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Dartmouth College Oral History Program
Dartmouth Community and Dartmouth's World
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DONIN: Today is Wednesday, December 5th, 2012. My name is Mary Donin, and I am in Hanover, New Hampshire, on Webster Terrace, at the home of Steve Severson and Martha Hennessey. Steve is Dartmouth Class of 1974.

Okay, Steve, so let's start out, first of all, by hearing about how it is that you ended up coming to Dartmouth from—it's Denver, right? Denver, Colorado?

SEVERSON: Yes. Good memory.

DONIN: I cheated, actually.

SEVERSON: Oh, good.

DONIN: [Laughs.]

SEVERSON: Well, even then, you had to remember that, so—

DONIN: Was Dartmouth in your background somehow? Was there family or was there a high school counselor? How did it happen?

SEVERSON: The first thing I remember hearing about Dartmouth was that my brother had possibly either applied, or maybe Dartmouth had asked *him* to apply because he was a National Merit finalist. He didn't come here. He went to Stanford. And the other thing I remember was that my best friend growing up, who became my roommate here, is the brother of a guy who went here, who was in Class of maybe '64. His name was Edmund Frost, and Edmund Frost was in the same fraternity as Steve Fowler next door.

DONIN: Amazing.

SEVERSON: Sig Ep. And I remember hearing stories—because that was the family—the Frost family was the one that taught me to ski, and their dad was our Scoutmaster, so I'd been around him a lot, and he taught me a great many things—you know,

knots and camping and you name it. So I think I heard about Dartmouth from those folks, because their oldest had gone to Mines, Colorado School of Mines. Their next child had gone here, and their third had gone to Harvard, and then the little guy, who's my age, came here. He was bound and determined for me to come here. I decided to apply to two on the East -- Williams and Dartmouth -- two on the West -- Stanford and Pomona -- and two in Colorado -- University of Denver and Colorado College.

University of Denver was an attraction to me because of its strong music program. My dad had gone there. He was a math major. And it would have been very attractive financially, but I wanted to get away. I sent money to Pomona. I had decided; I was going west. And then [chuckles] this guy, who became my roommate, who was my best friend, talked me out of it somehow. I think it must have been on the May 1st deadline when I sent a telegram, but I think my parents thought I was absolutely nuts.

There was a conversation about this between George Frost and my mother. I don't think my dad was at home the time when this conversation took place, but I can remember vividly being in the driveway of our house in Colorado. George was determined to have a buddy to come with him to come here.

I don't quite remember all the things that he said, but it must have had something to do with snow, because what would have attracted me to go to an all-male school with a music program perhaps not as strong as Pomona's, and at the time I was heavily into music, so I can't really remember exactly, but somehow [chuckles] he convinced me that I would be happier and I convinced myself that I would be happier here. And I sent a telegram the last day that you could do that, and they reserved a spot for me and said, "You can come."

DONIN: Had you been here to see it?

SEVERSON: No, not Dartmouth. I had been to Colorado College. My sister went there. And I had been to Stanford for my brother's graduation. But our family could not afford for me to take trips to visit, so I didn't quite know what I was getting into. The farthest east I had been was Detroit.

DONIN: Wow.

SEVERSON: When I was a kid.

DONIN: So you don't know what attracted you. It must have been the snow.

SEVERSON: I knew I wanted liberal arts. I knew I wanted small, relatively. I thought that Williams was maybe was too small. I decided Pomona was the right size -- it had a lot of courses and a strong music program.

DONIN: And none of these was co-ed at that point, right? Or were they?

SEVERSON: The Pomona and the other five Claremont schools were mostly co-ed, I believe.

DONIN: Claremont Colleges.

SEVERSON: Yes, including Claremont Mens, Scripps and Pitzer, so it's very integrated, from a gender standpoint. Yes, I knew Dartmouth was all-male. [Chuckles.] At this point, I'm wondering if I thought much about that!

DONIN: [Chuckles.]

SEVERSON: But I think it just wasn't that big a deal at the time because there were a lot of male colleges that were on the brink of—

DONIN: Going co-ed.

SEVERSON: —becoming co-ed.

DONIN: Right.

SEVERSON: Maybe I thought that Dartmouth would become co-ed -- I don't know. I can't really remember now.

But the other thing was that the Aires and the Glee Club came through Denver and sang, and that made a pretty big impression on me.

DONIN: So you arrived in the fall of 1970.

SEVERSON: Yes.

DONIN: With your pal.

SEVERSON: Yes. In his car. He drove us.

DONIN: Whoa!

SEVERSON: Big country.

DONIN: Yeah!

SEVERSON: It took approximately 32 hours going as fast as you could possibly go. I don't think we drove it straight. I think we stopped. I remember stopping in Indiana.

DONIN: So freshmen were allowed to have cars on campus.

SEVERSON: No, they weren't. That's a good question. His brother, who was the post-doc at Harvard, who now teaches here, allowed him to store his car in Cambridge.

DONIN: Oh, perfect.

SEVERSON: At 1776 Mass. Ave. [Both chuckle.] I love that address.

DONIN: It's great.

SEVERSON: Those were the days.

DONIN: And so what dorm were you in?

SEVERSON: I was in Hinman, which no longer exists.

DONIN: Oh, yes, yes. It's gone.

SEVERSON: It's gone.

DONIN: What's there now? I can't remember.

SEVERSON: I think Tuck School has something there.

DONIN: Right, right. And so how was it in the beginning? Did you feel well prepared in terms of academics?

SEVERSON: Oh, no. Not at all. When you discover all of these really smart people! The first thing, obviously, was freshman trip, and that was a joy. I still have friends that I met on that trip. Yesterday biking to school I waved to Peter Blodgett, who was on my freshman trip. He's the town librarian for Thetford.

DONIN: What trip did you choose?

SEVERSON: I chose the one that was considered the hardest hiking. There was a little rock climbing at the end of that trip, but it was mostly just hiking, and it was great. We had a great time.

DONIN: And you were well prepared for that, coming from Denver.

SEVERSON: Oh, yeah! I felt great because I came from a higher elevation.

DONIN: Yes. Oh, that's true. That's true.

And so what about the academics?

SEVERSON: Oh. I think immediately I felt completely submerged and overwhelmed. Right at the beginning, I joined the Aires and the Glee Club. At the time, to be in the Aires you had to be in Glee Club, so that was 12 hours of rehearsal every week. I was well under water, taking calculus, German and a seminar in Cosmology. I remember feeling like *I'm not gonna pass German. The teacher just doesn't do what I need*, or I couldn't do what she needed, or there was some mismatch. I did better after that. During the two terms of German after that I was much more successful. You know, you get sort of shocked when you come here, and you're at the top of your class in a big high school, 750 graduating class at South High, but, no, I didn't feel that well prepared!

There were a lot of kids who came from prep schools where they really knew how to study -- or maybe it was just an image that I have of their academic superiority. In high school I didn't really have to study that hard. I had to work, but I didn't really know that much about studying *per se*, so I had to figure it out kind of quickly.

DONIN: A lot of people we've talked to said the same thing. They felt unprepared, even though they were in the top of their class at their high school.

SEVERSON: Yes, it was a big shock.

DONIN: Yes, yes.

SEVERSON: And it was kind of lonely. You kind of felt like you were on your own, and you were. I was. The Aires did a good bit of traveling. My parents came in October for a teacher conference in New York, and then they visited with me here because they'd borrowed George's car in Cambridge and driven up. And so I got to see them. That was sort of a break away from the intensity. But I remember feeling -- *Oh, my gosh, I don't know if I can hang in there.* But I did.

DONIN: When you look back, what was your sort of group of friends? What was your first group of friends that you developed here? Was it the Aires, or was it your floor mates, I guess you'd call them?

SEVERSON: I remember being pretty good friends with a guy who was a cross-country skier from Oslo, Norway. His name is Erik Jebsen. Great guy. He was always nice to me. We had meals together. And there were other people from Hinman Hall -- because it's kind of a long walk, especially in the winter, to get to Thayer Hall, which is what we called the dining hall. I certainly ate with my roommate, George Frost, a lot. I certainly ate with the Aires a lot because a lot of the time, rehearsal would start right after dinner at 6 o'clock -- I think Monday, Tuesday, Thursday. And so we would eat before and then go to rehearsal.

DONIN: You didn't have time for a social life.

SEVERSON: I didn't have much time. Aires met after Glee Club, so Glee Club was 6 to 8, and Aires were 8 to 10. [Laughs.]

DONIN: Oh, my goodness.

SEVERSON: [Laughs.] I was definitely chewing off a lot! And then I was doing PE, which for me was rock climbing in the fall and the spring and skiing in the winter.

DONIN: Oh!

SEVERSON: So I was away from campus to do that a good bit, so I remember a lot of van trips to go to find rocks, which I loved, but it did make the hours studying kind of small.

DONIN: Yes, yes.

SEVERSON: Short.

DONIN: Did you feel, though, that you adjusted as the term went on?

SEVERSON: I must have.

DONIN: You adjusted to the demands?

SEVERSON: I must have. I can remember some things vividly. For example, you kind of have to find a place where you like to study, and at first I tried—probably like a lot of people do, I tried the [19]02 room, and that was kind of a disaster. [Laughs.] First of all, there were a lot of folks in there, and second of all, I don't know, I just sort of got lulled into sleeping there somehow. I can't imagine sleeping in those chairs -- they're not comfortable.

DONIN: No.

SEVERSON: So I remember feeling, you know, exhausted and not able to function. But later I changed venue to the physics building. Sanborn was not successful. I was too comfortable. [Laughs.]

DONIN: That's what they say about the Tower room as well.

SEVERSON: Oh, definitely, yes.

DONIN: Just nap city right there.

SEVERSON: Yes, you would be nap city right there.

DONIN: Yes, yes.

So did you ever experience sort of feelings of uncertainty and feeling that you'd made the wrong decision coming here?

SEVERSON: No.

DONIN: Or was it pretty positive?

SEVERSON: I didn't ever feel it was wrong; I just felt like, *Oh, my God, I'm really in over my head*. I felt like, *Okay, this is a challenge. Probably a lot of us are up against it. Something will work out*. I'm the middle child. I'm always the optimist.

DONIN: Right. That's true.

And how was it that your—the friends that you did have, who were around you at that point—were they okay? They were finding their way as well.

SEVERSON: I think so. Certainly, George was. He was a lot smarter than I. You know, more book smart, more able to pick stuff up quickly, a better reader. He had read a lot more than I had. A faster reader.

My third course was a freshman seminar: cosmology.

DONIN: Whoa!

SEVERSON: I remember a paper on pulsars. I loved it.

DONIN: Oh, did you?

SEVERSON: But, you know, it was kind of intense.

DONIN: Yes.

SEVERSON: It was a seminar, so you couldn't be a slacker in a six-person class. Nor could you in calculus, you know, because it would go pretty fast.

DONIN: So what role did the Greek life play for you that year?

SEVERSON: No role that year.

DONIN: Were you ever in frat houses?

SEVERSON: No, not till sophomore year, when—okay, so a lot of time had gone by across that first year and then into the second year, and I was busy with the Aires. The Aires had concerts during rush in my sophomore year, and I remember thinking, *I really want to join Psi U*, because that's where kids on the ski team were, and that's where some kids from my freshman trip

were, and Peter Edson, for example, was there, another friend of mine, on my freshman trip.

DONIN: So it sounds like you really did bond with some of the trip friends—

SEVERSON: Yes.

DONIN: —and they became your—yes.

SEVERSON: Yes, and I did ski with a lot of those guys. Tim Miner, Bob Fletcher—I'm trying to remember if they were on my freshman trip. They must have been, because I think that's how I met those guys.

So anyway, when rush came, Psi U wanted to see you a certain number of nights, and the Aires were performing and I couldn't be there all those nights, so I basically couldn't get into Psi U. So I kind of went where other people were going and my roommate went—did he go there? Anyway, a bunch of people went to Phi Delt, and they let me in, so I joined there. And there were a lot of good people there, and it seemed like a reasonable place to be. So, yes, I guess eventually—sophomore year, I did join.

And that's where I met Martha Hennessey '76, actually, later.

DONIN: I was going to say. So '71—there must have been talk on campus already about the fact that women might be coming.

SEVERSON: Let me think if I know the answer to that. I remember meetings in the Aires, which at the time—as you know from Parker's interview, that our group was called The Injunaires.

DONIN: Mm-hm.

SEVERSON: Horrible name.

DONIN: Mm-hm.

SEVERSON: But I didn't know at the time how horrible it was, except I did have a friend from Colorado who—I think he was on my freshman trip. His name is Tom Teegarden, and he might have been the first one to tell me how upsetting that was to the people in tribes, because he eventually married a Sioux.

We went to their wedding out in Colorado, and so I got to see that first hand. It's really impressive.

DONIN: Well, I assume growing up in Colorado, you were familiar with some of the Native Americans.

SEVERSON: Not really. A tiny bit.

DONIN: Were there kids in your high school?

SEVERSON: Not that I knew of.

DONIN: Really!

SEVERSON: No. That's a really good question. I would say the only familiarity with tribes would have been on car trips across the country, and our family took a lot in the summer because my dad was a school person, so I had seen tribal nations in Arizona, Utah and New Mexico. That's where I would have seen people, but not really known them up front. And eventually I met Howard Bad Hand, who was at Dartmouth when I was.

Anyway, Tom Teegarden probably was the first one to help me see how horrible the situation was, and at the same time, the Aires knew that there was a suggestion made strongly by the administration to remove every reference to the Indian symbol, so we went along fully with that.

At the same time, I remember voting for co-education, but I can't remember what month that was. I don't remember knowing whether that vote was binding, and I don't think it would have been binding.

DONIN: It was the students who were voting?

SEVERSON: Yes.

DONIN: Oh, interesting. Yes. Huh!

SEVERSON: And I don't remember feeling whether this was a done deal or a difficult deal for the college to manage, but, you know, later we heard a lot of stories about what a genius Kemeny was to manage the numbers and make a summer term.

DONIN: But were you conscious of any of your classmates or friends who were resisting having women come?

SEVERSON: I think I was, but none of them was a close friend. I wouldn't have been friends with people not in favor of coeducation! [Laughs.] But maybe I was and didn't really want to acknowledge it, but I did hear a lot of—not a lot. I did hear some discussion. I think to most of us, it was sort of automatic. It was sort of, like, "Yeah, of course we should!"

DONIN: Oh, really?

SEVERSON: Yeah! Oh, yeah! Yeah! Like "What's wrong with—this is, like, wrong, what we have. It seems really awkward."

DONIN: Yes, yes. So, I mean, coming here in '70—you chose Dartmouth and it was single sex, but you were fine with the transition.

SEVERSON: I must not have thought much about its being all-male, and if I had, I probably wouldn't have come, but I knew the reputation was good, and I'd already turned down Stanford and Williams, and they were fine schools, too, so I kind of knew this was a good school, and I kind of knew that my friend had a lot to say. Even though I didn't agree with him on everything, I think in this case I got talked into it. And probably the co-ed/not co-ed was ignored somehow. I can't explain that. [Laughs.]

DONIN: So how was the Greek life for you? Was it a good experience?

SEVERSON: I can remember a lot of things very vividly. One was the party that was up on the first floor, and that's where the atmosphere was relatively tolerable. You know, it was probably a rush party, and it's where I would have met Martha, because she was a hostess. She graduated in '72 from Hanover High, and then fall of '72 was at Vassar after she had turned down Dartmouth -- but after a year reapplied to transfer, so that would have been fall '73 that she was here.

I remember meeting Martha at one of those parties and asking her about borrowing a guitar for Speedy (Parker

MacDonell '76), so that was later. That was my senior year?
Yes, that was the winter of my senior year.

DONIN: So what was she hostessing?

SEVERSON: They had rush parties where they wanted women to be there to help introduce people to each other, to have the members meet the pledges, I think.

DONIN: Right.

SEVERSON: I think that was the idea, to make it look better. [Laughs.]

DONIN: To civilize it a little bit.

SEVERSON: Yes.

DONIN: I see.

SEVERSON: To make it look attractive, to get people in the door, maybe.

DONIN: Right.

SEVERSON: I do remember a guy from *Guys and Dolls*, which was one of the musicals that I was in, and he was in my fraternity, and he might have actually been there when I met her? Because we both know him. Anyway, there were, like, these memories—you know, visual—

DONIN: Flashes.

SEVERSON: —memories that I have. Another one was Sink Night, and that was not attractive whatsoever. I remember a lot of—I don't know what to call the material on the floor, but it was nothing good. So that was definitely a forgettable but unforgettable memory.

DONIN: Now, were you friends with any students who did not pledge fraternities?

SEVERSON: Yes. When we first moved from Hinman to Fayerweather in our sophomore year, we had John Danforth with us, and he didn't rush.

DONIN: And what does that do to your relationship?

SEVERSON: It doesn't change anything. In fact, that was probably one of the things about Greek life and probably still is true about it: that you can bring people in. Even if they're not members, they can visit. I remember often going to Psi U, where I really felt like I had more friends. But I had friends in both places. So there wasn't any feeling that you couldn't go anywhere. In fact, quite the contrary. It was kind of the feeling like it's like an open house everywhere.

DONIN: So whether you're affiliated or not affiliated,—

SEVERSON: Yes.

DONIN: —you're still welcome.

SEVERSON: That's how I felt. Whether that was actually true—[Chuckles.] I can't go back, you know, and know for sure.

DONIN: Right. So, you know, the take on the Greek life that it's exclusionary—you don't think that's true.

SEVERSON: I didn't feel that way. I didn't go to a lot of the other houses. I did hear stories of people who'd go to try to have a beer in each one. [Laughs.] I didn't do that.

And I had some other memories of Greek life. One was in the spring—I don't remember which spring it was; it was a beautiful day. Frat row was covered with people, and they had these big plastic garbage bags with probably limeade and, you know, sherbet of some kind, and I don't know if it was gin or vodka, but it was something strong. You know, there are certain things that, like, stay with you. That was one of them.

DONIN: Yes.

SEVERSON: Sort of pathetic, but—

DONIN: Well, that's—

SEVERSON: —they were tasty.

DONIN: Right, right.

SEVERSON: And I don't remember its being out of control of, like, feeling like I was going to go to the hospital or any of that kind of

nonsense, or throwing up on people. I don't remember any of that. But I do feel like it was a way to—[Sighs]—I don't know, release your tension, if you will.

DONIN: Yes.

SEVERSON: I think people used it as an outlet—you know, a way to relieve themselves from all the stress of working hard, because it was definitely a work-hard, play-hard sort of situation for a lot of us.

DONIN: Yes.

SEVERSON: I can't speak for everybody, but I know I felt like I was going, going, going, going, going—you know, just like—

DONIN: All the time.

SEVERSON: Yes.

DONIN: So can you describe how you felt the campus changed with the arrival of women? Mind you, there weren't all that many—

SEVERSON: True.

DONIN: —when you were there.

SEVERSON: Yes. Well, for me personally—

DONIN: In the classroom or socially or—

SEVERSON: Yes. I was taking a lot of science and math, so there weren't that many women in those science and math classes that I remember. There must have been some. Like, I think Ursula Gibson is from my class, and she's a genius, so there were people probably in my classes that I didn't really know that well, and, granted, I'm not really able to take much in except the material. You know, I'm not one who was socializing during class or anything like that. I just was focused on trying to keep my head above water.

But I do remember people, like at ski patrol I'd run into people. It's where I met Martha Beattie, Martha Johnson Beattie. It's where I met Judy Csaturi. That's where I would have met—I think I met some people rock climbing. I can

remember this woman named Gail and I thought maybe she transferred from somewhere, but maybe—I don't recall if we still had exchange students or not. We could have. It could have been somebody who came and then—

DONIN: Oh, the 12-College Exchange, yes. So they were there when you were—

SEVERSON: Yes.

DONIN: —probably a first-year—

SEVERSON: Yes, there were some of those. Not very many. But I remember Gail somehow. I didn't date her or anything, but I do remember her. And then I remember—obviously, with the Glee Club changing personnel, with forming a women's part of the Glee Club—and at first we had two separate groups that sang just men's and just women's and then sang some together, and same with the Aires and Distractions. They would sing separately and then we'd sing some together. And that was fun.

And when I was teaching ski lessons, and I met Jody Hill Simpson -- she was a ski instructor who had transferred from Middlebury when we went co-ed.

DONIN: Boy, you *were* busy!

SEVERSON: Uch! I don't know how I did it. I didn't study enough, I guess. You know, just looking at the numbers. But I did meet a lot of people. It was a good time for that. Sarah Hoagland. You know, there are some memorable folks in that generation. Sarah (and Jody Hill) was among the first people who sang in the Distractions. So I knew all the Distractions pretty well.

I can't really remember a lot of discussion with the women in my classes. I took a lot of physics, chemistry, engineering, math, music, a Greek and Roman studies, a couple economics, a geography. I remember a paper that I wrote about glaciers and how they flow and all the kind of crazy differential equations for modeling glaciers. But I don't remember that much about women in the classroom. Isn't that weird? I don't have a very good memory, it turns out.

DONIN: No, but also there just weren't that many women.

SEVERSON: No.

DONIN: I don't know what the number was during those first couple of years.

SEVERSON: I don't, either.

DONIN: It wasn't a lot.

SEVERSON: I want to say 100? I'm totally making that up, because I really don't remember. It was small. We knew it was small. And the first people who came were strong. You know, they knew what they were getting into. They knew they were at a place that was in transition, and they picked it because they wanted to be here. It was a good place. It wasn't that great, maybe, for sports, because we were trying to manage the facilities. You know, looking back on it, I can't imagine that the facilities were very good for them, but—

DONIN: They weren't.

SEVERSON: Like, I knew some kids on the ski team. I knew Betty Stroock and—I can't remember who else.

DONIN: So you sound like you were sort of the ideal student to fit in here and make your way.

SEVERSON: I'm the kind of person who probably would be happy anywhere. I would make myself happy somehow.

DONIN: You fit in everywhere.

SEVERSON: Try to.

DONIN: Yes.

SEVERSON: Yes.

DONIN: Yes. So the sense of sort of being on the outside looking in, which is a common theme, doesn't apply to you, I don't think.

SEVERSON: I don't think so. I can appreciate that, though, because I remember there was a rush discussion about a guy named Myron Allen, who to me was a genius, from Fayerweather. I think he now studies math at University of Wyoming, or

maybe he's a dean or something really senior. And they didn't take him, and we were just aghast, you know, that they wouldn't take him. I don't even know why. I wasn't in those meetings. But I was on the outside of that kind of activity because I was feeling more like a Psi U than I was a Phi Delt, and because the basement smelled so bad and that was really [chuckles] a big factor for me, you know—and I really care about smell, so—maybe inordinately.

DONIN: So you stayed away.

SEVERSON: I did.

DONIN: You stayed away.

SEVERSON: I did. It's kind of amazing that I ended up meeting Martha there.

DONIN: Did you ever live there?

SEVERSON: No. No, I was in Fayerweather for the rest of the time.

DONIN: Oh, really?

SEVERSON: Yes, 106. Great location. Loved it there.

DONIN: Now, had study abroad programs started by then?

SEVERSON: Yes. Yes, they had. In fact, wound up into that discussion, I remember deciding whether or not to go with the Dartmouth Plan, because when we became co-education, they gave us the choice, and I decided—basically, my mother decided for me that I was not going to Vienna with the music department.

I think when I was a freshman, a guy named Peter Kalafarski from our singing group was taking voice lessons down the street with someone who had grown up in Paris and New York, and she was really expert. I completely dove into that and took a voice lesson every week, to become a recital singer. [Laughs.] Which sounds ridiculous. But it was her world, and I sort of adopted that world, which is very strange, but—

Anyway, that led me down that path toward wanting to go to those kind of trips overseas. “No way,” my mother said. “I’m

not paying for you to be a music major at Dartmouth.” Her point was that you can’t pay the bills with music. She knew that first hand since my dad was a part-time musician in Denver. That was her opinion. Still is. [Laughs.] So she said no, and that’s when I decided, *Well, I better do something really practical, and I like science.* So I thought, *Oh, I’ll study engineering and science.* I was a physics major at the time, so I added engineering to that because I thought—I still loved the physics department, and didn’t want to give up on physics, but I wanted something to add to that that could get me to an engineering graduate school, so I did both majors. And doing both majors prevented me from doing the Dartmouth Plan because I needed to be on campus to complete all of my courses.

DONIN: Yes, for classes.

SEVERSON: For classes. So I decided, really on the basis of doing two majors, not to do the Dartmouth Plan, not to go overseas.

DONIN: Saved your parents some money.

SEVERSON: Yes.

DONIN: Yes. So you were a physics and engineering major but with an intense interest in music of all sorts.

SEVERSON: Correct. [Laughs.]

DONIN: And an athlete.

SEVERSON: Well, I was sort of an athlete. I was in rock climbing and skiing, if you want to call those sports.

DONIN: And weren’t you in the DOC?

SEVERSON: I was in the DOC, because as a rock climber I was in the Dartmouth Mountaineering Club and I think those of us who were ski instructors and on the ski patrol were part of DOC.

DONIN: And Dartmouth Players.

SEVERSON: I was in two plays. I was in *Mikado* in the fall, with Henry Williams. He used to always say, “Don’t fall off the stage!” I loved Henry Williams. And then with Rod Alexander in the

spring with *Guys and Dolls*. And I met Martha there, too. She was in *Guys and Dolls*. She was the clarinetist.

DONIN: So your paths crossed in multiple ways.

SEVERSON: They did.

DONIN: It was fate.

SEVERSON: It was sort of fateful.

DONIN: Yes.

SEVERSON: But when she was in *Guys and Dolls*, she was a senior at Hanover High, and then it took another year or so before she came back.

DONIN: Right, right.

SEVERSON: And then I ran into her again.

DONIN: Yes. So no wonder you didn't have much of a social life in terms of—

SEVERSON: Right.

DONIN: I mean, you didn't have any time.

SEVERSON: I didn't have much time. I do remember that Friday nights and Saturday nights were times when I should not necessarily always be studying. [Chuckles.] I can't really be sure what my hours were like, how planned they were, but I don't remember any mid-week partying. I remember I was hammering on studies every day except Friday and Saturday. It was pretty intense.

DONIN: Did that prevent you from taking advantage of your Greek membership, so to speak?

SEVERSON: Probably, yes, to a good extent. But bear in mind, most of the social life—I can't be sure for everybody, but I would say for most—for a lot of people, most of the social life was Friday and Saturday nights.

DONIN: Yes, and you were doing other things, anyway.

SEVERSON: Yes. Well, often the Aires would go away for a performance. There were trips off campus to go to parties. I remember one to Skidmore. The other trips were all Aires trips. I remember Cornell. I remember Wellesley. At Harvard we sang in Sanders Theatre. Great place to sing.

I remember Glee Club tours fondly. We had a great time with Uncle Paul. We called Paul Zeller “Uncle Paul.” His wife rang the bells at the Baker Tower. She was a wonderful woman.

DONIN: Now, what was Uncle Paul’s last name?

SEVERSON: Zeller, Z-e—

DONIN: Oh, of course.

SEVERSON: Paul Zeller and Frannie. And Frannie rang the Baker bells for our wedding. It was really nice. But, yes, there was a good bit of travel with the Aires that prevented me from doing a lot with fraternities. So I would say fraternity was not that central, but I would say it was the place to go on the weekend. So, you know, depending on which friend I was going with—if I was going to see Peter Edson, it would be Psi U, but if I was going with my roommate, George Frost, it would be Phi Delt.

And there was another guy who became our roommate when we lost John Danforth. John Danforth was bound and determined to be a doctor and to get straight As. He probably did get straight As. I don’t know for sure, but this was a guy that—he would walk the stacks because he felt that if he sat down, he would fall asleep.

DONIN: Wow.

SEVERSON: Yeah! [Laughs.]

DONIN: Studying, he would walk the stacks?

SEVERSON: Studying, he would walk the stacks. I don’t even know how much sleep he got. Probably not much.

DONIN: So he was pre-med?

SEVERSON: He was pre-med. Became a doctor. He practiced out in San Francisco for many years, and then he’s passed away,

unfortunately. Brilliant guy. But he left our triple in Fayerweather because he thought that having three of us in a room was too distracting for him. And it probably was.

DONIN: That's right.

SEVERSON: We were probably doing all sorts of crazy stuff. So he got the single just inside the door. Then we took in Tom Delancey, Class of '75, and he was a Phi Delt. So George and I and Delancey would probably go to Phi Delt sometimes, and other times I'd go to Psi U.

Certainly, I remember when Martha was there, we went to Psi U a lot, to dance. There would be a band or some sort of music.

DONIN: Was that the only place that you were able to socialize with the women, was in the frats?

SEVERSON: Wow, that's a good question. Probably, yes. Well, over meals you could. And I can't remember to what extent I would have done that. Obviously, once I met Martha, I was trying to see her as much as possible, so—

DONIN: It was easier to just—

SEVERSON: Probably that was a—

DONIN: Yes. Right.

SEVERSON: Yes, you would call that a social—

DONIN: That's social life.

SEVERSON: Yes, that's social life. That was a good social life.

DONIN: That was a good social life, clearly, yes.

SEVERSON: Yes.

DONIN: Well, so you really didn't have the experience that so many students had of feeling sort of like an outsider here. You really fit the mold of the Dartmouth student, with no sort of backlash against you. You were not excluded from anything.

SEVERSON: That's right.

- DONIN: You took advantage of a lot of the activities that were available to you.
- SEVERSON: Yes.
- DONIN: And—
- SEVERSON: Yes. I did see some people feel like they were treated unfairly. For example, we had this guy in our Aires group named Roosevelt Thompson. He had this big, booming voice, and he's a black man. He was a brilliant musician. I think he left Dartmouth in the middle and joined the Army or something. But he encountered a lot of reverse discrimination from other blacks who had criticized that he would be in a group of whites. And I think that could have been the reason that forced him to leave Dartmouth, but I'm not positive. I never heard him say that.
- DONIN: Wow.
- SEVERSON: Yes, there were things like that, that if you didn't stay in your group, they would give you trouble.
- DONIN: So what you saw was it was not easy to move among other sort of predefined groups.
- SEVERSON: Yes. I would say it was hard for some people.
- DONIN: Yes. Yes. And there was not a very big black population in the '70s.
- SEVERSON: That's true.
- DONIN: I mean, I don't know what the numbers were for—
- SEVERSON: I don't either.
- DONIN: I mean, John Kemeny was certainly reaching out to try to increase the diversity, going to the urban high schools in New York and—
- SEVERSON: Yes.
- DONIN: —that sort of thing, but it was probably slowly paying off—

SEVERSON: I would think so.

DONIN: —but who knows how many were in your class?

SEVERSON: Yes, I think you're right.

DONIN: Same with the Native Americans.

SEVERSON: Yes. I remember Thurlow Tibbs and Harry Brightly, both black guys in the Glee Club, and Harry was in the Aires. Yes, it was hard to be in the mix—you know, to be in a heterogeneous group.

DONIN: It was hard for them.

SEVERSON: I must have heard some stories about women having trouble on campus, but I didn't face it full on until Martha was accosted in a fraternity when I was in grad school.

DONIN: Right, right. So that happened after you left.

SEVERSON: Yes.

DONIN: Yes. Yes. Were you aware of any sort of diversity in the Greek houses at that point? I mean, where did black students go or where did the Native students go?

SEVERSON: Alpha Phi Alpha. They had a house, I think next to Gamma Delt, I think.

DONIN: Was this a black fraternity house?

SEVERSON: A black fraternity. I think, yes. That could be checked.

DONIN: Yes, yes.

SEVERSON: That's my recollection.

DONIN: Right, right.

SEVERSON: Cutter House, I think.

DONIN: Oh, Cutter Shabazz, yes.

SEVERSON: Maybe it was renamed.

DONIN: Did that—

SEVERSON: That existed.

DONIN: That existed even then, huh?

SEVERSON: I think, yes.

DONIN: Ah! I should look up when the Cutter House started. Yes. Okay. All right, then.

What's your perception of how the—especially through your eyes as a parent with two of your children going to Dartmouth—is it your sense that the Dartmouth community that they were part of was different and more diverse than the one that you and Martha were part of?

SEVERSON: Yes. I would say, given that it's more balanced male-female and given that there are more minorities.

DONIN: Yes.

SEVERSON: Yes, you'd definitely say that it's more balanced.

DONIN: So did KJ (daughter Kristina J Hennessey-Severson '02) go undergrad and to the medical school?

SEVERSON: Correct.

DONIN: Wow.

SEVERSON: She was an '02.

DONIN: Yes.

SEVERSON: And then she was '09 but stretched her med school to five years, so she graduated in 2010.

DONIN: To DMS.

SEVERSON: And Lizzy was '09, like Maggie (Donin).

DONIN: Obviously, there was gender parity by the time they were here.

SEVERSON: Yes.

DONIN: Unlike your time, when those brave early classes of women came.

SEVERSON: Right. Yes.

DONIN: Martha, among them.

SEVERSON: Yes.

DONIN: Okay. I think we're done.

SEVERSON: Great.

DONIN: Thank you.

SEVERSON: You're welcome.

[End Part 1. Begin Part 2.]

DONIN: Okay, so we're back on with Steve Severson, who's had a flash of memory that he did actually encounter a feeling of being outside the circle at Dartmouth. So when did this occur, Steve?

SEVERSON: Let me think. The progression was that when I first left, I was a grad student and I was in the Boston Club, so I was secretary of, like, the Boston Hub Club, I think it was called. And then later, I thought, *Oh, it would be really good to be a class secretary*, so—and I think because somebody else had to go to business school at Stanford—probably Rick Woolworth went to business school and said, “I can't do secretary anymore. Can you do it?”

And I thought it was because I was a class officer that I got put into the hat for being an alumni councilor. I think that's when it happened. So I became part of the Alumni Council in the mid-'80s, I think. But the committee that seemed to me the most interesting was the Student Life Committee because it dealt with: What's life like now? To me, the campus exists for the students; it doesn't belong to the alumni, even though we all love the place, and I feel like it's good to have a feeling about whether you think we should have gone co-educational or you think we should have let

the Indian symbol—But I didn't want to talk about those things any more! [Chuckles.] Because, you know, I was with the present.

But one of the things that the students convinced me was that there weren't very many good social opportunities on campus, and there were still a lot of assaults and there was still a lot of problem between the genders. So I took that on as a thing I wanted to help promote.

And that's when I started to feel like an outsider because here I was, leading this committee of people. I think Jim Wright was on that committee with me.

DONIN: So who was the president when this was going on?

SEVERSON: Oh, boy.

DONIN: I mean, the Student Life Initiative—

SEVERSON: McLaughlin or Freedman. McLaughlin, I guess.

DONIN: McLaughlin.

SEVERSON: I guess.

DONIN: So that was the '80s.

SEVERSON: That could be checked.

DONIN: Right. Because the name of it, the Student Life Initiative, didn't start until—

SEVERSON: Until a little later.

DONIN: With Jim Wright. But you were working on those same issues, though, regardless.

SEVERSON: Yes, and because—I think it actually might have been a factor for him, that he was on that committee then, and then later he might have tried to do something—I think he *did* try to do a lot of things that maybe didn't get as far along as he would have liked or we would have liked. But anyway, he had good intentions.

- DONIN: So you were getting push-back from your fellow council members?
- SEVERSON: No, mostly from Mike Choukas and other people in the administration, who didn't feel like we should be saying anything negative.
- DONIN: Oh, that's interesting.
- SEVERSON: And I remember Peggy [Epstein] Tanner saying, "No, no, no, things are better," you know? And she had a good point. They *were* better, but they weren't as good as they could be. And so I didn't adopt the idea that just because things were better meant that was enough. And Liz Epstein had a very different take on it than Peggy did. I remember feeling at the time supported by Liz but not by Peggy [chuckles] and certainly not by Mike Choukas. You know, bless his heart, he was trying to do the right thing for the campus, and he was in a position of getting a lot of grief from alumni, and I would never be good in a job like that, so I can appreciate what he was facing, but trying to keep everybody happy—you know, that's not an easy thing to do.
- DONIN: That's a no-win job.
- SEVERSON: He probably felt like I was one of those people that he couldn't keep happy and, you know, "Why don't you just shut up?" But I felt like the student voice was: "Hey, we have an opportunity here! Let's make the place better." And I thought, *I should help. I shouldn't just stand back and be complacent.* So that's when I felt like an outsider.
- DONIN: But the other people on the council at this point—were they with you?
- SEVERSON: That's a good question. Since you're asking, I thought they were. I think the people who were on that committee was definitely in consensus, yes, that I would have wanted to see and wouldn't have gone forward with a slate of responses without full support of that committee. But that doesn't mean that the rest of the council was—probably to your point earlier, that there were, most undoubtedly, people on the Alumni Council who did not feel like we should be changing anything, you know? [Chuckles.]

So, yes, there probably were a lot of alumni councilors who didn't really agree with us, but that was a hard position. I began, maybe for the first time, to know what it might be like not to be in the group [chuckles] that's accepted—you know, that has authority, that has the power. And that's when you choose your words very carefully, you try to be positive, and you still feel like, *Wow, my body is twinging a little bit here. It's a little bit on the alert.*

DONIN: Right.

SEVERSON: It's the fight-or-flight—you know. And I was definitely there to fight, but I kind of had the hair on the back of my head probably standing straight up. I don't know. It was an interesting thing for me.

DONIN: Did you stay on the council?

SEVERSON: Oh, yes.

DONIN: Yes?

SEVERSON: You had your term. You stayed your term. I loved being on that committee. Susan Wright was, I think, the secretary for a while. She's a wonderful person and really treated me well. Yes, I certainly wanted to try to fight the good fight.

There was a student named Karen Avenoso, who became, I think, a *New York Times* journalist. And I remember feeling, like, *Wow! These people who are here are unbelievable! They're so smart, and they're so talented. We have to listen to them!* You know, she was one of them. She's not living any longer, which is really upsetting. I found that out recently. I didn't really realize that.

DONIN: Yes, she died of cancer—

SEVERSON: Oh, my gosh!

DONIN: —at a very young age.

SEVERSON: So I felt blessed to be around these amazing people, and I felt like I was compelled to try to help them to do something. That's how I felt. And then once I'd served my term and did my thing, I kind of felt, like, *Well, I have to go back to work*

now. Not to say that I was going to give up on them, but once you're not in the council or affiliated in some official way, it's a little bit harder to do anything.

DONIN: To be effective.

SEVERSON: Yes.

DONIN: Yes.

SEVERSON: And I never really felt that strongly that the council *could* do very much, but I definitely wanted to make an attempt, because I think a lot of us felt like, "Oh, the council doesn't do much. Let's try to make a statement. Maybe somebody will listen."

DONIN: And one can only hope that there were like-minded people—

SEVERSON: I think there were.

DONIN: —that replaced you on the council.

SEVERSON: Yes, Al Cook is one of the ones who I remember feeling like, *Oh, this is somebody who really gets it.*

DONIN: Mm-hm.

SEVERSON: Because we met him out in Denver, and we'd known him.

DONIN: So the students gave pretty compelling arguments—

SEVERSON: Oh, yes.

DONIN: —for their need and their desire for improving the life on campus—

SEVERSON: That's right.

DONIN: —the social life on campus.

SEVERSON: That's right. And I can't remember all the things that they said. Oh, well. [Chuckles.] Too bad.

DONIN: But you remember their message.

SEVERSON: Oh, yeah, yeah! And it served like a jolt of lightning that goes through you, and you say, *I have to do this*.

DONIN: Right.

SEVERSON: *I don't really have a choice*.

DONIN: Right, right. Well, they're still working on it. [Laughs.]

[End of interview]