat. Kind of got us out there, got me out there, got me to see Washington a lot better.

INTERVIEWER: So you were pretty new to the area when you came here? You've moved around the country?

SARAH: Yeah, yeah. I moved here from Puerto Rico so, it was quite an adjustment.

INTERVIEWER: How long did you live in Puerto Rico before you came here?

SARAH: About four years.

INTERVIEWER: Oh okay, so coming from Puerto Rico, obviously another country, to the United States and then to Washington. I mean, that's probably a big adjustment.

SARAH: Yeah, the rain [laughs]. The rain was the worst part, but I mean I kind of got over that a little bit. It's beautiful here though.

INTERVIEWER: That's good. You've chosen to stick around.

SARAH: Yeah, so I obviously like it. You can go to the mountain and the water in one day, so that's good.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah that's good. Good. That's a good point. So classes, what did you study, what were your goals? You mentioned you wanted to stay on track in that community college is going to hope you get there.

SARAH: I basically just got my associate's because at that time I didn't know what I wanted to do. So it was just a basic associate's degree where I could transfer some credits. And then when I transferred, I transferred to St. Martin's, but I went to the branch campus on Fort Lewis-McChord. And it was great, because you put 40% down and made two payments and then you were done when the quarter was done, so, it was a nice transition. Classes were at night, still worked during the day. Studied criminal justice. So I didn't take any criminal justice here, because I didn't know what I really wanted to do. I mean if I did it would've been great. Because they have the good program here. I don't know if they still do, but they did have a good program. So I was able to transfer a lot of the credits over and get the basics out-of-the-way, which was really nice, and I think that's a plus. If people are looking to save money on their education it's definitely the way to go.

INTERVIEWER: So, talking about saving money. I mean, right now, tuition right now is expensive. I mean tuition's always been expensive. But it's even more so becoming a big deal. I read something that, nationally the student loan debt has exceeded credit card debt. So we're up over \$1 trillion in student loan debt.

SARAH: That's crazy.

INTERVIEWER: I mean, students, I mean do you think that students have to look at colleges carefully and, almost like a return on their investment. Like, I'm going to put this much money into my education and what am I going to get out, and how fast am I going to recoup. Do you kind of feel like that's becoming...?

SARAH: I think so, and I think the biggest thing is, is what can I take that's going to get me a job out there. Just because you could go take some fluff classes or get a fluff degree, but is that degree going to make the money to allow you to pay that money back? I mean it's just crazy. That's why I was kind of happy the way I did it. Just because I didn't have any, I didn't take any student loans out. When I was at TCC it was great, because I was on the tuition waiver scholarship for the first two years. And then I was able to get a grant from the Foundation here. I applied for that, so. And then I have the Hap Arnold scholarship which paid for the books. Pretty much my education here was free. So when I transferred over, it was a little bit different, but like I said it was great. 40% down, made two payments. It was like paying rent, but I still lived at home. So it was pretty simple, then work during the day. Made it a lot easier. But I just can't imagine these days. Just paying for school and the economy the way it is. It's got to be hard to get a job to pay that back. So it's definitely something that people have to think about, to get in a field that's going to be for them. For sure. Apply for scholarships. I know back then

they had a lot of different foundations that gave scholarships here. Which was great. If students could find out more about that, and have a list or something like that. It'd be great, it'll save them a lot of money.

INTERVIEWER: It seems like the typical student is, their motivators are food, money, you know, fun [laughs]. I mean, we kind of learned that in Stage training, what motivates students. Hey, have free food, offer a gift card. Those are all important things to reach out to students.

SARAH: Just having the activities kind of give them an easy way out. It made them affordable for students. Just having like that, even putting the transfer day together. That was awesome. Because if students don't know where they want to go or what they want to do, you're able to do that. The job fairs, is an excellent source. Because you can kind of see what direction you want to go to. I think that's an awesome thing too.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah I agree. Cool. So you got your degree from TCC, you transferred to St. Martin's, then what?

SARAH: I got my degree in Criminal Justice with a minor in Sociology. And then I worked, I still worked at the zoo. I worked at Point Defiance Zoo for a little bit in Development. And then I moved on and worked at an elevator company for a little bit. And then actually, now I use my degree, I work at the federal detention center in SeaTac, as a correctional officer/[Captain's] Secretary, so. It's kind of a nice little gig. We get paid well to do what we do.

INTERVIEWER: Wow. So tell me more about that, that's not sort of the typical job of the average person. Talk about what kind of you do when you're in charge of and...

SARAH: Well, to get in there you have to have either four-year degree or experience. It's a lot harder to get into the feds then, say, the state. You go away to training for three weeks in Glencoe, Georgia. It's kind of like gruesome and hot [laughs]. And then you come back. And basically are a correctional officer first. So, we work and units with up to 133 inmates, for one person. So you're in this unit with them, and that's their living space. They have TV, like a dayroom. Outdoor activities. But there it's a high-rise. So their outdoors, isn't really outdoors, they're kind of like in a cement thing. But you can kind of see through the slabs. But yeah we just kind of keep it safe and running orderly. And right now I'm doing the Captain's Secretary position, where do I the pay, and the filing, and all that good stuff. It's kind of a nice break from the normal, day-to-day process of dealing with inmates.

INTERVIEWER: What made you want to go into something like that?

SARAH: Well, I actually went in there as a stepping stone. Because they say that you get into the feds, and you can transfer anywhere you want to. I thought about joining the DEA, had the opportunity at one point, but wasn't ready to move. Because with the DEA you can't be hired where you're from. You have to go elsewhere. So at that point I wasn't ready, kind of wish I did it at that time, but. So I actually got in at the correctional facility just to move on. And I'm not

sure exactly what happened I want to take. But a lot of people go to the marshals, or the air marshals. And border patrol, and that sort of thing. But I don't know if I want to get into that.

INTERVIEWER: So you're still kind of undecided?

SARAH: Yeah, I'm kind of there. Like I said I get paid really well for what I do [laughs]. So it's kind of like, it's not pushing me, but it allows me to live a good lifestyle, so I'm not really in a hurry about that.

INTERVIEWER: Right, good for you. So do you keep in touch with your former students that you went to college with?

SARAH: We do, we do sometimes get together and have like a dinner or lunch. Or like little activities. Sometimes I can't make it, but it's kind of nice to see that we can communicate on Facebook. And that's kind of nice, just to see where people are at. Social media is amazing.

INTERVIEWER: You know one of the biggest challenges for a community college, to be honest, is the alumni network. Because most people, when they transfer to a four-year degree, and someone says, hey where did you go to school? They automatically go back to where they went to their four-year school. I went to St. Martins, I went to PLU, I went to UW.

SARAH: It's more prestigious I guess.

INTERVIEWER: And they don't talk about TCC. And you know it's a challenge for community colleges, and we've noticed. Number one it's kind of hard for people to identify that they went to TCC. And then number two, it's hard for them to get past identifying themselves with a four-year always. You know what I mean. Any suggestions as an alumni of how to overcome that?

SARAH: I know for me it's a little different, just because, like I said, um, I try to approach it from the money-saving point of view. So like if I talk with people, and they have kids, because a lot of people I hang out with now all have kids that are going to college. So I kind of always say it's a good stepping stone if they're not ready. Because sometimes you send the kids off to a four-year and its party, party, party, I don't know to do, there's nothing holding them back. So sometimes it's a nice stepping stone if they know that their kids aren't really ready. Or if their kids don't really know what they want to do. I mean it's great to come here. Also with the economy the way it is, and people losing their jobs, I know a lot of people are coming back here for continuing education. And I know a lot of people that have come back. And I'll mention it, say, if their spouse is looking to go somewhere else, or is needing to get an education, I definitely mention TCC. As far as getting it out there, I'm not too sure. I definitely think a selling point would be to make, to ease that financial burden a little bit. I mean it's still pricey, but it's doable. And then to transfer. Because then you're not paying for four years of college, you're paying for two years of college and two years of community college. That's how I would go, I guess, is financially, I don't know.

INTERVIEWER: It's interesting that you approach it from that perspective because a lot of teenagers don't really think about finances, too much.

SARAH: No [laughs]. Not at all. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: But you seem to be pretty, you were thinking about it, I mean at 18.

SARAH: Yeah, I was definitely thinking about it just because, number one I didn't know what I wanted to do. And then I had all these different opportunities for here. The Student Access Growth and Earning was in front of me. I had the tuition waiver scholarship. Then the [Hap?] Arnold scholarship. So it just kind of made it in easy transition for me and my parents. I mean, my brother went to the Seattle Art Institute right away but he knew what he wanted to do. He knew what his focus wanted to be, so. I guess it just kind of depends on what you want to do I guess.

INTERVIEWER: How supportive were your parents?

SARAH: Very. Very supportive. I mean it was easy for them, because they didn't have to pay of course. But they allowed me to stay at home as long as I needed to. And then to help me out. They were coming, they came to the events that we had here. I was student body president for my last year here, which was fun, and exciting all in its own. Got to introduce a lot of speakers, so my parents got to come to that. And then I received the Ellen Pinto Leadership Award, which was kind of exciting, and a big thing, and I used that as well on some applications, which was good. So yeah, it was just an overall great experience here, for me.

INTERVIEWER: What was it like being student body president and involved in student government? Because I know student government is different from programs.

SARAH: Yeah, it wasn't always fun. I mean our group is a little more fun than, say, the past. I don't know, we had a picture, and our picture, everybody else looked serious, and you see us and we are kind of doing a weird pose, and we're not dressed up. We were little bit more relaxed. But you had to be a little bit more focused, a little bit more aware of what was going on, in the actual runnings of the institution, or, of here. Because you actually have to vote on having new buildings or raising fees. And that's a lot of responsibility right there. And our goal was to get more people involved in the student government.

INTERVIEWER: How important was student body involvement?

SARAH: It was very important, because we were talking about raising fees for people. And like I said, some people maybe just could afford it. So you really had to think about it. But of course, you have to modernize things too. Because you don't want it falling apart, and you want to make the college something people want to come to. Wow, that's really nice campus, I want to be there. You don't want to, not, but at the same time you want to consider people's pocketbooks.

INTERVIEWER: Any memories that come back, about an event or something that you really enjoyed, or your favorite moment? Either as student body president, or as senator, or just working in student programs, an intramural event or rafting trip, or something that...

SARAH: The rafting trips were a blast, I got really hooked to those. And they made it more affordable for us too, because they did like a group setting. I remember going down, it was a Class 3/4, but at that time it was running as a Class 5, because the snowfall was heavy. We had some people fall out of the rafts. We were able to bring our families along, I think my sister came along, and she got hooked as well. So it was something we continued doing after that, because of the experience. I remember having snowball fights outside of the office, and just kind of letting loose. And doing like popcorn, and advertising student government that way. Going to other, going to high schools and trying to recruit to come here was kind of exciting too. Got to meet a lot of interesting people, like I said Yolanda King, that was probably one of my biggest highlights. Just a wonderful woman. Yeah, I mean, I would say my experience here was great. More so, just because usually at community college people come to class, and they usually leave. But I came to class and was here pretty much all day every day. Except for the weekends. Unless there was like an event or something like that.

INTERVIEWER: Or rafting trip [laughs].

SARAH: Like I said to, I played basketball for year. It just wasn't as fun as high school, because they're more serious. So I only did it for a year, plus it interfered with my work too. Because we'd be away, and maybe there was an event we had to do, and so I was kind of stretching myself a little thin. Got to experience it all [laughs].

INTERVIEWER: That is awesome. Can I get you some water?

SARAH: That'd be great.

19:10

[Water break]

19:40

INTERVIEWER: So let's talk a little bit about the 90s, and kind of focus on the college at that time. Have you been on many college campuses since you graduated?

SARAH: Not really, and I kind of did a different route because I went to a branch campus. So it wasn't the same feel as say a regular campus. I mean I've been on the original St. Martin's campus, but it's still... not too many, I guess.

INTERVIEWER: How would you say TCC then, in the 90s, compared to like a four-year college back then? I mean, did you visit, did you come, because we visited UW, we went to PLU, did you come on that trip, for those trips?

SARAH: I don't think so, no.

INTERVIEWER: So did you visit any colleges when your student here?

SARAH: No, I mean not any college colleges. Just community colleges, like other community colleges.

INTERVIEWER: So how then does it stack up against other community colleges at the time? In terms of facilities and you know...

SARAH: It seemed pretty good. I mean I've noticed just by driving by some schools, how far they've come. You know, Pierce College, PLU, UPS. The only difference I guess between this school and a four-year school is, you know most people live on campus, their day-to-day life is on-campus, so you're pretty much there and partaking in the facilities more so than you would be at a community college. Just because it looks like, there are more students out and about. The crowd is younger. Your typical students are 18 to 23, 24 at a regular college and at a community college you have all ages. I mean all ages. You could be next to someone who is, you know, getting their education at 50. And then you have some 18-year-olds. But very little, very few young people. I don't know how it is [clears throat] I don't know how it is right now with the economy being the way it is. I don't know if students, if you're seeing more younger students at a community college or not.

INTERVIEWER: I think it's pretty much the same, our average age is 29 right now. And I mean it's very similar to what it was in the 90s. The economy though, has brought folks who have had a long career and been laid off, and brought them back to school for some retraining. And from that respect, we've seen some older folks come. Which has been great. I mean, as a student, so you were a teenager when you came here, you know, and a young adult. Did you feel like it was great to have a mix of different age groups around campus? Did you think that was a good thing? Or did you think what a downer, I wish everyone here was my age?

SARAH: I think at the time I didn't really even think about it. But it gave, in certain classes it would give a different perspective. Somebody of a more mature age would have a totally different perspective on issues than somebody like my age at that time. But I guess, I don't think I really thought about it.

INTERVIEWER: Well that's good. What about stigmas? In the 90s did you hear anything about TCC, in terms of like negative connotations?

SARAH: Well, the only thing I can think of is like... I know when I transferred here, I went to Wilson High School. And the first thing the counselor said was, "Oh, oh." Because I came in with

a 4.0. And the counselor said, "Oh well that's from a third world country," you know. Really down on it, on the education there. So when I said, "Well what about this tuition waiver scholarship here, this is what I want to do." "Oh, you won't get it. There's so many students that are above you, that have higher GPAs than you do." You know, even though I had the 4.0. And I thought oh that's kind of a downer. But it didn't stop me from what I was doing, so, of course, I got the tuition waiver scholarship, got into student programs. And then she was like my best friend. What was cool about that was the fact that it was an easier transition, and then I just didn't really have to think about it. I didn't have any stigmas or anything like that. Because that's not... but I know a lot of people are probably like, oh, that's community college. I'm going here, I'm going to a four-year. But what was interesting about that, was that there were some folks that were the valedictorian or higher up there, that ended up back at TCC the second year. So it just kind of reiterated my whole deal with coming to a community college first, as opposed to just going away. Because I don't know if I would've just focused and got things done, or if I would've went the other way. But I think I probably would've went the other way.

INTERVIEWER: Many do. That's good. I think TCC kind of went through some, a time. For quite some time, like with a stigma. Like Mildred Street University, tee-hee-hee.

SARAH: [Laughs] I never heard any of those.

INTERVIEWER: Oh really [laughs]. I was going to say, do you think we've overcome that? I know you haven't been on campus but driving by, living in Tacoma still, I mean do you...?

SARAH: I think so. I know my mom's come back and taken some computer classes here. She's taken a transcription class here. So it's kind of, you know, I don't see it like that. I mean, I see a lot of students here. I see the parking lots full. And new buildings, so I'm assuming that the enrollment must be up if they're able to put new buildings up to accommodate the students a little bit more. I just don't know, I just think that it gives people opportunity. And they advertise and send out pamphlets and everything, so people can do. But I think, it seems like the major, what I've noticed was the major, was to get people for continuing education. Like I said, I don't know if it's the economy or what, but that seems to be where I noticed the focus is when I get things in the mail. That sort of thing, it's like classes for continuing ed. And they're pretty reasonably priced really. Considering you can come here and get your computer stuff taken care of. You can come here and do medical billing and transcriptionists, which is good. It's an easy way to get a career going, you know, a way to make money without having to spend four or six or seven years doing it.

INTERVIEWER: There was a student satisfaction survey, we administer one every three years, and we did one in the fall. And the results were interesting, 75% of the current students that took the survey said TCC was their number one choice. And that hasn't always been the case. A lot of times students would apply for this four-year that four-year, and oh by the way, yeah, TCC if nothing works out. But now students are telling us that, hey, you were on the top of our list. That's a good feeling for us.

SARAH: That definitely has to be, I would say. Plus you have that program where kids in high school, they can come if they're done with their credits? Is that Running Start? Which I think is a good program, which I think some of them want to finish out. And then they can start at a younger age and then and finish out too. Which is a great opportunity as well.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah it is, yeah that's true. What year did you graduate high school?

SARAH: '95. 1995.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, I know several people from your class. I went to Wilson too.

SARAH: Oh, did you?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

SARAH: My sister went there too.

INTERVIEWER: Where did she graduate?

SARAH: She graduated in '98. 1998.

INTERVIEWER: So did mine. Wow.

SARAH: So you probably... know her [laughs].

INTERVIEWER: Small world, that's great. Okay, so... We talked about a lot of different things, is there anything that you can think of that you, that you... that we haven't talked about that you want to add? Something that, you just knew driving over here that you wanted to touch on that we haven't talked about yet?

SARAH: No, I didn't know what to expect actually [laughs]. I mean, I knew what we'd be talking about, how it used to be, how it was. Like I said I had no idea, I didn't know if student programs existed anymore, or how it was developing. And like I said, there's so many new buildings. So it was kind of cool.

INTERVIEWER: Is it a good feeling, as an alumni?

SARAH: I think so. It's just an accomplishment, I can say oh I got my associate's, so I'm good to go! It's definitely accomplishment. I know a lady I used to work with at the zoo, she just came back here. She's graduating tomorrow, I believe, from here. So I think she was excited at the fact that now she can say she has a degree. Because she said, it kind of felt weird around people who were saying "I went here, I went to this school, I went to that school." The kind I made her feel a little awkward. But she's proud of yourself, I'm proud of her, she's graduating. Her daughter just graduated college too, so it's an exciting time for her. So it's kind of

interesting to see, and hear about people that came here, and are coming here for classes. And I guess the wide range of age, I think, is an interesting part of a community college.

INTERVIEWER: I agree. Well good, I think were done. Nice work.