

Jessica Elfenbein Interview

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SPEAKERS

Interviewer: Bedell Terry

Interviewee: Jessica Elfenbein

Bedell Terry

It's June 22, 2021, at 3pm. I'm with Professor Jessica Elfenbein via the online zoom platform, we're about to begin our oral history interview for *the University of Baltimore stories*, the purpose of *The University of Baltimore stories: 100th anniversary oral history project* is to celebrate the university centennial by preserving the memory of those influenced by the University of Baltimore over the years, we will be creating a digital archive and exhibit and making these recordings available online through the Internet Archives. So, thank you for joining me today, Professor Elfenbein. The basic format we're going to use is that I'll ask a few questions about yourself as well as your experience with the university. We'll have between 60 and 90 minutes to have a conversation about both these things. So, getting started, where were you born and where did you grow up?

Jessica Elfenbein

I was born in New York City. I grew up in northern New Jersey, until middle school. And then my father stayed in that area. And my mother moved to Washington, D.C. And I went to boarding school in New England. And then from boarding school in New England, I went to college in New York City, because I'd had enough of the pastoral, beautiful setting with this New England boarding school. And then, after college, we moved to Baltimore, moved to Baltimore the first time we said we've been on two tours of duty in Baltimore. I came the first time in 1984, right after my graduation from college. I actually came to Baltimore, I thought I wanted to be a public-school teacher, I thought maybe I'd like to be a principal. And so, I spent the first three weeks that I worked in Baltimore teaching, first grade, in actually in Station North, but I was really poorly prepared to teach in Baltimore City at 22. And so, after three weeks, I decided that my mental health was too important to me. And I didn't have the right kind of support. So, I left that. And then I was very lucky. And I got a job at the News, American when the News American was still a newspaper downtown. And I worked there for a while until I got a job with Mayor William Donald Schaefer as the Deputy Press Secretary, and I was there for about I think two and a half years and then I went to graduate school the first time.

Bedell Terry

Tell us about your school years. How did you select the schools you attended?

Jessica Elfenbein

Well, I didn't select any of the schools I attended up [to] age 14. They were just the public schools in the town where I lived -- New Milford, New Jersey. And then I went to a summer camp where I met these girls who went to private school. I grew up in a really middle-class community, sort of ethnic white people there were ethnic Catholics, and Jews. And we didn't really have any private schools. But I learned at summer camp about private schools, which I didn't know anything about. So, I told my parents, I thought maybe I would like to go to private school. And they said, "That's very nice". They didn't think that they could afford it. But they said, if I applied and if I could get enough financial aid, they would let me go. And since there weren't any private schools -- well, there were parochial schools, but there weren't any nonsectarian schools where we lived. So, I learned about boarding schools, and I thought it would be an interesting adventure to go to boarding school, even though nobody I'd ever known had gone to boarding school. But my parents gave me enough rope. I remember writing 40 handwritten letters to admissions offices at all these boarding schools. And, then my parents were kind enough to take me to see these schools and I got enough financial aid to go to one of them. So, I went to Northfield, Mount Hermon. And that's how I chose it for high school. And then for college, I wanted to go to something quite different. So, I went New York City, [and it] was about as different as I thought I could be. So, I went to Barnard College, which is the women's college of Columbia University in New York City.

Bedell Terry

In Morningside Heights.

Jessica Elfenbein

That's right. And in my last semester, second to last semester of my senior year, I met a man in one of my classes, who I started to date, and I moved to Baltimore for the first time because he went to graduate school at Johns Hopkins, and that's sort of how we came to Baltimore the first time. So, we were in Baltimore from 1984 until 1986. We got married in Baltimore at the Lloyd Street Synagogue, in 1986. And then we moved to Washington, D.C. just for a year, but I started graduate school at GW in American Studies. And I was there for two years, I entered to go to a PhD program. But after I started, I decided I didn't want my PhD. I thought a master's would be fine. And so, I got my masters. And at the same time, my husband, Robert Feinstein, started law school. And so, we moved from Washington, D.C. to New Haven, Connecticut.

And we commuted sort of between these schools for a while and then I decided I did want my PhD. I worked in New Haven, I worked for a consortium of soup kitchens, pantries, and shelters. And I did special events for them. And that was really good work. But what I discovered was that I was more interested in studying the people who did that kind of work, that I wasn't actually doing that kind of work. So, I thought that I would like to go back and get my PhD. And so, I applied, I actually [interested in] only applying to the University of Delaware to the Hagley program. And the reason that I applied to the University of Delaware was because, well, two reasons. One, because I was interested, they were doing the history of industrialization, very broadly defined and broadly conceived. And I thought I was

very interested in that American industrialization. And also, because they guaranteed funding and I didn't want to compete with my peers for funding I wanted to be able to be collegial and collaborative and not compete. So, they had a pretty good financial package. And I thought that seemed very attractive.

So, in 1990, we moved to Delaware. And I [had] started my PhD program there [in 1989]. And we were in Delaware, just from 1990 to 1992, my husband took a job in Baltimore again, and I was done with my coursework. And so, I continued my graduate studies at Delaware. But I needed a dissertation topic. And by that time, by the time we came to Baltimore, I had two really little children. I got pregnant, my first month of graduate school, in the PhD program at Delaware. And then I got pregnant again. And so, the girls are 23 months apart. And so, I really needed, this was a case of necessity being the mother of invention, I needed to find a dissertation topic that I could do with two really little children. And I don't remember exactly how I became interested in the YMCA, but I don't remember how I discovered that UB had the archives for the Central Maryland YMCA. But anyway, they did. And that was my introduction to the University of Baltimore. So, as I was writing my dissertation, I was also, at the University of Baltimore, doing research for my dissertation. And that started a very happy and pretty long association with UB that was in 1993 I think. And, so, from 1993 until 2011, I was pretty intimately involved with the University of Baltimore. A nice long run.

Bedell Terry

So, you, you were using the archives at the University of Baltimore. How did you find them?

Jessica Eifenbein

That's what I don't remember, I don't remember exactly how I knew that they were there. This was pre internet. So, there must have been paper finding guides, or somebody I knew maybe told me that they had the records of the YMCA. And so, I wrote my dissertation on the history of the Baltimore YMCA. And the reason I chose that topic was because I was interested in the history of American religious stuff. I was interested in urban history, and I was interested in the history of philanthropy, why people give their time or their and or their money voluntarily and the YMCA had all of those elements. So, I thought, well, that's really cool. And I think there was another thing going on, which was that the YMCA, so, the Baltimore YMCA, of course, as part of the national YMCA movement. And all of those papers had been, many organizations related to the YMCA, they had their papers in the national YMCA Archives.

And then right around that time those archives got sent back to the local communities, there were some weird things with the archives. So, there were a bunch of young scholars who were all doing their work related to the YMCA, but most of them were [taking] a national view on a particular aspect of the YMCA. So, there was somebody who was doing the railroad branches of the YMCA. And there were other people who [were] writing about the student branches of the YMCA. And there was somebody who was writing about gay life at the YMCA, but they were doing national studies. So, I thought it would be interesting to use the papers at UB to do sort of a biography of the city of Baltimore through the lens of a single organization. And I used the YMCA for that purpose. So, I wrote my dissertation about the Baltimore YMCA, really largely based on collections in special collections at UB.

And through that experience, I met Tom Hollowak [Thomas], who was then the director of special collections. And we really came to have a very strong friendship and partnership, we did a lot of work together for a long time, for a really long time. Just about two decades. We work[ed] very closely together. And, you know, I think my career would have been very different had not I found those archives at the University of Baltimore, had not Tom Hollowak befriended me, I suspect my career would have been maybe very different, might have been very different than what ended up happening. So, I will always be pretty grateful to the University of Baltimore, and [for] my friendship with Tom.

Bedell Terry

I'm really interested about how you found the discipline of history, was that something you were always interested in, that it developed over the years through education?

Jessica Elfenbein

Well, I remember being pretty little. I didn't have language for it, but I think I was an experiential learner. I liked being [in] places and I liked house museums a lot, because I liked open hearth cookery and smelling it or seeing the weaving or so, I was very interested in those kinds of experiences of other times, and other places. And I remember that pretty clearly. Certainly, by the time I was in middle school, I thought all of that was pretty good. Also, I'm 58. So, I was in middle school at the time of the Bicentennial. You know the kind of American history, so, the celebratory American history, I didn't really know about critical American history at that point. But I thought the whole thing was pretty interesting. And I don't think it was patriotism exactly. But I wanted red, white and blue carpeting in my bedroom, I wanted to sort of live the full experience.

I remember the tall ships sailing in New York Harbor and a lot of those kinds of experiences. And I think I was pretty much infected by that. And so, in high school, I had the opportunity. So, the high school I went to was one that had been founded as this egalitarian institution where there had been a girls' school and there had been a boys' school, and eventually they merged, but the girls' school was founded first. And by the time I attended this incredibly liberal, New England boarding school, there was a woman who was the head of school, and there was a man who, was I forget what his title was principal or something, but they were co-equal. And so, I saw the egalitarian stuff, and I thought, Oh, that's very cool. And I had no idea [that] the world wasn't like that. And so, I think it was an old, you know, an old New England place. And so, I became very interested in all of that, but I was also, very, very interested in how objects can tell stories. And this is part of why I thought I wanted to be an elementary school teacher.

I actually wanted to be a museum educator. And I thought that if I got my license for elementary education that would enhance my ability to be a museum educator. And so, I did some internships in college for museum education, and I liked it. Because I liked teaching history through objects. I thought that was pretty cool. I was not so, much interested in the kind of source. Like how beautiful things got made, I just was interested in the way you could use the beautiful thing or the not very beautiful thing to tell stories. So, that's, I think, how I became interested in history. In college, I did a double major in American Studies and Religion. And I was very interested in American Protestantism. And then I went to graduate school at GW for my Masters in American Studies. And there I wrote a master's thesis on Washington, D.C. Board of Trade. So, it was really kind of a business history, but also, about the

disenfranchisement of people in what should be our 51st state and, and all of that, and I was able to work with people in American Studies and people in the library and people in history as I did the history of the Washington, D.C. Board of Trade.

So, that was very interesting to me. And when I started graduate school in Delaware, I actually thought that I wanted to write the history of credit cards, which I didn't do. So, in time, I became much more interested in urban history, and, again, the history of philanthropy, and then learned that there was a field called public history. I'd never heard of that. But I knew I was interested in museums. I never thought I wanted to be an archivist, but I certainly was really interested in archives. I'm always very interested in museums, and I really just didn't know there was such a thing. I didn't know there was a field. But throughout my career, I've done a lot of stuff that I think there's no question [about], but that is public history.

Bedell Terry

I've just discovered the public history area; I wasn't aware that there was public history and some delving into it during internship.

Jessica Elfenbein

Good for you. All right, well, I'll also, put in a plug. So, now I'm at the University of South Carolina, I'm chair of the history department there. And we have one of the oldest and strongest master's in public history programs, and we fully fund our students.

Bedell Terry

Oh, I've dipped my toe in with Morgan State and the University of Baltimore, University of Maryland, Baltimore County,

Jessica Elfenbein

Yes, they have a very good program.

Bedell Terry

So, it's very interesting. It's something new to me.

Jessica Elfenbein

It's, well, the thing that's so, great about it is it's, especially in the world we're living in right now. It's a way to affect change, right. It's a way to use history to change the future. And I've always thought that I wanted to use history for community building. And of course, I think that embodies the whole idea of change, right? You [are] building community, you want to find common ground, but I think you also, want to leave the place better than you found it. So, you know, who knows what each of our own professional or personal legacies might be, but I would be very gratified if that was part of mine.

Bedell Terry

I can understand. What was your first position at the University of Baltimore, I understand you came to utilize the archives and made friendships with the archivists, who are special people.

Jessica Elfenbein

Yeah, that's right that happened. I didn't come to UB to do those things. I came to use the collections. And then Tom was really nice to me, Tom Hollowak was really nice to me. So, I had these two really little kids at home, and we had a small house, and I had a babysitter there for them. So, it was hard for me to work at home because I would undermine the authority of the babysitter by being in the house. So, Tom knew that, and he was really nice. And he created this honorific position for me. He called me "scholar in residence", which didn't really exist. But it was a nice thing that he did. And he convinced his boss at the time, the library director was Steve Labash. I don't know, Tom somehow convinced Steve Labash that I was the scholar in residence for special collections. And that meant that they would allow me to have my own special desk. And they left the desk for me, and I was allowed to come and go as I pleased. I had a desk and a telephone. And again, this is still pre internet. So, I think I was doing things longhand and by making copies. And I don't know how long but maybe close to two years.

I was a scholar in residence while I was working on my dissertation. And then, at some point during the time that I was doing my research in special collections, I think that faculty members from The Division of Legal, Ethical and Historical Studies made their way over to the archives. And I got to know them. There was then a guy named Fred Hopkins, who was an old timer who did Chesapeake Bay history. He was also, the last one in the country, I think, to teach a three-credit course on the history of the War of 1812. But anyway, Fred Hopkins, there were these other people around and somehow, I got to know a couple of them. I think two things happened: I got to know them a little and universities can be pretty lazy. So, they knew that my dissertation was just about done. And they knew that, you know, I was there. And they had some teaching, some adjunct teaching opportunities, they asked me if I wanted to teach, I think that was part of it.

But the other part of it was that very early on, Tom Hollowak and I came up with some projects that we wanted to do. We wanted to do a Baltimore history conference. And I think I had barely started teaching. And I was supposed to start teaching on an adjunct basis, a course or two, I think. And then somebody left, there was a resignation, and they had an opening at the 11th hour. And they hired me into a position that was then titled "Clinical Assistant Professor". But it was a full-time position. And I started, in the fall of 1995, I think, full time at UB, but not on the tenure track. And then Tom and I were doing this program, this history of Baltimore program, because one of the things that happened was, at least at that point, so, 25 years ago, there was not as much good history of Baltimore, as we thought there should give the importance of the city. And in part, that was because Johns Hopkins graduate program didn't focus at all on Baltimore, it was almost as if like, that's too easy. We won't do that; our students won't do that. So, they were focused on other ways, College Park was a little bit too far, most of their students weren't really focused on Baltimore. And so, there was not a lot of energy, scholarly energy around the study of the history of Baltimore.

And so, Tom, and I thought we should try to bring together the scholars who were, at that point, doing work on Baltimore. We did and UB was willing to host it. And it was this sort of community thing and brought in a lot of people. So, I did that, I think, just as I was starting to teach at UB, and I don't remember the details exactly. But pretty soon after I started at UB, I made myself indispensable to the institution by doing all of this public outreach work, public history, right. But I didn't know that's what it was called. I just thought we should make history useful to the community and what was weird and

interesting. Bedell, I don't know if you're a Baltimore native or not. But there was so, much pent-up interest on the part not of historians, although they were interested, but on the part of community organizers and community stakeholders, they really thought that if they could understand the history of the city of Baltimore, better that they could do a better job planning for its future.

So, they were very grateful to us for doing these convening. Organizations like the Citizens Planning and Housing Association, CPHA would send its people or League of Women Voters would send its people and then it became evident that there was an overlap between a lot of the groups whose membership would show up for these history convening that we were putting on, and the groups whose archival records UB had collected before Tom got there, when there was an initiative I think, called BRISC, [Baltimore Region Institutional Studies Center] it was from the 1970s. This guy named Ted Durr, who was a sociologist, had started that he was collecting the record groups of all these civic, voluntary and nonprofit organizations. So, it turned out that those groups whose records he'd collected were the same groups whose members were coming when we would do these public convening. So, I made myself kind of indispensable.

And then the university actually pretty quickly had a tenured track job opening. I think it took two years, but then I was hired into the tenure track position at UB, and you know, because you're a history major, and I don't think things have changed too much. You know, there were, I think about a half dozen historians, that UB [does] not [have] a very big group. And I think they thought I was a very junior person, and I think they thought just give her enough rope and she'll hang herself like, what's the harm in saying, yes, she's not likely to actually do these things, because academics have a lot of good ideas, but they very rarely follow all the way through on them. So, I think people said yes, because it would have been more trouble to have said no. But then when I started doing the stuff, and it reflected well on the University of Baltimore, then people were very nice, because it helped UB, and it helped me, and it helped. I hope it helped the archives. So, that's kind of what happened, at least in the beginning.

Bedell Terry

I see that you were Associate Provost. What's the responsibilities of an Associate Provost?

Jessica Eifenbein

Oh, well, that was a very special moment in UB's history. So, what happened was, I've been a regular faculty member, I went up through the ranks, I started as a clinical assistant professor, then I was an assistant professor on the tenure track, then I got promoted to associate professor. And then I got promoted to full professor, but at the same time, I was doing all of this community engagement work. And at some point, I left UB in 2011, I think maybe around 2000. And my dates might be off, around 2006 or seven. This guy, Wim Wiewel came, he was Dutch, and he was hired to be the provost. And his real claim to fame was that he came to us from the University of Illinois at Chicago and his area was community engagement for urban institutions like UB or the University of Illinois at Chicago. And I think that when they interviewed him, they made him think that our program at UB at that time was more robust than perhaps it actually was. And so, when he got there, he discovered that there was plenty of good work going on, but that there could be more work. And so, he thought it might be interesting to have a position that worked on community engagement. And I think that's how it happened. Although prior to his arrival, people had always been really nice to me at UB. I mean, I will always be grateful to

UB because I really had a very -- I'm trying to think of what the right word is, people were nice to me. I had about as good a run as I could possibly have had at UB. I don't know whether it's because UB as an institution is a pretty scrappy place, or at least was during my tenure was a pretty scrappy place. And I was a pretty scrappy person who took the initiative or whether I just got really lucky. I'm not sure why. But I had a pretty charmed run at UB.

And before Wim Wiewel came as provost, Bob Bogomolny [Robert L. Bogomolny] had come as the president, he had a pretty good run. Before he was there was this guy Meb Turner, who was president for like 33 years. Meb was also very nice to me. When Meb [Turner] left they were hiring for Bob Bogomolny. I was the only untenured faculty member on the search committee. And that allowed me to know the search consultants. And they were very helpful to me. So, I mean, I really got so lucky. I had every opportunity, I think, that could have been afforded to somebody like me, I mean, it was about as good as it could have been. So, I did all this community engagement work [and] really liked it. UB let me do a lot of it. But I think in part I had grown up at UB, I'd been there for before the beginning of my career, really.

Then I sort of started running out of road, because it was kind of like, well, what else can I do? So, as Associate Provost, I spent the first part of my tenure doing community engagement. And they really gave me a lot of roads to run on. And so, that's where we did the "Baltimore '68" project, which was a really big and complicated project to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, and all the unrest and the uprisings that occurred. And that was a multi-year project. And it had many, many players and it created all kinds of stuff. And I'm very grateful that we did it when we did because I think in a post Freddie Gray world, there is no way there is no way that you could have focused on the 68 riots. I think that moment passed, maybe it'll come back someday. But I think we were naive and wanted to believe that the world was better and that stuff like that could never happen again. And when it did, and it was so, jarring and sad, I don't know if you could have gone back and done 68.

The 68 [project] was good, because it was 40 years out. And the people who were alive and had memories had very clear memories, no one had ever asked them about it. And so, we were able to pull off a really pretty big project. But that's some of what I had done in that position. And then the last year I spent in that position was a more general [one], I had a more general portfolio, because the community engagement, not that it seems to be [less] important, but the provost had changed. And we had a guy named Joe Wood, and he was interested in doing other kinds of stuff, which was his prerogative, and it was perfectly okay. So, when I came back, I did merge sort of general Provost Office kinds of stuff. And then, well, I should mention, because I think it is an important small component of my career. And it explains the timing of what I did.

In 2008, 2010, I served as an American Council on Education fellow in Higher Ed Administration. So, that was probably the single biggest gift that I have been given in my career, and it was a full year to go and learn how Higher Ed looks at an institution that's not your own, but your home institution pays your salary. So, UB very generously paid my salary. And I still had little kids at home. So, I couldn't go very far. But I went to Stevenson University for the year. And it was interesting. And most people who do the ACE fellowship, then you owe your home and institution a year, they go home, they go back to their

home institution, they serve a year, and then lots of people go on the job market and go somewhere else, which was what my plan was, but so, I went back to UB before that final year, I worked with Joe Wood when he was provost. And my plan was to go on the national market, but my husband was offered a position in Columbia, South Carolina. And because we had thought a lot about what a community would need to have, in order for us to consider moving to Colombia had all those things. We said, sure, we'll move to Colombia, even though I didn't have a job when we came down here.

So, I left UB after that, not because I didn't like UB, I really did like UB, I love UB. It was great. But because I've kind of run out of road, there was not much more I could do. They'd been as good to me as they could be. But, you know, I got pretty far, but there was no place to go. And they weren't going to hire me to be the provost. Because you know, sometimes you need [it], it's hard to be a prophet in your own land. So, it was time for me to leave. I'd been at UB for 16 and a half years when I left. And so, that's kind of it in a nutshell, I guess.

Bedell Terry

In 16 and a half years, what kind of changes did you see in the University of Baltimore? Did you see it grow? Get more, I don't know how it could get more liberal, but it's a small university and very inclusive. I'm finding [it] because I went to three years at St. John's 25,000 students, [a] very religious institution, and then to come to the University of Baltimore to finish, it's a big difference. What kind of differences did you see from the time you came there [to] the time you left?

Jessica Elfenbein

That's a good question. Well, among the differences, I don't know if this is one of the biggest, but certainly one of the most obvious differences was that when I got there, it was an upper division institution. So, it had only juniors and seniors at the undergraduate level. And the really weird part, I mean, whoever heard of that there were never a lot of those upper division institutions. There are not a lot of them in the United States. It's a very flawed model, because there are not the big intro classes to support those smaller classes that you get as a junior or a senior. So, of course, I had never heard of an institution like that. But most people who taught it up during the period when it was upper division only, they really liked it because all their classes were small. So, that was a great thing.

And I mean that the small classes continued my whole tenure at UB, but it did not continue to be an upper division institution and so, one of the things that did change during my time there was the conversion from upper division to a full four-year institution. So, I guess that was one of the big changes the retirement of Meb Turner [H. Mebane Turner], and I think Meb Turner still lives and I hope somebody, I don't know if he's well, but if he is, he certainly should be interviewed. When he retired. I don't know how far into my tenure that was maybe around 2001 or around there. I think he was then the last longest serving American college president, I think in the United States was something like 32 or 33 years as president. So, I think in some ways, it has been pretty stodgy. I mean, the University of Baltimore can only be so, stodgy, but it has been a little stodgier. And it got a little more dynamic.

When this guy Bob Bogomolny came in, as President, he was there for I think 10 years or so. I left before Kurt [Schmoke] became president. So, I think Bob Bogomolny was there the rest of my tenure, and he was a little more razzle dazzles a little more flash a little more, the four of the conversion to four

years happened on his watch. Other changes? Well, when I was there, at the beginning, there was really not that there was no student life. But there was certainly not much emphasis on student life, because most of the students were adult returning students. And then UB tried when it went four yours tried to also, welcome recent high school graduates. And that was a little bit of a culture clash. They never really got as many as they hoped to, at least in my tenure, things may have changed in the last 10 years. But I vividly remember being in a faculty meeting and afterwards a colleague saying what happened to all the freshmen we ordered freshmen was like, the freshmen were never delivered, and we don't have the freshmen. So, the whole thing and trying to attract freshmen was an interesting culture shift at the university. And because most of those, so, you know, the, you look like the profile of what students had been, in the first part of my career at UB, they were older students who were returning who were very hungry for an education. So, preparation levels varied very widely.

But the one thing that almost all the students had in common with each other was this real interest in hunger in being in college. And it's not that and that went away with the coming of freshmen and sophomores. But I think the freshmen and sophomores did make UB look more like lots of other places, and less like the UB I experienced in the beginning. And I liked working with adult students, I mean, that was really fun. Other changes, I mean, with Bob Bogomolny there, they built some of those newer, nicer buildings. I don't think anything [was] built during the time I was there, when Meb Turner was still the president. Things were maintained, but I don't think anything was built. But the new law school came online [and] they took over that building that had been the Knights of Pythias building or whatever, that a little further down Charles Street, the light, the new, the under Bogomolny, they also, built that. I don't know what the building [is] called, but one that has the bookstore in it in the parking garage. They made a deal with the postal service to get the land to do that one. So, there was some real building in the second part of my career that hadn't been there in the first part that was different. I think there was more promotion of UB in the second part. Yeah, so, I've never really thought about what changed in my time there. So, those are just right off the cuff kinds of [things].

Bedell Terry

President Smoke is putting forth a model for the University of Baltimore and for basically, community colleges in Baltimore, to have more of a CCNY type setup where the junior colleges feed to University of Baltimore, and it becomes the cornerstone of the county community colleges and they feed in and he's put that forth and it sounds like a very workable plan.

Jessica Eifenbein

It sounds to me like a return to the roots of UB as I experienced UB because when I first got there, there were all these articulation agreements with all these community colleges, because without the community colleges, UB couldn't really exist. But one interesting thing there is that, and I could be a little bit off on this, as I as I understand it, UB used to be when it was private, it was a four-year institution, but when it wanted to join the state system, the Community College lobby, I think was pretty strong. And they said that's great. You can have UB join the state system, but we really don't want them competing with us for freshmen or sophomores. So, in my very thumbnail sketch of the history of Baltimore, what I understand is that's how UB ended up being upper division in the first place. And so, in some ways what Kurt Schmoke is proposing sounds like what was, and I don't know what happens

to the freshmen. We're never really delivered the sophomores or whatever. But it does sound a little bit like I returned to roots as I experienced UB.

Bedell Terry

As a presidential fellow, how were you selected as a presidential fellow?

Jessica Elfenbein

Well, I think again, I was sort of this very active junior faculty member who people knew had pretty good administrative instinct. And I think - I forgot the order - I think I did the provost one first and then the presidential or the presidential, the Provostal. I don't know. I spent a few years sitting in other people's offices doing stuff with them and for them, and I don't really exactly remember. Oh, I know. I think I did the prep; I think [it] would happen. I know what happened, the presidential fellowship happened because I was the only pre tenure person on that search committee that brought in Bob Bogomolny and then he must have thought that it would be a good idea to have a fairly young faculty member advise or something, I think that must be how I got it. And then he was there when Wim Wiewel got selected as Provost, and Wim had this, as I mentioned, special interest in community engagement. And he needed somebody who could also sort of be his translator to the campus. And I think that's how it all happened.

And then I think the Associate Provost thing happened after -- I know what happened after both of those things. But it was, I think it was in response. No, that's not right. I don't remember actually how that one happened, either. I don't remember exactly how it happened. But anyway, I spent a few years doing that. And I don't know how popular that made me with other junior faculty, right, that I got plucked out for these very special assignments. I'm not sure I mean; I never noticed any ill will towards me. But that's not to say it wasn't there. I really just don't know; I think I could have been oblivious to it. Because I think now about the kind of institution that I'm at and if there had been no process, and somebody had gotten these nice spoils and, and lots of other people hadn't I'm not sure that [would] have played very well. I'm not sure that it played very well. I just don't really remember feeling. I don't remember anyone ever making my life unpleasant. But maybe other people weren't that happy about it. I don't know. Because again, mine was a pretty charmed existence at the University of Baltimore.

Bedell Terry

What does a presidential fellow actually do?

Jessica Elfenbein

I went to meetings. I went to meetings. And when they you know, if there was a new one, there were all kinds of initiatives. But if there was a new initiative about faculty recruiting, or a new initiative about recruiting, you know, what we were going to do with the freshmen and the sophomores. If they did come or not, I was just a voice at the table. And then I would have assignments that came out of those meetings. And I don't recall whether it had charge of anything in particular, I didn't look at my own CV in preparation for this. I truly don't remember. I'm sure I did some special projects, but I don't remember what I did.

Bedell Terry

And that's all within the University of Baltimore.

Jessica Elfenbein

That was all within the University of Baltimore. And then when I went on the ACE fellowship that was outside the university

Bedell Terry

That was at Stevenson,

Jessica Elfenbein

Yeah.

Bedell Terry

I see you've authored and co-authored and edited a number of different books, articles [and] essays that many centered around Baltimore in Baltimore history. Did the University of Baltimore archives helped you in research in your writing?

Jessica Elfenbein

Yes. Yeah, the University of Baltimore archives was pretty central to my career at the University of Baltimore. So, I mean, it was useful in my own research and writing, but it was also, really useful in the teaching that I did. I tried very regularly to bring students into the archives and have them have the archival experience. And also, I'd like to think, but you asked me about my own research and writing. Yes, so, it definitely did. I don't think I used any collection as heavily as I had that YMCA collection at the beginning of my career, but I know that I use the CPHA collection at various points. I did a project on a piece church in Baltimore called well called Church of the Brethren. And I use some stuff from the UB archives for that. And then I did a lot of engagement with these civic, voluntary and nonprofit groups whose records, the archives already had, in a lot of instances to get them to bring their record groups forward by saying, hey, you might not even remember that you have you League of Women Voters, or you, Planned Parenthood or you, whoever, because there were a lot of these organizations, you might not even remember that you have historical records at the University of Baltimore. But if you don't know that you have them, you should, because they might be really helpful to you for promotional materials or look backs or whatever.

And also, the University of Baltimore would really like to get from you, the papers that start at the period where [they] collect and stop the last time. So, I spent a lot of time and effort working on helping to bring current, at least some of those collections, and also, bringing in some other collections that complimented the ones that were there. So, things like the Maryland Food Bank, we brought in their papers, we brought in some records of philanthropic organizations in Baltimore that were funding the organizations whose records we already had. So, that was kind of cool. So, that the record groups could be in conversation with each other. So, yeah, I did a lot of work with and about the special collections that UB.

Bedell Terry

Did you encourage your students to utilize the archives? Because I know Dr. Nix basically grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and took me over to the archives.

Jessica Elfenbein

Yes. So, I think I don't know that it was not every class that I taught at UB. But I would say probably at least half of the classes I taught at UB did something with UB, still with special collections.

Bedell Terry

And now you're at the University of South Carolina. Tell us about your time there.

Jessica Elfenbein

Sure. So, I got here in 2012. And well, we came down in 2011. Actually, I was at UB through January of 2012. And last semester I was physically here, but working remotely for UB and you know, you didn't ask me this question. This is an answer to an earlier question. One of the biggest changes that UB [had] in the time I was there was that they were pretty pioneering in the online space. I mean, I never taught online, but UB was pretty pioneering during my tenure there. They did a lot of what we'd call online now, stuff and it increased over, of course, over the period of time I was there. So, that would be one of the other changes I saw.

So, I've been at USC since January of 2012. So, I'm in my 10th year. When I first got here, I worked in the graduate school. I was the Senior Associate Dean for the graduate school for about almost five years, overseeing the day-to-day operations of the graduate school, but my tenure home was in history. And I think it was a pretty lucky place that I landed because with my background in American Urban history, there was not an urban historian on the faculty. And again, there's a pretty storied and an old public history program. So, they were also glad to have me for my expertise in that area. So, my tenure home was there. But I was in graduate school for the first almost five years. And now for almost five years, I've been back in the department. And I teach and I've been chair and finishing my second year as chair of the department and it's a big and strong department. There're about 32 full time historians at the university. That's pretty big. And so, that's what I've been doing. And it's been a good run. And it's been very interesting for me to be at a major research one university. You can take piano lessons on campus, you have colleagues in public health, your colleagues. And, you know, UB when I was there for most of my time was three schools. And then by the end, it was four schools, but University of South Carolina is 14 schools. So, it's pretty diverse. It's pretty big, diverse in terms of subject areas and disciplines. So, it's been. Yeah, it's been a good run.

Bedell Terry

How large of a student population do you have down there?

Jessica Elfenbein

It's over 30,000. Think low 30s. I don't know exactly how many. I think the graduate population is somewhere around 6 or 7000 and the other 26 or 27,000 are undergraduates

Bedell Terry

We're coming to an end, what's your most outstanding memory of your time in Baltimore.

Jessica Elfenbein

I mean, I think the thing that I have the greatest pride in having done was the Baltimore 68 project, because it was so, flawless and so, beautiful and so, inclusive, which doesn't mean that we didn't get criticized for not being even more inclusive. But we worked pretty hard at it. We did a really good job, and it was so, multi [disciplinary]. It was just so interesting, and so much fun to do. And I had the good fortune to work with people like Betsy Nix [Elizabeth M. Nix] I don't know if you've interviewed Betsy or not? Well, you haven't, because I know I [am] your first interview. But you guys really ought to consider reaching out to Betsy, on this because it was Betsy and Tom Hollowak and I who really did a lot of work on the Baltimore 68 project. And we brought different strengths to the table. And I think it was my most meaningful work in Baltimore, because it was so collegial and so collaborative. And it wasn't like, you know, somebody doing that work was going to hurt somebody else doing that work, it was like the pie just kept getting bigger. So, it was deeply, deeply satisfying work.

And we included lots of students. And students did such important work for that project. And I think one of the things I take away from UB that I'll always treasure is that because our students are themselves stakeholders in the communities from which they come, they actually provide [an] entry for faculty into community life in Baltimore. So, in some ways, that's not how you [are], so, it's a shared authority, right? Because faculty don't have the standing in the communities that our students do. And that was an enormous gift. And I think one that I would find very hard to replicate anywhere else. There are things I really like about the University of South Carolina, but it doesn't do that. It's not that kind of place. So, UB to me was very, very special because of that.

Bedell Terry

Those are all the questions I have. Do you have anything you'd like to add? And Dr. Nix is in Sacramento. And hopefully, hopefully, we can reach out to her. She was enormously influential and pointed me towards public history.

Jessica Elfenbein

Yeah, she's the bomb. I mean, I think Betsy is great. And if you talk to Betsy, what you'll learn is she ended up at UB because she and I were in a dissertation group together in the 1990s, something. And so, we didn't know each other before, but we worked on it then. And she taught before she came to UB, she taught at the Bryn Mawr School, and then she was looking for some other work. And we were able to recruit her to UB. And, you know, she was a wonderful collaborator, and colleague for most of my tenure at UB, I think 10 of the 16 years or something. And it was great. It was great to work with her. And I miss working with her. [It] was really a joy. So, and I, you know, again, I was so, lucky to work with Tom and with Betsy. And there were other great people as well. But they were probably the highest notes for me, the two of them. And yeah, it was really fun.

And I think years ago, UB if I thought about it, I would have pulled it out. But it might be [that] I'm at home, and it might be at my office at school, but UB did this project years ago, where they had this big vinyl. I don't even know what they're called the big vital banners that were hanging on Charles Street. And I was one of those people who got featured on one of the banners. And then there were these smaller posters, and you had to give a quote about why you like UB or something. And my quote was

something to the effect of I like UB, you know, I really enjoy UB because as a place where people don't fit into tiny boxes, you cannot judge the book by the cover of UB. And I just remember, you know, like the guy who's the mechanic [who] comes to class in his jumpsuit from being an auto mechanic by day is the Shakespeare scholar at night. You know, it was just people don't fit into tiny boxes. And that was great. And I really did believe during my time at UB that UB was as close to being a meritocracy as one could find in American higher education that people really could do differentiate themselves and stand out because they're not because of who they were born to or what their name was or where they got to high school or anything but really just because of their merit. And that was I thought was a huge gift of teaching it at UB as well.

Bedell Terry

Well, I want to thank you for your time. It's been an absolute pleasure to be with you this afternoon. We learned a lot and thank you!