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THOSE WERE THE DAYS:
GRAND VALLEY IN THE SIXTIES

Roberta Simone

When I arrived in 1965 with a new Ph.D., I thought and appreciated that there was nowhere else in the world where someone like me could expect to teach Shakespeare in one term (and not be expected to publish a book at the end of it) and Greek Literature in another, and Virgil and Dante or Chaucer, Spenser, and Milton in others, and so on, down through much of the English curriculum. Of course, I had to take my turn with the required freshman course, but that was called, "The Art of Self-Expression," so much nicer than "Composition," which I had taught exclusively, several sections at a time, for three years each at Bowling Green State University (Ohio), and the University of Illinois (Urbana). In my first year at Grand Valley, I taught just one five-credit class each quarter. How was that possible? Each professor would lecture to sixty or seventy-five students in a big hall twice a week, then break the class down to three, four, or five discussion sections, which met twice a week, and then into bi-weekly tutorials of three to five students. Though teaching only one course at a time may sound like a cushy job, it was not.

In addition to teaching, we spent a lot of time in a numbing number of committee meetings and in Friday afternoon faculty assemblies, constructing what the college would become. We argued about what liberal education meant and how best to implement it, what new programs and new courses to establish, what students should know and even what kind of recreation would implement that. We were serious and responsible teachers, full of enthusiasm for the college, for our students, for our profession. We were a young faculty, and there were no older cynics around to say, "We tried that once, and it failed," or otherwise to dampen our spirits. Being at Grand Valley in those early years was exhausting, but exhilarating—and also fun!

The college was small enough so that I knew all the faculty and all the staff. We'd have great interdisciplinary parties on weekends (like Carl Kobernik's annual Halloween costume fest) and lunches at noon, sometimes eight of us grouped around a table meant to seat four in the Grand Traverse Room on the second floor of Lake Michigan Hall, augmenting brown bag lunches with soup, coffee and cookies from vending machines. Later, we ate somebody's home-cooked meals in a short-lived dining room for faculty in Seidman House, and even later, at an even shorter-lived café in what is now the Grand River Inn, run by a few faculty wives. Our conversations were usually academic: somebody generally brought a good student bloopers along: e.g. about "toe-headed boys" or "students staying up late and raping with each other," or some favorite author's deserving to win the "Pullet Surprise." We even had an interdisciplinary limerick contest, in which the Political Science Department beat the English Department hands down.

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Although nostalgic, I cannot be entirely romantic about the smallness of the college. There was cacophony as well as harmony. There was some snarling between the "pure liberal arts" and the "professional ed" types. And although the French Department had only three members, two of them (European born-and-bred, native French speakers—a coloratura soprano and a retired colonel) would communicate with each other at department meetings only through the third, an Iowa-nurtured youngster with a new M.A. The latter returned to graduate school and ended up as a Professor of Social Work.

Students in general were, or seemed to be, more respectful in those early years, and classes were more formal. Students were called Mr. Van Dyke and Miss Jones, not Mike and Deb. Professors were called Professor or Doctor and were thought to be more knowledgeable than were taxi-drivers. Moreover, they were not called upon to pussy-foot around student egos. A few examples may serve to illustrate. 1) A certain history professor, in returning mid-term exams to his classes, attached signed withdrawal slips to all those that had been given an F. A student complained that he had attended every lecture and discussion section, read all the assignments, and studied four hours for the exam, and yet had flunked it. The professor looked at him sympathetically: "You did all that and still failed the exam? Gosh, you must be really stupid." 2) Another History professor opened a discussion section with a question on the day's reading assignment, read all the assignments, and studied four hours for the exam, and yet had flunked it. The professor looked at him sympathetically: "You did all that and still failed the exam? Gosh, you must be really stupid." 3) A student told his English professor that a mistake must surely have been made in giving his paper a C. The professor looked through the paper and said, "By Golly, you're right; this is a D paper." 4) A visiting professor from England felt pestered by a student who stopped her in the hall to ask if she had graded their papers yet. "If I had finished the bloody things," she responded, "do you think I should want to keep them?"

Student evaluations were used not as a basis for faculty contract renewal or promotion, but rather for faculty edification—and sometimes amusement. We could also read each other's at will. Their comments would range from, "He should wear more modern ties," to "The textbook was not relevant" (this for a Shakespeare course in which the text was his collected works). I read student comments about the most revered and distinguished professor on campus, Harry Jellema—a master of the Socratic method—whose class I had observed in order to learn how to do it better myself. Samples: "I don't know what he wants." and "If you don't agree with him, he marks you down." Sound familiar? But my all-time favorite came from a class, in which Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* had been taught: "I didn't pay good tuition money to read about giants copulating."

We all have favorite student stories. Mine come from those early years. A freshman submitted this thesis for his essay: "Football is a contact sport." After several sessions with him in which I again explained the difference between fact and opinion, and that a thesis had to be an opinion, he proudly handed me his revision. His new thesis was "Hockey is a contact sport." Another student of mine was having trouble with *The D Theory* of Erasmus Quinque. He replied; "The readin..."
trouble with *The Divine Comedy*. "Is the reading too difficult?" I asked. "No, no," she replied; "the reading is easy. It's the understanding that's hard."

But we had excellent students too, excellent non-majors in our general education courses (like Cindy Hüll, now in the Anthropology Department), and excellent majors, several of whom went on to get Ph.D.'s (even though they may not have done well on the specialty part of the GRE's—for we didn't teach toward that exam) and to win awards for excellence in teaching and in scholarship. Those I know tell me how important their years at Grand Valley were to them. Sharon Whitehill is another who came back to teach at Grand Valley.

We had an active theatre performance group before we had a Theatre Department. Al Baker of the Chemistry Department and Lou Rus and Bob Chamberlain from the English Department together directed the student/faculty performance group "Les Visages" (meaning "faces" or "masks") for the first three years in such contemporary plays as *The Bald Soprano* by the Romanian Eugene Ionesco. One of the student actors, Richard Dean, later did the costuming for the film *The Cotton Club*; another, Dick Haisma, went on to dance for a national ballet company. This group also performed at the annual Arts on Campus festival in the spring. In 1966 the festival featured the world premiere of my translation of a sixteenth-century Italian comedy—*La Lena or The Bawd*, which had been part of my dissertation, and I was thrilled to see it on stage. For this performance, we needed a professional director and found Laura Salazar, the wife of Hugo, who taught Spanish. Laura set about laying down the rules for the actors like a drill sergeant: e.g., "You miss two rehearsals and you're out." "Please, please," I had to tell her; "you don't know how hard it was to persuade my colleagues to take part." Hundreds of people from on and off campus came to Lake Huron Hall to view Gil Davis, Lou Rus, Bill Oldenburg, Ralph Wiltse, Don Hall, Ted Young, and John Freund in black tights, slippers, and befeathered felt hats. After the performance, there was some question of its propriety for conservative West Michigan; today, it could probably be performed by a local junior high without comment.

Grand Valley sponsored its first interdisciplinary conference in 1967—the Erasmus Quinquecentennial—largely through the initiative of Dr. Quirinus Breen, an old friend of Harry Jellemars, who after having retired from the University of Oregon and been a member of the Princeton Institute for Advanced Studies, came to Grand Valley to spend a few years in the History Department. Professors Oskar Kristeller from Columbia University and Deno Geanakoplos from the University of Illinois gave the keynote lectures; Grand Valley, Hope and Calvin faculty members read papers, and Grand Valley students read selections from Erasmus's works and provided vocal and instrumental music. At dinner that night (served in the Commons) I sat next to one of the presenters, a historian who had newly arrived from England and was teaching at Hope. I was stunned by the arrogance he displayed throughout the evening. With his Oxford accent, he sneered at the provincialism of West Michigan, belittled its institutions of higher education, and denigrated every conference presentation but his own. Finally, exuding utter contempt, he announced: "I certainly came here under false pretenses." About a week later, we learned that indeed he
had. While the conference organizers were trying to collect the conference papers for publication, they learned that the man had disappeared, that he had been discovered to be an impostor, not only of a professor, but earlier and elsewhere of a medical doctor and a lawyer. To this day I marvel at his chutzpah!

As young faculty members, some of us were, yes, well, I suppose we could have been considered naughty. I even have it on good authority that our present, august provost was not above playing tricks on the plant manager or on Vice-President Phil Buchen, who went around explicit orders that coffee could be made only where there was a sink. I must admit, however, that Glenn never took part in the lotteries we set up before faculty assemblies on how long the academic dean would take in his opening comments. One of my favorite metaphors comes from a faculty assembly. When it was announced that educational studies would be transferred from the auspices of the Psychology Department to its own "institute," a professor of Russian stated: "You have just pounded the last nail into the coffin of liberal arts at Grand Valley." This same professor, having grown up poor in inner-city Detroit, was overwhelmed by the president's lawn party at which champagne and martinis literally flowed out of battery-run gadgets: all you had to do when your cup was empty was hold it under the stream of your choice. In his most exaggerated Russian accent, he announced, "Welcome to the people's punchbowl." And later he pointed out that the necktie of one of board members in attendance probably cost more than his whole suit. At an earlier one of these parties, such faculty garb had been tested for its durability in the presidential swimming pool.

We had a faculty newsletter in the early years (sort of like today's Forum), which did not last long, because we used it so much for spoofs. Its purpose was to note awards, publications, participations, etc. of the faculty. One day it announced: "Bill Oldenburg has recently been elected to the Buccaneer Boosters. Congratulations, Bill." Whoever the editor was didn't realize that one could "boost" the Buccaneers (the Grand Haven High School football team) simply by buying a button, which Bill had done. Succeeding issues announced similar "honors" as well as faculty lectures that would not take place: e.g., a presentation on family planning by a thirty-year-old who was the father of five children. Eventually, the editor caught on, and publication ceased for a while.

Our energy, however, also produced some exciting intellectual events. During a couple of summers, Grand Valley hosted high-achieving high-school students in a program called HIFYS. To these we brought such prominent writers as X. J. Kennedy and Anthony Burgess, the latter of whom, at an evening party given in his honor, played the piano and sang Tom Lehrer songs with me: we both knew all the words. Perhaps everybody's favorite presentation was Political Science Professor Bob Carley's. He would be introduced to the audience as a professor who had just flown in from Germany, and for an hour he would shout in a German accent and pound his fist on the lectern as he extolled fascism. Later, differently appareled and introduced as a visitor from Moscow, he'd growl out statements in a Russian accent about the superiority of communism. The high school students, completely taken in by his performances, would be roused to vociferous counter-arguments.

The Pit in Seidman was a carpeted stairs as seen before a place where speaking Department gave poor well attended by but production of eighteen Loretta Wasserman. Another time, Laura Happened in Irukis choosing romance performance was Max and I can remember from Moo-cows.

By 1969, the English School of General professors, but tutors were reserved for them. Some rumor that an anthropologist did the morning advanced weird "happenings" involved and body painting. A colleague of mine that he couldn't have common long hair and doing on campus? Many would wear a crewcut, Aur... Kaufman drove his r... Petoskey stone, and... Kaufman drove his nw... Could call Don (I have... Certainly, the sixties heard.

One sunny morning the balcony of Lake Superior, we hear opinions on the why supporting the U.S. as speaker, the popular withdrawal slips. Instead into our hearts. The ancestor and faculty unrest of the National Guard of serious suspension of classes to the House for discussion. As attendance passed another students who wanted (then called "teach-in") jumped up and exclaimed...
The Pit in Seidman House was a cozy fireplace surrounded on three sides with carpeted stairs as seats, where students could sit and study or chat, etc. It was also a place where speakers could give intimate talks and some of us in the English Department gave poetry readings and performances of readers' theater, which were well attended by both students and faculty. Once, Bill Oldenburg directed a production of eighteenth-century British writer Henry Fielding's *Tom Thumb*, in which Loretta Wasserman played Queen Dollalolla and I played Princess Huncamunca. Another time, Laura Salazar directed us in the contemporary Soviet play, *It Happened in Irkutsk*, a stirring patriotic drama about Siberian factory workers choosing romance with their tractors, rather than with each other. A third performance was *MacBird*, a biting satire on the Kennedy assassination: the only line I can remember from it is Ted Kennedy's, as he arrives in Texas: "Look, Bobby! Moo-cows!"

By 1969, the English Department was suddenly no longer "cutting edge." The School of General Studies was established: its professors were not called professors, but tutors, and it seemed that experimentation and eccentricity would be reserved for them. Still, the main college retained a few eccentrics. There was a rumor that an anthropologist was starring in *Moo-cows*. I played Princess Dollalolla and some of us in the introductory art class, complete with toilet paper strewn and body painting. A middle-aged, casual visitor to the campus complained bitterly to me that he couldn't tell the boy-students from the girl-students, because of their common long hair and jeans. I wondered why he should care? What was this guy doing on campus? Meanwhile, in the English Department, Tony Parise continued to wear a crewcut, Aurele Durocher still sported his string ties clasped with a shiny Petoskey stone, and Bob Chamberlain still had chalk all over his suitcoat. But Lee Kaufman drove his motorcycle to school. And we had a new president, whom we could call Don (I had always called President Zumberge, "President Zumberge"). Certainly, the sixties had finally hit the cornfields.

One sunny morning with Arlo Guthrie's "Alice's Restaurant" playing from the balcony of Lake Superior Hall, a small group gathered around the Library steps to hear opinions on the Vietnam War. A math professor was roundly booted for supporting the U.S. involvement. Everybody expected a rebuttal from the next speaker, the popular young professor with the five children and the mid-term withdrawal slips. Instead, he proposed that all wars would end if we accepted Jesus into our hearts. The audience was stunned into silence. Later, in response to student and faculty unrest over the U.S. invasion of Cambodia and the killings by the National Guard of students at Kent State, the president announced a two-day suspension of classes so that the students and faculty could gather in the Field House for discussions and workshops. At a morning assembly, the hundreds in attendance passed a resolution that granted "political asylum" to any Kent State students who wanted to transfer to Grand Valley. At one of the afternoon workshops (then called "teach-ins"), one of our most mild-mannered and soft-spoken professors jumped up and exclaimed, "The faculty has got to get its shit together."

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When the war was over, Grand Valley was blessed with a number of Vietnamese refugee students, some of the best students I have ever taught. While our other students wrote essays about crying at high school graduation or triumphing at winning the game at the last moment for their high school team, these Vietnamese students wrote accounts of escaping through the jungle with a younger sibling on one's back and a sockful of rice in one's hand. The content of these papers was incredibly moving, but even more striking was the remarkable control of the content in their early mastery of the language—the precision in diction, the flourish of style.

As the sixties came to an end, so did the institution as we had known it; it had been too good to last, mostly because it was too economically inexpedient. Soon we were teaching more classes, having fewer tutorials, and preparing students for getting jobs. The student body just about doubled each year, there were more options in required courses, and curricula changed so often that I was less knowledgeable at the beginning of the year about what was required for students than a newly hired faculty member was. The faculty just about doubled each year too, so that on top of all our other duties, we seemed always to be reading applications and interviewing candidates. Soon, I was seeing more unfamiliar faces at President Lubbers' fall kickoff parties than familiar ones.

I will leave the "scandals" and the urban myths (campus myths?) of the early years to the editor of The National Inquirer and end as I began: by reminding especially the new young Turks that we were serious, hard-working, and committed to making Grand Valley, if not exactly what it is today, at least, a first-class public college, and by asking them not to be too impatient with us if we say, "We tried that once, and it didn't work."

The Arts on Car

In addition to music, we offered voice different from the Theatre Department's drama club "Les V Soprano in 1964 and I came to Grand Valley to teach Spanish at C and to collaborate on a play for the next year, The Devil popped up in the faculty and staff meeting. The following year, an Ann Arbor article I had been reading appeared as a feature in its own hand at a live performance: The Devil popped up in the audience. Pride, could possibly appear as further theatre forms. Finally, I won the award to jazz. I won the award to jazz. 