Interview Two with Robert Rosenbaum and Marjorie Daltry Rosenbaum by
Maddie Neufeld, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, April 24,
2012.

MADDIE NEUFELD: This is part two of the interview with Professor
Rosenbaum, and we can start out by asking if there was anything that came
to your mind after our last interview that you want to share.

ROBERT ROSENBAUM: No, but possibly as we talk today, something will turn
up.

Neufeld: We ended last session talking about the introduction of advanced learning
to Wesleyan.

R. Rosenbaum: Yes.

Neufeld: Could you talk a little bit about the different presidents, the ones who had
the longest tenures, including Butterfield and Campbell, and how differently
they influenced the institution? Or if you want to focus on only one, that’s
fine.

R. Rosenbaum: Well, in order, there would be Vic Butterfield, and we talked quite
a bit about him last time.

Neufeld: Yes, we did.

R. Rosenbaum: And I, at least, was motivated to introduce his effect on Wesleyan
pretty thoroughly into our conversation.

Neufeld: Yes.

R. Rosenbaum: And then after Butterfield, before Colin Campbell, was Ted
Etherington, and then Colin Campbell. Colin had been a protégé, you might
say, of Ted Etherington, because when Ted Etherington was working for the
stock exchange—was the head of the stock exchange, in fact—Colin, who
was a lawyer by trade, was Ted’s aide in many things they did. I had a very high regard for Colin Campbell, as I did for Vic Butterfield, as I emphasized last time, although Colin didn’t have a thoroughgoing academic background. I don’t mean that he hadn’t gone to college, as well as law school, and so on, but rather he hadn’t had a background that utilized his training and education. He was a fast learner, and when he took on the presidency after Ted Etherington left, he developed his own commitment to education, and Wesleyan in particular.

I think that his tenure included many interesting and fruitful ideas about what might be done at Wesleyan. He spent more time and money on buildings and that kind of thing than Vic Butterfield did, but he also wanted the faculty and student body to work together in ways that hadn’t been done previously. He was himself pretty youthful when he was president. I forget how old he was, but he was pretty young. And he had a student’s outlook, in many respects. I would say that he did a lot of good work for Wesleyan, and for many other organizations. He clearly had a great affection for Wesleyan, and I think a lot of people had a great affection for Colin Campbell. I know I did.

MARJORIE ROSENBAUM: And so did I.

RR: Colin’s tenure as president culminated in his leaving—retiring, you might say, from the presidency—to work for a number of nonprofit organizations, culminating in his being named the director of the Williamsburg Foundation.

I won’t try to go through all of the presidential tenure here, but subsequently there are two people, both of whom did have a good deal of the academic outlook which I said Colin didn’t have. Both of them were protégés, you might say, of Carl Schorske, the intellectual historian whom
we mentioned a number of times last time. Both of them are Wesleyan alumni. Doug Bennet and the current president, Michael Roth. Both of them, I think, were at least the equal of Vic Butterfield in their academic outlook.

M.D. Rosenbaum: Could I say one small thing?
R. Rosenbaum: Yes

M.D. Rosenbaum: Which you can erase if you’d like. I was thinking about Colin, who was already a very good man, and very wise, when he came, but about how he kept developing a more and more enlarged vision for the University. It seemed he just kept getting larger, for all of us, really.

And I remember that he tried things that had not been tried here before, or not in quite that way, or had not happened at all. And he did something that really touched my life. I was the Director of Teacher Preparation, and he said to me: “Marjorie, whatever happens in other people’s thinking, I want you to know that as long as I’m President of Wesleyan University, there will be Teacher Education.”

Neufeld: What happened to end that program? What precipitated that?
M.D. Rosenbaum: There was another president, who just waved his hand and said no.

Neufeld: Because of budget cuts.
M.D. Rosenbaum: No. He didn’t think it was our thing.

Neufeld: [laughs] The period following World War II, up until the 1970s, is commonly referred to as the golden age, or the golden years of higher education. How did that manifest itself in your life as a professor at Wesleyan? What was it like to be in an expanding academic institution, or in the world of higher education at that time?
R. Rosenbaum: Well, there were many changes that occurred during the period to which you’re referring, and let me tick them off. One of the first was getting a much more diverse student body, including people of color, students of color, starting with African Americans and then Hispanic students.

And then a good deal more effort to bring in representatives of sections of other cultures, not just the traditional Western cultures, but African—not necessarily blacks—and Asian. A whole conglomerate of traditional U.S. minorities—and then beyond that.

Well, I should really elaborate more than that. Wesleyan started as a Methodist institution, and the community—and by that, I mean faculty, staff and students—tended to be US-born, white, Protestant people. And then, at the early stage to which you referred, there were a good deal more representatives of Catholic students and faculty, and then Jewish students and faculty.

And then now, other religions—Mohammedans and so on, so that that broadening of the cultural representation of students and faculty became one of the big changes. Putting this in chronological order, a second change was the broadening of the curriculum—to which there were two aspects. One was the advanced learning, to which we referred last time, and the other was a broadening of departmental representation, like Sociology and Anthropology, which hadn’t been part of the curriculum before then. Or, even earlier and more significant than that, Psychology hadn’t been as strongly represented in the curriculum as it now is. Thirdly, and I don’t put it third in importance, but only in chronological order, was Wesleyan’s return to coeducation. Those are three of the really extraordinary developments that occurred during that period.
Neufeld: Can you talk a little bit about what precipitated each one of those developments, those changes? And what effects they had on the campus culture, socially and academically, if at all?

R. Rosenbaum: Well, the representation of people of color on the campus was tied, in many people’s thoughts, I think, with the Civil Rights movement. There was a feeling on the part of many people that if Wesleyan had as much money as it did, with the *My Weekly Reader* and other sources of income, then the institution ought to use some of that wealth to do what was the right thing to do for the population that we were able to help.

It wasn’t just a feeling of obligation, but a feeling that we would do a better job of education if we had a diverse student body, and a diverse faculty. Many of us are still working hard trying to get a faculty as diverse as the student body is. And as I say, it’s not just a feeling of obligation to those populations, but rather a desire to offer an education to the people who could profit from that education, and do a better job for everybody.

All right. That was a fairly complicated set of reasons for that development. And really, the advanced learning comes under the same heading of doing a better job of education if we are able to add PhD candidates to the bachelor’s and master’s degree candidates.

And so far as coeducation is concerned, that was very clearly a dual effort—that is, we should consider it an obligation to help both men and women in the process of education, but also that we would offer a better education and a richer education for everybody if it were not just a single-sex institution.

Neufeld: Did you find that the atmosphere in the classroom, or on campus, changed drastically after these changes?

R. Rosenbaum: Yes.
Neufeld: How so?

R. Rosenbaum: As far as I’m concerned, the main change was a change in seriousness. That is, the student body we have now takes the academic aspects of the college much more seriously, and contributes to the atmosphere much more impressively, than was the case when I came to Wesleyan.

Neufeld: Why do you think that was the case?

M.D. Rosenbaum: Well, I can think of two places where there were whole new areas for students to take leading roles, which had not been there in that number before. And one of them was the whole business of the Film Department. And the other, of course, is the Music Department. These were enormous changes, and it was all, it seems to me, a wonderful result of individual students contributing in a large way—because they were invited to do it.

Not that they weren’t in other places, but this gave them more space, and more opportunities. Isn’t that true?

R. Rosenbaum: Yes, it is. But although the colleges and universities were helping teenagers and students in their early 20s to mature, to provide them with the opportunity to get to know different groups of people, it was only in a very marginal way. The emphasis was still on scholarly activity—and that was true not only for second- and third-rate institutions, it was also true for Harvard, and the University of Chicago, and so on. So the presence of women made the atmosphere on the campus different from the atmosphere when there were only men here. Just as the arrival of men changed Smith, and Wellesley, and Mount Holyoke, and so on. There was a richness to the intellectual aspects of the atmosphere on the coeducational campuses. That
didn’t happen everywhere, but it surely did happen at Wesleyan when it became coeducational again.

Neufeld: Was there a fair amount of resistance to the reintroduction of women at Wesleyan?

R. Rosenbaum: Some felt that Wesleyan was being ruined by becoming coeducational. It was losing all of the spirit which had characterized its fraternity-and football-centered nature, and so on. But with the changes in the student body—the addition of women, of the Catholic, Jewish, African-American and other groups who weren’t represented previously on the campus—that really was the counterbalancing effect—a counterbalancing effect.

I mentioned Swarthmore as a college that I thought had many of the same features as the current Wesleyan and Reed College, I think, in our discussion last time. But there was a time when Swarthmore had the best football team money could buy, and it’s hard to realize that, given the current institution. That change at Swarthmore was made by a president, not unlike Vic Butterfield here, and many of the alumni at Swarthmore thought that he had ruined the institution by turning it from it’s earlier emphasis on intellectual excellence and moderate athletics.

Neufeld: So, as the student body became more diverse, the faculty did as well, I assume? I wonder if there were any particular tensions amongst faculty as more women and faculty of color were hired at Wesleyan. In other words, how did that change manifest itself in relationships amongst the faculty?

R. Rosenbaum: Well, the faculty now is itself much more serious about their work, I think, than was the case when I first came to Wesleyan. I used that word “serious” with respect to students. I’m using it with respect to faculty, as well. And there, I don’t think there was any of the resistance that you
referred to quite appropriately with respect to the students. The faculty realized that that’s what they should be doing, so although there may have been some resistance in the faculty to asking the students to be more serious—that, after all, boys will be boys—they should have a chance to mature on their own, and so on and so forth. But I think that now the faculty is trying its best to make the faculty and students work together to develop mature thinkers, doers. That is what everybody would agree represents the important reasons for having a college.

Neufeld: Let’s take a break from the institution for a moment and talk about your family life. You lived in Middletown, correct?

R. Rosenbaum: Yes.

Neufeld: What was your family life like? What did you do outside your job? What was meaningful for you besides your work?

R. Rosenbaum: In one way, it was an unhappy move to Middletown, because in Portland, Oregon, at Reed, we had just built our own house, with colleagues from the college building a house next door. It was a very congenial sort of thing. When we came here, the college provided housing. We paid rent on this (rather decrepit by our standards) house—but we didn’t pay very much. And our three children—how old were they in ’53? Bob was ten. That would mean Joe was seven and Dave was five. And they—this became a family joke: We took a family vote as to whether we were going to move to Connecticut, and they agreed to come with us if we could have a ranch when we got here. There aren’t all that many ranches in Connecticut, but we did buy an old hillside farm in Massachusetts that was a wonderful place for summers.

Neufeld: Where in Massachusetts?

R. Rosenbaum: It was in Ashfield, Massachusetts. Almost to the Vermont line.
Neufeld: My parents just bought a house in Massachusetts, but in the Berkshires, so it’s near Great Barrington—not close to Ashfield.

R. Rosenbaum: Well, the Mohawk Trail goes across northern Massachusetts, and as you go west, you have Greenfield, which is a little north of Northampton, which is where Smith College is. And then you get to Great Barrington on the New York State line, virtually. Our summer place was in that general northern Massachusetts area.

The boys started in public schools in Middletown, of course, which were not very good in those days. In fact, I’d say they were third-rate schools. But our kids did what they could tell everybody else did, which is what they wanted to do, too.

From the early days of my experience at Wesleyan, I taught in Wesleyan’s graduate summer school for teachers, and we had teachers from private schools, in many cases, enrolled in that program. So I got to know people from the Mount Herman School in Massachusetts, and Northfield, a girls’ school. The Mount Herman and Northfield schools were rather close to our summer place in Massachusetts, and the boys got the idea that they’d like to go there. Well, you could see that in all respects, those schools were a lot more attractive than Middletown public schools. So, although we believed in public education, when the chips were down and the question was, “What about your own kids? Are they going to get a good education?”, we all opted for their going to Mount Herman. And it was a very good experience for all three of them.

Going back to Middletown; after we had been in this rather decrepit house for some years, Wesleyan announced it was going to tear down the house to make room for a parking lot.

Neufeld: What street was it on?
R. Rosenbaum: Church Street.

Neufeld: What number?

R. Rosenbaum: 185. At the corner of High and Church, on the southwest corner, there is a house that was occupied by the Winslows and the McAllisters. I believe we mentioned both of them last time. And the next house to that house on the corner of High Street was the one that the Schorskes lived in—other close friends. I think I mentioned the fact that I thought it was unusual that we made as close friendships as we did, starting when I was a full professor—as contrasted with a young assistant professor, when you might expect to make new friends that way. A lot of our socializing was with faculty friends, and we had the children—the McAllisters had two children, the Winslows had five, the Schorskes had five. They all went to the Middletown schools before the high school that I spoke of, the Mount Herman School. And the McAllister and the Winslow and the Schorske kids went to summer camp in Massachusetts, not far from where we had the old farm.

M.D. Rosenbaum: What would you do on the weekends? Would you socialize?

R. Rosenbaum: Sometimes during the year we would all go up to Tanglewood for concerts and so on, but I don’t think that weekends were especially times for socializing. I guess there were dinner parties. And there were lots of things happening on the campus, but since it was not a coeducational student body, and there weren’t many women faculty—relatively few women faculty—in fact, none. The social life was more limited. And we took our teaching and our scholarship pretty seriously,

M.D. Rosenbaum: And this could never have been anything but difficult for Louise, because Bob’s wife, and the mother of those three children, was also
a professor of mathematics. There weren’t any other examples of wives and husbands teaching together. Not here, anyway.

R. Rosenbaum: But whether it be weekends or otherwise, it was fairly common for us at the corner of Church and High to call our next-door neighbors at 10 o’clock at night and say, “We’re knocking off for the day. Come over for a beer.” We would have informal social times of that sort, which might be during the week, as well as on weekends.

Neufeld: This might be an unfair question, but can you remember any specific conversations, or experiences, or moments, or events when you socialized with the Schorskes and other Wesleyan families that were particularly memorable for you?

R. Rosenbaum: Well, we used to have lots of discussions as to whether Wesleyan was a serious institution or not. The word that I was using so often earlier on in this conversation was one that we worried about. And so we would discuss such things as the Beta Symposium. Beta Theta Pi is a fraternity, as you know, and the annual Beta Symposium was an interesting, informal contribution. I mean, it wasn’t part of the curriculum, but it was something that made Wesleyan a more interesting place for faculty and students.

And now you remind me that Downey House had some food service on the lower floor. There was the round table there, and faculty and students would congregate there at 10 or 10:30 on mornings for coffee and talk. I remember some of the students whom I had in class those first few years: I found them among the most interesting of the students with whom I had contact, and they tended to be among Wesleyan’s liveliest intellects. Carl Schorske said that in teaching his upper-division intellectual history course, his best students were usually physics majors, not history majors. And they were also the ones who congregated in Downey House, where they made a
real contribution to the positive atmosphere, the recreational atmosphere of the college.

Neufeld: How did faculty and students relate to each other, both inside and outside the classroom? Was it more professional, more personal, a combination?

R. Rosenbaum: It varied a great deal.

Neufeld: In your personal experience.

R. Rosenbaum: As far as the students were concerned, the ones with whom I interacted most were a few who were really young associates, the ones who wrote senior theses, and so on. Like Sandy Siegel, for example. As an undergraduate, he wrote two senior theses. One was in math, which he worked on with me, and the other was in classics, with Nobby Brown. Norman O. Brown—I don’t know whether that name is familiar to you—was a really lively member of the faculty and always needling people. I team-taught with him. One of the many people with whom I team-taught, which I enjoyed very much. I don’t know whether I mentioned team-teaching, it was really a very attractive feature of teaching here.

Neufeld: You did.

R. Rosenbaum: I spoke about the fact last time, I think, that math majors were not all that interested in math very often. They were just interested in finishing the requirements for the majors. So with undergraduates, a lot of my interaction was through athletics—playing squash and so on. And these were people who weren’t necessarily in courses that I taught. They were just people who enjoyed playing squash, so the action centered in the gymnasium. It didn’t center in Wesleyan all that much.

But now you remind me of another feature. This was the fact that I contrasted the atmosphere on the campus of my early days at Wesleyan with what I had experienced at Reed, and I thought that there wasn’t really as
much interaction between faculty and students of a sort that I thought was desirable. It was very common for faculty living in a college-owned house near the campus, as we did to put up overnight the girls who came for party weekends.

I remember one time when I was talking with some members of the fraternity, Delta Sigma, on High Street, and was being critical—as I’m being critical in my report to you here—and the students I was talking to said they were disappointed also in the lack of any significant interchange between faculty and students. I talked not only about what I had experienced when I was teaching at Reed, but also my experience as a student at Yale, when we had the so-called “college plan,” and you lived in a college, and took your meals there, and so on. There were faculty who had offices and living quarters on the campus, too. I think I used that illustration as a mitigating feature to the fact that I didn’t take a very broad set of courses—and these opportunities for interaction contributed toward some of that desired broadening.

The students at Delta Sigma said: “Well, let’s set it up so that you come here for lunch at the fraternity a couple of times a week.” And that did go on for some years. It was a type of interaction which I had almost forgotten about until you were pressing me on this.

Neufeld: And was it a positive interaction?

R. Rosenbaum: Yes. And it’s lasted for years and years—that is, some of the students whom I didn’t get to know except through those luncheons at the fraternity have been people with whom I have maintained contact all these years when they return for a reunion, at least.

Neufeld: And what would you talk about at those luncheons?

M.D. Rosenbaum: Everything.
R. Rosenbaum: I think that it tended to concern not very deep issues, but occasionally a question that came up in class would surface again in this kind of informal discussion. I believe both the students who raised the questions and I would look back afterwards at that as having been a really pleasant, very worthwhile, sort of experience.

M.D. Rosenbaum: And it worked both ways. Later on, when there were all those different houses, as well as fraternities, there were faculty people who were made members, or were asked to be part of, those residences. They took that very seriously, and visited there often, and it wasn’t just for meals. And this was a relationship that extended all over the campus.

Also, because some students didn’t have a chance to get home for Thanksgiving—they were there for classes until noon on Friday, and had to be back on Monday, or they lived too far away—some faculty people invited them for dinner, or to stay with them. They included them with their families. And that was nice.

Neufeld: Indeed!

R. Rosenbaum: That’s right.

Neufeld: Now, I’d like to talk about the administrative positions that you took on. I know you were acting president, vice president, provost and chancellor, correct? Not that order, I think. Can you first talk about how you came to those positions, and how you found that work compared to teaching?

R. Rosenbaum: Yes. Well, that’s a part of my life that I really remember vividly, without pleasure. I never enjoyed any administrative work, but I did a lot of it; and I did that simply because, when I was asked, I felt it was a duty to accept.

As Marjorie knows, I’ve said that I got into this sort of stuff at Reed College. Reed had a very small body of administrators, so faculty were
pressed into duty for informal administrative work. Anybody who showed any ability in or any talent for administration—and was willing to do it—was often pressed into service. Well, the same sort of thing happened at Wesleyan. As faculty members, we would get elected to the Educational Policy Committee or the Student Affairs Committee or the Faculty Advisory Committee. These were three of the many committees which were needed by the institution in order to help it run.

And once you got invited—or elected, perhaps—for this kind of thing and showed some ability in it, then you would get tapped for more of the same. When a number of the science faculty gathered together to discuss science faculty development (leading to advanced learning, leading to the PhD program), I was interested in that, and in its other ramifications. So I became a member of the self-starting Science Development Committee. Well, then we started to talk about really doing something along these lines. Also, the chairman of the Board of Trustees at that time—Gil Klee—was very active in the administrative life of the college, and it was agreed that one of the things that we should propose would be to have a Dean of the Sciences, who could give some continuity and help in this science development. So it was natural for the members of the Science Development Committee to try to recruit some distinguished person to be Dean of the Sciences.

We worked pretty hard, and almost got a good person for the job, but we didn’t quite succeed. And so the committee said, “Well, Rosenbaum, you be dean of the sciences.” And I said, “I don’t want to do that. I want to teach.” The countered with, “Well, you can teach, too, but why don’t you just be Dean of the Sciences for a couple of years?” So I agreed, reluctantly, to do it. Then the provost resigned to become the president of Skidmore
College, in upstate New York, and so they came to me, and they asked, “Will you be the provost?” And I said, “I don’t want to do that. I want to teach.” And they said, “Do it for just a couple of years.” And so that continued for a long time.

Neufeld: Did you find that work meaningful or fulfilling, or it was just a duty?
R. Rosenbaum: My answer to that is complicated, because I don’t think that I really had a talent for that. I think people thought I had a talent for it, because I was willing to put in the time. But I don’t really think that I did first-class work.

Neufeld: So what does it take to be a first-class administrator?
M.D. Rosenbaum: Love it.
Neufeld: You have to love it.
R. Rosenbaum: Well, I describe the way that a good faculty member works. When you’re a good faculty member, even when you’re showering and shaving in the morning, you think about what the class is going to look like today, and wonder what ideas do you have for that? And if you’re a good administrator, the same thing should happen. You say, “There was an issue that we didn’t resolve yesterday, and is there some way to do that now?” I would always be thinking about my teaching, and I never wanted to be thinking about administrative problems. And that’s the difference between a person who has a real flair for the job, and one who is just going through the motions. I don’t mean that I didn’t try, but the question is whether I had the talent. I mean, Vic Butterfield and the president of Swarthmore would be examples of administrators who really did that work very well.

Neufeld: How did you come to be acting president, and what challenges did you face in that position?
R. Rosenbaum: I became the acting president because Ted Etherington wanted to give up the presidency in order to run for nomination for the Senate in Connecticut. They had to find somebody to be the acting president, and I’d already been doing these various administrative jobs, and I hadn’t made a terrible botch of any of them, so they said: “Well, why don’t you be the acting president—and we’ll be looking for a permanent president as fast we can?” And that was just one more step in my varied career as administrator.

M.D. Rosenbaum: Can I interrupt just long enough to say a little part of a poem by Robert Frost? Bob laughed at it when I told him that it existed? Frost wrote quite a lot of things at the end of his creative life that were okay, but they were not the great poems of his past. Still, they had a lot of wisdom in them. And one of them had a wonderful title: “How Hard it is to Keep from Being King When it’s in You and in the Situation.” Don’t you think that’s nice?

Neufeld: It’s appropriate.

M.D. Rosenbaum: Yes.

Neufeld: What do you make of that poem?

R. Rosenbaum: Well—

M.D. Rosenbaum: I think that’s just what we was talking about—that it was hard not to do it.

R. Rosenbaum: I don’t begrudge the time that I spent on this, because I didn’t make a terrible botch of the things I was doing, and they had to be done — but I didn’t find, within me, the ability or the imagination, or the personality to do this.

Neufeld: What were some of the specific challenges that you faced?

R. Rosenbaum: I admit that I was the acting president at a very difficult time for anybody to be a president, or acting president. It was the Vietnam War, which—like lots and lots of other people—I deplored as an activity for our
country, and it was affecting everything, like the educational programs. But it was also the early days of our reconfiguring of the institution. Jack Hoy was the dean admissions, and he—and I contrast him with me—he had the flair for acting on the idea of getting students of color here, and then getting them here. And he did a very good job, but it was not an easy time. Far from it. The president—or the acting president—had plenty of problems there, ranging from students saying: “You invited me to come here as a student at Wesleyan, and you gave me a pretty good scholarship and so on, but you didn’t give me any money for ice skates, and I should get some more things, and also some money to give my family, because they’re poverty-stricken,” and so on. Or students who were working with the Black Panthers, who would set up a shooting gallery in the basement of what used to be called the John Wesley Club. There were all sorts of illegal activities, and dangerous activities, that went on, as well as the student strike over the invasion of Cambodia.

Neufeld: And how did you deal with the student strikes?

R. Rosenbaum: Well, I did a better job on that than some other things, really. We gave students opportunities to finish their academic work late if necessary, It was a way of acknowledging the fact that everybody was having a pretty difficult time figuring out how to deal with national and international problems that were impacting the lives of all of us.

And so in order to ameliorate that, you had to give students an opportunity to learn the hard way if they wanted to keep guns in their rooms and got arrested for doing that, or wanted to try to do things that took them off campus for long periods. Some faculty members joined the freedom rides in the south—John McGuire and Dave Swift were examples—and that interfered with their regular teaching. Well, students did similar things,
which interfered with their learning, but I believed that they had to have the chance to have the experience.

Neufeld: Was it a particularly exciting time on campus, politically?

R. Rosenbaum: Yes, it was very exciting, but exciting doesn’t mean that it was necessarily pleasant or easy.

Neufeld: I understand. I’ve heard that the golden age went into decline around the 1970s, if I’m not mistaken, and the higher-education institutions entered a period of more economic instability. So did you, as acting president or as a member of the Wesleyan faculty, have to reassess your priorities in terms of funding because there was less of it?

R. Rosenbaum: Well, by that time I was out of the administration, and so there was relatively little that I had to do, or did do, with respect to addressing such issues as you speak of. You see, by 1974, I was really out of the administration, and was working on something that I felt better suited for, namely the Project to Increase Mastery of Math and Science. I didn’t mean that it was necessarily more important, but it was something for which I had more talent, and from which I got a greater feeling of fulfillment. I wasn’t so much worried about whether we were or weren’t living in a golden age.

Neufeld: Can you talk about PIMMS, and how it came to fruition, and what trajectory it’s taken since then?

R. Rosenbaum: My interest in mathematics has always been an interest in the teaching of mathematics, as well as just doing mathematical research.

Starting in the mid-’50s, there were a good many of us who, in our discussion of our profession, thought of the fact that schooling and learning of mathematics (these activities, which we considered to be very important) were not being dealt with adequately in formal education. These were not all professional mathematicians; they centered at Wesleyan, but they were all
people who had the same concern that I did, and we used to meet informally to discuss these issues, in some of the settings that you were asking about before. About a dozen of us would have periodic meetings to discuss this sort of thing, and we decided finally to try to see how large and committed a group of people we could find in Connecticut.

So we arranged for a couple of days of sessions here on the campus, and the meetings culminated with our asking each other: “Are we willing to put our backs into the work, and see whether we can make any improvement in the formal education to which we had been exposed, and our children, and so on?” Well, we had, I guess. Of the close to 100 people who came to the sessions, perhaps forty signed their names to pledge that they would keep working at this to try to figure out how to improve what we thought of as an unsatisfactory situation.

Well, with no funds, we had very little in the way of financial support. We got some from friends working for United Technologies, or General Electric, and this enabled us to keep some continuity of effort with publications ongoing, and the like. And we kept thinking about what might be done.

I’ve told this story many times: I got a call from the person who ran the General Electric Foundation, and whom I had come to know because he used to visit the campus here at Wesleyan occasionally. And he said: “We’ve been thinking about ways that we can help improve mathematics education, and we believe we have a useful idea. We have quite a few technical people who work for General Electric who, when they retire, will still have energy and ability. What would you think of our trying to get some of these retired General Electric folks to go into the classroom and help
teach? We assume that they have more knowledge of some facets of math than the average teacher.”

I said, “Well, I think it would be a useful thing, but I don’t think it’ll solve the problem.” Well, he said, “Why don’t you come down to Fairfield, anyway, where the headquarters of General Electric are, and talk with us about it?” So I said I’d be glad to do that and I went down to Fairfield. The person who was in charge of the little discussion said: “What would you think of setting up a kind of summer school for teachers, where we try to get the teachers to know more math than most of them do, with a view to improving what they teach?” And I replied: “Well, that’s not what I thought you were asking me to come down here for, but if that’s what you really mean, I happen to have here in my briefcase exactly the description of such a program.”

I gave it to them. They leafed through it and said: “How much do you need to run this?” I made an estimate of what we needed on the back of an envelope, and I left the meeting with a pledge of $175,000, which sounded like a lot to me—and made me think that money-raising was very easy.

And that’s what’s got to start it. They decided that they wanted to do this for math teachers, despite the fact that they’re an applied organization. They thought that math was what was needed to start on the road to improvement. So then we went to the various divisions of United Technologies and got an equal amount of money from them for science teachers. And that’s how we got started.

We rang lots of changes on this kind of program. For example, we found—or we thought we found—that a lot of young women were dissuaded from going into math or science, that they were discouraged by their teachers, their parents—so we started some programs called Multiply Your
Options. By that we meant: Before you give up too early on the possibility of learning something about mathematics and using it, keep your options open for careers, and also learn something of the fascination that you are perhaps convinced is not your dish of tea. It’s now about forty years, I guess, that we’ve done this.

Neufeld: And so that touches on your evolving relationship with Middletown, through PIMMS and through the university and through your individual life. Can you talk about that relationship, or Middletown and how it’s evolved?

R. Rosenbaum: I’d begin by thinking of how Main Street compares with what it looked like fifty or sixty years ago. Marjorie, you’d better help me on this—

M.D. Rosenbaum: When most of the people living here were happy to be with each other, and had a feeling of “this is home,” but were kind of ashamed of it.

Neufeld: Why?

M.D. Rosenbaum: Because it wasn’t first-class. Because there were a lot of things that needed to be better. They loved Middletown, but they wanted it to be better. And for a long time, we thought that almost everybody came from Italy, that it was a place people moved to from other places. But it isn’t just Italian people. It wasn’t then, but there were just a lot at the beginning, there were more of them than today. Now there’s a multicultural mixture and, of course, some of the things that Wesleyan actually did in its curriculum changed a lot of that too. Because we had World Music, and a world-view of society.

I think there was a point where everybody began thinking, “We could be better,” but they really didn’t need to. The faculty were pretty damn good. There were a lot of things that were very good, but were not honored, or
recognized as such, and nobody knew exactly how to make the “new” era start.

And one of the things that happened was that Bob and some friends of his at the college decided that they ought to sit down and talk about what Wesleyan could do. Was there anything they could do that would make it into something that people would really feel pride in? So they met, and then they discovered—and I don’t know who did that, but Bob certainly could tell you—and they thought: “Maybe the place to start is with the schools—find out all the good stuff that’s going on, and give people a chance to shine. There were fifteen schools, and they began getting the topic of improvement into the general conversation, into school administration meetings, wherever they could. I think that’s all I should say. You can say the rest. But I remember that they all talked for a long time.

Did I say any of that right?

R. Rosenbaum: Yes, you surely did. This was an industrial town originally, and the Goodyear Rubber Company—that’s the national Goodyear, making automobile tires, but they made galoshes as well—and then there was a Remington Rand factory here. (They had a big strike, and that colored the atmosphere as well.) But now, I think that the self-deprecating idea of Middletown not being a very good place to live or come from—or to come to—that Marjorie spoke about, I think that has changed a good deal.

M.D. Rosenbaum: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

R. Rosenbaum: And there always have been interesting activities run by people living here, including those from Wesleyan. There was a Middletown Scientific Association, not just Wesleyan people, but townspeople. There were music—including jazz—and art and theater. These have been built upon by people like Marjorie, who had a job running CAUSE in
Middletown. C-A-U-S-E stands for “Community and University Services For Education.”
R. Rosenbaum: And that has run for how many years?
M.D. Rosenbaum: Forty-six.
Neufeld: Wow.
M.D. Rosenbaum: And we’re going to have an event on May 4th.
Neufeld: So does Main Street look completely different now from the way it did when you first arrived in Middletown?
M.D. Rosenbaum: Oh, yes.
R. Rosenbaum: That’s right.
Neufeld: What about the Wesleyan campus? What have been some of the more significant physical changes, expansions, transformations?
M.D. Rosenbaum: Let’s finish the first thing, because I want you to know that it was not just making the place look better.
Neufeld: Sure.
M.D. Rosenbaum: It is better. There were fifteen schools that Wesleyan could do something about, and for all their intellectual strength, there remained the question of how could you give it or share it with the people of the town? How could you do that? Is there a way? What if we just began an organization that did that sort of thing? And if we had a lot of people in the college who wanted to help, how would we organize that?

And we did the smartest thing—and I’ll just take a little time to explain this, because I think you have to understand that it didn’t last over forty years for nothing. The smartest things was this: You just make sure that everybody knows that people want to help, and they want to have some opportunity to share in the education of the young people, but they don’t know quite what it is you need. Most people know the kinds of things that
they think we’re good at, but not necessarily how you would use them. And that was the message. In other words, we were saying: “Ask, because we’re here and ready to do it.” We weren’t going to impose anything. We engineered a way for it to come to us. And that’s the difference.

I got one phone call in the first week, from one of the elementary schools—I think they went up to grade six. The principal said: “We’ve just been given some money by the United States government so we can feed our kids. Lots of our kids come to school with no breakfast, and now we have the money. We’ll buy the food, and we can feed every kid in the school. But we’ll have to teach the mothers and fathers not to feel that they’re being thought of as poor—it’s just that their kids didn’t take time out to have breakfast, and that they’ll do a lot better in school if they’re fed. And how do we go about it, doing it? We have the staff, we have the money now, and we have the food now. We have teachers who could put the stuff out, I guess, but then they have to go back and teach their classes. Do you have any students at Wesleyan who might be willing to clear things up afterwards, and get everything squared away so the kids and the teachers can go off to their classes? Could you get a few people to help?” And I said, “For the whole school?” He said, “Yeah, for the whole school.” I said, “Sure, I’ll certainly get the word out, and post notices around the campus. When do you need to know?” And he said, “Well, tell me by Friday how many you’ve found.”

He called me on Friday, and I said, “Well, I’ve got 81.” “Eighty?” he was amazed. I said, “Yes. We can’t use them all every day, but they can schedule themselves so that they have a small group that helps on different days. They’ll work it out, they’re very bright people.”

And that’s what happened. That was the beginning—and we had over forty-five different programs over these years—some of them music, some
of them art. We have had a show for I don’t know how many years now, certainly thirty years, where the college turns over its biggest and most wonderful display places for a couple of weeks so that the kids from kindergarten to grade twelve have their work hanging in our art buildings.

R. Rosenbaum: The summers. What about the enrichment summers?

M.D. Rosenbaum: And we had an enrichment summer school for over 100 kids, and then it grew even larger.

R. Rosenbaum: The humanities program.

M.D. Rosenbaum: Yes, the program that is still going, which we’ll be looking at on May 4th, centers on high school humanities, and features a number of the great teachers at Wesleyan. I have to say, I chose them, and I know how wonderful they were. They have changed over all those years, some have retired, but we’ve had high-grade heavy cream.

What we do is invite five high schools to join us, and they can each send twenty—and sometimes we let it get to be twenty-three or four—students from their school. They take an English class run by a teacher who likes the idea of being a colleague of the professors at Wesleyan. And they build the curriculum together.

It’s a semester course, offered in the spring. In the fall, we meet to decide what books they’re going to read. Everyone will be teaching the same books, though each lecturer may use them differently, depending on what he or she wants to stress. So we had, usually, between six and eight in a semester at Wesleyan, in the Honors College.

The students are there about every third week for the day. They have read the book, they hear a lecture—usually about an hour and a half—then they have a discussion for an hour after that. Then they go and get lunch, wherever they want to—after all, they’re all seniors, or juniors and seniors.
When they come back, we go to our theater to see a film. The films, which relate to the readings and the lectures, are selected by Jeanine Basinger, who’s done this for most of the years of the program. The students leave the college about three o’clock, or three-thirty in the afternoon.

In many cases, we’re invited to come to their schools the next Monday for further conversation, to reinforce the integration between the reading, the lectures, films, and so on. They also like to think through the effects of going to school with kids from other schools, which was in itself an exciting element of the overall plan. Well, it’s been such a success that it’s still going, and we’ve now added another school.

So—there are those kinds of things that have been happening, and it was all started by those conversations that Bob and his friends had.

I remember they hired me because, they said, they needed a doer. They had all these great ideas, but they knew it wouldn’t happen if they just talked about it. The first thing I was asked to do was to name the program. And the second thing was to create a summer school, an enrichment summer school, from which the rest grew. But it all came from the schools, and we were partners with them throughout the whole thing. We functioned like twins. The man or the woman who was giving the lecture was from Wesleyan, but in conversations we worked out what it was they all wanted to have happen, and what was the particular book that could make it happen.

If you were teaching in all those schools, you knew you were not just preparing them for something new, you were part of it. So that’s what we’ve been up to.

Neufeld: I see that we have about twelve minutes left. Let’s talk briefly about the physical transformation of the Wesleyan campus, and how it changed.
R. Rosenbaum: There have been very extensive and dramatic changes. I think of it all as very recent, but I guess it isn’t all so recent if we start in 1953, which is when I came to Wesleyan. The physical plant, was very big as compared with Reed College’s physical plant. But then, the size of the Wesleyan student body grew, so the physical plant didn’t seem so enormous in terms of the number of square feet of building per student, or something like that. But there still were relatively very few attractive buildings like the Honors College that contributed to an ambience that was especially pleasant. And then there were buildings like the houses that faculty members lived in, owned by Wesleyan, that tended to be run down and not especially attractive.

The first buildings of the new era were the Science Center—there had been the Hall Chemistry Building, and the Shanklin Biology Building, but then the new Hall Atwater, and the Science Tower, and so on were added. That was really a dramatic increase in the quality of the building—I mean in terms of usefulness and attractiveness—over what there had been before. And next came the Center for the Arts—that group of Indiana limestone buildings there.

M.D. Rosenbaum: Where all the trees were saved.

R. Rosenbaum: And then in really quick succession: the Freeman Athletic Center and the Film Center, and the Foss Hill dormitories, and the expansion of the library and the Usdan Student Center. And so it’s now I think a very attractive setting for the University. When I first started to teach math in the basement of Fisk Hall, you had to be careful walking from the hall into the classroom because the floor was pretty shaky, and it was easy to have your foot go through the floor. Well, there are no longer these sorts of danger spots on the campus, I think.
M.D. Rosenbaum: And apropos of that, there is a much greater—and very proper—concern about people who need help getting around the campus. I mean, there were some buildings you simply could not get into if you had my problems, but that’s not true anymore.

I remember trying to get somebody into the new music hall, and you couldn’t do it; there were too many stairs. They couldn’t walk up. And once you got in, you had to go back down. What do you do? I was informed that if you went into the part of the music buildings where they had their offices, and took the elevator down, not up, then you could walk through the tunnels, and after a little while there would be a door where you could knock—and there you would be in the theater.

Neufeld: Yeah. [Laughs]

M.D. Rosenbaum: But you don’t have to do that anymore.

MN: Let’s finish up with the question of teaching, or your passion for teaching, which seems to be the underlying theme throughout your history at Wesleyan. What is it, or what was it, about teaching that kept you going for so many years?

R. Rosenbaum: Well, I’ve written a piece, a little booklet, that you ought to dig out somewhere. It comments on what’s significant about Wesleyan, with perhaps as many as a dozen faculty writing short bits on what’s important to them. I wrote that what has impressed me most is that I have learned so much from my teaching, both from faculty colleagues—sometimes those with whom I’m team-teaching, perhaps—and also from students. I noted that an important feature of teaching students is to listen to their comments and questions, because I’m impressed that when I listen to them, I sometimes say to myself, or say to them, “I never thought of it that way before.” They made me think about something that I hadn’t thought of, or that I hadn’t thought of
in that way before. That gives you a refreshment, an awareness that you’re not doing the same thing over and over again. You’re always learning something new from their observations and questions, and that’s what makes the teaching always fresh and invigorating. That’s an easy thing to say, though not always easy to accomplish. But it’s true and it’s important.

Neufeld: That’s wonderful. Is there anything else that you want to say before we’re done? Are we finished?

R. Rosenbaum: Yes.

M.D. Rosenbaum: Was there one question that you didn’t get to?

Neufeld: Yes, but I think we might wait for another time on this one. So—how do you think the status of Wesleyan in the larger ecology of higher education has changed over time, or stayed the same?

R. Rosenbaum: I’ll think about that.

Neufeld: Thank you both very, very much.

[End of Interview]