So just by way of introduction, this is Robert Burkhardt, from the great Class of 1962. This is the Princeton Alumni Weekly Oral History Project. This is our first interview. And I’d like to start with how you came to Princeton. How did you first hear about Princeton, and how did you come to actually enroll here?

My father’s life changed a whole lot in the early-mid ’50s. In ’53, he — our family didn’t have any money. He was in debt, and we actually didn’t have Christmas in ’51 and ’52. And then — but he was interested in politics. And that didn’t pay a lot of money. But then we were visiting some folks in — visiting our cousins, in Philadelphia. ’Cause we lived up in a town called Central Valley, New York, on the Hudson River. And he stopped in Bernardsville, New Jersey, to just say holiday greetings to a friend of his, a Democratic national committee member, Archie Alexander. And Archie said, oh, by the way Bob—I’m Robert Junior—by the way Bob, there’s a job. And my father didn’t say what is it? He said, how much does it pay? And he said 6,000 dollars, and he said, I’ll take it, what is it? Well, it turned out that a young lawyer for Phillipsburg, New Jersey, by the name of Bob Meyner was going to be running for governor.
In a heavy Republican state. Long story short, my dad ran his campaign, and began, for the next 20 years he was deeply involved in national politics. So we moved down here from New York. Moved over to Titusville, on the Delaware River, north of Washington’s Crossing. And then a lot of people who my parents now were associated with said, and of course the boys are going to go to Lawrenceville. And we said, what is that? Only bad kids go to private schools. We had that real small-town mentality. So I was a day student at Lawrenceville for four years. And I planned to go to the Military Academy, which was actually near our home up in Orange County, New York, 'cause I would—'cause we didn’t have any money, and you could get a free education there. But Frank Thompson, who was the congressman from this district when I took the exams, he said, look, you pass, you get your choice. But if you have an IQ of 112, you can’t do the work at West Point; if you have an IQ of 114 you’re bored at West Point; you have an IQ of 113 you’re perfect for West Point. Go to Princeton. Beause then a lot of guys in my class did, and so I came here, because I was accepted.

**Tomlinson** And when you made that choice, what were your thoughts about Princeton, and what were sort of your expectations of what you’d see?

**Burkhardt** Well, you need to remember that I was a small-town boy whose world view was just steadily expanding, and it had expanded a lot at Lawrenceville because even though I was a day student, I began to see that there were places like California, Venezuela, the Middle East. We had students from all over the world there. And, I had wonderful teachers who began to get me interested in the things of the mind. Princeton began to loom as a wonderful place in my mind. We came up here periodically, and although I had never though I was someone who would wind up going to a good school, because again, I had a different mentality, it just seemed a natural thing. And I came to understand that at that time, a lot of people at
Lawrenceville went to Princeton. It was like, if you were Andover you went to Yale, if you were Exeter you went to Harvard. And so I was one of 35 guys, I think, in my class. What happened at that time was that the director of admissions at Princeton came down to Lawrenceville, to interview us. It was like one-stop shopping, you could the thing. And I remember my interview; he kept asking me questions, and finally he said, is there anything else you do. And I was so nervous. And I finally remembered that I was on the swimming team, and I was a pretty good swimmer, and we were the Eastern Champions, and I swam here at Princeton, well, oh! I’m on the swimming team; I’m on the swimming team! And I thought, oh, that does it, they don’t want someone like that. So I resigned myself. But I got in.

Tomlinson And when you arrived, what were your first impressions?

Burkhardt Well, I was in 723 Pyne with a fellow name James Buford Anderson, Buford as he was known. And Buford and I were roommates for four years. He was from Sumner, Mississippi. And, so that was interesting, north and south. And I actually roomed with southerners my whole time here. Bill Cooper from South Carolina, Joe Logan from Virginia, David Bramlette also from Mississippi. And I was a, it was, again, I was a real small fish in a very big pond. Although at the time, and you know, these things happen in our lives. For some reason or the other I was dating Anne Goheen. Her father, Bob Goheen, was the president of Princeton at the time. So I would be walking around campus, and he would be, and see me and wave, and I’d, you know I’d try to hide, because I didn’t want anyone to know that I knew the president. I mean it was like, I was only a freshman. And I got invited over to Morven, or not Morven, Prospect, at the time the Goheens lived there, so he invited me over several times for dinner. I was scared to death. But he had gone to Lawrenceville also, and was a terrific guy, and a wonderful president at Princeton, so it was one of
those lucky things. But I, I immediately made some bonds. There was a
new swim coach, at the time, a guy named Bob Clotworthy, who had been
an Olympian. And when I was at Lawrenceville, we always swam the
Princeton freshman, and kicked their teeth in. Because Lawrenceville was
the swimming power of the east at the time, and the Princeton freshman
were not really serious about swimming. Until my freshman year. And we
had Tom Welch, and Barry Bosak, and Frank Cibula; there’s a bunch of
guys who were really good swimmers. I wasn’t the star, Bill Hilliard, but I
was on the team. And we beat Lawrenceville, and we won cane spree, and
the swimmers beat the sophomores at swimming. So I was part of a group
that made it possible to have an identity and some friends. I also, since I
was on a scholarship guy, I was a waiter up in Holder, at that time
everyone took their meals, freshman and sophomores all took their meals
up in Holder. So I had, so there were several groups I could be friends
with, and I joined Whig-Clio, the glee club, and so began to be part of a
bunch of things. But I also overreached; I was young Icarus. I had studied
Latin and French at Lawrenceville and I figured, you know Russia is,
Russian’s gonna be a great language, so I figured I’d knock off Russian.
It’s a hard language. I speak Farsi, I speak Spanish, I speak French, you
know I, but I flunked Russian when I was here. I didn’t get a seven—they
had one through seven grading scale—I got a six. I thought I was gonna
flunk out of Princeton. But being part of a group of people was a whole lot
of fun, and then I began to, after a while I could walk around campus and
hold my head up and wave to President Goheen, and think that this was an
OK place for me to be. When I was a sophomore it came time to pick
majors. And I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. No sense at
all. And so, it got closer and closer, you had to declare somewhere like
halfway through your sophomore year—February, there’s a date, say
February fifth, I don’t know what the date was. So it came February first,
second, third, fourth, ten o’clock, you had to cut it by noon that day, and
by 11 o’clock I’m, what am I going to major in? So I finally realized I
should look and see what classes I had passed at Princeton. And I had passed all my English classes. I’m an English major! So, there it was. And that, and that was a wise decision, as it turned out. And then I joined the, I tried out for the cheerleading squad, and became one of the cheerleaders here. And that year, in my first cheerleading gig, Dartmouth and Princeton had tied for the Ivy League championship, so the playoff was at a small school, city college of New Haven. They had the playoff up there. And I didn’t—I’m an identical twin, and my twin brother was at Dartmouth, so he couldn’t come down to the game, but Dave Mishalove was in my class, and one other guy, I don’t know who it was. I think it was probably a junior. We went up to be the cheerleaders for the Princeton game up at Yale. And my brother’s friends, all in his alpha-theta fraternity at Dartmouth decided if, that they would kidnap me, and bring me back as a present to him; they’d throw me in the trunk of a car, if Princeton won. I knew nothing about this. He might have known about it, but he kept radio silence for a long time. So we’re down to the last thing. And it was kinda like the Harvard game last year, except there was a guy named Rudy LaRusso who later was an NBA All-Star, played for Dartmouth, with three seconds left, there was this very disputed out-of-bounds, time-out call. I’m not saying the refs were biased, but. And Rudy LaRusso cut through the Princeton defense, they knew who it was going to go to, but it was like, a hot knife through warm butter. It just, he just went and made the layup. They beat us by one point. And so I never got the chance to experience the back, the trunk of a car all the way up to Hanover. So that was OK.

**Tomlinson**  So when did you find out about the plan?

**Burkhardt**  Well, a week or so later his buddies apparently told him, if they hadn’t already told him already. He said, you know what would have happened, ehhh. But it was, my claim to fame.
Tomlinson  Well, it sounds like you definitely took to the social scene. Are there specific things that you remember as being difficult to kind of get used to with Princeton?

Burkhardt  I didn’t understand the bicker situation at all. Although, it was what one did. It was like there, and I was, I still wasn’t—I mean, I was young in my class. I was seventeen when I got here. I know there were a couple of guys who were younger than me, but I was one of the younger members of my class. And I was, there are a lot of things that I am now aware of that I wasn’t aware of. My politics had not developed a whole lot. So I’m not sure whether I would go through bicker again, but it was what you did. And I also knew to keep my head down, because, from my point of view, there were, I mean, there really were lofty seniors and people who were doing really important things. They were lacrosse team, or captain of the swim team, and these were people who were— But I, because I lived nearby, I had a chance periodically to go home, and... I, cheerleading became a big part of it, I became head cheerleader. Steve Larned was supposed to be head cheerleader, but he flunked out, so I, they moved me up. So all my junior year I was head cheerleader. And that was fun, because I got to wear a white sweater and carry a megaphone. And at that time, most people went to football games. They don’t now, but it was still a very big sport here then, and you did that. And we were, in my junior year, we won the eastern collegiate year, eastern intercollegiate swimming championships, the EIC. We had never won, or it had been years or so. But, cause Bob Kiphuth had been the coach at Yale, and Yale always dominated them. But because of Bob Clotworthy, we, and guys like Tom Welch, and then Jed Graef ['64] came in, he won the Olympics in ‘64, I mean, we began to get really good swimmers. Art Smith was the captain that year. He’s ’61. So I was actually part of something that which doing something here, and it was great. And I was beginning to enjoy my
academic experience here, because of choosing to major in English and
writing a lot about Eugene O’Neill and T.S. Eliot and Hart Crane, and
people like that. So I began to feel as though I belonged here.

**Tomlinson**  Do you remember any specific professors who made an impression?

**Burkhardt**  There are several, but for me the most significant was Sherman Hawkins.
He was this young guy, and he had these big huge glasses like almost owl-eye glasses. And I remember going into a class, I think it was poetry 206,
and he started off by reading some poems. I had never heard poetry read
before. Yes, I had listened to some people attempting to read poetry. This
guy, the emotion in Wordsworth, and Keats, and Shelly, that he had, I, we,
just everyone in the course leaned forward in their chairs. And I, I was just
enamored of him. And that was, I go the highest grade I got at Princeton in
his class. Because I just, he would ask it; we would do anything for him,
because he would make the English language come alive. I took a course
on Hemmingway with Carlos Baker, who he was, Baker was his, his
biographer, was Hemmingway’s biographer. Walt Litz had theories of
literary criticism, which were just wonderful, he was an incredible
professor. I took a Shakespeare class as a freshman, and it was a big, thick
Thorp was the professor teaching the class, and that seemed like, again, I
began to think that was perfectly natural. Why wouldn’t you have the
world’s expert on Hemmingway be your professor? Why would you want
some shlunk teaching it? So I began to drink in that very heady diet of
really incredible professors. I also the time I began to understand what
precepts were. I had a, there was a guy, he was a graduate student, I think,
who was my preceptor in one of the politics classes I took—I don’t even
remember what it was. I just remember he had given us an assignment to
read, and I read it, and he came in and he wanted feedback on it. And I had
been very disturbed by the reading, and you know it kind of bubbles up
out of you; and I said, this is insane, I don’t—and I didn’t realize that he had set us up to have that precise reaction. Very few other people had it. I was either courageous or dumb enough to speak in precept, and he said, that’ll be enough; that’s A for the day Burkhardt, shut up; alright, now the rest of you, why didn’t you—and I realized that, oh, I got it right. Eh! I can make it here. I don’t even remember what the topic was, but his name was Gollumbuski, or Gollumbieski, but he set us up. And I realized that that was a good teaching technique, because it really got me deeply involved in the text, in the criticism of it, and, and later on with the reflection of, yeah, I figured out something, rather than just rote acceptance of what a professor gave us. So that was very helpful for me. I think that one of my best experiences as an undergraduate—I had studied a lot of French at Lawrenceville, and so I was taking French classes here, and Professor Maman was this wonderful French professor. But Ed Sullivan was the head of the French department, and between my junior and senior year, there was a guy, he was obviously an alumnus, who worked in Paris for the international Herald Tribune. And his idea of a good time was to get undergraduates over to France, to work all over France. So I signed up for it; I got, they gave me 500 dollars, as a—lot of money—but it worked. And I was a stagiare, an apprentice welder for the Gaz de France, the French national gas company, in Quimper, way out in Brittany. Looking back I realized, I had to do all this myself. I had, no one was there as a guide. It was like, we went into his office, a bunch of us, and he said, here’s your assignment, here’s your—what are you standing around for? So I get out to Camper, I had to find a place to live, I had to find where the thing was; I did have a little piece of paper. But that was a wonderful experience for me, to have to make it in another culture. It led to me being, becoming a Peace Corps volunteer after Princeton; it led to working with Operation Crossroads Africa in Chad and Ivory Coast. I was Peace Corps in Iran. But it, it really helped me cement myself as someone who could make it on my own, in another place. And in the job—not to
leap too far ahead—but in the job I’m currently have, every summer I bring a Princeton student to where, to the school I’m the head of in Colorado. And we have a Princeton summer intern, and it’s part of me paying back Princeton for the incredible opportunities I had here. So I’ve had members of the class of ’92, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and I got, right up. We’ve had 20 years of Princeton interns. Really terrific, wonderful people. It’s a way for me to keep in touch, but also to pay back Princeton, and give some folks who are interested in education a great opportunity to be, to get a sense of what their teaching career can be. Because we really, they have life changing experiences when they come to us, because of school.

**Tomlinson**  And, this is a perfect transition, because I wanted to talk about how Princeton kind of shaped what you wanted to do with your life after Princeton; you’ve obviously had time in education, but did you kind of know that as an undergraduate?

**Burkhardt**  No, again, I didn’t, I still don’t know what I want to do when I grow up. I just found out about an opportunity yesterday—I’m 71, but there’s an opportunity, and I’m going to explore it. It probably won’t happen, but it’s fun, it’s always fun to dream. But when Kennedy was at the University of Michigan at 2 a.m. on an October night, and he said, to this incredible crowd of kids who waited for him in October of 1960, you guys really ought to do something for your country. How many of you would like to go and teach overseas, and do this, and they went nuts. And so, two days later, my brother and I, he’s at Dartmouth. We’re in the fall of our senior—junior year, was it? Junior year. And we pick up, we each pick up The New York Times, about the same time, and we both reach for the phone, and our lines are busy. And we finally reach each other, and we say, this is what we’re going to do after we get out of college. I went to Iran, he went to Tunisia. Literally, after I graduated, I went to, on Cannon Green, I took off my cap and gown in a hurry, so we could drive to
Newark airport so I could fly out to Logan, Utah, where my peace corps group was already assembled. There were some of them who had graduated in May. We graduated in June. So a bunch of us on the plane; but, they all had, well, there were 20 of them, had been down in Gallup, New Mexico, on a Navajo reservation. I was so upset that, why didn’t, you could have waited! And then here’s this group of people. And so the volunteers were, who were already there, were checking us in, and this sort of short, feisty, but very energetic young woman named Donna Shalala was checking us in, and Donna and I got to be good friends, and she went on to fame and fortune, as they say. But we had an interesting group in our Peace Corps. And that, so my assignment was to be an English teacher. So, we studied Farsi all summer long, although most of us were listening to Dave Brubeck, he’d just come out with “Take Five,” and so we had our headphones with Dave Brubeck, because that was more fun than Farsi. But again, I was, it was so easy for me to learn Farsi, I don’t know why. Part of it was the fact that I was going to a place where they didn’t speak English. But, so we get over there, and I’m assigned up on the Caspian Sea, up in Northern Iran. And the ministry of education, in its wisdom, decides that these 60 village kids that I’m going to teach, boys, ages 16 to 25, I should teach them, as beginning English, *Gulliver’s Travels*. OK, let’s all say, “Brobdingtogian.” Let’s all say, “Liliput,” let’s all say “Houyhn—,” you know I threw the text out the window. This doesn’t work. And I began to design my own curriculum. Because I didn’t know that—I knew that *Gulliver’s Travels* wouldn’t work with village kids—their language was Gilaki. It wasn’t Farsi. So we had Gilaki, Farsi, and English, and my Farsi was good, but it wasn’t fluent by, at that point, it was, I was two weeks into Iran. But then when I read Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, seven years later, and found out about generative ideas and banking education, and problem posing education, that is exactly what I had done; but I had invented my own raw form of it, and then he helped me with theory, as I began to look into how we can
change the American education system, which is what I’ve been about for the past forty years. You notice I’ve been successful at that business, but, no applause. But it led to me becoming a teacher, and when I got back I taught in my hometown, then, and I was invited to come back to Lawrenceville to teach there, and then I went to Columbia to get the, to Teacher’s College to work on my master’s degree and start my doctoral work. And then a friend of mine and I, we decided to go down to San Francisco and start a free school, a free school movement—we were gonna really change American education. So, so, but all of that was all about a dissatisfaction with the way education was delivered, and that there were much better ways to do it, and there should be opportunities for young people really to learn and become effective human beings. And so for the past 20 years, that’s what I’ve been doing, at school in Colorado. I’m the founding head of. We work with adolescence for whom success has been elusive. In their lives, it’s just, where they are, they’re 15, 16, 17; it’s not going to work. They’re not going to get a high school diploma. They’re from Red Hook, they’re from Pacoima, a lot of places in between. They tend to be students of color. They tend to poor kids. Because we, they’re all there on a full scholarship. And we throw the labors of Hercules at them. Start ’em off with 25 days in the woods. I’ve got, Monday morning, so, two, three days ago, our newest group of students, they come in three times a year, they went out to the Lost Creek wilderness area. Wonderfully named, but I told them get lost in Lost Creek, and we have, we choreograph an environment and a curriculum around that, so that, 100 percent of the kids coming into the school are not going to graduate from high school if they stay where they are; for any reason you can think of, and usually it’s this permutation of different reasons. I have kids at Berkeley, Wellesley, Morehouse, Spellman, San Francisco State, University of Colorado, NYU, and their lives have, in the way that mine, when I went to Lawrenceville, this poor kid from this small town in upstate New York, and my world opened up. There are many parallels to
what is going on in the lives of kids I’m bringing. I mean I at least had a nuclear family, parents who loved me, and who wanted the best for me. Most of the kids who come to us, there’s single parents, there’s issues in the family, that kind of thing. But, the resilience that they had inside them, it’s been flickering down, it’s this tiny little flame, and then we get the, if we show up at the right time in their lives, we help them rekindle it, and they go on to do some pretty interesting things. So that’s what I’m doing now. And Princeton in the nation’s service, was the motto at the time, and now, in the service of all nations, for 15 years before I did my current job, I was doing national service work. FDR had the civilian conservation corp. The tree army. Jerry Brown, when he became governor in the mid-’70s, said, you know, I could take that idea down to the state level. And I was, I helped to create, shape, and lead the California Conservation Corps. We had about 14 hundred kids, planting trees, fighting fires, building trails, all that kind of stuff, all over California. I did that for seven and a half years, and then Diane Feinstein said, wait, wait, wait, we can take, if Jerry can take the FDR idea down to the state level, I can take this down to the city level. She was mayor of San Francisco at the time. So I led the San Francisco Conservation Corps for seven and a half years. So that fifteen and a half years of national service work, Princeton in the nations service, came directly out of Peace Corps, came directly out of Operation Crossroads Africa, and led to the work I’m doing in Eagle Rock School and Professional Development Center.

**Tomlinson** You mentioned the big influence that that initial Kennedy speech and the foundation of the Peace Corps had on you. Did you feel like something of an outlier at Princeton, or was that spirit kind of broader?

**Burkhardt** You know, that’s 50 years ago. It’s hard to remember back. I, I don’t know how to answer that question accurately. Why did the idea of the Peace Corps resonate with me? Well, what, how do we know, how do we
shape ourselves to become who we are, is a good question. And I don’t know the answer to that. I do know that I was very enamored of Kennedy. My father ran his inauguration. He, by that time he… So, I was able to get some top guys in the Kennedy administration to come up and talk at, when I was a senior here, to come up and talk with, I was in quadrangle club. And then George Kennan came up. And I don’t know why I got to have dinner with him, but I did, before he went and spoke over in Alexander Hall. And we were a group of seven or eight of us, having dinner with him, and we asked him, what should we, you know—he was, Kennedy had just appointed him to be the ambassador to Yugoslavia, and he was leaving in two days, but he made time for Princeton, as so many alumni do. And we said, what should we do? And he said, here’s what you do. Here’s the one piece of advice. You carry a book with you wherever you go. When I, no matter where I am, I have a book with me. And if the conversation’s boring, that’s their problem, because I’ve got the book. If there’s down time, I’ve got the book, and no matter what—and I’ve got my kindle right in there with 150 books on it, that, if this were a boring conversation, I’d pull it out and start reading. It really helped me, because I never, I always have that with me. I’ve always had a book with me. And I never forgot George Kennan’s advice. But he was doing, he was going off; he was at the end of his career. But he was going off to serve, “ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.” So those kind of ideas, and the ask-not idea—I was in the chorus that answered John F. Kennedy, and I was proud to do so. It just seemed like that’s what you should do. It was a natural extension, at the time, at Princeton.

**Tomlinson** I’d like to eventually get to, kind of your—

**Burkhardt** Is this what, is this what’s supposed to happen?
Tomlinson  This is excellent. Yeah, this is…

Burkhardt  What do I know.

Tomlinson  It’s about you talking, not about me, so—

Burkhardt  Here’s to you. It’s only water.

Tomlinson  I want to eventually get back to your connections with Princeton through the years, but first I want to briefly go back to Bob Goheen, because he was such a big figure for such a long time at Princeton.

Burkhardt  And he had been at Lawrenceville; he had been captain of the soccer team at Lawrenceville, and was at Princeton. He was the son of a missionary in India, and so embodied and personified what Princeton in the nation’s service was. A classics professor, you know, picked from the ranks. But did so many wonderful things for Princeton. He was great. So his, I don’t know that I saw it when I was here, because, again, the frog that’s at the bottom of a well sees a sky that’s this size, and I was really a frog at the bottom of a well as a freshman here. But I did have—I knew that there was the thing called power. Because my father was getting into it. And Morven, at the time, just over, a little bit from here, was not a historical museum at the time, it was where the governor actually lived. So Dick Hughes, who was the governor, my father ran both of Meyner’s campaigns, and then ran both of Dick Hughes’ campaigns. He was secretary of state, he was Democratic state chairman, and again, he worked on the Kennedy campaign, we’ve got pictures of him with Kennedy, and Johnson, and all that stuff. So I knew that there was this stuff that was going on. I just didn’t, I was lucky to have a father who was, had come up; I mean he had been a foundry worker. After he came back from World War II. But he
loved politics. And so he, and my mother too, they taught us that, without saying; well, my mother used to say to me, Robert, it’s the most exclusive club in the world. She wanted me to be a United States Senator. I didn’t want any part of that. But the fact that she could even think that way was a stretch of my imagination. Again, small town boy. Eighteen hundred people in the town I lived in. And to be here and to have Goheen pushing and shaping the university, which I also got to do later along at Lawrenceville, when, because the trustees there decided—Princeton and Lawrenceville were dominantly white Anglo-Saxon protestant, when I was at both of those institutions. And again, I was 13 when I went to Lawrenceville, I didn’t, what the hell did I know? But right after, by the time I got back from the Peace Corps, the trustees at Lawrenceville decided that they wanted to enrich the caliber of the school. Still, sorry, no women, I mean, come on, let’s not go too far. But they wanted to get a much more diverse and rich complexion to the school. So my classmate Johnny Peck, who had the misfortune of going to a city college in New Haven, was the first guy to do that, and then after Johnny did it for several years, and then, I’m teaching up in my hometown, and Bruce McClellan, the headmaster, sent me this letter inviting me to come down to run their talent search program. So I get to help Lawrenceville go like this, because I’m going to the Indian reservations, to the south Bronx, to rural North Carolina, etc. to try to find young people, news boys all over Pittsburg, St. Louis, Minnesota, Minneapolis, to try to get kids who otherwise would not know about Lawrenceville. And you can see how this resonated with me, as someone who grew up not knowing any of this stuff, and now I are one. I got the opportunity to represent Lawrenceville to kids in Harlem, and to bring them down, and I don’t know if you’ve ever heard the field house at Lawrenceville on a Saturday afternoon when the indoor track meet is going on, and the swimming meet or water polo is going on, and the basketball and the ice hockey, and the wrestling and the squash, and it’s all in the same building. And you think, it’s a three ring circus. I bring
these kids down, and their worlds go like this. Even if they don’t get into Lawrenceville, they begin to see those possibilities. So got to help shape that, and that, that was just part and parcel of Princeton in the nation’s service, of you’ve gotta give back, of we can, that there’s more to this than just—Shelby Cullom Davis, who for me, is a controversial alumnus of Princeton. I mean, there was two lines struggling at Princeton, at the time, as there had been, there were people who thought Norman Thomas was a jerk, and there were people like me who were, Norman Thomas was a Princetonian? Yeah! So as my politics began to develop, I began to see that I had been, you know the opportunities that I have had; I was not unaware of the number of people who were ambassador positions in the United States, who came from either Harvard, Princeton, or Yale. I was not unaware of my access to power, just because I happened to have the ’62 after my name. But I, because of the Peace Corps, I guess because of Princeton, I mean, I got a lot of the ideas here, I began to align myself with unpopular political causes, for some people. There’s this saying, many people who are ahead of their time have to wait for it in uncomfortable places. So when I was at Columbia, and they had the things about Mark Rudd and SDS and all that, and I’m out, and so they, the cops beat up the Barnard girls. Which, don’t get me started on that. But the next day, and the Barnard girls were screaming at the cops, but the cops just waded into the Barnard girls, and beat the crap out of them. So the next day I got my madras jacket, and a black armbands, and I’m in front of the teacher’s college Columbia walking back and forth, picketing my institution, and these people are coming up saying, you’re not going to get hired, you’re going to lose your job—I said, that’s—people will see you! I said, that’s the point! They should see me. We gotta shut this place—so, I was, I got into radical politics, and we need to change America. So, which helped me with my ideas in radical education. At the time radical education. But it just seemed to make common sense that young people should have significant control over their education. Now, that sounds like
pablum. But it was such a radical concept because in so many schools, sit
down, shut up, read chapter four, I’ll get to you when I want you, and
answer questions one through six. And when I want you to think, I’ll tell
you what to think. That, that didn’t work for me, and I don’t think it works
for most people. But we have structured too much of American education
where there’s a teacher up in the front of the room, the kids are sitting
down here—now, we’ve made some significant changes, but we, there’s
so much we have to do, and we underfund it, we under-resource it, we do
not honor the teaching profession. The people who wanna go and work on
Wall Street make a lot of money; and, you know, as my mother used to
say, richer or poorer, it’s nice to have money. And I hope that they live
fulfilled lives, but I, I’m only going through once. So if I’m only going
through it once, I gotta do what I think is right and good, that sustains me,
that fulfills my soul, and that helps make a difference in the world, in the
lives of some other people that, given the gross inequities in our society,
why shouldn’t I use my Princeton credentials, experience, contacts to
make it possible for other people to see that the—there’s this great Phil
Ochs song, “The Power and the Glory,” I don’t know if you know, Phil
Ochs was this wonderful folk singer from the ’60s, and he sang this, it’s,
his song about America is one of the best there is; it should be the national
anthem, it’s better than “God Bless America,” it’s called “The Power and
the Glory.” And he talks about, like Pete Seeger did, and like so many
other wonderful folk singers, who raised questions about things, what do
you do when you’re in a position of privilege and power. Do you
agglomerate that for yourself? I don’t think you should. I think that, which
is why I like that Princeton’s co-ed, that Princeton, a number of years ago,
made the decision, let’s do the acceptance and then we’ll look at whether
this person needs money; money is no longer an issue. So that a kid from
the meanest background can come here. And when I walk around the
campus, when I—I represent my, for the past ten years I’ve represented
my class on the day of, service of remembrance on memorial, on alumni
day. And we start out, and there’s those all those old fogies there, doddering. And then, as Princeton files past us, up in the chancel, of the chapel, they get, they get younger, but all of a sudden there’s men and women and then there’s many more people of color. And they’re beginning, Princeton’s beginning to look the way the United States is gonna look. I mean, if you know the statistics, what, two weeks ago they had the birth rate, the baby, finally we’re dominantly births of color? And there are some people who don’t like that, who think it should stay the way it was, but they don’t get it. Which is why this idea of sending Princetonians overseas for a year, I mean, it’s only what, 20? Come on, it needs to be two, three hundred. And they also need to do it, they should have, if that’s sort of a Princeton Peace Corps, they should also have Princeton Vista, because there are so many needs in this country, and there are great opportunities in so many places where there—just take three: education, healthcare, and the environment. If they did what they’re doing internationally with Princeton undergraduates here, before they got here, so someone was in West Virginia for a year, or in New York City or LA or North Dakota or wherever. They could come here and be that much better equipped to begin and understand how to make use of their Princeton education. ’Cause I didn’t. I mean, I came right out of Lawrenceville because that’s what you did, you just went on. And so I was, it took me a long time to figure that out. Both of my children have done gap years after high school, which was terrific for them. If you did that when I was there, it was like, a faint odor of distaste, like, what’s wrong with, not going—but now it should be, if I were the director now I’d make it mandatory; you couldn’t come to Princeton until you’d done a year after high school of something. Start a business, create a non-profit, work, do service, whatever. But come in and have some sense of who you are. That would incredibly enrich this place, which is pretty hip now, but I talk with our crew at our 50th reunion, good lord. And because of my work with undergraduates over the years I’m so impressed with who the young
people are who are here today. They’re just amazing. And they’re going to do great things. And I don’t mind that some of them go to Wall Street, I mean, I think, you have to have money to run an entity. But what they can do with the money. Or others can go do the things, and then maybe they can get the money from their rich classmates. I haven’t figured it out. I’m wandering, so ask me another question.

Tomlinson  So, you’ve already touched a bit on it, but how have you stayed involved with Princeton? Obviously you’ve had interns from Princeton…

Burkhardt  Yeah, at Eagle Rock, we started, I had been—I was back for my, one of my major reunions, so it would have been 30, maybe it was my 30th. I was on a panel. I’m on two panels tomorrow. They gotta do better than me. And it was an education panel, and I was talking about, come one, you guys gotta go out and join Teach for America, it’s the best, and Peace Corps, and all that stuff. And so a young woman came up to me afterwards, and said, wow, what do I do, and what’s this school. Well, she [Eleanor Harrison ’92] later ran the student volunteer corps here. She came out and spent some time with us, and that led to me realizing, yes! I can do this. So then Sarah Bertucci, Class of ’94, came that summer. And then this whole string of undergraduates: Andy Artz, Caitlin McTague, Josh [Brankman]. But so many I can’t even remember their names anymore. That was wonderful. I also became, got more involved in my class. And so for the past ten years I’ve been a class officer. I was Vice President of my class for five years when Sam Reiken was president. They wanted me to be president, I said, what are you doing, I got a job! I’m not going to be president. But I became treasurer. And I’m getting an award tomorrow. Our class just won the class of 1930—I think they give everyone an award, but we’re winning the class of 1932 award for the most percentage of dues payers or something like that. Just got to an email, and writing guys, saying, come on, pony up. I also just got invited
to serve on the executive committee of the alumni council, which was
great—I mean, I didn’t know even what it was, I just knew there were
these people who—but it’s really cool to be on the alumni council,
because they show us places, they take us places. I’ve seen parts of
Princeton I had never seen as an undergraduate. And it has also given me
the chance to—the terms are too short. It’s a two-year term and then they
bounce you off; just about the time I’m learning what the job is. So,
although, I will say this. Henry von Kohnorn? He’s the chair, I think. I had
an idea, ’cause we’re talking about, in the class affairs committee, how
can we get more Princetonians involved in Princeton. And it finally came
thought, why don’t we have an event called gather anywhere? A
worldwide event, no one has ever used the term yet, I don’t think, and yet
it’s in everyone’s Princeton lexicon, everyone knows that phrase, “gather
anywhere.” So why can’t we have in Hong Kong, in St. Louis, in Beijing,
in Albany, wherever, on a given night, and maybe on the night the
university was founded, you know, some specific day, in groups of twos
and threes or groups of 20s all over the world, have a night for Princeton
where we gather anywhere, and make that sort of either a bi-annual or
quadrennial event that people can have and celebrate Princeton and bring
people closer together. My idea. I thought of it. And, but now they’re
throwing me off. Where’s the love? Where’s the loyalty? But for me…
I’m a kid from a small town. My mother used to say my father would cry
at the opening of a K-Mart, he was very sentimental about things. There
are, there are ways we measure excellence in the world. And if you don’t
know that Princeton is one of the finest universities in the world you don’t
know what the finest universities are. It really, when you look at what our
alumni have done, and are doing, and will do in the years ahead, I don’t
have to do the litany of the supreme court, presidents, commerce, arts;
every human endeavor, we have people who are at the top of their
profession, in the medical or—it doesn’t matter what profession it is. We
have, somehow or other been able to attract people who make a difference and really do these great things. And for me to be able to give back to that? There’s nothing better. And I get to, we had a dinner with the class officers last night. David O’Brien put me in charge of the memorial service, and then he said, well as long as you’re doing that, find out where we put the ivy. So I didn’t—I didn’t, there’s this great guy in the building and grounds named Steve Virostko, and Steve, he was so helpful to me. ’Cause I called around, called around, and finally, we agreed to meet by Nassau Hall last October. And so I said, what do we do? And he said, well, I mean I said, there’s got to be protocols, I mean, and, it turns out, space on Nassau Hall, there’s three, after us, there’s three more spots left. So what do they do with the class of 2030 and 2050 and 2080? They don’t get Nassau Hall. But we have the single best spot, for my class. It’s on the back wall of Nassau Hall. It’s always in the sun, and it’s alone, it’s what you see, and everyone walks by it all the time. Everyone walks by the back of Nassau Hall, you don’t walk by the front of Nassau Hall. And there’s 1962 right there. So I helped pick that spot with him. And he said, you know, he said, you don’t have to do this, but there are, some classes have done this, there’s this company that does this granite thing that says class of 1962. If you want it, they could make small replicas so you can honor some of the guys in the class who’ve really done a whole lot. So last night we had the class officers dinner, David O’Brien who got these things, sort of orange and black granite with Class of ’62. What can you give a guy who’s come back for his 50th reunion? He has, he’s made it in his profession, he’s on the down-hill run, he’s either retired or semi-retired, or maybe in a second career, except for people like me, who’ve got two kids I got to pay for college, so I still got to work. So we gave those out last night, and it just, it meant so much that when—first, they didn’t know what they were, and so after they were all given out I said, by the way, you might walk by the back of Nassau Hall, and you’ll see a larger version of this embedded in Nassau Hall by the class ivy, where on
Saturday morning Linwood David will deliver our ivy oration. And they just, they didn’t know what to say. It was great. So. It’s that kind of stuff that the association or something goes back to 1746, is just… A couple years ago, and a lot of it has to do with the fact that, I’m in my 22nd year as the head of head of a school, I’m the founding head of Eagle Rock school. Lawrenceville just celebrated its 200th anniversary, Princeton recently, for me recently, ’96, celebrated its 250th anniversary, So I, I am able to, with this fledgling school, that is actually only in its 19th year of operation; I had three years of planning and development to get the school started. But I can draw on 450, pushing 500 years of accumulated wisdom, excellence, design, imagination, and draw on that to help shape a school for kids who have been wounded, discarded, tossed out of society. That—and I love that I can do that. I’ve had classmates donate money; I’ve had Princeton students come and help there, and helped them change there what they want to do in education. I draw on, whenever, it’s I’ve had every like 20 years, is the city college of Cambridge does it, they do their, they say, what are we going to do at Harvard. We need to change the curriculum. And they come up with two or three principles, which I really like because I, it’s a good school. I spent some time there, too. And I like to draw on those ideas, but I love to draw on ideas from Princeton. Because this university should be, it shouldn’t be elite, I mean, but it should be in the group that leads the thought, in how we look at society, how we look at the arts, how we look at politics, business, finance, etc. And education. And so if I can draw on ideas from here and use them in my school that’s, I can channel 450 years of Lawrenceville and Princeton, that’s, I got lucky. That’s pretty hip.

Tomlinson Well, we’ve actually reached the...

Burkhardt We’ve probably gone way over time.
**Tomlinson**  No, we’re right at the end of the time that I wanted to, I just wanted to give you a last opportunity to add anything that we haven’t touched on, or go back to anything.

**Burkhardt**  Not particularly. I’m just, they say luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity, but I’ve been pretty lucky. To, in my selection of parents, I got real lucky. I married up. So my wife Elizabeth is, that’s a blessing. And my kids Eileen and Patrick. Eileen is here with me; she just graduated from the Elon University in North Carolina last Saturday. And Patrick is working, he’s working, he’s at the University of Puget Sound. I, I’ve been, I’ve led a blessed life in so many ways and been able to do so many things. And to be able to thank Princeton, and be part of Princeton, be part of the wonderful class, and to have worked for three years on our 50th reunion. And to have classmates like Bruce Dunning, who, if he didn’t—oh, you have it! The magnificence of that piece of work, is, it is staggering. The work that he did. And when David O’Brien asked me, David told this story last night, it was, he thought he was going to have this hard sell, come on Bruce you got to do this for the team, you know; and Bruce said, eh, sounds like fun. I hope that’s a true story.

**Dunning**  [off camera] Yeah, that’s pretty—it’s within the realm of truth.

**Burkhardt**  But the last thing I will say is that when, there was, I, when I, I went through my poverty years after I graduated from Princeton. I didn’t have any money, I was out in California. So I couldn’t come back as much, I couldn’t afford the plane fare. But as I started coming back more and more, for the 20th, 25th, etc., my classmates got even more interesting. There really were some very interesting guys. And now I’m so excited to be here for a number of days, to have some more deeply engaged conversations. Because what they’re doing, what they’ve done, what they can still offer. So thanks, I appreciate the opportunity to say some things.