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Charles Klass: the Paper Titan of WMU and Failing Swimming

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WMU Alum and Adjunct Professor Charles Klass

Wednesday, Feb. 8, 2023 at 4:30 pm

Virtual Meeting via Phone Call

Cassie: Okay, so I'm recording now. So I'll have you like I said, just introduce yourself, spell your last name for us and then we'll start talking about your connection to WMU.

Chuck: I am Charles P. Klass. Most people at WMU know me as Chuck Klass. I am a 1962 graduate of WMU and basically, I have a degree of a BA in Math with minors in Paper Technology and Chemistry.

When I enrolled at WMU or started WMU in September of 1957, we had both the East and the West Campus. On the East Campus, the math department had classes in Walwood Hall, which remember downstairs, it was the Walwood Union. So I had my basic freshman math classes there. Also had the bulk of the rest of my classes over on the West Campus with the Chemistry department.

Chemistry department, there were classes in the Admin building in the Chemistry department and in the Paper tech department, which were over on the West Campus. Bottom line was they had a couple of classes on the East Campus. So we commuted back and forth in some cases walked. There was a bus that ran back and forth between the East and West Campus. I remember the very friendly driver named Eddie.

And there was also a practice. There were a lot of cars that went back and forth and hitchhiking was very common. In fact, it was set up so that if you would go on Michigan Avenue outside the administration building on the West Campus, basically, you just stand there, pile in a car and people would go over to the East Campus. Same thing coming back in the other direction. The pickup spot was over by what we call the Walwood Union.

I do recall a number of things I recall about the East campus. One thing was when I started there, the library, it was before the Waldo Library had opened. So here too, the library was



on the East Campus. There was also the infirmary. I managed to pick up mononucleosis over Christmas my freshman year.

Cassie: Oh no.

Chuck: Spent a couple of nights in the infirmary. Another favorite memory about the East Campus was basically that, for the first few years, I guess for the first three years, all the time I was there at homecoming.

We had two homecoming dances with a different band in each one. One would be upstairs at the student union on the West Campus and the other one would be in the Oakland gym. Homecoming always started out on Friday with a jazz concert in the Oakland gym. I do remember specifically that Gene Krupa's band was there. I think if I recall correctly, we also had Stad Kenton. But jazz was a very big thing in the 50s and Friday afternoon in the homecoming week, the jazz concert always kicked off about three or four in the afternoon.

At that point in time, Western also had a homecoming parade that came up South Street, one of the streets there a long way, and then came across a little bit of Oakland Drive and into the stadium.

So that's the memories that just come out. I recall that I know later on, the Alumni Association ended up putting their... Well, in Walwood at that point in time, they actually had top couple of floors, I think was dormitory rooms, but then the downstairs of the union, and then there were classrooms.

I know, I think it was by my sophomore, or junior year that the math department moved over into a new building on the West Campus. So they were there at the beginning, but I had some classes there. Those are the memories that come right out. I mean, I have stayed with it. I do know when I know that Heritage Hall was developed, and I made a donation and basically have my name on it, Heritage Hall. So that's what comes to the top of my head. If you go ahead and ask some questions, if that maybe stimulates better memories.

Cassie: Yeah, I do have a follow-up question because nobody else has mentioned it. You said that you were in the infirmary for two days. What was that like? Do you remember anything about the infirmary?

Chuck: I remember that it was up on the East Campus. I think one of the buildings up there was a library. I'm sure there was an infirmary up there, we did that.

And if you had, you could go up there and see the nurse. There was a doctor there and a nurse, and in my particular case, basically, I came back from Christmas vacation about a couple of days after the Christmas break. At that time, we were on semesters, so the end of the first semester was in January. So we'd come back and have a couple of weeks of classes and have finals.

Cassie: Okay.

Chuck: I was living over on the West Campus in Smith Burnham Hall at that point in time, and I do recall that I came back I was sort of upset, and my roommate said, your head feels real, really hot.

So I went over and they diagnosed that I had mononucleosis and basically kept me in bed for a couple of nights. And then did it, I mean, the thing I do remember the most, the funniest thing about it was that I had mono was out for a week from it, and my freshman year, I had 21 hours of classes, including math, chemistry, physics, all that sort of stuff.

One 1-hour class I had was swimming, because at that point in time, you had to take swimming in one of your first two semesters. It was part of the thing the legislature wanted to try to prevent people from drowning. I really came out, and I really didn't feel very well, but I had to go dressed out and basically, go through into the swimming pool, basically to tell him that I said I really need a delay on my final exam to swim for the thing.

And the guy who was also the varsity swimming coach, basically just sort of got upset about that. Just said, go ahead, and just pushed me in the water and I damn near drowned.

So the bottom line was, my first semester, I got 20 hours of A and 1 hour of F. It was the only course I ever failed at Western Michigan.

Cassie: Oh no! (Laughing)

Cliff: You haven't heard the funniest part. Maybe the funniest part of the story is that probably, I don't know, 10-15 years later, I was back for homecoming, and they used to have a thing down in town they called a Bronco Bash.

Cassie: Yes.

Cliff: And it was late morning, early noon, and basically a fair amount of Bloody Mary's and stuff like that flowing. And I'm there and I've had it. And Ed Gobble, who I think who had been the varsity swimming coach I think this is like a decade or a couple of decades later. I think Ed was starting to have his problems.

But he comes up and he looks at me. And he puts his arm around me and said "Here's one of my swimmers." Implying that I was one of his varsity swimmers, right? All I said was, "I'll never forget you, Coach."

Cassie: Ooh.

Cliff: I think it was Bob Beamer. Somebody walked over and said, "What was that about?" And I explained it, and they said, well, you're very kind.

Cassie: Yeah.

Cliff: I said, It is a funny- it's one of those funny war stories.

Cassie: Yeah!

Cliff: But that sort of summarizes a lot of what I remember. I do remember there were a couple of dormitories on the old hill. By the time I got there, the incline thing up the hill was out, the tracks were still there. But that hadn't been in use for years.

Cassie: Right, yeah, the trolley?

Cliff: With me, relative to Western, I've stayed very close, very much in contact with it. Particularly with the paper. What's now the Paper Engineering Department was the Department of Pulp and Paper Technology. I've been very active on the Paper tech foundation. I got a lot of equipment donated, I've raised a lot of funds. And back in 2019, I had a role in getting a lot of the equipment donated.



When they dedicated a new pilot paper machine over there on Parkview campus. In there, if you go look at it, there's a nameplate on it. They call it the Charles P Klass paper machine. I've been very involved in there. I got inducted into the School of Applied Science and Engineering, Academy of Engineering Excellence.

I've been on the paper tech foundation. I've been in the Hall of Fame and that sort of thing. Have been a big thing since 1999. I've been

officially an adjunct on the Paper and Chemical Engineer or Paper Chemical and Paper Engineering faculty. And I still come back to WMU and teach. There's a coding course for the paper industry that's there. I teach in that so.

Cassie: Okay.

Cliff: I've stayed very active at WMU the whole time.

Cassie: Yeah, and I want to go back a little bit because I'm not sure if we touched on this. What brought you to WMU then? Are you from the Kalamazoo area? Were you born here?

Cliff: No, I grew up in Dayton, Ohio. And I had no from a pretty poor background. My father's people were coal miners. And I think I'm the first one on his side of the family. That graduated from high school let alone college.

Cassie: Wow.

Cliff: First generation anyhow. In my junior year in high school, I had a chemistry teacher send me to a ... said "Go to this career night it's about careers in the paper industry." It was held in Dayton. It was by an organization called Ohio Tappy. Which is the Ohio Technical Association of Home and Paper Industry.

And they talked about opportunities there. Then in my senior year, the counselor at my high school said, you're interested in paper? And I said yes. She said, "Well, Western Michigan College is having competitive tests for scholarships in pulp and paper technology."

So a couple of others and I went, drove up there, went to there, and bottom line, that led to my getting a scholarship to study pulp and paper technology at Western Michigan. At that time was \$500 a year, and I was an honor student in high school. So I qualified for a \$600 a year scholarship from the Kettering Foundation that I could use anywhere as long as I majored in math or science.

So, that's what brought me to Western. I would say the guy that was head of the department at that time, Dr. Nadelman, was very instrumental in that. We did not have the foundation at that point in time. The Paper Tech foundation wasn't founded until a year later. What happened at that point in time is that Dr. Nadelman would call companies and basically get them to write a check for a scholarship each year.

Cassie: Wow.

Cliff: In my case, my \$500 check was provided by the Cornstarch Products division of Anheuser Bush. In their thing, they had excess cornstarch byproduct that they sold to the paper industry. And Dr. Nadelman basically convinced, I guess, their regional manager there to go to the company and get them to write a \$500 check. I also worked maybe 20 hours a week or so in the lab and pilot plant at Western Michigan for Dr. Nadelman who had a consulting practice. And he hired some students, myself and a couple of others basically, to do lab work. So that was how I put the financing together to go to Western. And it worked out well. It was the key to a six-decade career in the paper industry.

Cassie: Yeah.

Cliff: Along the way, I ended up getting a couple of top awards from the Technical Association of Palm Paper Industry. One is the Distinguished Service Award in 1994, and the other one in 2016. Well, in 2015, I got the Gunner Nicholson Gold Medal. Which is sort of commonly referred to as a Nobel Prize in the paper industry, it's for technical contributions that are developed that are being applied all over the world. And then in 2016, I was inducted into the paper industry International Hall of Fame. So the key to a very interesting career was my education at Western.



Cassie: Wow yeah and I'm wondering, you talked a little bit about a swim coach. I'm wondering, were there any professors or faculty that you think were the most influential? During your time at WMU on your experience there?

Cliff: Yes, definitely. I put in that category Dr. Alfred Nadelman. Who founded the Pulp and Paper Technology Dept and was the chair of that department at that point in time.

Cassie: Okay.

Cliff: There are several other professors in there. Raymond James and Robert Diehm. They're paper tech professors. I'd say in the math department, there was a professor that I had Dr. McColley that really took a special interest in me.

I went in and started with Freshman math. It was college algebra. And after a couple of classes, I and several of the students in there were taken over into an Honors math program that was under McColley's direction, that was new ways of teaching math. So I learned a lot about set theory and things like that too. While the other people were learning differential equations. Which I already knew, so...

I say those were there, the paper tech professors. There were a couple of chemistry professors that were pretty... Dr. Efland. So I did that, and between my freshman and sophomore year, I stayed up there, I took some summer classes, and I also worked in the pilot plant at Western Michigan.

And one of the things that had me really pushed toward this, making sure that we got a foundation together and do this is that Charles Kettering died. So all of a sudden I was told there was no young science and math scholar, but there's no more money.

As I recall, Bush had a bad year and decided not to write another check. And that result was I ended up starting to work night shifts at a paper mill, in Plainwell while I was a full-time student, in order to stay in school.

And then after a period of that, my father got sick, I went home to Dayton and I actually stayed out for like, I guess over a year. Because I was out for a semester and going to come back, I was working at a paper mill in Ohio, in the Dayton area and taking some classes at the University at Dayton at night. They didn't have a paper department, but they did have a strong math department.

So, when I came, my father died, I stayed out for a year to help my mother, I'm an only child. When I came back in 1961, when I came in, they said, well, you can't get a paper tech degree because you have to have a chemistry major. And I would have had to stay an extra year in order to get a couple of the required chemistry courses. They said, you can get a math major with a minor in paper and a minor in chemistry and graduate in '62, which is what I did. So, I had taken all the paper courses, but I was missed at that time, you could not get a paper tech degree unless you also had a math major. And there were a couple of courses and I just couldn't work them all in together. So I chose the paper courses and the math, instead of

electives I took the math courses and basically graduated with a major in math and minors in paper and chemistry.

Cassie: Okay, I see.

Cliff: Then I went to work in a paper mill in Savannah, Georgia. It was sort of interesting because at that point in time, and still that point in time, the students coming out of the paper program have starting salaries that are probably the highest on campus. At the time I was there, they were the highest in the state of Michigan.

Cassie: Wow.

Cliff: It's still a very good program but today, basically, we have a foundation, I've just been very motivated basically to help raise funds to be on a paper tech foundation and get the scholarship funding together so that others did not face what I had to find that our scholarship funding dried up-

Cassie: Right, yeah.

Cliff: And try to figure out how to stay at school.

Cassie: Yeah, well, we're nearing the end of our time now, so I wanted to make sure that you had time to answer one more question that I had. Which was, what do you think impacted you the most during your time at WMU? Whether it be a person, a place, or something that happened.

Cliff: I would definitely say it was the head of the department, a couple of professors in the paper technology department. I'd put Dr. Nadelman at the top of that list, and I'd put Ray James and Bob Jean and Robert Diehm there.

What we had at that point in time, the faculty at that department were not your normal academics, they were people that... they worked in the industry and then they came at the end of their career and taught at Western.

Cassie: Right.

Cliff: So, you not only learned the technology, you got a lot of career advice from people that had already been out there working in it for years.

So I'd say that was probably it. And later on, I managed to get what is the pilot coder over there on the new Parkview Campus there, that was back 20 years ago. At that point in time, I got that donation and basically that was the spark that sort of developed the Parkview Campus because we were not gonna have the face-to-face to put it in McCracken Hall.

And at that time in time, fortunately, we had a very good president in Elson Floyd, who was, hey, we got this opportunity, we're gonna go big. So, it's the experience.

Cassie: Wow, yeah. And do you have any last thoughts or last topics that we didn't touch on that you wanted to conclude with or any last memories you wanted to share?

Cliff: It was great to see Western grow because when I started there in September of '57, there were a couple of things. First of all, it had just changed names from Western Michigan College to Western Michigan University.

Cassie: Right.

Cliff: And September '57, was the first time that they had the equivalent of 5,000 full-time students.

By the time I graduated five years later, June of '62, Western was almost 10,000. In other words, the student body had almost doubled. Now, if you look at the ensuing decades, Western grew up into a major research university. When I started there, it was basically a state teacher's college that also had an occupational therapy department and a paper tech department. But other than that, it was basically a teacher factory.

Cassie: Right.

Cliff: I watched it grow into a major Carnegie One research university. So, it's really been exciting to watch it happen and to be part of it and try to help it happen.

Cassie: Right, yeah. Well, thank you so much for talking to me today and taking time out of your day to share some of these memories, I really appreciate it. And did I send you a consent form over email?

Cliff: I think you did, but if you want to, I don't recall, but maybe if you didn't, go send me another one, you got my email.

Cassie: Okay, all right, then I'll send that by the end of today, and then if you could just fill that out and send it back whenever you get a chance, that would be great.

Cliff: I'll turn it around as soon as I get it.

Cassie: Okay, sounds good. All right, well, if you have any questions in the meantime or anything, let me know.

Cliff: All right.

Cassie: And I would be happy to share that website link with you then when it is up, if you'd like to take a look at it.

Cliff: That'll be good, I'll be looking forward to it.

Cassie: All right, great. Okay, well, if anything comes up in the meantime, let me know, but I'll send that consent form over then, and I will talk to you soon.

Cliff: Very good.

Cassie: Thank you so much.

Cliff: Bye.

Cassie: Bye.