Barrett Oral History Project
Interview with Dr. Peggy Nelson
2 November 2018, Barrett, The Honors College
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DZENGA: Hello, this is Primrose Dzenga and Katie Boyce-Jacino interviewing Dr. Dean Peggy Nelson, the former Vice Dean of Barrett, The Honors College, on the 2nd of November 2018, 3 pm at Barrett, The Honors College. This interview is part of the Barrett Oral History Project. Our goal is to preserve a record of Barrett's history in honor of the 30th anniversary. Thank you so much, Dr. Nelson, for taking the time to sit down with us and share your experience.

NELSON: My pleasure.

DZENGA: Can you tell us when and how you got involved with Barrett?

NELSON: Sure. I was a fellow in the Center for Environmental Studies and on the faculty in anthropology when Dean Jacobs was hired here at ASU. And he contacted me and asked if he could just come talk to me because he knew I'd worked a lot with all our students, especially in the social sciences. And he's a plant biologist, so he wanted to learn more about that. So, I said, "Sure, tell me what you want for lunch. I'll get us some sandwiches." And we met in a conference room over in the Center for Environmental Studies, and we talked for about an hour and a half. And at the end of the talk, he said, "Would you like to be the associate dean of Barrett?" And I said, "No, thanks, I don't think so. I'm really very happy doing what I'm doing." And he said, "Well, think about it." So, the next day I wrote back and said, "Yeah, maybe I would do that. But how about just for a year or two? Because I have these other things." And he said, "Okay, sure." And I was with Barrett for 15 years.

DZENGA: Oh, wow.

NELSON: So, from the first week, working in Barrett. I completely loved it. I could honestly say I could get up every day and be happy.

DZENGA: And when was this? When did you start?

NELSON: I started in, uh. Well, the meeting with Mark Jacobs was in the fall of 2013, so it was 2014, I think. Took me on in a year.

DZENGA: Wow. 2013 and 2014? Wow.

NELSON: I'm sorry, 2003 and 2004, yeah.

DZENGA: 2003 and 2004?

NELSON: Yeah, no, completely wrong.

DZENGA: Not at all, not at all. So, what are some of the memorable events of your time as a vice dean of Barrett?

NELSON: That's a very hard question. I've loved every aspect of Barrett in which I've been involved. I very much love working with the faculty. So, I worked with all the faculty and was part of the growth of the faculty from 7 faculty when I started to 40 faculty when I left, and I was part of the interview. I'm the only person in Barrett who was part of the interview committee for every single person who's on the faculty here. So, I got to see how that changed and grew and the diversity of people who are interested in being part of Barrett. So that was wonderful. I've been involved in a number of projects that the students have initiated. And one of my favorites was that I was having trouble figuring out how best to communicate to the students to get them to pay attention to something that was really important. So, for example, we have money, we still do, we have money for students who are working on research, but they really can't afford the time because they're working two or three jobs.

DZENGA: That's true.

NELSON: So, we have a fund which eventually became called the Bidstrup fund, and it would pay the students $2,000 to work with a faculty member. Now, who wouldn't want that?

DZENGA: Everyone would love that.

NELSON: Yes.

BOYCE-JACINO: Can I ask you how you spelled it? The name of it.

NELSON: Bidstrup? B-I-D-S-T-R-U-P. It just started off as something we called the Faculty Student Research Fund. And we started it because students, there were too many students who couldn't afford to do research because they just didn't have the income to stay in school. They didn't work two or three jobs.

DZENGA: Absolutely.

NELSON: And one of my students came in, was late to a research meeting, and she is covered with mayonnaise and I said, “Where have you been?” She said, “Well, my second job is at Jimmy John's. And then I'm going to go from here over to Costco and put stuff on the shelves, you know, until midnight.” I said, “We've fixed this.” Anyway, I had this, we had this great fund, and people weren't applying for it.

DZENGA: Wow.

NELSON: Now, why weren't they applying? They just weren't hearing the messages. So, I asked students. I mean, in just a general meeting, I was with the students who are all RAs, CAs, they're called, CAs. I need a communication committee. Just people, you tell me, here's my message. Tell me how to frame it and how to put it out there, because it's different for different things. And what a fantastic group of students. I mean, just step right up. They're so creative. And we went

from not enough applications to even spend all the money to needing to triple the size of the fund because we had so many applications.

DZENGA: So, you actually tripled the fund after that?

NELSON: I actually what?

DZENGA: You actually tripled the fund after that.

NELSON: Yes.

DZENGA: Wow.

NELSON: Yes.

DZENGA: That is amazing.

NELSON: And you know, all of those students needed that money. So, we were getting the word out there. And I think that if we had even more, we would, Dean Jacobs would just put more money. And donors love putting money into that. That's how we dealt with the fund in the first place. We talked to a donor and they said, yeah, that's a great idea. We'll give you, how much do you have in there? 50,000. We'll give you another 50,000.

DZENGA: Wow.

NELSON: So, you know, it's good. It's a good thing to get donors to act on and it's fantastic for the students.

DZENGA: I wonder if my next question is going to be what you've already told me, but what did you like best about your role in this development of Barrett?

NELSON: There isn't anything I liked best. Again, I loved working with the students on all kinds of things. I love working with the faculty. One of my responsibilities was to meet every year with each faculty person individually and just talk to them about what they're doing, how's their teaching, how's their research, can we help in some way? I love that. Really knowing, and I got a chance to read the research published research of every faculty member.

DZENGA: Wow.

NELSON: Which I also loved, just knowing what people are doing. Gosh, what else? Well, also Barrett has a fantastic, you may not know this if you're new, but the staff here is completely committed to the students.

DZENGA: They are.

NELSON: They work together beautifully and always in the best interest of the student. There's no place else I've ever worked where everybody's first thing they say that's important to their job is to do what's in the best interest of the students.

DZENGA: That is true. I have experienced that firsthand. So, can you tell us a little bit about The Human Event?

NELSON: The Human Event? Well, that's an interesting question because I've never taught it.

DZENGA: Really?

NELSON: Yes, because I came here from being a faculty member in anthropology and I taught honors there. But I've never taught The Human Event. Now, I've read lots of human event syllabi, I've talked to faculty about teaching The Human Event. What I believe, I believed before I even came to The Honors College, is that The Human Event should be taught to everybody. All 77,000 ASU students should have it in some form. because it's really not the content that I, this is my own opinion. If I was teaching it, I might feel differently, but it's really not the content of a particular class that it's about Darwin, that it's about Shakespeare, that it's about, that's not the critical thing. The critical thing is that every student in the class learns how to become a good critical thinker and an argumentative writer. And that serves you no matter what you do.

DZENGA: Yeah, absolutely. It transcends all these boxes.

NELSON: Everything. I've heard chemistry majors say, I wrote better lab reports after I took The Human Event. I mean, I wouldn't have thought that's the case, but actually it is because it's the logic.

DZENGA: Absolutely.

NELSON: You know, figuring out you have to make an argument. How do you make the argument? You learn how to do that. So, the Barrett students are very fortunate to have it. You must be in the History of Ideas.

DZENGA: I am in the History of Ideas, yes.

NELSON: Which is structured a bit in the same, well, pretty much the same way. And we developed that because the value of The Human Event was so critically important to our first-year students. Our three-year students didn't get anything like that. So, the faculty and the deans developed this thing called the History of Ideas to make sure that we weren't just serving our students from the freshman year, but we're really serving our students from the minute they arrive. And the minute they arrive, that's why you're required to take it. That's why when students say, “Well, I can't fit it in.” Yes, you can. Because it's so critical to your future success.

DZENGA: So, this is why it's important. This is why you think students should take it.

NELSON: And never should it go away. Never should it get bigger. Never should it become a lecture class. And always we in The Honors College, because we know its value, should be thinking, how can we get this into the classrooms across the university? We haven't succeeded in that. We should.

DZENGA: Well, hopefully that we give them. So, you said that you talked a little bit about the relationships that you built with other faculty. Can you tell us a little bit about fostering faculty connections and relationships, not just in Barrett, but across the ASU?

NELSON: Right. Let's see, how do I... Barrett is successful in part, for all the reasons I've told you, but also because it's well supported by all of the colleges at ASU. So, you can go to any college and it's not, the deans will always say of the other deans, oh yeah, we're for that. We'll support that. But it has to trickle down. It does. But you can go to the faculty in any college at ASU and they will say, oh, Barrett is extremely important. Working with honor students is extremely important. That comes from Janet Burke, who is in my position. Janet Burke.

DZENGA: Janet Burke.

NELSON: Yeah.

BOYCE-JACINO: Is that B-U-R-K-E?

NELSON: She was, when she finally, when she left the university, retired, she was actually the head of ONSA.

BOYCE-JACINO: How do you spell that again?

NELSON: O-N-S-A, Office of National Scholarship Advising. Which is Kyle now. Yes. But before she took that role, she was in my role. And she had started something called Faculty Honors Advisors. There were about a dozen of them around the university.

DZENGA: What time was this if I may ask?

NELSON: I'm sorry?

DZENGA: I was wondering, like, do you remember the time when this happened? When she started this?

NELSON: Around 2013 or 2014. When I came in, she moved to a different position. And when I saw that, I could, well, I could see that it was working very well for those 7 to 12 departments in which there was somebody. So, all faculty members, advisors, or faculty members in another department in the university whose job it is to serve honors students. In addition to everything else they do in their department, with all the departmental expectations, they also agree to serve honor students, help them navigate those majors. So, I worked really, one of the primary things I did was talk to them and then just go out to departments and talk to them about how honors could work within their department. What would be the best kind of honors, what would be the best kind of relationship for them to have with Barrett. And every one of those is different. What the physics department wants is really different from what the dance department wants, is really different from what CC, the School of Earth and Space Exploration, what they want. So, what I did over the time I was here was to build that number from about a dozen to, I think when I left, it was 125 or 30.

DZENGA: Wow. And how did you build these relationships?

NELSON: By one-on-one, you know, going out and talking to people. I had some connections in departments, so I started there and said, go to a department and said, I'd say, the 70 honors students you have, are you interested in having more honors students? They actually represent 2% of your undergraduates, would you like, what would you like it to be? And how would you and I together make that happen? And each one of those was slightly different. And I was getting a little bit, my brain was getting a little full of stuff trying to address all of that. But what happened is we built it into something that became more systematic. In fact, at one point I had built it big enough that it was, it was just like a big, I'm trying to think of something like if you're trying to hold a ball that just keeps coming apart and rolling off your hands.

DZENGA: It was like a patty.

NELSON: Yeah, some of the Faculty Honors Advisors, yeah, melting chocolate ball or something. And a couple of the Faculty Honors Advisors came to me and said, you know, we really think that you need to have some rules. And we want to help make those rules. And I said, well, that's fantastic, because I don't want to be out there saying, okay, all of you who are volunteering for us, here's your rules. But if you make them…

DZENGA: And give them to us.

NELSON: And we work on them together, then I'd be happy to distribute them as the guidelines that come from Faculty Honors Advisors to other Faculty Honors Advisors, to help them be successful, and that was great. That was a sea change. And then people really wanted to participate because they could see what it is they were expected to do. I was doing it on sort of one-on-one and whatever and come up with some good expectations.

DZENGA: And it became easier to manage?

NELSON: It became much easier to manage, except that it got bigger and bigger and bigger, because we want every major in which there's a Barrett student to have a faculty on his advisor. Yes. And there are now about at the time I started doing it, there were probably about 60 different majors. Now Barrett students have 150 different majors, so we need somebody. And then Karen Bruhn, who is on the faculty, she's the faculty chair right now, she started working for me. So, part of her job was to work with me with the Faculty Honors Advisors until we transitioned all of the faculty honors advisor work to Karen. So, she meets with them, trains them, answers their questions, gets the support she needs. I worked with her to make sure that everybody was getting what they needed. Because some faculty or supervisors want a lot of structure, and some of them want no structure. That's true. Some of them need resources. You know, in departments where there may be only three or four faculty, they can't do the same things as people can in departments where there's 155.

DZENGA: That’s true.

NELSON: So, we're just sensitive to those differences. And they're our friends, they're our best friends. Anytime we need help, people in the faculty honors advisors, you know, and what great ambassadors for us. If we have 150, 120, 150 people out in the university who are faculty who say, I'm an honors faculty, I'm a faculty honors advisor, then we're really integrated into the university. So that's been one of my favorite projects, working with faculty.

DZENGA: And why was this important and meaningful for you, being vice dean?

NELSON: Because it serves students so effectively. I know that when you come to the university, you can learn a tremendous amount from a lecture class. But when you really learn, really deeply learn is when you're working one-on-one with a faculty member. And the Faculty Honors Advisor is that person who can work one-on-one with you and can get you to the right person to do research with one-on-one, because they know. If someone comes to me and says, I want to do my research on the organic chemistry of phosphates, I say, well, that's a great idea. But I don't know who those people are. And I could spend many, many hours trying to find out who those people are, contact them. They don't know who I am. But if I contact the Faculty Honors Advisor and I say, this student would like to work on the organic chemistry of phosphates, how can we do that? And can I help you- can you help me in finding someone to work with her? And it works every time. So, the students are so effectively served. When there's somebody who's really their advocate, at the departmental level. And Karen and I decided a few years ago that what we really need to make sure is there's never more than 50 students to one Faculty Honors Advisor in a department. So, in some majors, we have, I think in life sciences, we have over 400 students.

DZENGA: Wow.

NELSON: So, one Faculty Honors Advisor is not going to be, might as well be in a big lecture class, right?

DZENGA: That's true.

NELSON: So, we ended up creating, I think there are eight or ten faculty honors advisors in life sciences now. So that it really would be more than 50 students to a faculty member. Even then, I'd like it to be one to ten, I mean.

DZENGA: I would too.

NELSON: But we don't expect the Faculty Honors Advisor to do all the research with the students. We expect them to help the student find the right place. Another, I mean, I'm just keep answering. This is answering an earlier question. You got me [unintelligible]. A few years ago, I was paying a lot of attention to which students struggle in finding research to do for their thesis. By which students, I mean in what majors. And the life science and physical science students rarely struggle very much.

DZENGA: Why?

NELSON: Because they have labs, because they get into lab relationships, because people in the engineering and the life sciences and physical sciences can accommodate quite a few students in their labs. There's a guy in engineering who has 2500 students in his lab.

DZENGA: Wow.

NELSON: Yeah. They just can because they have these research projects and they have these big labs. But if you go to a history faculty member, he or she might have one because they're writing a book. You know, who can help them work on a book, so we could do research with them and interact. So, it was the social science and humanities students who were really struggling, more than, it's not that no physical sciences students were struggling, but it was less common. So, I went to one of the deans in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and said, you know what, you have more than 30 centers. And the centers are filled with faculty who rarely have contact with students because centers don't teach classes.

DZENGA: That's true.

NELSON: So, the faculty don't meet students, especially undergrads. So, why don't we create a program where we go to the centers and say, what research would you like to have students engaged in with which faculty? Supply us with all of that. We'll create a web portal, advertise to the students, the students apply and we in the Barrett look through them all to make sure that they are really in Barrett and they really are going to do research. And then we send them off to interview with the center faculty. The center faculty pick the students. Every student who gets picked becomes part of a cohort, which I taught, along with one of the deans in CLAS, we met with them four times in a semester, and we talked about how do you do research? How is your research in your field different from your research in your field and his and hers and so on? And how do you come up with a research question? What's that process? Because the students had to do that while they were working with these faculty. Anyway, it was incredibly exciting. It started off with 30 students and I don't know what it is now. Mary Ingram-Waters, Dr. Ingram-Waters teaches, she took over my spot. So, she runs that program now and teaches in it. But it was extremely satisfying to see these students because more than half of them ended up doing a thesis from that project. So, they were early on, we were targeting sophomores. We really wanted to get the students in at the sophomore level. So, that was just really exciting to see, work with faculty at centers, work with the deans at another college, and then create a program that really serves the students.

DZENGA: So at the end of the day, you had relationships that were multifaceted, the faculty, the students, the deans, everyone.

NELSON: Yes, that's the fun part.

DZENGA: Well, that's absolutely amazing. So, I'm going to move to something a little bit more different. So, can you tell me more about your relationship with ASU Athletics?

NELSON: Oh, sure. My relationship with ASU Athletics started when I was a faculty member in New York. I was at a university which didn't have a Division I athletic program. And the president of the university said, we're going to have this. We have to create this. I need, and the NCAA requires that every Division I school have a faculty athletic board. So, he asked me to be, the president of the university in New York, asked me to be on the board. And I got very well educated in what it means to have a Division I athletic program. So, when I came to ASU, I went to see the athletic director and I said, I'd like to be on the athletic board, whenever you have an opening, I'd like to be on the board because I just find it such an interesting aspect of the university. And that population of students needs people paying attention to what they're getting from their university experience. Coaches are paying a lot of attention to what they're getting from their athletic experience. Someone's got to be paying attention to what they're getting from the full university experience. I mean, academic, social, athletic, all wrapped together. So, he said, wow, that's great. No one ever volunteers. And so, I joined, or I was invited to join the athletic board. I don't remember when I joined. It was a long time ago. It was before I came into Barrett.

DZENGA: Even before.

NELSON: And it was a fascinating experience. There are so many dimensions to being a student athlete. There's so many dimensions to what governs schedules of student sports events and the way students are recruited, the way they're treated. And everybody's young. Well, not everybody, but mostly the students are young. They're between the ages 17 and 22. That's true. There's a few older, but not too many. And even young people, I'm not saying this to be disrespectful, but they just don't have a lot of experience. So, they make the wrong decisions. And it's not because they're bad. It's because they make the wrong decisions because they're young. So, we need to understand that and then help them get to the right place so the decisions come out better. It's the same thing here in Barrett or at the university.

DZENGA: Absolutely.

NELSON: But especially different for athletes because they're so visible and people can be so overwhelmingly adoring of them or can be so negative about them.

DZENGA: Yes.

NELSON: And normally just a student on campus doesn't have those ends of the spectrum.

DZENGA: Yeah. The spotlight is quite big, and they need a bit of guidance.

NELSON: Yes. Yes, there was a student, I'll just give you an example. I won't even name what sport it was, but there was a student who was late to class all the time. And this is really true. The student was really speaking the truth. And so, the coach called him in and said, you can't be late to class. You know, you're going to hurt your grade and that's going to hurt your position on the team and you're not going to want that. And so, the student said, well, coach, the problem is

everybody wants to get my autograph. So, when they see me coming to class, they want to get my autograph. And you've told me that I always have to be obliging to people who want to get my autograph or to say hi to me or shake my hand, so it always makes me late to class. The coach said, look, you got to put it in perspective. And he was honestly, he wasn't just making that up, I don't think. He was honestly saying, as an 18-year-old boy, that was his interpretation. And so, he was late to class, so it was hurting him and he didn't even think about it. Yeah.

DZENGA: He was doing the right thing. Oh, that's quite an experience. Well, you've done a lot, and I'm just wondering, so what do you feel like is your legacy here at Barrett?

NELSON: My legacy? I don't really feel like anything is my legacy because everything that happens here during the time I was here was a team effort. I didn't do anything by myself. I always did it with other people. And Dean Jacobs and I work very closely together on everything. I would say that one of the things that has changed in Barrett during the time I'm here is that every time we make a decision, the mantra, the understanding, what's front of everybody's mind is what's in the best interest of the students. That's changed at a big university.

DZENGA: How has that changed?

NELSON: Well, at a big university, any bureaucracy, federal government, any bureaucracy, big company, there's lots of rules, and people are socialized to follow the rules and to consult the rules. So, if you want to drop a class, there's a set of rules about that.

DZENGA: Yes.

NELSON: Right? So, what happens in many bureaucracies in most places is people just look up the rule, and then they say, well, actually, you see you missed the deadline by two days, so we're not going to be able to drop you from that class, right? That's a terrible way to operate with young people. Maybe it's a terrible way to operate with everybody, but it's a terrible way with young people, in part because of what I was just saying. Young people are learning how to make good decisions while they're in college, so that's true at ASU too. You know, there's a set of rules and you consult the rules and then you tell people what the rules are. We here have an entirely different mantra, which we evolved over the time that I was here. I don't, I would never say I evolved it, I made it happen. I was just part of, I was the, I was the, one of the voices saying every time what's in the best interest of the students. So, you may come in and want to drop a class and we'll talk to you about that and find out why you need to drop that class. So, I had a student come in to say she wanted to drop a class because she got a B on the first test. I said, that's no reason. That's not a reason, right? Because you can raise that up to an A plus if you want to. You know, don't, let that change the direction of your life. Anyway, so she couldn't drop it.

DZENGA: You wouldn’t let her, right?

NELSON: I wouldn’t, I wouldn’t agree to help her, right? Another student could come in with an entirely different set of reasons. And I would say, absolutely, this makes sense. So,

everybody's not treated the same in terms of the rules. Everybody's treated the same in terms of us doing what's in their best interest. And that understanding of their best interest comes from talking to them, not from me sitting here thinking, well, what you need is, but us understanding together what it is that you need. and moving in that direction. So that is, I wouldn't say that's my legacy, but that certainly is a legacy of, that Barrett leaves at ASU always. The leadership, the team that's been here has made that happen. I think if you talk to anybody on staff now, this wasn't the case when I came, but now they would all say the same thing.

DZENGA: So, it's fair to say that even though you don't consider it your personal legacy, but the spirit of team building and always putting the student first is something that you contributed in at Barrett, and even though ASU is this big university, it still lives on.

NELSON: Yes. I would say. Well, you know, legacy is a tough thing. You say, I can say, if you ask me, well, what's the legacy of my research? There's certain things that I wrote about it and published about it. So that's there, even though still that's team effort. But in an organization like this, where you can't have a legacy if the other people in the organization are not on the same page with you, not for you, but with you. And so, legacies are funny that way, I think.

DZENGA: But that's how they're built too, no?

NELSON: Yeah, well, people say that it's their legacy, but I don't think so. I mean, you know, Michael Crow might say, this is my legacy, but really, it's not his. It's his whole, it's the whole team of people that made that happen.

DZENGA: Well, thank you so much, Dr. Nelson. So, I'm going to move on a little bit further and ask you, what are you most proud of about Barrett?

NELSON: Oh, the students. That's easy. The students.

DZENGA: What they've done, where they are, which students, how do you mean that?

NELSON: Yes, what they've done, where they are. You know, the students in Barrett, I don't know whether, it's partly that students come into Barrett because they want to make a difference in their lives, other people's lives. They want to, they have a vision, they want to do this or that. They don't necessarily end up doing this or that, but they have a drive. Or maybe it's that some come into Barrett and they find a drive. But every student leaving Barrett seems to have something that they want to do that's important. And it could be important for their community, for science, for justice, for the state, the nation, the country, the world, the climate. But they leave having that. And it's what drives students to complete their thesis when they are sick and tired of it. And they just want to graduate because it really is something that is important. And I'm incredibly proud that our students are, in that way, so accomplished and believed that they're going to take over the world because it's time for someone. It's time for change. And our students are really well prepared for that. Across the spectrum, some of our students are incredibly conservative. Some of them are incredibly liberal. I don't mean that I favor one end or the other

of anything. Some of them are very science-oriented. Some of them can't stand science. I've had them in the same classes. But they all are doing something important.

DZENGA: Well, that's something to be proud of, yes?

NELSON: Yeah.

DZENGA: So, after all these years, 15 years? That's a long time. And you've moved on. And now how do you see the future of Barrett?

NELSON: Well, I think that- I think that because Barrett is such a team-oriented college, we have the ability to move to whatever's important. So, when we realized some things are important, we moved to it. We realized that students needed funding to do research. We moved to it. We realized that students needed research opportunities with faculty and moved to it. I think we realized a couple of years ago that students needed much more exposure to the other, I'll call it, I'm an anthropologist, so I'll just call it the other in anthropology. To people and places other than themselves and their own experiences. And even if a student has been to six places in the world, well, there are six thousand, million more places they could be.

DZENGA: They could go-

NELSON: And so, it's so extremely important that students get experiences outside of themselves and outside of even their safety zone. So how do you do that? For some students, they're just afraid of it. So, you need to have some ways to help them not be afraid. For example, one of the things I haven't, I never had a chance to develop, but what I wanted to develop, was a travel abroad course where it was just a week. The travel was a week. The course was a semester. So, you take a course starting at the beginning of a semester and you study a place. We'll call it New York City.

DZENGA: Yes.

NELSON: Or, you know, or Singapore.

DZENGA: Yes.

NELSON: We'll take Singapore. So, you study Singapore. And the way you study it is that the person teaching the course, me, I've identified people in Singapore who will, each week, one of them, Skype in with our students. So, our students will read about what that person does. It could be somebody who is a boot maker, then somebody who's a politician, somebody who owns a vegetable stand, somebody. So, for the whole first half of the course, you Skype in and talk to these people in Singapore, learn about them.

DZENGA: Yes.

NELSON: And then right in the middle of the semester, you go to Singapore and you meet them all face to face and you talk to them. You understand that, you get to even better understand their

lives. Then you come back and then you write about those aspects of Singapore and your own, how that affects your own personal experience of travel. and exposure to other people in other ways. I never got to develop that. I proposed it. I tried to get a grant because it's the travel part. You have to have a grant for it because you want anybody in Barrett to be able to go. I mean, only 20 at a time, but you don't want people to be eliminated from it because of their funding. And it tends to be true that people on the lower income levels have had less travel. So, they will tend to be more reticent to travel. So that's why this is a great course for them, but you have to have the money for them to travel. Anyway, I think that Barrett needs to go more and more in that direction. We need to expand the global experience of our students, and we need to make it more. easily possible for everybody to do that. That's a big challenge. That's a big, big funding challenge, but something I think that is extremely important.

DZENGA: Well, I love that you keep- Well, I love that you used the word we, even though you've moved on. My question would be, why do you still care about that?

NELSON: Oh, my goodness, well I'll be very candid. As I moved into my 60s, my mid-60s, I thought, when am I going to retire? Why would I retire? And so, I thought, well, what's going to happen is I'm just going to get cranky. I'm going to get tired of the things, you know, in any job and, you know, any group of people you work with, there are people who are annoying.

DZENGA: Yes.

NELSON: Right? And so, in order to make things work, you don't let that get under your skin. But I thought, oh, it'll just get under my skin more and more. I'll get annoyed with people, students, staff, faculty. I'll just think, oh, gosh, this again. I never did. I never did. I kept getting up in the morning and saying, I love going to work. I love going to work. Not every second. You know, there's challenging things. And so, I realized if I decide to retire because I don't like my job, I'll never retire. And so, I had to come up with some other reason. No, I had other reasons to. And I can talk about that, but that's not about Barrett. But so, Barrett is, I believe so deeply in Barrett. I believe in what it provides to students, the way it treats students, the way that students have such a voice in the Barrett experience. I love that. And I'll always be, I'll always say we are doing this because I'll always feel like I'm part of it, even if I'm not actively directing parts of it. And the same thing, you know, I've never been, I've been an academic for 40 years. More than 40 years.

DZENGA: That's a reasonable time. Not frightening.

NELSON: Just remember that so when you could say, I've been an academic for 40 years. And I've never been in a college where everybody in the college, all the faculty are here because they love working with students. All the staff are here because they love working with students. We don't always agree on everything, just like a family squabbles. But they all do- it's always a team effort in the best search for the students. And so, what could be better? And I support it

completely. And I'm still part of it, just lurking in the shadows, you know, look up and I'll be in the corner.

DZENGA: No, that's amazing that you're here and you're telling us all this at Barrett at 30, so you're still here.

BOYCE-JACINO: Can I ask a follow-up question? I was wondering, that reminded me of something you said earlier about wanting, like imagining The Human Event for everybody at ASU. And again, when you were talking about the faculty, Honors Faculty Advisors and sort of communicating and integrating Barrett with the rest of the university. So, I was wondering sort of how you see that aspect of Barrett going forward, this relationship between Barrett and the rest of the university and what kind of, yeah, how you think that will change, what you would like to see with it, and what your thoughts on it are?

NELSON: With The Human Event or just in general?

BOYCE-JACINO: Just in general, yeah.

NELSON: I think that having this big network of Faculty Honors Advisors is very valuable for, and it's not just valuable for the students. It's great for the students, but it's really valuable for the college, for the understanding of the college. There's a lot of misunderstanding that can be competition. Rarely does Barrett ever see itself standing in competition with any other college. They just don't feel that way about us. And we don't feel that way about any college. We'll help any college with whatever goals there are, as long as it's got students in mind. So given that platform, I think that we could significantly expand research and internship opportunities for students with faculty because that one-on-one is absolutely critical, and it should start early. Not necessarily as freshmen, because freshmen need to get their feet on the ground sometimes. And some of them are ready, but many of them are not. But we could expand the opportunities for students to reach. The other thing that we could do is to, if the university were willing to think this way, this is the harder one. Our faculty, who are so good at teaching small seminars, we would be one of them. They’re so good at it, could teach other faculty of the university. We could have workshops here. We could partner with faculty of other departments to say, you want your department to have something that's Human Event-like? Let's co-teach. Just one class to get it started to see how that is. And then let other faculty in the department sit in on it and see how it goes and see what happens with the students. Because once they see that the students are going to go from here to here in one semester, they're going to want their students to be like that, right? They're going to want that maturity of thinking to happen for their students, too, because it's, frankly, easier to teach people.

DZENGA: That's true.

NELSON: But I think that's a future that we could really make a difference in. That's what I got the opportunity when I was at the end of being in Barrett in May to meet with Michael Crow.

And he said, what would, you know, give me some advice. And I said, Human Event for everybody.

BOYCE-JACINO: I love that.

NELSON: He said, how would you do that? I said, well, I have some ideas if you're ever interested.

BOYCE-JACINO: That's great.

DZENGA: That's amazing. So actually, I'm going to just ping off what you're talking about, the proposal that you had just before you left. Why do you think it would be important for Barrett students specifically to learn about, say, people in Singapore and how they're living their lives and then write about it?

NELSON: Why do I think that kind of seminar is important?

DZENGA: Yeah, like what do the students then get out of it other than just talking to the students?

NELSON: Well, there's two important things at least. One is for students who are reticent to travel, having the opportunity to get to know people who are at a place before they go so that there's more comfort in going to that place, seeing how people are living by Skyping with them, seeing how they're living there. That's valuable for a lot of students. But secondly, getting to know somebody who lives in a different environment from your own, who thinks in a different way from the way you think, and who lives and works in a different way from what you've experienced, profoundly changes people's lives. A lot of students, when they go on and travel abroad, will come back and say, wow, that's changed my life. I didn't realize this or that. I'm thinking you came from Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe to the United States. Didn't that change your life significantly?

DZENGA: Absolutely. I'm sitting here talking to you.

NELSON: It's just, there aren't other classroom experiences. You can study, you could take a class on the history and culture of Singapore, but it's not the same as actually talking to someone, going to where they live, and that just really changes people. And that kind of change, I don't see any downside of that. That kind of change is important.

DZENGA: Absolutely.

NELSON: Especially, I was going to say especially today, but it's always been, through my lifetime, this has been true. People who don't have experiences outside of their- where they grow up…

DZENGA: Their communities?

NELSON: Their families, their communities, tend not to appreciate the perspectives and challenges of other people. And we need that. We really need that.

DZENGA: Why? Why do we need that?

NELSON: Why do we? Because when people don't appreciate the perspectives of others, they lose the richness that can be part of their thinking about whatever their problems are. Take climate change, for example. If we don't appreciate the experiences of people in other parts of the world with respect to pollution, water, just weather, then our only ideas about solutions come from our- come from here, just come from what we experience here in Phoenix, Arizona.

DZENGA: We are less accommodating.

NELSON: And less aware, really, of what it is that climate change represents. We only know what it represents here. So, then our solutions are narrow and less successful.

DZENGA: Absolutely. Absolutely. So, what would you tell someone new or that is considering coming to Barrett?

NELSON: Oh, well they couldn't make a better choice. Here's part of what I used to say when I was, I did a lot of recruiting in California, and I grew up in Northern and Southern California. And so, I know the big UC schools very well. I grew up in Los Angeles, I grew up in the Bay- and then later in the Bay Area, near San Francisco, I know Cal. And there are lots of really great schools, great universities, just phenomenal with Nobel laureates and all these famous people. But as an undergraduate student, before you decide to go anywhere, you have to say, what do I have access to?

DZENGA: That's true.

NELSON: So, University of Chicago, for example, has, I don't know how many Nobel laureates, lots of them. And they advertise that. You want to come to college and be, you know, cheek to jowl with a Nobel laureate, come to University of Chicago. Well, undergraduates don't work with those Nobel laureates. Whereas here in Barrett, that is exactly what we do. We get students in the offices of, in the labs of, in the classrooms of people who are at the very top of their field. One of the Nobel laureates here at ASU teaches honors courses. Only honors courses. He's phenomenal. And he works really closely with students. I think he has seven honors theses this year. He's an amazing person. That wouldn't happen in another place. It wouldn't happen in Cal. It's a great university, but undergraduate students. It's not about undergraduate students there. It's about postdocs, PhD students and researchers. So, go there when you're a graduate student, but don't go there as an undergrad. Come to a place like this where you really know you have access to all those wonderful things that a big university can offer.

DZENGA: And where the people have your interest at heart, the faculty.

NELSON: That's right. It's true. It's true.

DZENGA: Well, that has happened to me, so that's why I was asking. What should I tell another student, and it's an enriching experience.

NELSON: Good, I'm glad it is for you.

DZENGA: Oh, well, Dr. Nelson, thank you so much for your participation today. And if you have any more thoughts to share later, please feel free to reach out. And if you have any questions about this interview or our 30th anniversary project, please contact Vice Dean Foote, she was here just a while ago, or Rachel DiDonna. And I think that we gave you the details on that form. Yes. So, thank you so much. It was such a pleasure talking to you.

BOYCE-JACINO: Thank you so much for coming.

NELSON: What fun. I was on the edge of my chair.

BOYCE-JACINO: Wonderful. So, yep.