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Michael Dixon and his Moment of Unexpectedly Doctorate Material

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WMU Alum Michael Dixon

Thursday, Jan. 12, 2023 at 11:45 AM

In-Person at the Zhang Legacy Collections Center

Cassie: Okay, all right, today is January 12, and this is Cassie Cottridge here with Michael Dixon, right?

Michael: Dixon, yeah.

Cassie: Dixon, okay, and could you spell your name?

Michael: Yeah, the Michael or the Dixon? Dixon, right?

Cassie: The Dixon, yeah.

Michael: D-I-X-O-N.

Cassie: Great, and okay, so how are you associated with WMU? How did you come to WMU?

Michael: How did I come here? Well, I graduated from high school at East Detroit High School on the far east side of the state. And everybody that graduated from there was going to Eastern, and I go, I'm going to go someplace else.

So I went to Western. (Both laugh) That's pretty good. There was a lot of kids in my graduating class, too, like 600, 700. So there was only five of us that went to Western. And I picked that mostly because I got to do something different than high school because that's what Eastern wants.

Everybody ran home on the weekend because Eastern is close to East Detroit. Nobody, they just came home and I go, no, it wasn't that I wanted to get away from my parents or anything. I just wanted to get away.

Cassie: Reflecting back on that decision, are you glad that you chose Western?

Michael: Yes, very much so. It's been a fantastic experience for me. I mean, all the way through undergrad, working through my masters, the professors, the association- I was in a fraternity in undergraduate school and they're not so popular now, so that really helped make lifelong friends from the fraternity. There are still probably 40 of us that get together with our spouses in Sarasota every other year for a long weekend.

We have a really nice weekend plan where we do a variety of things with nice dinners, and we end it Saturday night with sail out into the ocean for dinner, cruise out in the ocean. So we've been doing that for probably the last ten or twelve years.

We get together every year at homecoming and we meet and have a tailgate behind the press box there. And then, now that some of us are getting older and the weather doesn't work so well, there's also a group that just meets at a pub and has pizza and beer and stuff.

So, yeah, from a collegial point of view, it's been excellent. From an academic point of view, I just feel blessed with the professors that I met and I had the opportunity to continue a relationship with. Starting with Mike Moscow, who was the... I don't know what his title was, but he was the director of Business Education area?

He wasn't the dean, but something similar to that, okay. I maintained relationship with him through my doctoral work, he was undergrad. Welky, Dr. Welky, he was an accounting professor, Cannon, who was a marketing professor, and Dr. Jean Booker was the finance person. Not my finance, but the statistical person, research person on my dissertation, okay?

So even when I was over on east campus, I kept track to all these guys. And then I had my bachelor's and master's, and I was teaching for a few years. I was teaching accounting. Accounting was my main emphasis that on marketing. And then I went into business education because I kept sitting there thinking that I really don't want to look at numbers all the time. I kind of like to interact with people, and what I do now is accounting.

Cassie: Oh, really? (Both laugh) So, you look at numbers!

Michael: I have to look at numbers, yeah. But I do a lot more outside on the leadership part of the thing. But anyway, so I went through there.

I started my master's program, and I kept in touch with Mike Moscow. And one year when I was laid off, I went back to him and I said, "Have you got a graduate internship that you can give me? I'm laid off, and I'd be happy to work towards a specialist or something like that and do an internship, teach a class or two for you."

And they paid a few bucks, and he kind of looked at me and he said, "Now, your doctoral material." And I go, "You don't have a doctoral program here?" He actually picked up the phone and called Educational Leadership Department in Sangren Hall. This is what he said when he answered the phone.

He got a hold of Dr Weaver there, I believe it was Dr. Weaver. He says, "I have my next doctoral candidate is sitting across from me right now." And said, "You need to get to know this guy." And they said, "Well, send him over!" He says, "Yeah, I'll do that. We're going to lunch first." (Both laugh)

Cassie: Wow.

Michael: And I got the fellowship. I mean, it was a full ride for two years. It was a Mott fellowship, you know Mott is, founder GM. Okay, CS Mott, he founded GM. Okay, so it was a fellowship through them that came through the university, and I got to study leadership.

We did leadership training activities. We brought people in from throughout the country, and we usually did them in Flint, mostly because the Mott Foundation was in Flint, and we'd bring them in and did leadership trainings. Those were part of my internships. My dissertation was a challenge. They all are.

I've just had just fantastic experiences. When I got out, my career just took off on me. I can't be anything but thankful. I spent 27 years as chief financial officer in various school districts, Rochester and Troy. I worked in the private sector as a finance director. I have worked in the private sector, also as a financial consultant.

And then I started my own company about 14 years ago. And I do what's referred to as turnaround work, bankrupt, mostly municipalities, school districts specifically. And I get them turned around and get their finances squared away. That's where I get back into the accounting.

Cassie: Yeah.

Michael: I love this for a reason. So that's kind of that in a real quick nutshell. Some of the experiences I remember on East Campus were you never wanted to be there in the summer, and I was okay, because are you familiar with the campus?

Cassie: Yes.

Michael: Okay. Those old big windows that you have there, rolled windows, wooden ones that rolled up and it was hotter...

Cassie: They'd bake you in there?

Michael: Gosh, it was really warm, okay?

Cassie: Yeah.

Michael: And I remember my junior year, I really busted up my knee playing basketball, and I was on crutches, and I lived behind East Campus. You know where Walnut Street is? Down that hill?

Cassie: Yeah, so in the Vine neighborhood?

Michael: Yeah.

Cassie: Okay.

Michael: And trying to walk up all those stairs and crutches and your business law books were like that thick. Accounting books were thick, and they didn't have backpacks back then.

Cassie: Wow. Did you make it up? (Both laugh)

Michael: 45 minutes. Okay, that was interesting experience. I also remember one time my senior year I was taking- My marketing stuff was pretty much squared away, and I was

taking a lower level marketing class, it was advertising. And I'm going, this is kind of boring, okay? So I quit going to class, all right? And one day, in March... School used to get out, like, the third week in April for us, okay. And it was in March, and it was a beautiful day. I lived over on West Main where West Main and West Michigan come together, that old white house on the corner, okay? And I walked to campus, and I said, "Well, I'll go up to campus and see what's going on."

I go into my advertising class, and he was going on sabbatical in four weeks, it was the final day. My god, I never moved out of a place so fast in my life. I got home, I called him afterwards, made up some story. I think I told him I was in Detroit interviewing for a job, and I couldn't get back in time.

He said, "Hey that's fine, come on in after lunch." So for two and a half hours, I crammed my advertising book because they'd underline them. I got a B in a class. But that was a memorable story.

Cassie: So you got away with it?

Michael: Yeah, he just said that's fine. Back then, they didn't care. I mean, there's no way I got a kid associate that quickly with everybody else to get-

Cassie: Right.

Michael: And he didn't know because they never took attendance. The class had, like, 100 kids in it, so he didn't know whether I was there or not there. And I really hadn't been there probably in about month five, six weeks.

Cassie: Oh wow. (Both laugh)

Michael: You talk about being blessed. I go, Holy Toledo, I was sweating. Because I go, that's the last thing I need to do is get an E. And I can imagine me showing up the day that was on the exam or on the course portfolio for the final exam, and it was four weeks ago.

So anyway, those are kind of some memorable moments from East Campus. I loved North Hall. The library there, the business library. It was quiet. Those old spiral staircases that went up to the archives. It was quiet, easy place to study. It was Walnut Street where I was living was kind of a center point for a lot of my friends and stuff.

And the year before that, I lived in a fraternity house on South Street. So that was my haven, okay?

Cassie: Yeah. So you had classes in East Hall at all?

Michael: Yep, had east, west, most of the business education classes were in East Hall.

Cassie: Okay.

Michael: Okay, and West Hall was management, finance, accounting. North Hall was marketing and business law. Mostly marketing and business law. And the library was on the top floor. So I had all three halls. I was in all three of them. Done in all three of them.

Cassie: Do you remember anything else about East or West Hall?

Michael: Yeah. I mean, it's just old, rickety really-

Cassie: Hot?

Michael: Hot, yeah, in the summertime it was really, really hot. The access to the professors was one of the things that was really pleasing to me, because you could set an appointment up with them, and they were there.

Cassie: Right.

Michael: Okay, and they were easy to work with and amenable. I don't remember running into one of my business professors that was really kind of an incorrigible person or anything of that nature

Cassie: And were their offices near where the classes were?

Michael: Yeah, they're always in the building. Okay, the building that had the classes.

Yeah, so the accounting people would have been in West Hall. Business education would have been in East Hall. Marketing and business law profs would have been in North Hall.

Cassie: So physically, very easy to access as well.

Michael: Easy to access, and they had office hours. They were there during their office hours. So if you dropped in you'd see them. The only... I didn't have trouble with Booker on my dissertation, he had trouble with me on where I was going with it. Kind of, "Let me help you."

Cassie: Yeah. (Both laugh)

Michael: Okay, and he did help me, squared me away sometimes. Which was good, that's what he's there for. They're advisors that are on your committee to make sure that your dissertation is squared away and it gets published and microfilmed and sent to the University of Michigan libraries, so.

Cassie: So when you weren't busy with classes and your undergrad or writing your dissertation later on, what did you do in your free time?

Michael: Well, I was active in the fraternity, okay? And then one of the things that we did was a lot of whole variety of different things from homecoming activities, building floats and all that stuff. We had a fraternity sing competition in the fall after homecoming was over, where we had actually all the fraternities competed against each other in a sing.

And we had about 100 people in the fraternity, you had to have something like 95% of your people there, so you couldn't kick the people out that weren't any good. And I was a mouther because I'm tone deaf. So they used to put us up in the back and make us stand on, I was also taller.

And I can remember the director, every time Bill Miller and I were both standing next to each other, he'd go, "Will you two mouth it? Just mouth it. We can hear you, and we don't want to hear you."

Cassie: Oh no. (Both laugh)

Michael: Okay? And we go, yeah, okay, whatever.

Cassie: Yeah.

Michael: So we were always doing things. We did some civic activity related things, too. A lot of intermurals, football, basketball, softball, that type of stuff. Coached the girls football team. We did a whole variety of different activities. We always had something to do.

Cassie: Yeah.

Michael: Friday night, there was always a TG someplace, thank God it's Friday. Somebody had a keg of beer somewhere.

Cassie: Yeah. I just had one more question that I really wanted to ask, which was, what do you think impacted you the most during your time at Western, during your ten years at Western?

Michael: Can I give you two?

Cassie: Yes.

Michael: Okay, it would have been one, Dr. Moscow when I was sitting there talking to him about doing a graduate internship. And he said, no, you're doctoral material. And he called them. And I'm sitting there going, "I'm doctoral material?" It was kind of like that wasn't even on my horizon.

And they knew that they had some fellowships over there where I could go to school free, and they'd pay for it. And then they'd pay you a stipend every month, because while you're doing the research and things, they don't want you to work, because it distracts you from what you're doing.

There were six of us that started in the program, eight. I was the first to graduate, and I was only the first to graduate in a doctoral program because everybody else was married. So. I spent a lot of time at 8 o'clock on Sunday morning in Sangren Hall waiting for the librarian to open.

Cassie: You got at it.

Michael: Yeah, that was brutal.

Cassie: Yeah.

Michael: But that was a very memorable moment to me. And then when he told him, he said, I got your next doctoral candidate sitting across from me.

Cassie: Yeah.

Michael: And then Dr. Weaver was my chair of my dissertation committee, really guided me in directions that were the right directions when I would have been going right or left or something of that nature.

So, those two people really helped out my career, and I kept them. Eventually, Dr. Moscow became the provost for the university, so whenever I was in Kalamazoo I'd stop by and we'd go out and have lunch. And I'd see Dr. Weaver a couple of times a year. They're both, everybody's passed now, I'm not young.

So, I think those two things were the ones that shocked me was Moscow, and then Dr. Weaver's constant guidance set me where I need to go. And then when we kind of graduated, I got the certificate for the, it was like most improved but that's not what they called it.

It was the doctoral candidate that progressed the most. It was like the most Improved award-

Cassie: Right.

Michael: So from zero to ten, and everybody else already had an eight. I was really surprised that we had a couple of doctoral candidates from Australia and I cannot believe how smart those guys were.

I could not believe it. I just sat there, I'm in a different world here, how am I gonna get through this?

Cassie: And they were there at the same time as you?

Michael: Yeah, but that's a tight community. I mean, we used to have resident group seminars, everything was three and a half hours long.

And the problem with those seminars is there's six people in them. You got to prepare, you can't go sit there for three and a half hours without participating, so, you got to be ready to go.

Cassie: Yeah, right.

Michael: This isn't like, take Thursday night off for a Friday morning class.

Cassie: Yeah, or you don't show up for a while and cram the book in two hours, right? (Both laugh)

Michael: Yeah, that's true. But there was also so much help and support and guidance and things of that nature, so.

Cassie: Yeah, well, we're nearing the end of our time because I know you have a meeting at one.

Michael: Well, okay, I changed it to 1:10 because I know you're gonna be around a few minutes longer.

Cassie: Okay.

Michael: So I'm okay if you're okay.

Cassie: Yeah, did you have any last thoughts you wanted to share or anything we didn't touch on that you wanted to share?

Michael: I don't think so. North hall I told you about. North Hall, the steps on crutches were brutal. The windows...

Cassie: Yeah.

Michael: Double in there, half the time when they got them up, you couldn't get them down.

Cassie: Brutal, but beautiful, probably.

Michael: Yeah. Well, the whole campus, I mean, the whole East Campus because it sat up on top of everything, it still is-

Cassie: Very collegiate, yeah.

Michael: I had a friend of mine that went to the university high school there, though, which was part of East Hall. I think he graduated, one of my fraternity brothers graduated from there.

Cassie: Wow, just before it shut down, probably.

Michael: Yeah-

Cassie: Yeah, because it shut down in 67 or 66 or something.

Michael: He was a couple of years older than me. Yeah, it was before it shut down. So, I don't think so, I remember just having a lot of not only fun, but good friends. And I mentioned to you there's still a bunch of us, some of my best friends, other than my high school friends,

the people that I grew up with, with my neighborhood- Okay, and some are from Western. And we stay in contact on a regular basis and that you'd be thankful for your friends, what you have. I mean, seriously, that's what the world's all about.

Cassie: It gave you your career and lifelong friends, then it's-

Michael: Gosh, I would have never thought at 27 years old, I'd have a doctorate degree. And had never thought that I'd have a doctorate degree, it wasn't on my horizons whatsoever.

Cassie: Right.

Michael: And then, boom, boom, bachelor's, masters, and then the fellowship, and I'm gone. Then my world just took off, I was very fortunate. Very fortunate and thankful. Thankful for this university.

Cassie: Well, thank you so much for agreeing to talk to me today.

Michael: No problem. Sorry, we got messed up.

Cassie: That's all right, no, it's my fault, I didn't even look to see because I had so many virtuals back to back, and I was like, another virtual. And then I looked and you put in person, and I was like uh oh!

Michael: Okay. And I'm sorry I saw your note just because I was driving, I don't mess with my phone or my iPad.

Cassie: That's okay, I'm glad that we still got together then.

Michael: So, I'm I.

Cassie: We were able to fit it in, yeah.

Michael: We'd have done it probably one way or the other anyway.

Cassie: Yeah, right.

Michael: Is you getting some good stories?

Cassie: Yes, very good stories. Yeah, we've had graduates even from the forties.

Michael: Have you?

Cassie: Yes.

Michael: Oh good, good, because I was wondering, because some of my fraternity brothers, like Ross Dancotti and things of that nature are still in town. Ross, he's got to be 87 or something, so he'd have been fifty's.

Cassie: Yeah.

Michael: I don't know that I've got any fraternity brothers that are still with us from the 40s, but we do from the fifty's I know that, I do know that.

Cassie: Yeah, there are people, too, who went to the campus school, so the old training school that Western used to run-

Michael: Yeah.

Cassie: Elementary school. So we have people that went to the campus school and then University High and then went on to WMU, too. So they were just here for everything, yeah.

Michael: I know it was original that East Campus was the original campus-

Cassie: Yes, East Hall was the first building of the university.

Michael: It was the whole university. Yeah, it was 1903.

Cassie: Yeah, well, I think the building finally finished in 1907, because classes before that, they were borrowing, actually, from Kalamazoo College here.

Michael: Were they really?

Cassie: Buildings, yes.

Michael: Okay, I didn't know that, I did not know that.

Cassie: Yes.

Michael: Because we have a brunch at homecoming at the Kalamazoo Country Club, and we usually have somebody from the alumni association that comes in and talks to the group of us. Because the same 40 people that get together in Sarasota, we get together and have brunch with our wives and families and stuff at the country club. And the university usually sends somebody over.

Cassie: Really?

Michael: Yeah, and he plays trivia with us. He really does, about different things that happen at different points in times. And our historian in the fraternity, we had to just kick him out because-

Cassie: He knows, yeah. (Both laugh)

Michael: He used to just keep whipping out the answers before anybody can start thinking about what the question was.

Cassie: Yeah.

Michael: Yeah, cuz the only thing you'll win is a candy cane or something. Well, it's not that... he hands out a bunch of different Western paraphernalia, that type of stuff.

Cassie: Oh really? But yeah, there's been really great ones, and you would start to hear a lot more that's not in the written records or the photos. Like the tradition that you weren't truly a co-ed until you got kissed from the East Hall, yeah, facing the house.

Michael: That is true, that is true, I remember that.

Cassie: You do?

Michael: I remember the story. I mean, it wasn't that we believe that.

Cassie: Right, but it was a popular story. So there are stories like that. And we got to interview somebody who went to Western, and then he stayed on to be the assistant for president of Western. And he worked here for 50 years or so.

Michael: Holy cow.

Cassie: Yeah.

Michael: Was it he or she?

Cassie: He, yes.

Michael: Yeah, he's got some stories.

Cassie: Yes, he does, yeah. He was the personal assistant to President Miller at the time, but he met Sangren when he was a student so that he's met every single president except for Waldo, because he had passed when he started at Western.

But yeah, when he was a student, he met Sangren and then he worked for Miller, and then I think he has met every single president since then. But he worked under two or so presidents, yes, that was really cool.

Michael: Wow, I still remember our homecoming activities and the floats and stuff. That was all so much fun working on that stuff, putting it together.

Cassie: Yeah, such a big bang?

Michael: The whole thing was just so much, yeah. It was a lot bigger than it is now. We had a huge parade.

Cassie: Did they still have Parents Weekend, too, at the time?

Michael: Well, we had Parents Weekend and we had Dad's Weekend.

Cassie: You had a Dad's weekend, too?

Michael: Yeah, that was a little back in the 60s... sexist in any sense the word. But the dads were a little different party than when mom was there.

Cassie: Yeah.

Michael: But anyway, so yeah, we had Parents Weekend. We did have Mother's Day, too, towards the end. We had in fall, we had not on Mother's Day, but not the fall, the spring. We had a get together with the mothers and had a brunch for them, too. We did do that.

Cassie: Was that through the fraternity?

Michael: Yeah, I'm trying to think that may not have been through the fraternity. Don't repeat that one. That may have been something that we just pulled off. But we always had parents weekend, and then we, as a fraternity, had a Father's Weekend. We used to have a dance in Paw Paw, probably every other Friday night. The fraternity did, we'd drive to Paw Paw, because there's a hall there that we could rent that was cheap. Yeah, it was a lot of fun.

Cassie: Yeah, well, thank you so much.

Michael: Well, you're more than welcome.

Cassie: It was great to meet you.