Mark Jewett: Storm Watching at East Hall and the Professor That Changed His Life

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WMU ScholarWorks Citation
University Libraries, "Mark Jewett: Storm Watching at East Hall and the Professor That Changed His Life" (2023). East Campus Oral Histories. 51.
https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/east_campus_oral_histories/51
WMU Alum Mark Jewett

Friday, March 3, 2023 at 11:30 AM

Virtual Meeting via Zoom

Cassie: Okay, so we’re recording now, so go ahead and introduce yourself whenever you’re ready.

Mark: Sure, my name is Mark Jewett, I graduated from Western in December of 1993 with a Bachelor’s of Science in Sociology. And I remember East Campus and East Hall being a place that I and my friends would go to to hang out and talk.

Sitting on the front steps overlooking the Kalamazoo Valley was always such a great backdrop to long conversations just about life or pontificating about philosophy or politics or whatever. But really, it was just a cool place to be.

And it’s interesting because I was going through some old photos and kind of reminiscing about that space and my friend group from college, or from Western, got together almost 20 years after we graduated in 2012. And we chose to go to East Hall. That was where we wanted to kinda go and hang out and have fun. And I’ve got some great photos that I can’t share because we swore that they would never go on the internet (both laugh), of us hanging out and just clowning around and being goofy and enjoying each other’s company and that space and kind of all the memories that it held for us. And so I would say that the building and that environment was pretty special to me and to my friends.

One of my favorite memories of East Hall or East Campus would be when anytime there was a thunderstorm over Kalamazoo, what would happen is the Kalamazoo Valley would kinda trap the storm in the valley. And so there’d be, like, this great weather event over the city. And anytime there was a thunderstorm or a lightning storm over Kalamazoo, I would ride my bike up to East Campus cuz I didn’t have a car and hang out.

And it was interesting because every single time there would be a group of people there for the event, which… I don’t know how boring our lives were, but in 1992, watching weather over Kalamazoo was a hot ticket. And I would go up there and there would always be some photography students trying to catch the elusive photo of a lightning strike on one of the buildings over the city.
And I saw some great photos, and I’m sure there’s a bunch in the archives of students having photographed lightning over Kalamazoo because they were always there. And so you could probably fill a book with the pictures of weather over Kalamazoo. And then there would be a couple of people off to the side smoking a joint or, like, some other folks over art students with their sketch pads.

But it was kind of a hangout spot. And again, I think that’s probably why my friends and I gravitated back to it years later when we went back to campus because so much of campus had changed in the intervening years. There were new buildings put up, and the architecture of campus had changed.

But one thing that hadn’t changed to that point was East Campus was still kind of dilapidated and run down and diffused, and the building was closed, and yet that was kind of how we remembered it. So it was appropriate. And I’ve since been back once it’s been renovated, and it’s beautiful now, but I do remember it being having graffiti on the front doors and chains on the door and that kind of thing.

The more adventurous students would occasionally crawl through a window on the second floor or actually do some urban spelunking in the building even after it was closed. I was never so brave, but I know that that was something that students would do. Another memory that I have of East Campus was that’s where they had the old gymnasium.

And I took a couple of volleyball classes there. So actually I took classes on East Campus even when the campus wasn’t really broadly being used very much, just because in that one building there was a gymnasium that was used for that class. Yeah, and I loved it, it was super fun for me. And my parents teased me about the fact that I took two semesters of volleyball. Yeah, I was just a few credits away from my volleyball minor (Both laugh).

But I love those classes and I love that space. And again, it was a way that I had access to those buildings and those facilities that was really fun for me.

I lived on the other side of East Campus from the main campus on Wheaton. I don’t know if you’re familiar with Wheaton Avenue or Vine in that area, so I lived on Wheaton. I was in 726 Wheaton, which I found it on Google Maps, and it looks very much the same, like literally the same paint.

It was really fun for me to kind of look at the house and remember all the time that I spent there and the parties that we would have with our friends over, but also to remember the streets cuz it’s down a hill off of East Campus.
And it's a pretty steep hill, and the streets were made of brick, and I don’t know if they’ve been repaved since, but at the time they were like brick streets or cobblestone, I guess, but whichever. And I remember it was terrifying in the wintertime because they would ice over and there was no traction at all.

And you'll recall, I didn't have a car, and so I would ride my bike down these treacherous ice-covered roads, and yet again, it was a lot of fun. I would cut through East Campus to get to Main Campus, or I would cut through on the way home because off the back of the hill where East Campus was, there was this long staircase. And it was… I can't even really estimate how long it was, I don't know if it’s still there or not. But it’s very non-compliant.

**Cassie:** Yeah. It’s not there anymore.

**Mark:** Yeah, but it was this really long staircase, and I remember I used to ride my bike down the stairs.

**Cassie:** Oh!!

**Mark:** Yeah, because it was, like, the shortest distance between campus and my house, and it was just fun kind of bombing around Kalamazoo on my bike. So I guess that's what I have. You said you have got some questions?

**Cassie:** Yeah, well, yes. And I'm wondering, what were some of your earliest memories of East Campus? Do you remember the first time that you saw East Campus or stepped foot on East Campus?

**Mark:** Yeah, so I remember when I was first at Western, or even when I was touring campus with my parents, East Campus was kind of referred to as the old place that wasn't really in use anymore.

Here was Western, and Western was large and glorious and big and all new buildings and 25,000 undergrads, and it was this great thing. And then, oh yeah, there's East Campus, it's up there somewhere, and we don't really go there. It was kinda the idea or how I remember it being portrayed at the time.

And it had this weird connotation that kinda up by East Campus was over by the mental hospital that was up there because that was also before, in the '90s, John Engler closed all of the mental hospitals and there was a state-run mental facility up that direction.

And so I kinda thought of East Campus as being kind of this mysterious and maybe even a little bit dangerous place. But again, I was, what, 19, and I didn't know anything about anything. And so I might have driven by it, but not really looked at it much.

But once I was actually on campus and spending more time, I was braver and was willing to explore and kinda see what was going on. And I remember finding it and thinking that it was just a really interesting old building and learning a little bit about the history of it back when Western was a teacher’s college and its origins, that I think at the time, was probably the
oldest building on either campus, just because that’s where it started, right? So that, for me, kind of became interesting more for its history and perhaps its architecture, because I thought it was cool and kind of what a college building should look like, as opposed to, I don’t know, a brick square, like Sangren or something.

There were buildings that were obviously built in the ‘70s and were kind of boring and then there was and East Hall had kind of that old look that I would associate with an academic setting. So I thought it was kind of sad that it wasn’t being used very much.

So that’s what I thought of it when I first got there. And again, it really wasn’t until… I don’t know if it was a friend of mine that encouraged me to go check it out if there was ever a storm or something, but it was going back again and again anytime weather came through. That really is probably my strongest memory of the place.

**Cassie:** Yeah, right. And I have another question. It’s a bit of a tougher question, so feel free to answer it however you can. But what do you think impacted you the most during your time at WMU, whether it be something that happened, a place, a person, or perhaps something else?

**Mark:** Impacted me the most, just in general?

**Cassie:** Sure.

**Mark:** Yeah, okay, I had a professor, Dr. Susan Caulfield. She was a professor of sociology and criminal justice. And I started at Western as a music major, and I’m a first gen college grad. And so when I went to Western, I had no idea what I was doing.

And I didn’t really have a whole lot of guidance in terms of, like, this is what you should major in, and this is what you should do. And this is how you create an outcome for yourself in your professional life based on the work that you do at Western.

And so I was just taking classes that I thought were fun, like volleyball. And so I went to Western not because there was an academic program that I was interested in or anything like that, it was because they had a choir that I wanted to join. There was a choir called Gold Company. I don’t know if you’re at all familiar with it. They still exist, but they’re a vocal jazz ensemble. And I had aspirations of singing with Gold Company. And so I went to Western as a vocal music performance major. It’s a tough job, but yeah, I went there with that major and I did audition for Gold Company, and I made it into Gold Company, too.

And I had a lot of fun singing, and I was taking dance classes, and it was just a hoot. I was having a blast. And academically, I was kind of struggling. And being a music major was a whole lot harder than I thought it was cuz I thought it was just singing and dancing and having a good time.

But I learned that, no, there’s music theory and oral comprehension and all kinds of stuff that I wasn’t very good at. And I had another teacher, Dr. William Apple. He was my voice teacher, and I would take private voice lessons with him as a vocal performance major.
would, and I remember he told me that I didn't have a very good work ethic, which is true, and that I would never be good enough to be a professional musician.

**Cassie:** Wow, tough.

**Mark:** That I would never get anywhere, that I would never earn a paycheck as a singer, and that I needed to figure out what I was going to do because I wasn't going to do that.

And older me wants to look back at 19 year old not knowing anything me and say, don't listen to him. He's just one opinion. There are other opinions out there. But at the time, I was crushed and I thought, “I'm wasting my time. I don't know what I'm doing. Why am I even here?” And so I knew I was going to change my major.

Weirdly, I had this notion that I was going to get back at him by starting smoking. I was like, yeah, I'll trash my voice and that'll show him. Teenager logic. So, yeah, I was very dramatic.

But anyway, I kept taking classes. I just wasn't taking music classes anymore. And I was taking general education courses because whatever. And I think I took an Intro to Psych or I'm sorry, Intro to Soc or an Intro to Criminal Justice class just because it fit my schedule or something and it was with Susan Caulfield. And I loved the way she taught and I loved the way she made me question the world around me in a way that no one had to that point. And asking questions about, okay, “If this is the way it is, does that mean that's the way that it should be?”

I guess you could say she was what we might call today a social justice warrior or somebody. But it was just somebody who saw the world through a very specific lens and asked pointed questions about morality seen through the lens of public policy or policing or justice. And I found that A, the subject matter was really interesting to me, and B, her teaching was compelling.

So I decided, well, I really like that class, so I guess I'll take every other class that I can with her. And so, I think I took every class she taught just because I wanted to be in more classes with her as my teacher. And the funny thing is, if you take six or seven classes with one teacher, that becomes your major.

**Cassie:** Wow, yeah. (Both laugh)

**Mark:** And so I didn't intentionally say, “I'm going to become a criminal justice major.” But functionally, I did just by taking so many classes in this one area with this one professor. And I was one or two semesters away from graduating. And by this point, I felt like I had taken so many classes with her, and she was kind of my advisor at that point, and we were sort of friends, I guess. I'd like to think we were, anyway. And I remember I was in her office and it was during office hours and she said, “What are you gonna do after you graduate?” Cuz I was, again, graduating with this degree in criminal justice. And I said, “I don't know, I guess I'll become a police officer, a cop. That's what you do, right? It's criminal justice.” And she asked me a question, and I'll never forget it. And I remember it absolutely word for word.
She said, “Why would you take a bullet for someone that hates you?” And, boy, that really kind of made me think about the nature of that work.

And that if you are a police officer and you’re not trusted by a community that you’re serving, that you are potentially putting yourself at some risk. And doing so in a way that generally isn't really appreciated very much by the community that you’re policing, in many cases. Depending on the community and other circumstances.

But it just seemed like such a powerful and impactful question to me that I really had to think about it. And I ended up changing my major from criminal justice to sociology because the classes worked in both majors. And I was actually able to graduate a semester sooner with my degree in sociology rather than criminal justice.

And so if any one person was really impactful or memorable in my time at Western, it was very much her. Yeah, so I’m assuming she’s long retired by now, but she was pretty important to me.

**Cassie:** Yeah, and so what did you end up going on to do with that degree?

**Mark:** Sociology? Gosh. But again, I had no idea what I was doing or how I was gonna do anything. I started a semester of grad school but then kind of ran out of steam, and so I had to come home and get a job. And in Metro Detroit in 1994, I couldn’t get anyone to hire me, and I didn’t really have a strong sense of how to market myself.

Which is funny, cuz I ended up working in a career services office helping students get jobs. And boy, I wish I could have helped myself back then. But yeah, I didn’t know how to write a resume or how to interview for jobs, and so I really struggled to find a job.

And my first position after college was as a typist. Because the one marketable skill I had after writing hundreds of papers in sociology classes was, I could type really well. And so I got a typist job working for Kelly Services. And back in the ‘90s, we were called Kelly Girls.

And so my first job literally was I was typing a whole book into a computer so that then they could reprint it. And the book was on breastfeeding, I learned a lot, it was very interesting.

But that job, I transitioned into a temp secretary position, and then I was a temp executive secretary. And then I was permanently hired as a human resources associate or assistant working in labor relations and compensation. And this was at St. Joseph Hospital. I did that for a little while, but I didn’t really like it cuz a big part of my job was firing people or figuring out a way to fire people, and the vibes were not good.

I was trying to find something else, and I got a call to go work on the assembly line at Ford Motor Company, building transaxles. So I worked on the assembly line for about six months and then got into a skilled trades journeyman program to be a machine repairer.

But I was terrible at it. I wasn’t really mechanically inclined, which was very sad and embarrassing, I’m sure, for my father, who was a very gifted mechanic. But another position
came up at Ford called an education and training coordinator. And to apply for that position, you had to have a bachelor’s degree.

And by that point, I’d been working at the plant for three or four years, and I had a bachelor’s degree, and I had an interest in education and training. So I applied for the position and I got it. And I did that job managing education benefits for the employees of the plant for about ten years, and it was great.

I worked as an academic advisor for people that were interested in going back to college or going to college or helping people kind of chart their path, especially as people were thinking about leaving the plant, what else could they do? I would help them figure out a path that made sense for them.

Since then, I’m now working at Macomb Community College, and I’m an associate dean of applied technology, which is the skilled trades programs and automotive. So it’s kind of come full circle. I’m back working in education and using some of the experience that I got working in an automotive plant.

**Cassie:** Right, well, it makes sense then that you said the professor was most impactful to you. I think you became exactly what you needed back then and what you sort of found with her.

**Mark:** It’s true, and the thing that I absolutely love most about the work that I do now is that I have the opportunity to teach and to be that professor and to have an impact on my students and to kind of function in a way that I think would have helped me back, long time ago that I can be flexible on turning in late homework without penalty or something like that.

**Cassie:** Yeah! (Both chuckling)

**Mark:** I can show people a little grace because I remember what it was like. It’s hard, especially for somebody that isn’t coming from a background where their parents or their grandparents graduated from college and they understand what to expect.

**Cassie:** Yeah, right. And coming now to the end of our time together, I’m wondering, do you have any last memories or stories that you’d like to share of your time at WMU then or any topics that we didn’t touch on that you wanted to conclude with?

**Mark:** Yeah, I would say, I don’t want to give the impression that I didn’t enjoy being a music major cuz it kinda didn’t end up the way I wanted it to. I loved Dalton Center, I loved spending time there, I loved my friends that I had there. I was a huge fan of my classmates because everyone was so amazingly talented, and it was an absolute blast, and I wouldn’t trade that.

And so, I’m still very much a supporter of music and performing. I’ve done community theater and still sing. Never made a paycheck with it, but I still get to perform and I love
doing it, and I’m so happy that I had that opportunity and that I made the friends that I did when I was in the school of music.

I think, if you have the opportunity, that you should go to Dalton Center and watch a performance, a student recital, or something. The tickets are free, and they often have snacks, so you should check them out. It’s amazing, and the people there are so talented, and I think it’s absolutely a gem of Western’s Campus, and the faculty are fantastic and Gold Company, cuz they’re great.

**Cassie:** Yeah. Would you also recommend going to East Hall to watch the storms?

**Mark:** Yes. My gosh, absolutely. If you haven't done so, please, you have to check it out. I’m sure the show that Mother Nature puts on is still just as entrancing as it was back then.

**Cassie:** Yeah. Well, thank you so much, Mark, for sitting down with me today and sharing some of your stories and your memories of East Campus, I really appreciate it.

**Mark:** My pleasure.

**Cassie:** Great. It was great talking to you and I will send you that consent form electronically to your email then.

And like I said, if you have any photos of your time at WMU or a more recent photo that you’d like to accompany your story, feel free to send those over.

**Mark:** Sounds great, thank you so much.

**Cassie:** All right, thank you. Have a good rest of your day.

**Mark:** You too, bye-bye.

**Cassie:** Thanks, bye.