

Elizabeth M. Nix Interview

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SPEAKERS

Interviewer: Bedell Terry

Interviewee: Elizabeth M. Nix

Bedell Terry

Good afternoon, this is Bedell Terry, and it's August 6, 2021, at 2:05pm. I'm with Dr. Elizabeth Nix on 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's 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 to the Internet Archives [website]. So, thank you for joining me today, Dr. Nix. The basic format we're going to use is that I'll ask a few questions about yourself as well as about your experience at the university. We'll have between 60 and 90 minutes to have a conversation about both of those things. So, getting started. Where were you born?

Elizabeth M. Nix

I was born in Memphis, Tennessee.

Bedell Terry

And how did you grow up in Memphis in the city? in the country?

Elizabeth M. Nix

No, I was definitely in the city. I lived in East Memphis. And so, Memphis, as you may know, is bounded by the Mississippi River. And if the river is the West boundary, and then if you go out east Poplar Avenue is the main big Street and so I was in the city at Poplar Avenue. And [when] I grew up I went to Memphis City public schools. And I went to a school called White Station Elementary School. And, it has nothing to do with race. It was just like a guy named Mr. White had a station that was out there on the train. And so, I started school, and there were a few black kids in my school. But then when I was in second grade, Memphis started busing, officially busing kids from another neighborhood into the school that I was going to. And it was really interesting because a lot of white families left White Station then and went to private schools.

Memphis is a lot like Baltimore, like there's almost a parallel school for every Baltimore like for Gilman [all-boys independent school], there's MUS [Memphis University School]. And for Bryn Mawr [private all-girls school] in Baltimore, there is St. Mary's in Memphis. So, it has that same kind of private school culture, with fewer Catholic schools, though. And so, a lot of people, white people left the public schools at that point. And I stayed in, and my family stayed in. And so I went to public schools, all the way through that whole period of busing, and it's actually the year that I graduated. Well, a little bit after I graduated, that was the point of that the public schools in America were the most integrated right at that point in the mid 80s. And so, I was part of that whole, you know, that whole school integration that should have happened in the 50s didn't happen until the 70s and 80s.

Bedell Terry

So, your family life, did you come from a big family? Do you come from a big family?

Elizabeth M. Nix

No, I've got one sister, and you know, my parents met in Memphis, and their parents were all from Arkansas, but they went to college in Memphis at It was then called Southwestern University and now it's called Rhodes College. And so, it's just the four of us and my grandparents did live in Memphis, but my other grandparents lived in Hope, Arkansas. So, I had cousins that were, you know, in Arkansas, and eventually in Texas, but no I'm not from a big family.

Bedell Terry

Hope, Arkansas. Did they know the Clintons?

Elizabeth M. Nix

They did know the Clintons. So, my grandfather was a doctor there. And Bill Clinton's mother was a nurse in his practice. And, like the practical jokes that my grandfather used to play in her book in her memoir, but Bill Clinton broke his leg when he was little. He was like five years old, and he was jumping broke wearing cowboy boots. and my grandfather said it was a pretty bad break like you had had, you know, he was in a bed, and it was hanging up and there they had to build an elaborate pipe to keep it elevated. And then my husband worked in DC when Clinton was president, and he met him in a receiving line one time and he said, "my wife's grandfather is Jim McKenzie". And Bill Clinton said, "he was my doctor". And he said, "My leg" [Laughing] your brain is so big. you've met a million people and you remember that. So yes, they knew Bill Clinton.

Bedell Terry

And now you're after leaving Baltimore, you're in Sacramento.

Elizabeth M. Nix

Right after leaving Baltimore, I'm in Sacramento and the other places that I've lived, I left Memphis, went to college in New Haven, Connecticut, and then moved to San Francisco for a couple of years, and then did my graduate work in Boston, and then lived in DC when we first came to the area, lived in DC for one year and then moved to Baltimore in 94. And every one of those places. I did live for one year on the Peninsula in California, like down by Stanford, but all the rest of the time. I never lived in a suburb. I always lived right in the city.

Bedell Terry

Well, San Francisco is such a nice city to live in. I lived there. I lived there for two years.

Elizabeth M. Nix

Where do you live?

Bedell Terry

I lived on Army Street, which is now Cesar Chavez Boulevard.

Elizabeth M. Nix

Oh, great. Great. Great.

Bedell Terry

Yes. And now I couldn't afford to rent the house we sold.

Elizabeth M. Nix

Oh, right. Exactly. I lived on Taylor Avenue.

Bedell Terry

I know. Exactly.

Elizabeth M. Nix

And so, the Cathedral's up there right at the top of Taylor. And so, I lived in an apartment, and then I could walk to work down California. And you know, I can afford that out of college. I was a waitress for a while and could afford that apartment. And now. No way.

Bedell Terry

No chance. So, you went to college at Yale,

Elizabeth M. Nix

Went to college at Yale. Right?

Bedell Terry

And how did you select Yale?

Elizabeth M. Nix

I really liked liberal arts colleges. And I knew that I wanted to study History or English or you know, something like that. And I like the residential college system at Yale. They have, you're assigned to a college when you enter as a freshman, and you stay in that college every you know, for your whole four years. And you're so there are about 400 people in that college freshmen through seniors. And so, they're about a little over 100 people in your class that you're living with in a you know, like a dorm that has a big courtyard and a dining hall and a library. And I was in Silliman. And my husband was in Silliman. And so that was the residential college that we got assigned to. And then our son went to

Yale, and he was in Silliman. And so, all of that is just nice to have that kind of association. I also really liked that it did not have fraternities and sororities. And I say that now, but Brett Kavanaugh was also in my class. And he was in the one fraternity DKE [Delta Kappa Epsilon] that existed on campus, and there was really no reason to have a fraternity because the residential colleges, they had a party, you know, like, every year, they would have an annual party like a Casino Party, or, you know, a themed party. And so that was like a social life. You didn't need fraternity parties really. And so that was another thing I really liked about it. Like there was no hazing, and no pledging and any of that stuff.

Bedell Terry

And you studied American Studies, what exactly comprised American studies?

Elizabeth M. Nix

So, by the time I went to Yale in the 80s, American Studies had kind of changed. And it was, it kind of started out as something like a post war, you know, America, let's look at America and think about American exceptionalism and things like that. By the time I was in the 80s. at Yale, it was much more about interdisciplinarity. And so, you had art history and literature and history and social sciences. And so, you could take all those courses that were about America, and then you know, and create, get a few from each discipline and then create a whole plan that, you know from that, and I thought it was going to be really good for teaching.

Because, you know, you can teach history, but you can bring in art from the period or you can show a movie from the period or you can, you know, read a novel that was written in the period. And so, I think it kind of makes a richer cultural history understanding to do American Studies. Right after I left a lot of American Studies kind of turned into the Americas. And so, it started to more fully encompass South America, Central America, and that's really good and Canada. So that's really, that had just started when I started when I left college. And so that's a, that kind of makes it a different kind of discipline than it was when I was studying there.

Bedell Terry

So, you knew then you wanted to teach?

Elizabeth M. Nix

Yes, I always thought that that was going to be something that I wanted to do.

Bedell Terry

And Masters and PhD from Boston University.

Elizabeth M. Nix

Right. So, my husband, we were dating, and he went to Stanford Law School. And so, I went out to see he was at Stanford, and I was in San Francisco for a couple years, and then applied to graduate programs and got into Boston University. I got the presidential scholarship there. So that meant that I could, you know, get a stipend and I was a teaching fellow and didn't have to pay for graduate school, they would have paid me, which is the best way to go right.

Bedell Terry

[Laughing] I've heard that and I'm searching for that myself. So

Elizabeth M. Nix

yes, make sure you do that Bedell,

Bedell Terry

and the New England studies that's specifically for the Massachusetts area current studies history.

Elizabeth M. Nix

Yeah. So, I think that Boston University tagged that on to their American Studies program to kind of differentiate itself and give it a specialization. So even though I mean I did study New England things when I was there, but that really, my dissertation was not a New England dissertation, but we went on field trips, and, you know, kind of had those resources available to us. But that wasn't the focus of my studies there.

Bedell Terry

And somehow, after that, you've made your way to Baltimore, well to DC,

Elizabeth M. Nix

right, so then, my husband got a job. When he graduated from law school, he got a fellowship, and he did public interest law. And when he was doing that, he was working for a Disability Rights Center in Boston. And he really got interested in disability rights. And then when he was 25, he had his first episode of bipolar, manic, well, bipolar depression. And then, you know, cycled into a manic session. And so, he realized that not only was he working in a disability setting and helping people with disabilities, navigate their systems and try to get you know, the benefits they deserved, that he was also experiencing disability.

And so, that pretty much became the focus of this whole career. And after his fellowship finished, I was nine months pregnant. And we moved to DC from Boston on like, the hottest day of the year with a U-Haul truck and three cats and going down the New Jersey Turnpike and going into the rest stop and they say, oh, we've run out of ice and the air conditioner isn't working and it was so hot, and we moved to DC. We got out and we had some friends who helped us get stuff out of the truck because I couldn't really lift anything. And we had boxes everywhere. The three cats going around this apartment that you know, we had picked out in like an hour when we could pick out an apartment and we collapsed in it and all the electricity went off and [laughing] all the lights to know where we were. So anyway, [laughing] so I went and had that baby and we lived in DC for a year, but we had some friends who lived in Baltimore, and we were always going up to visit them.

And Baltimore was a very family friendly city. And we could miraculously you know afford a house that was in Baltimore City, and even though we had, you know, no money because he was a Hill staffer, you know, entry level Hill staffer, and he was working for Tom Harkin, at that point from Iowa, and he was working on the committee that did disability and Tom had a real interest in disability. And so anyway,

we ended up moving to Baltimore on July the fourth of 1994. So, our first son, Gareth, was almost a year old.

Bedell Terry

And when you moved to Baltimore, you taught at Bryn Mawr?

Elizabeth M. Nix

Yeah, yeah, I taught at Bryn Mawr for a while. And that was when I taught juniors and seniors there. So, I also got to teach some Gilman boys, because they came over for some classes. And so, I actually taught in the English department there, I taught Shakespeare and the Nobel novel was a really fun class to teach. And we did, we read William Faulkner and we read Omeros epic poem, by Derek Walcott, and that was, all that was really fun. And then I had a second child. So, when he was little, very little, he's born in December, and that spring semester was just very difficult to figure out childcare for him and teaching and all that stuff. So, I left Bryn Mawr, you know, at the end of that semester, spring semester, so I'd been there for two years.

Bedell Terry

Now, some of us don't come from an area where there's a lot of the private schools like there are in Baltimore, which Bryn Mawr kind of describes what kind of school it is.

Elizabeth M. Nix

So, Bryn Mawr was I actually wrote an article about the history of Bryn Mawr and their connection to women's lacrosse. So, after I left Bryn Mawr, I did a little bit of work on the history of Bryn Mawr and it was a progressive girl's school that was started in the 1880s, I think.

And the idea was that girls in Baltimore from these well-educated families, they were getting, you know, like schooling either from private tutors or they were going to like, oh, there were, there was a woman in town who would teach girls up for wide variety of subjects, kind of like a finishing school in some ways. And so, they were worried that the new college Bryn Mawr College, the girls' College in Pennsylvania had opened up. And they were worried that all these girls' daughters were there was no way for them to get an education to prepare them to go to a college like Bryn Mawr, which would be not a girl's finishing school, it would be, you know, a rigorous education.

And so, they created Bryn Mawr School for Girls in Baltimore City. These daughters are five girls, four or five. I'm sorry for the four girls who are Daughters of very prominent, very wealthy Baltimoreans. And so those girls were some of the founders of this school. And the idea was [that] in order to graduate from the Bryn Mawr school, you would have to pass the entrance exam to Bryn Mawr College. So, it was like a feeder school for Bryn Mawr College. And it became, you know, a really rigorous school [that] was run by these headmistresses that were real scholars.

One of the headmistresses wrote a lot about mythology and her books are still in print. And you know, we're used in classes all over. Why can't I remember her name? It will come to me before the end of this interview. [Edith Hamilton] But anyway, she lived in Bolton Hill, she lived on Park Avenue. And so, they were doing that, and they were also really interested in girls' athletic education. And so, they had

basketball teams and they had outdoor exercise every single day. They had classes outdoors, which is really interesting. You know, with all the COVID stuff, they have to have classes outdoors and the Bryn Mawr school was built right where the symphony is now, so it was really close [to] UB's campus. And it had this massive building with a massive wall so people couldn't peer in at the girls getting all their exercise. And it was covered by tiles. And so, you know, it seems like an amazing building had a gymnasium and a swimming pool that had all [the] stuff that I wish you knew, we still had around. And anyway, Bryn Mawr is still a very rigorous school that a lot of girls go to very selective colleges and it's one of Roland Park Country, Gilman, and Bryn Mawr, those three schools, their campuses are very close to each other up in North Baltimore.

And they have bridges over the major streets so they can go to each other's campuses. And once they're in high school, they often take languages or seminars, like I taught English seminars at the other campuses. So those of you know, you get students that don't go to your school, but they're in your classes.

Bedell Terry

And you found your way to the University of Baltimore to all of our pleasures.

Elizabeth M. Nix

My pleasure, too.

Bedell Terry

How did you get to University of Baltimore, you have an outstanding curriculum vitae And, you know, there were other colleges around?

Elizabeth M. Nix

So, this is a story, it's a Smalltimore story. Definitely, I had these two kids, and one of them was, you know, a toddler, and I had finished my dissertation when my older son was three. And so, then I had worked at Bryn Mawr and by the time that he was five, I had this second son. And so, we were part of a playgroup that I got invited to by this friend that Martha Bishai, who I had known before we moved to DC, and she's the one that lived in Baltimore, and we came up there and she had gone to Roland Park Country School, she had grown up in Baltimore. And so, she had a playgroup that she invited me to. There were all these women there who had kids, my kids' age, and sometimes they were taking time off, and some of us were working on our dissertations. And so, there was a subgroup of this play group that was a dissertation subgroup. And one of the people who was in that subgroup was Jessica Elfenbein. So, I don't think that you ever studied with her, Bedell but

Bedell Terry

No, we interviewed her.

Elizabeth M. Nix

Oh, great.

Bedell Terry

And I spoke to her.

Elizabeth M. Nix

So yeah, so you can just feel her energy and all of her ideas. And you know, how committed she was to Baltimore, and how committed she was to UB And what she really is, is a connector, and she is always her, her brain is always spinning, oh, you need to meet this person, and you need to meet that person. And let's all get in a room together and figure out a project. And so, she was kind of doing things like she would, she was teaching in the history department, but she was also starting the community studies major, and she was working in the provost's office, and then she was working in the president's office. And so, what happened was, she would just kind of say, oh, she I've signed up to teach this course. But now they want me half time in the provost's office. She knew I had a degree that was a lot like her degree.

And so, she would just call me up and say, "Hey, can you teach this course?" And, you know, sometimes it was pretty late, close to the beginning of classes. And so, I would always say yes, because I love teaching here. And I loved the classes that I often got, which [were] part of that old core curriculum. And one that I taught very often was called The Modern City. They don't teach that anymore, but it was part of the upper-level general education. But it was, I thought, a really fun class because you just got to think about urban issues everywhere, but use Baltimore, you know, for specific examples, and so often I got called in to teach that course.

And then I was like, I was teaching an occasional course as an adjunct. And then I got pulled into teaching halftime and so I was teaching halftime and then one of the professor's got sick. Tom Jacklin got sick at the beginning of fall semester, and I'm not even going to be able to remember what year that is. But he taught the core course for history majors, and that time it had a different name, and I can't remember what the name was, but okay, I should have known the name but anyway, it turned into the historian's toolkit. And so that is [why] I took that over. And then I taught that you know, every fall for the whole 16 years that I was there.

Bedell Terry

I remember the historian toolkit.

Elizabeth M. Nix

I know you do. I know you do. Yeah.

Bedell Terry

I love that class.

Elizabeth M. Nix

I love teaching. I really love teaching it. Definitely. Oh, you're frozen Bedell? Do I need to get out and come back in?

[Interview was interrupted and resumed]

Bedell Terry

Okay. Your time at the University of Baltimore, you were there for 16 years? What kind of changes did you see in your time there? because I've seen changes in just four years. So, was it a two-year school or a four-year school when you came in?

Elizabeth M. Nix

It was a two-year school, when I came in. And it was, you know, very, very busy at night. Very busy. We taught, you know, until 10:45 at night, like, you know, so many people were coming in, and they were having two classes. And you were really there in class until 10:45 at night, and you kind of had to decide whether you as a you know, as a professor, were going to teach 5:30 to 10:45 are you going to split it up and take like two late night courses in a week. And so, you really had to, you know, time your caffeine intake and take a little nap in the middle of the afternoon because like, if you wanted to be still up and energetic at 10:45 at night, you had to be serious about that stuff. So, it was very, very vibrant. You know, in the evening, which is a little different from the way it is now I think

Bedell Terry

This is still night classes, but it is more during the daytime, the law school does a lot of night classes.

Elizabeth M. Nix

That's true. That's true. But that whole thing, like a class, starts at 8:15 and ends at 10:45. That is commitment. And if you were teaching the Academic Center, the heat would turn off at 10 o'clock. So, like 10 o'clock, there's no heat. And it's just that for the next 45 minutes. It's just colder and colder. [laughing] It was crazy. So anyway, yeah, that was interesting.

And also, I mean, you know, I was here before they built the law school. So that was a parking lot. I was here before they built the Fitzgerald that was another parking lot. And I just can't describe to you how serious parking was and how much you had to think about parking. So, like if you brought your car in the day, and you parked in Fitzgerald because where the law school is that was like privileged parking that was you know, you had to be a special person to park there.

But the rest of us parked in the Fitzgerald lot, that flat lot. And you couldn't move, you couldn't leave during the day; you couldn't go to a meeting off campus because there was no parking when you came back. So that was always a challenge. And so, all the buildings that have you know, happened. When I started the whole building, that's the LAPD building, that was my bank. So, all of those buildings. that's happened, that's new.

Bedell Terry

What about the students there as the mix changes? They're the younger people or returning students like me, or how did that change?

Elizabeth M. Nix

Well, you know, definitely you would have been a typical student right when I started, there were a lot of mixed ages. That's what I loved about teaching. There was so much experience with the students and, you know, older and more mature students talking to younger students and younger students talking to

older students, and it was just a great exchange of ideas and points of view in the classroom all the time. And so, I completely, you know, we still get that, but it's definitely I think, statistically, its students are younger now the student body average age has decreased a little bit. But, you know, I'm really happy that we haven't lost students like you who are coming back after a wealth of experiences.

And that was just what made it the whole teaching situation there really rich and different from a lot of my friends who were teaching in more traditional places. And of course, after the freshmen came, that changed the whole way that everything felt like. the daytime felt very different. You know, I remember when the freshmen first came, I always taught in learning communities, so I knew the freshmen, but it was interesting to see people saying, they're people holding hands in the hallways, or kissing. [Laughing] Like, yeah, it's college. You know, in the past, everybody was so serious, and people had worked all day, and they came to class, and they were like, tell me what I need to do. And yes, I'm ready for a good conversation, but they were not like, looking for love and all that stuff. And so that was really that was a whole different feel.

Bedell Terry

So, you've seen a different administration there. Does that impact how you were able to interact with the students or changes to the curriculum? You know, looking at the history department when I came in, to the history department now, I even noticed the changes.

Elizabeth M. Nix

Right. So, I think that I think it's changed, but in a lot of ways, it stayed the same. And I think that we've always had that desire to define ourselves by our connections to professional experiences. And so, I know that, you know, the history department, yes, looks different now. But it still is tied in a lot of ways to professional opportunities that you can get with a history degree or graduate opportunities that you can go on to, you know, and a lot of ties to the law. And I think that, for history, the legal historians that we had, and the people who had actual law degrees who were teaching in the history department, that was something that definitely, you know, set us apart. And so many of our history students went on to the law school or other law schools.

And so that was something that, you know, we definitely wanted to, to build on and make sure that people understood that you could do something with a history degree. And that was, I guess, you talked to Dr. Elfenbein, about community studies and civic engagement, when so that was a multidisciplinary degree that had history as one of the tracks, and you know, you would every student would take history classes, but the idea was, you were learning about that in order to work in the nonprofit sector. And so that was when I first came to UB.

I did a lot of work on that with Jessica [Elfenbein], on that major, and that was always the idea that yes, there are 4000 nonprofit organizations in the Baltimore area. And it seemed like there were so many people who had all that energy to make the world a better place. And it would help if they had some theoretical framework and research skills to you know, before they went into the community to really know how to understand the community better. So even that wasn't just pure research. It was, you know, with that career focus,

Bedell Terry

Applied Research,

Elizabeth M. Nix

Absolutely applied. Thank you for that. Yes. Applied Research.

Bedell Terry

Yes. And the law, I recall, Dr. Carney, and he would initiate you into the law.

Elizabeth M. Nix

Yes, he most definitely. He would definitely do that. And then, you know, you had Jeffrey Sawyer, who knew all about the English law, traditions, and so yeah, those were the folks who were there the whole time that I was there, too. And, you know, they took care of all those legal history classes, and I could do the fun stuff, the cultural history.

Bedell Terry

Now, the while you were there, tell us about the origin of the Baltimore 68 project. We see that you volunteered, and you're so really involved in revitalization of Baltimore. And the Baltimore 68 project seems to work its way to the top there.

Elizabeth M. Nix

Yeah, definitely. And you know, I got to give all the credit to Jessica Elfenbein with that, and she, I'm sure told you the story of the famous lunch at Sasha's that she and Tom Hollowak had, and where she just said, "Oh, you know, the 40th anniversary of Baltimore 68 is coming up. Where were you? You lived here, then what were you doing?" And then he told her, and then we came back. And we talked to Rosalind Terrell. And she told us where she was.

And then we talked to on black woman who worked in the provost office whose father had been a doctor, and where she had been, and she told us a whole different story. And so right in that two-hour period, we had three very different perspectives, one from somebody from the Polish community, one from a young black mother, who had been living in Bolton hill at the time, and one from the daughter of a black physician who was there. So, all of that got Jessica thinking, oh, this is great. And, you know, I had to admit, she was much braver in that whole process than I was, like, isn't this dangerous? Like, you know, we're opening up some old wounds.

And there's a reason people haven't talked about this. But you know, she was so good about pulling in a variety of people and making sure everybody was at the table as much as they were willing to be at the table. And so, that project, I think, you know, was good for moving Baltimore forward, because so much So there had been so many assumptions about Baltimore, 68, what had happened during that week, and what the causes were, what the ramifications were. And I think it helped a lot of people to be able to tell their story, to get it out, you know, like this has happened, and maybe this hadn't [been] thought about before this effect hadn't been considered.

And also, the article that I wrote with Deb Weiner, you know, we really said, look, 68 was not the cause of the beginning of the downfall of Baltimore, which was what a lot of people had assumed. And we really were able to prove, I think, at least in the three business districts that we talked about that it may be accelerated trends, but those trends were already in place. And I think that's an important finding, to really understand Baltimore's history, and then be able to, you know, do the kind of civic work that I really enjoyed doing while I was there.

Bedell Terry

And they both were 68 project that was oral history, and

Elizabeth M. Nix

It was oral history, it was a website that's still up, it was a driving tour, it was turned into an anthology that, you know, a lot of people turn in, after the Freddie Gray uprising. kind of understand any comparisons between those two areas it was and then a community conference, which was this big convening on the anniversary. And one reason I really liked that was because we got people with all these different points of view coming together. It was an art project that Christina Rawls did for the mosaic project. And she was talking to people who were, you know, people who were out on the streets, looting and people who were looted. And so, everybody was there together, working on this art project 40 years later, so that was quite an accomplishment.

Bedell Terry

the website still exists.?

Elizabeth M. Nix

It does, yes, you know, it's on the Langsdale [RLB] Library website. oh, it's not the Langsdale library anymore. There's another [change]. The [Robert L.] Bogomolny library. I'm sorry

Bedell Terry

and I'm still trying to be able to pronounce that correctly.

Elizabeth M. Nix

I know bo go molny, money,

Bedell Terry

I refer to it as the library. You're volunteered for several substantial positions, having to do with Baltimore history in the daily life of Baltimore residents, what's your motivation for doing that, you know, you have kids, you have a teaching position. And yet you're still volunteering for these community projects.

Elizabeth M. Nix

Well, a community project that I'm proudest of is Southwest Baltimore Charter school. And that is a school that's now in existence. 13 years, I think. And I started that with my neighbor Erika Brockman and her sister Abigail Breisethand we three, you know, wrote the proposal to get this Charter approved and started a school and for a while was on the third floor of James McHenry. The building that James

McHenry elementary is in and now it's in its own place on Herkimer Street, right by the park, by Carroll Park. And Erika Brockman is the executive director.

And now it's a pre-K through eighth grade and has over 400 Baltimore city's kids every year. And we have music and dance and arts and also one of our UB history graduates, DJ Nash is the librarian there. And so, I'm very happy that he has found a satisfying professional life helping kids. He's fantastic. He did all these wonderful videos during COVID, that he would read aloud to the kids and wear costumes. And it was just so great. so that has been a very satisfying project because we were able to kind of invent the curriculum at the very beginning.

And we took an interdisciplinary thematic approach that brought in a lot of history that, you know, schools oftentimes don't even have the time to teach anymore, because they're so focused on reading and math. And so that was kind of a way, I actually got a grant from UB, the very beginning to try to institute parent teacher as part of that community studies major. To Institute, better parent teacher conferences, and look at the difficulties that a lot of parents in Baltimore City have come into a teacher conference because they had experiences with schools growing up. So that's, and you know, after that initial part, I was on the board for the whole time I was in Baltimore, but it was really Erika, who took over the directorship and has stayed with it, and her own kids went there. And it's just, I'm very proud that I had any part in the beginning of that, and I was the secretary on the board. So, I know, I'm proud that I was able to do that. But that is definitely something that, you know, I've always thought —

My kids went to Baltimore City public schools. They went to Midtown Academy, very close to UB. And then one went to the Ingenuity Project at Roland Park Middle School, and then they both went to City College High School and graduated from City. And so, I'm very proud of that. They were both valedictorians of City, I've got to brag about it a little bit, but you know, they got a great education in the public schools. And for a long time, I've just thought if, you know, there are a lot of problems Baltimore has to fix. But before the latest crime wave, it was sort of like if Baltimore can figure out education, and really have a high quality school system, then it's a long way to making, you know, building up the tax base in Baltimore City, and given making sure that we're sending graduates out who can take all the great jobs that are here in this area, you know, between DC and Baltimore, and we went the Charter school route, because the Maryland Charter school teachers are unionized. And so, it's a pretty strict charter law that allows Baltimore City to be the governing agency that renews the charter. So, in a lot of [cases] it's very different from other states where charter teachers don't have to be unionized, and it might be another entity, that is overseeing the charter schools and so they're much more like private schools. But in Maryland, and especially in Baltimore, they really are integrated into the public school system. And the charter school board and our fundraising abilities to have that nonprofit arm really allowed us to do more fundraising, and to get some of the special projects, especially those themes that we started out. And I was talking about those, those interdisciplinary themes morphed into a thing called expeditionary learning.

And that is very much like an American Studies thing, like, okay, get kids out, you know, into the forest and look at science projects in the forest or put them on the circulator and take them to a historic site. And so all of that is very central to the curriculum of the school now, we don't have to write it, which is great. And kind of my philosophy of teaching was really reflected and what that school ended up doing.

Bedell Terry

Yes. And then Baltimore City loses residents because of the idea of the public school system. When we moved from California, we looked in Baltimore City at some beautiful houses. But then we said we're going to have to spend \$12,000 a year to send the kids to private school and wound up in the County.

Elizabeth M. Nix

Right? Well, when we moved to Baltimore, that house that we miraculously could afford was in a school district, one that was taken over by the state the year that we moved there, you know, so it was such a failing district that they took over that particular school, Lake Montebello, that was our assigned school. So that's one reason we ended up in Midtown. And that's another [thing] I mean; Midtown Academy was another great thing for community studies and civic engagement. Because, parents were so involved, I made some really strong friends in that group, people that I still have, you know, we still have zoom book clubs. And all of those people were so committed to Baltimore, and just really felt like, yes, we need, you know, we need to, we want to stay in the city, and we want to send our kids to public school. And this is the way we're going to do it.

Bedell Terry

We looked at houses in Lake Montebello, but having been in your classes, I know that you are a proponent of public history.

Elizabeth M. Nix

Yes.

Bedell Terry

And how did you try to promote that during your time at the University of Baltimore?

Elizabeth M. Nix

Well, Baltimore, 68 was definitely a public history project. And I think that sometimes, you know, as what you're doing now is a public history project, right?

Bedell Terry

Yes, it is

Elizabeth M. Nix

public history for the history of the university. So, you can feel you know, like talking to stakeholders, people who have lived through things and people who live in the community now, about your subject is so important. And so, it makes much more sense than kind of like doing all this archival research, which is really important. Fatemeh, it's very important to do that archival research, but, you know, also bring in people because they then they feel like their voices are being heard and that, and that story, and you're not just as an institution, packaging something and saying, hey, here's your history, but they're having an impact in the actual telling of the story of the way it's interpreted. And that, to me, is really important in a place like Baltimore, because Baltimore has been so divided, especially along race, definitely along class, as well.

And so, people experience the history of Baltimore in different ways. And so, if you are always, you know, having that public history mindset that you're going to incorporate a wide variety of views, and you are not going to sit there as the expert telling the audience what they need to know that you're going to include them in that discussion. That's very, very important in a place like Baltimore, because you've got to gain the trust of the audience. They've got to, to believe what you're talking about, and you've got to incorporate what you hear from them into your interpretations.

Bedell Terry

Yeah, so I've gotten a taste for public history. Although I originally said I just want to go into archives and research and write, I am beginning to see the point more and more to the ability for people to do it. Right. Not wanting to just stand and give lectures that Fort McHenry, although that's important

Elizabeth M. Nix

part of it, right?

Bedell Terry

I'm beginning to see there's so many other ways to influence that. So

Elizabeth M. Nix

Here's a little aside, I just met somebody this past week here in Sacramento. And they learned I was from Baltimore. And he said, "I really want to talk to you about the Battle of Baltimore 1814. And here's my theory". And he launched into this theory about the bombardment and how the British were never going to get over to the fort. And it was just, you know, all the way to say that they did something. And that's why The Star-Spangled Banner shouldn't be our national anthem. And I was like, [Laughing] I wish somebody who really knew about the Battle of Baltimore was here. But it was funny, because he really wanted that Fort McHenry experience and, you know, show me what this is, and here's this. And that, you know, that's great if some people really, really want that. And that is, that is wonderful for the people who can do that. But I think what you're doing right now and what, you know, just talking to people, and you'd be so good at it Bedell, you'd be really, really good, because I think your whole demeanor is one that inspires trust.

Bedell Terry

Thank you, but

Elizabeth M. Nix

you want to pursue that. you have a real gift for it.

Bedell Terry

Fort McHenry, besides your class, I had never been there. My wife took the kids when they were little.

Elizabeth M. Nix

Yeah.

Bedell Terry

But I had never been there. And frankly, I think there's a bias for some people around here, because we're so close to DC and all of them, you know, I worked in DC for 20 years and never went to any of the museums.

Elizabeth M. Nix

Right, right. It's easy to do because you take it for granted. Yeah, that you know, you'll always have access to it. Yeah,

Bedell Terry

you've co-authored and co-authored and edited several books. What kind of challenge was that? Especially the co-authored?

Elizabeth M. Nix

Yes, so I co-authored a book with two other authors. I was in Baltimore at the time, one other was in California, and one was in Indiana. And we had actually met at a public history Association and the National Council on public history conference, annual conference. And they had been talking about starting this book, an introduction to public history designed for classrooms. Because it didn't exist, a good one didn't exist. And so, I had gone to their session, and then kind of nothing had come of it. We all had kids. And I certainly wasn't the only one at the session.

And then Joe Wood [Provost 2009-2016] very graciously sent me to the Aspen Institute, which was at Wye River conference center on the eastern shore. And it was a national gathering. But it was easy for us from Baltimore, we can drive there, and you spent a week, and you went through the Aspen Institute's this was about civic engagement. And it was a curriculum, you know, classic philosophy writings, and you were not supposed to like to talk about it from your discipline, you were just supposed to, like be a student and, and take it all fresh. And one of the women who had been at that session was at the Aspen Institute.

And so, we all had dinner. You stay there all week. And so, we had dinner together. And I said, "You know, I think you were the person at that session", and she said, "Yes". And I said, "What happened with that project? Are you doing that book?" And she said, "Yeah, maybe we are". But it's been put on hold. And so that was definitely Joe Wood that, you know, I just happened to have this other woman there. So, we started collectively writing all these chapters together. We did it all on Google Docs. We would, you know, edit each other's things. That was not It wasn't like I wrote a chapter, and another person wrote a chapter which is the way the anthology worked for Baltimore 68.

But this was definitely [how] we were all writing all the chapters. And sometimes we were, you know, taking the chunk and doing it ourselves. But it was very, very collaborative and kind of illustrative of the way public history works, too, that you're always having to kind of give up control and allow somebody else to have authority in certain settings. So, they're just both wonderful people. And both came [from the] National Council on public history. NCPH met in Baltimore in 2016. And after the uprising, and a lot of the conference was about the uprising, and we did a session. The big keynote on the night was some of the people who had given oral histories in Baltimore 68. And then some people who had been

Devin Allen, the photographer who was on the cover of Time magazine during the uprising, he was at our session and some other journalists were there, community organizers were there. And so, it was just a big Baltimore moment. And both of my co-authors were there, too. And it's just very exciting to have all of that coming together in 2016. So, yes, that is the book.

Bedell Terry

It's interesting, then, that some refer to the issues in 2015 as the uprising, and some as the riots.

Elizabeth M. Nix

Well, that was a thing with Baltimore 68 like our publishers really wanted to get riots and rebirth, they wanted that as the title. And a lot of people said, you know, Marian Bascom said he didn't call it the riot riots. He called it the disturbances. But then there were other people who were out on the streets who said it was riots, we were rioting, you know, so it's hard to figure out. Yeah, what, and that was just so disturbing and interesting to be living through 2015. Having studied 68, and thinking, oh, my gosh, this is what I was asking people, you know, how they experienced these things. And I don't even know if I could go on and say, you know, this is what this is, because it felt different at different periods. You know, sometimes it felt like life was completely normal. And sometimes it felt like we were in peril. It just was, it wasn't a consistent experience.

Bedell Terry

So, you're in Sacramento, you're connected to any universities there or?

Elizabeth M. Nix

No, I actually, you know, I retired from the University System of Maryland, and I got a job at a Presbyterian Church. [Laughing] So I'm teaching kids and youth at a Presbyterian Church. And I've got a pizza party, that s'mores cookout that we're doing tonight, and [it's] really fun. It's right. It's a beautiful church. It's called Westminster Presbyterian. It's a 1927 Spanish building. It's right on the State Capitol Park. I can walk there; my husband can walk to work. If he ever goes back to work. He's still working from home. So that's what I'm doing. I don't have to grade papers anymore.

Bedell Terry

[Laughing] That must be a great relief.

Elizabeth M. Nix

It is a great relief. No grades here. No.

Bedell Terry

Wow. Well, those are all the questions that I have. Do you have anything you want to add?

Elizabeth M. Nix

Well, I just hope you're talking to people about adding freshmen and sophomores. Like, have you talked to a lot of people about that period, because?

Bedell Terry

We are just beginning the real meat of the project and Fatemeh is trying to get as many viewpoints as possible. And that's, this is my summer internship. And I volunteered to keep doing it into the fall.

Elizabeth M. Nix

Great, perfect. Yeah,

Bedell Terry

because I really, I really liked doing it. And it's interesting. It's interesting. And I only have two classes this fall, so

Elizabeth M. Nix

Oh, great. Are you done?

Bedell Terry

I'm done. And Dr. Elfenbein took the time to tell me that the University of South Carolina fully funds their graduate students.

Elizabeth M. Nix

That is good. I am sure she did.

Bedell Terry

I want to thank you for your time here. It's been wonderful seeing you again.

Elizabeth M. Nix

great seeing you tell everybody. Hi. And yeah, good luck with this project. And I think it is really exciting for me, as you say, in just four years, a lot has changed, but it sure has changed a lot in the past 20. So, so good luck, you've got a lot of fertile ground there.

Bedell Terry

We've got a lot. And I think you mentioned Mr. Wood, and

Elizabeth M. Nix

yeah,

Bedell Terry

we, I think we're going to interview him.

Elizabeth M. Nix

Great, you should definitely do that because he was a real visionary thinker, and was so committed to liberal arts, and had a lot of great ideas about how UB [University of Baltimore] could set itself apart, you know, being really having a commitment to Applied Arts, but, you know, making sure that people were leaving with a really well-rounded curriculum. And so, I really liked working with him, I think you're going to find him really interesting. And he's also you know, done a ton of, of civic things that would be interesting to talk to him about his ideas about Baltimore too.

Bedell Terry

Well, thank you again.

Elizabeth M. Nix

All right. Bye.