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Jay Weessies and His First Home in Ernest Burnham Hall

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WMU Alum Jay Weessies

Wed., Jan. 18, 2023 at 4:15 pm

Virtual Meeting via Zoom

Cassie: Okay, we're recording now, so go ahead whenever you're ready.

Jay: All right, my name is Jay Weessies. I enrolled at Western in the fall of 1983. I started out as an engineering major, and that lasted about the three semesters before I switched to business. Let's see, I lived in Ernest Burnham Hall for three years. I'm sad that it's being dismantled right now, so.

But, let's see, I remember I walked to East Campus from Ernest Burnham Hall, and also, I had an apartment on Academy Street, kind of near, anybody that went in my era would remember Boogie Records, which I was very close to Boogie Records and Burger King was across the street, which was unbelievably busy on weekend nights.

But. Let's see, then I guess, there were a couple of summers that I had class in East Campus, where I drove from various, like, California West Apartments was one time. And, I also lived on, boy, the name escapes me. It was near Forest Street, I lived on Forest Street.

So all those places I commuted to class on East Campus. I graduated, I got my bachelor's degree in the December of 1987. My first job was as an accountant in Three Rivers, Michigan, and I still lived in Kalamazoo. And so, I got my MBA. I decided to pursue my MBA, which I believe I started in 1989, and classes were on East Campus still, then.

The MBA program was eleven, three credit classes, and maybe about half of them, maybe a little more than half, I took on East Campus before the remainder, I guess, it was called the Fetzer Center. I'm not sure if it's still called the Fetzer Center.

Cassie: Yeah, there is the Fetzer Center, yeah.

Jay: The Business building, that was my, last I don't know. I was working full time during my MBA, so I took one class at a time in the evenings, and I finished that up, I believe it was summer 1993. So.

Cassie: Okay, yeah. So right at the end, I think of School of Business being mostly on East Campus, right?

Jay: There wasn't anything on East Campus.

Cassie: Early 90s?

Jay: Well, I mean, the buildings were there.

Cassie: Right.

Jay: I guess I'm not sure if there was anything, there was some blind rehabilitation or something that was going on in West Hall.

Cassie: Yeah.

Jay: I think all the business classes were gone from East Campus, they all moved at the same time.

Cassie: Right.

Jay: That was my understanding of it.

Cassie: So, I mean–

Jay: So, I can–

Cassie: Sorry.

Jay: Yeah, go ahead.

Cassie: I was just gonna ask, are you from the Kalamazoo area then?

Jay: I grew up in Climax.

Cassie: Okay.

Jay: So, a half hour drive from campus, approximately.

Cassie: Was that part of the reason that you chose to go to Western?

Jay: Oh, sure. I grew up in a single parent household with not a ton of money, and Western was a great option locally, and it seemed doable.

Cassie: Right.

Jay: It was something, and so, that kind of made the decision where I was gonna pursue higher education.

Cassie: Right.

Jay: So.

Cassie: Yeah, and you have the unique perspective then of being, starting at the School of Business while they're on East Campus, but then finishing when they're on West Campus, which became main campus then. So, what was that transition like? And what are some of your earliest memories of East Campus?

Jay: Would you want the transition, or do you want early memories first?

Cassie: Let's start with the transition.

Jay: Okay. Well, I was a full time worker when the transition occurred, so I wasn't as maybe plugged into campus as when you're a full time undergrad, doing undergrad things.

Cassie: Right.

Jay: And. I don't know, I guess, I wasn't in school, I guess I was a little, probably more sad about it than happy about the... I always enjoyed having school in old buildings. I don't know if that, generations had been there, and they were brick, and, I don't know, I guess it was kind of my idea of what higher education, where it should take place.

It should take place in old brick buildings. That have been there forever. And, I really enjoyed East Campus, I enjoyed the historical aspect of it. Even when I was an undergrad, I enjoyed those buildings. There were a few of the classrooms in East Hall, and it used to be an elementary school years ago, I don't know how many years ago, but...

You could still read "grade three" outside of the classroom when I was going into my accounting class or whatever. And, I liked it. I liked that it wasn't a cookie cutter building, there were quirky stairways and windows, and I always enjoyed the old buildings.

And, I don't know, I guess East Hall and North Hall, those were the places I went to. There were a lot of finance classes in North Hall, and North Hall had the business library.

I remember I spent a lot of time in the basement at North Hall, that seemed to be where several of my finance classes were. And, I don't know, I guess East Hall was a little more exciting cuz it had a gym, it had a gymnasium that was still used for, well, I guess the sport that I was involved there was intramural floor hockey.

Cassie: Oh?

Jay: Yeah, yeah. That was fun. One of my roommates was kind of a fringe Bronco hockey player. He was on the team, but he never played kind of thing. But, it was fun to play floor hockey over there and, I don't know. It was a long walk, and it was obviously, I mean, a really steep hill to get up to East Campus, both when I lived on Academy Street and when I lived in the Burnhams, it was a long, steep walk, but... I don't know, I mean, I didn't think about it. I didn't think about it, it was just something, I grew up in Michigan. You just did, it was wintertime, you just did it.

Cassie: Right, yeah. You experience enough Michigan winters, and then you're like, okay, this is nothing, yeah.

Jay: It was cool, I mean, those are off the top of my head, those are the memories. I think it probably was a little drafty in some places.

The windows weren't the greatest, but your class was either 50 minutes or an hour and 15, depending on whether it was a three or two times a week class. And it was cool, I liked it. I was kinda always hoping that they think of a purpose for those buildings so they could remain vibrant.

And, I guess they did the best they could with East Hall, but North Hall, I think, is just kinda sad that the facade is there. And it's just, every time I go by there, I just, what's the point of that? I don't know.

Cassie: You said that you spent a lot of time in the basement of North Hall, what was it like in there?

Jay: It was normal classrooms. It was just where they had finance classes, a lot of them, and I'm not sure I can picture.... I have a mental picture of being in the classrooms, but I'm not sure I have much of a picture of the hallways outside of the classroom in my head.

I can remember the business library that was in North Hall. That was the second floor North Hall. It was a necessary thing. I mean, you had to do it, and you had to learn how to use the indexes, the paper indexes, and crawling in the stacks.

And they had some kinda funky places you had to go to get to some materials. You'd have to go kinda on these skinny stairways. I mean, it was what we had, and if we had a group projects, that would be the place. I remember meeting there for group projects in the library. They had tables set up, it was just a common thing.

Cassie: So how would you summarize your experience at Western, reflecting back on your time there?

Jay: The whole time?

Cassie: How about, we'll start with your undergrad?

Jay: No, I love Western, I unabashedly love it. I didn't have a good childhood, and I have two kids, and I've told my kids that Ernest Burnham Hall is my first home.

That's what I consider my first home. It's the first place I felt... I look back on it and it's where I became me, and I don't know. I don't wanna delve into it too deeply here, but, I mean, I was raised by a mentally ill mother and it was really trying, especially my teen years and being at the Burnhams and being finally kinda away and I was able to take a breath and I fell in with a really positive group of people. And we were supportive of each other. I love Western.

Cassie: So what did a typical day look like for you while you were at Western in your undergrad? A typical day?

Jay: Well, we always had classes on Fridays, so I know I've been on campus in the last few years on Fridays. And it's a ghost town compared to what it was when I was there every

single day. You had your Monday, Wednesday, Friday classes and your Tuesday, Thursday classes, basically.

And I always was a full time student. I had, I guess, 15, 14-16 hours was considered full time, I thought. And, I never really complained about dorm food or anything like that, we had the 20 meal plan. It was only Sunday nights when the cafeteria wasn't open, and so we'd go out on Sunday nights, that's what we did.

But a typical day, I mean, it was going to class, and I lived on the fourth floor. And, we were just really, it was a good group, and there was always somebody to hang out with. Of course, I mean, you had to study if you wanna graduate. But if you did have a little time when you didn't have to study, I mean, there was always somebody that would go down to the Gary Center, and we called it the Gary Center then, play basketball or work out or whatever, that was before the current configuration. I don't know, there was that, and I was on several Intermural teams. The basketball seems at least half of the year, and softball, it was just great. There was some binge drinking that happened, of course. Yeah, I'll own it now.

Cassie: Yeah (Both laugh) and you said that you and your friends would go out Sunday nights, where would you guys go to?

Jay: Probably my favorite place was, I don't think it's still there, but it was Taco John's. It was on Stadium Drive out there, I always liked Mexican, it was inexpensive and... I don't know, easy to get to. That's one thing Western's never really had is, well, at least in the 80s, we didn't have restaurants that were really easy to walk to or anything like that. But I don't know. I had a car all the time, and it wasn't a hard thing to do.

I mean, there's all the usual other suspects. There were a couple of restaurants that aren't there anymore, that not for Sunday night so much, but I really love Maggie's for breakfast. That was near, I guess, Knollwood Avenue, near that. It was across the street from Bilbo's. I think this is Michigan Avenue. Let's see. No, KL. It might be KL Avenue.

Cassie: Yeah.

Jay: Yeah, right. Yeah, I don't know. Loved Western. There was guys on the floor that were involved in was it called Student Entertainment Committee? And seemed like we were always, I don't know, if there was a decent movie, we'd go to the movies and do stuff afterwards.

Cassie: Yeah, do you remember anything about the teachers or the faculty while you were at Western?

Jay: I'm guessing you're asking about East Campus faculty.

Cassie: Yeah, or any faculty that made an impact on you.

Jay: I guess I never told her this. I guess my favorite would have been Janet Camburn, and she taught accounting and I had her both as an undergrad and a grad, and she seemed a really

positive person, and she kept things lively and, I don't know, made accounting seem accessible. And she was probably my favorite. Let's see. Boy, it's been a while. Yeah, she's my only standout teacher that I really liked.

Let's see. I remember when I was in grad school. What's this guy? I can't remember his name. I had a professor. I was getting married right at the end of the semester, and they used to publish marriage licenses in the paper. And I remember handing in my final exam, and he said, you're getting married soon, the teacher, and I said, yeah, I'm getting married on Saturday.

I can't remember his name. That was accounting, too. That was an accounting teacher. I don't remember his name. I don't know. I guess it's been too long.

Cassie: That's alright! Yeah. All right, I did have a few more questions that I wanted to ask, too, one of them being, what do you think impacted you the most during your time at Western, whether it be a person, a place, an event, or something else that happened?

Jay: It was my group of friends, mostly centered around Ernest Burnham Hall. Of course, some of the guys would move out, but we remain friendly and going out with them. We loved Bronco football back then. It wasn't super popular back then. The team was not real good, but we loved the games, and we had a great time.

And I don't know, I mean, we did lots of silly things together. We made up this, we called it tape ball, and we played it in the basement of the Burnhams, and I don't know. And we had this whole thing where we had a league and standings, and it was in the Western Herald.

One of our friends was a photographer for the Western Herald, and he took a couple of pictures, and it got in the Western Herald.

Cassie: That's cool. And how do you feel about WMU now versus when you were a student there?

Jay: My memories are obviously extremely positive of my time there. When I go back, I'm not sure it feels the same to me. The buildings are so much different than when I was there. So many of them aren't there anymore, or they look so different, like Sangren Hall. That's not the same building that I remember. I mean, it has the same name, but it's not the same building.

But that's a different building, yeah. Even going back to a basketball game. The basketball arena is so different, and it's not as cool like in the 80s, MAC schools like Western could compete much better. And I remember being at Reed Field House when we beat the number two team in the nation.

It was DePaul. I think it was 1985, and it was just jam packed and just rocking. I've gone to games in the last few years, and it just you can't even imagine that place, a Bronco team beating the number two team in the nation and just having it jammed to the rafters.

And I don't know, that was better. And I don't know. When I've gone back, I took my kid on a tour, and it was on a Friday, and campus was just kind of a ghost town. And I'm like, this isn't Friday at Western. I mean, where is everybody?

And I guess, I don't know. I know there's a place for a big regional university in West Michigan, and Kalamazoo is a great town. It seems vibrant whenever I come back there. And, I don't know, I guess I'm a little sad that it's so much different than what I remember, but I guess that's the passage of time.

I don't know. That was always a thing. I remember being there, and K College is just right across the street, and they have these old buildings that are really well-preserved and attractive. And I remember just talking to my friends and saying, "Why can't East Campus be like K College?"

Why can't we take care of these buildings and refurbish them or keep them vibrant? And I guess the Fetzer Center was cool and when I went, a part of it was cool, but I don't know. East campus could have been cool, though. I'm an accountant and I know, dollars and cents, and maybe the cost would have been just prohibitive to make those buildings viable.

But, I don't know, K College was, part of our vision like every day. And why can't Western take care of the buildings like K? I don't know, I guess that's what I did have that discussion a couple of times with my friends. Why do we have to do this, why can't we take care of our buildings?

Cassie: Interesting.

Jay: So...

Cassie: I just had one more question and that was if you, do you have any other memories you'd like to share? Any final topics that we didn't touch on, that you wanted to talk about?

Jay: Boy, I don't know. I don't know. I think I touched on, most of my high points, as it were, and I don't know.

I love being there and, while I was there I knew I didn't wanna be anywhere else. I don't know if that makes any sense to you, but, it was just like a feeling of belonging. And, like I said, I consider, that's my first home, Ernest Burnham Hall. And, I'm actually, right now I was in town, I don't know how many weeks ago it was, but I noticed the fencing was around the Burnhams, and work had obviously started.

So I contacted facilities, because I think it'd be really cool if I could have my old dorm room door, and bring it to my house, and make it be my bedroom door.

Cassie: That would be cool!

Jay: Anyway I've been in contact with facilities, and the lady was really like, she wanted to help me out, and so she researched it for me, and it turns out I believe I'm gonna get a door, but they can't guarantee it was my door.

I guess, they kind of have it in. I don't know if that's in piles or what it is, but anyway, I'm gonna be happy with having a Burnham door in my life. Hopefully. Hopefully that can happen, I'm supposed to contact her next week, and I'm gonna hopefully come on down, and get a piece of the Burnhams.

Cassie: Awesome. Well if you do get a Burnham door or piece, whatever they can give you, send a picture over, and we can include it in your story. I think that would be a really cool picture to add with it. Yeah!

Jay: Yeah, I could do that, that'd be all right. Hopefully that can happen next week.

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

Jay: Are you an undergrad or grad, or are you doing this?

Cassie: Yeah, I actually just graduated in December with my bachelor's, so I was undergrad when I started, and they asked me to stay on to finish the project.

Jay: East campus was a very vibrant place, in the there was cars everywhere and people everywhere, and nothing like today. That whole area couldn't get a parking spot. It was very vibrant, so I'm sure there are lots of people that have, lots of memories.

Cassie: Yeah, well thank you so much for talking to me today, and meeting with me.

Jay: I'm very glad to talk to anyone from Western.

Cassie: Yeah, and if there's any other pictures too, like, of your time at Western or any current ones that you wanna put with your story, then feel free to send them on over. You don't have to, but if you do have any feel free to email them over to me and include them.

Jay: If I can get the door...

Cassie: For sure.

Jay: If I can get the door I think that might be, I don't know. That might be neat, I'm going to lord that over my friends, so...

Cassie: For sure all right, well thank you so much. Let me know if you have any questions in the meantime, but when the project's up, I'll make sure to send you an update, and send you the link to that.

Jay: All right, thank you, it was very nice talking to fellow Bronco Alum.

Cassie: Yes (Both laugh).

Jay: And good luck in the future. You have grad school in your future?

Cassie: Yeah, I did apply to a few, I applied to a few grad programs, but also some jobs and such too, so we'll see...

Jay: All right well, success, right?

Cassie: Yeah (Both laugh).

Jay: All right.

Cassie: Yeah, thank you very much

Jay: It was a pleasure talking to you about Western.

Cassie: Good.

Jay: All right

Cassie: Well have a good rest of your night.

Jay: Yeah, you too.

Cassie: Thank you, bye,

Jay: Bye, bye.