“Untold Stories: Histories of People of Color in Oregon”
U-Engage ALS 199 Fall 2014
OSU Faculty/Staff Oral History Project

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Interviewee: Antonio Torres
Interviewers: Jacob Dimm, Nick Hawkins, and Jacob Novotny
Transcriber: U-Engage Student and Avery Sorensen

[00:00:00]

Student: Our names are Nicholas Hawkins and Jacob Dimm. We are students at Oregon State University U-Engage Class, “Untold Stories, People of Color in Oregon.” Today’s date is Thursday October 30, 2014, and we are conducting an oral history interview with Antonio Torres. Please state your name and spell it out loud.

AT: Okay, my name is Jose Antonio Torres. Torres spelled, T, like in Thomas, O-R-R-E-S.

Student: What is your birthdate and birthplace?

AT: I was born in Viña del Mar on the coast of Chile in 1949.

Student: With which ethnic or cultural backgrounds do you identify?

AT: I’m a Latino.

Student: When and where were you born? What they’re backgrounds. Oh. You’re parents born, sorry.

AT: My parents were born in Chile. My father’s origin, I have no idea how far it goes back, I guess a mixture of natives and Spain, but we have no idea of his roots. My mother is a more recent immigrant to Chile, so she came from Italy. And so, I’m third generation from the Italy background.

Student: Where did you grow up and where were you raised?

AT: I was raised until finishing college in Chile. I lived on the coast and attended German school, it was a full immersion program. So my first language was mostly German. The doors of the school were closed, and I was the guy who didn’t speak
German. So it was, right away, the feeling of being different from the rest was notable. My family, nobody spoke German, so it was a little bit strange, but it was a great school, nothing to say about that. Then I went to school in Santiago where I attended Catholic University of Chile, and I graduated with a bachelors in math first and then a second bachelors in industrial and chemical Engineering. Then there was a possibility of coming to the United States with the restriction that I had to be in food science. So I said, I don’t know anything about food science, I was a chemical engineer. I had no idea what food science was all about, but I wanted to come to U.S. I had been here as a kid with my parents, but I had no idea what it was to live in the U.S. I mean, as a tourist, it’s not the same as living in a country, so I wanted to live in the U.S. So I was fortunate to be accepted at MIT, so I went to live in Boston where my family started. I graduated from MIT first with a masters in Food Microbiology and then a PhD in Food Engineering.

Student: Who are your mentors, personal or professional?

AT: I mean, my first mentor, and probably the most important mentor, was an elementary professor, and he was a German. He had a strong influence on my life because, first, he had a love for science; his house was a museum, he collected stuff: minerals, rocks, fauna, flora, everything. It was fantastic experience just to go to his house and just see in this museum where you could touch and play with anything that he had to show us. You know, and some of those were brought also to the classroom. So the science was there, the discipline was there, obviously German discipline, it’s well known for its effectiveness, okay. But, most important was also his gentle transfer of the experience of war. He had been on the Africa corps in Africa fighting in World War II and later in the Russian front, which was even harsher than being on the African desert and then, obviously, the final days in Germany for the war. He was also very much a hippie. I mean, if you had seen him when he was 50 or 60, he would be hitchhiking in California trying to cross the U.S. by hitchhiking.

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He was always exploring. And one day he decided to go to the Amazons from Chile to Brazil, just driving and getting into small villages, getting to know the natives, how they were living originally, and getting in a lot of adventures. So it went from, kind of what I learned was things like, I have a horror for war, I cannot stand that, a love for science at an early age, discipline because you’ve got to get organized, you got to do your thing. I mean, it’s one thing saying you will do it, the other thing, you need to get organized to get it done. So, that was probably my strongest influence. And then, I think that in my PhD program, I had another person, kind of similar context. He was a Jew who was born in what used to be Russia, or what used to be, sorry, Poland and
then became Russia. Went also through the experience of going through part of the war thing. And so, a little bit of that context of the horror of war, but also what I learned from him was the love for being a faculty, right. And being a faculty in the U.S. is totally different from being a faculty anywhere in the world. It’s very, very, very different, and we can talk about that if you want to. Another thing I also learned from him, the love for writing; I love writing. I have never written fictional, it’s always technical writing, but I do, I really like writing and editing and I learned that from him too. So probably those two are the most strongest influence in my professional and personal life from a teacher point of view. Well, and let’s forget, also parents. My parents, I mean, they were, they came from pretty humble backgrounds, and both of them considered education was the most important investment they could ever make. My father, for example, chose to live far away from home, he was never there because he was a merchant marine, which was the only way he could make enough money to pay for our good schooling that we were receiving. The German school in which we were attending, me and my sisters, was private, and, therefore, you had to pay tuition. But, the combination of tuition, support from the German government, plus support from the state, made for an incredible school experience. If I can tell you just a few examples, I’m sure you have never heard that this elementary school teacher I had, people had PhD in graphic arts, and language, and physical education. In elementary school system, I don’t think that you can find that anywhere in the world. I mean, it was an unique experience because we had that triple funding source. A lot of Germans also had a horror for war, so instead of doing military service, they elected to do social services, so a lot of the teachers that we had were choosing doing social service rather than serving in the army. That was a choice that was very popular in the sixties, seventies, and eighties. I don’t know if it’s still valid in Germany yet, but it was the experience of their time; they were choosing to do something good instead of doing military service.

Student: Very interesting. Why did you decide to come to OSU? When was that, and the year?

AT: It was in 1984. And the reason was a job. I mean, the job description was exactly what I wanted. I wanted to be a faculty and have the combination of requiring the unique skills that I had acquired in my undergrad and then strengthening my doctoral program in microbiology, which I have found to be essential to work with food. For me, if you don’t solve microbiological programs in food, you have solved nothing. Food would either spoil quickly, if you don’t, if you have microorganisms there, they will grow there, they will get rotten, smell funny, whatever, or it will kill you. So, neither one are a very nice thing to do. So, I liked that aspect.

Student: Yeah. What were your first impressions of the University, of the Corvallis community?

[00:10:07]
AT: Well, it’s my parents that brought me to the U.S. as a kid to the East Coast. I don’t know if you’ve traveled to the East Coast, but if you live in New York, New York City, Washington, Philadelphia, Boston, all the big cities of the East Coast, you will think that farms are things that you go on vacation, they are not part of real life because you live in cities, cities that never stop. I mean, you drive from Boston to New York, and its housing never stops; it’s always housing and then more houses and more houses. The density reduces, but it’s always housing and housing and housing, very urban environment. So that was my image of the U.S., that this was just big city. Well, I was totally wrong, this is a big farm—nothing else but a big farm. So when I flew to the job interview, I flew into Eugene, and I had a friend who had also graduated from MIT, was also a faculty at that time here, so he picked me up from Eugene. And we drive on 99 to Corvallis, and I saw sheep and cows, and I say, “what the hell, where am I?” Okay. It was, you can imagine the experience of coming from a big city and landing in Eugene Airport and driving to Corvallis, which at the time had only about 35,000 people, and this university probably had about 10, 12,000 students, so it was very small and very rural. When my family was over here, my kids went crazy about it. They were like—my young boy, he was absolutely crazy seeing cowboys, he was like, “Dad, cowboys! Cowboy boots, ooooh, cowboy boots. Cowboy belts.” A few months later, all he wanted to wear was cowboy boots, cowboy hat, cowboy belt, and cowboy, everything was cowboy for him, so it was a very different environment.

Student: Did you like how it was different than what you thought it was going to be or…?

AT: In the beginning, to be honest, I’m a city person. I was born in a medium-size city, which now has grown to probably about half a million to a million, surrounded by another city of about the same size, so I was a city person. Then I went to a school in Santiago, which is a five million city, then I went to Boston to school, big city again. So it was, I was not sure. I liked the job, I was not sure about living in a small town. So the beginning, I was not sure if I was gonna stay here or not forever; I was thinking, maybe, I should go back East. The main reason of going East, is that it’s easier to go to Chile where I’m from. From here it’s difficult to go to Chile. So, in the beginning, I was not so sure, not so sure. I was sure about the job, but not so sure about living a small town, which I had not done before. Right now, if I had to describe it to be honest, it’s kind of a love - hate relationship. I love the environment of being able to take my mountain bike and do mountain biking, running in the forest, that’s great. Taking only three minutes from home to work, fantastic, I mean, I love that efficiency, the easy living. This is easy living. And when you live in a big city, life is a lot harder, the daily life as a lot harder. So, the compromise of being here and much more efficient, I have more time free to do things I really like, which in my case is traveling. I’m a traveler by definition. I travel
much more than you can think that I should’ve done as a faculty, probably. I travel a lot.

Student: That’s cool. What is your current position?

AT: I’m an Associate Professor of Food Processing Engineering.

Student: Please describe your job duties.

AT: My main duty as a faculty is to do research, but research not only for the sake of research, but for the training of future researchers, future scientists. I feel that the research is a tool to help them learn how to think creatively, solve problems that are challenging, and get a new knowledge. I mean, that’s what I think my main job is to have new students that would be to do what I have been doing for the last 30 years.

The research is a tool. But it’s exciting research; I enjoy every project that I work on. There’ve been very few jobs, very few projects in which I have not enjoyed every minute of it. And one thing that I’ve managed to be able to do has been to marriage this love for traveling with my work. I strongly believe that the more I interact with other people in other locations, I get new ideas new, ways to see things. I don’t like inbreeding when we start looking at our self here and we keep talking to our self, keeping talking to our self even though you came from another place, I mean 10, 15 years afterwards, you are one of these people here, and you become the same as everybody else. So, I want to get the opportunity to see the thinking of other people everywhere. So, a lot of my research has collaborations that are international. So, Mexico—obviously, I mean, it’s so close, I speak the language—Europe because my German education, I had a strong connection to Germany, Spain because of the language, I have a strong connection to that, and Chile because I was born there, and now, I married a Chinese woman, so now, I host a lot of interest in China, which, by chance, have been also a source of new projects and interactions. So, for example, I teach a graduate course in Mexico, and I just travel on Thursday night, teach Friday afternoon and Saturday, and fly back on Sunday, and I’m back at work. So, as long as I’m healthy enough to keep traveling, you will see me at the airport.

Student: That’s cool. Do you like doing that?

AT: Oh I love it. One of the things that I’ve the privilege is that in most jobs, your boss will tell you where to travel; I choose where to travel. And I choose to travel with people that I really like. So, I mean, there are so many scientists in the world, why
would you like to work with someone you don’t like? It is rare for me to spend much

time in hotels, most of the time I spend time with my friends. Stay in their homes and
we work and then we talk about other things and do other things. For example, one of
my passions is biking, as I mentioned before. And one of the most beautiful places to
bike is Europe; there’s a lot of trails where you can do wonderful biking, and one of the
best is in Spain. There’s a very old tradition that goes back to about 800 where people
would do pilgrimages to the north of Spain to a city called Santiago de Compostela.
And, probably it’s a myth, there’s a myth that Saint James, you know, one of the
apostles, the most important apostle to Jesus. The myth is that he’s buried in this town.
So, people would travel from all over Europe to this church to pray to Saint James,
okay. It’s possibly invented for political reasons. You know, the Muslims, the Moors,
were coming from Africa, invading Europe, and they made it into France. And,
obviously, they were pushing their Muslim belief, and the Christian Kings of the North
didn’t like that, they wanted to be Christian kings. Therefore, for them, it was important
they create a barrier to this loss of their playground. I mean, this is where they were the
kings, and they wanted to keep it that way. So, by sending about a million Pilgrims into
northern Spain every year, you created a tremendous barrier to further expansions of
the Muslims. Creating a very strong Catholic Church in Spain, stopped it and protected
these western Christians’ view of Europe. It could have been different. If the Moors
could have gotten up all the way into Europe, then we would all be praying to Allah
today, if it had not been for that.

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So, it’s an interesting. So that traditional pilgrim still remains today. I invite you to try
it; it’s a very organized way of traveling by foot or by bike in Europe because every
small town, there’s a place where you can stay for free or for no, close to no money.
And you will see pilgrims today from all over the world; I see people from Korea,
China, all over South America, a lot of Europe, and a few from the U.S. too. Anyways,
go ahead.

Student: Uh, let’s see. Please describe the types of classes that you teach, research you
conduct, programs you administer, services you provide.

AT: Okay, so in terms of teaching, I’m responsible for two topics. One is more
descriptive than quantitative; it’s food packaging, all the technologies that are used for
food packaging. And, a good friend of mine who works for a company in Albany,
Oregon, Freeze Dry that produces Mountain Health. A lot of you like to go hiking,
hiking food is that packaging is very important. Like for you, when you go outside
when it’s cold and hot or raining or snowing without clothing, that’s the same thing if
you send food into a market without a package. It would not be very good for the food,
It would not be very good for you to go outside naked, not because it’s shameful, but because you’re gonna get cold or you’re going to get burnt by sun or frostbite if it’s that cold. Okay, so that’s one course. The other course that I teach tries to give the students their strength in quantitative views of our industry, the food industry, how to solve quantitative problems. When we say, for example, this food needs to be heated, that doesn’t tell me anything. I need to tell you what temperature and how long and how fast I need to reach the temperature I said. So, all those quantitative questions are engineering questions that I try to teach my class. And, in terms of research, there are multiple topics I’ve covered in my experience. But most of it has to do with solving some microorganism problem—either a spoilage or a safety problem, microorganism safety. So, we use a variety of technologies to control microorganisms. Typically heat is the most useful one, by heat you kill microorganisms; and the problem with heat is that it kills microorganisms, which is good but it also changes the chemical composition of food or it changes the flavor of food which is not so good. And therefore, it’s always about how much can we do so that the quality of food is still good while it’s also safe. So, it’s always trying to find that optimum way you can have solve the problem or reduce the risk to a minimal acceptable while, at the same time, preserving the good quality of food. We also use, look for new technologies. And last ten years, I’ve worked a lot on the use of high pressure instead of heat, so the advantage of using pressure is that—the reason that the chemical composition of food changes by heat is that heat is so much energy that it breaks the chemical bounds so the chemical nature of the food changes because all the chemical bonds are destroyed by heat, okay. The advantages of pressure is that it’s not so much energy, and therefore, it cannot break covalent bonds so the chemical nature of the food stays the same. I can give you pressure treated orange juice and fresh squeezed orange juice and you won’t be able to find the difference because it will taste the same, it will have the same color, it will be minor changes, it will be difficult to detect. Because microorganisms is a very complicated organisms, they have a lot of structural components, and those structural components can be destroyed by pressure. So, I can kill microorganisms without changing the chemical nature of foods.

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And there are a lot of products today on the market which it makes it nice when you start working on something that doesn’t exist. Because 15 years ago there was no pressure treated food, it was only just beginning our research and this department was one of the initiators of pressure research in ’93 when we started which was barely the beginning of this technology. And today, we have products on the market, that’s nice.

Student: Who has been important to you here at OSU in terms of your work and position?
AT: Who’s been important to me…Actually, probably EOP has been a source of a lot of my colleagues that have been supportive. So, Janet Nishihara is important to me—not only because she’s the instructor of this course, but she’s been a good friend for a long time. Another friend from the same department, Dr. [name unintelligible] which was a partner in the scholarship that we can talk about later. But, unfortunately she passed away a few years ago. So, colleagues have been important. Two places that have been really important for me has been Valley Library; I find that is a wonderful place in terms of the environment, particularly with this new structure—it’s new for me because the old one was totally different—but since 2001, the Valley Library is a fantastic place to be. And Dixon, Dixon Recreation Center for me is the other place that is very special. And its special, one because the infrastructure has been well designed. An architect will tell you how important is the design for how you feel in that certain location. For example, this place, I’ve tried my best to make it friendly, okay. I just, it’s a box—and these windows are not very attractive, and the street outside is terrible, right? So, there’s not much you can do with this thing, but when you do some good architectural design, they are better. And this what happens in Valley Library and Dixon—have been good architectural designs working on them. The other thing is the staff. I mean, most of them are students. And there’s good training there because the quality of interaction that the students do with the people that they serve, it’s fantastic. If you ever work there, congratulations. Those are the ones that can come to my mind. Most of—most my collaborations or support have been coming from outside the university because of my nature of trying to seek this international network. And my students, I shouldn’t forget my students. When I say my students I’m talking about my graduate students; they are like—it’s like, you know, you’re exploring and you can be the head of the exploration team but you better have good relationship with the team because when you are in a no place land when you don’t have no idea what’s going to happen, having the support of your team is important. My students have been very supportive.

Student: How have you seen the OSU, and just the community of Corvallis, change over the 30 years that you’ve been here.

AT: Oh yeah. First of all, the color has change. Earlier, when I went to register my kids in Hoover elementary school, the first impression was the statistics. When they said that you will be here the diversity in the school, I said I don’t want to be anything, I just want to bring school to kids, my kids to the school.

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But they said there was 99.7, 99.8 percent white. There were other schools with a little bit more, but Hoover school was in the North of Corvallis was very, very white. And the other thing also, was there was a strong rejection for people that were not white. I
was shocked to hear questions like, “When are you leaving? When are you going back?” And, I couldn’t understand it because probably you—I should give you a context. There are many jobs that you can have in this country, right. All of them have one thing in common, great mobility, you’ll be moving from job place to place, company to company—not faculty. Faculty jobs are the most stable jobs there can be. So, having a faculty job, and knowing that in Hoover school there were so many of the faculty that are new faculty, that also stable jobs, why was I being asked when I was leaving? That didn’t feel quite right. Or when my kids were told by the parents of other kids that they shouldn’t play with their kids because their language would be, their way of talking English would be damaged, okay. My kids were born in the U.S., they speak like a gringo, okay. They went to from preschool--from childcare, preschool, kindergarten, all through college in the U.S.—they speak like gringos. So, I couldn’t understand. Some parents, when they would find out they were not born in the U.S., their kid would stop coming from our home—it was a bit strange. That was very discouraging to say the least. I think that has changed; there’s much more acceptance of diversity today. There have been a lot of efforts by the community, in particular the university and some companies, when—for example when Hewlett Packard was a much stronger employer in this city. I mean, what you see of Hewlett Packard today is nothing to what it was ten years ago, I mean probably it was five times larger than today, that’s huge. And, they had a lot of Indian foreign engineers, foreign scientists that came from, originally from India. And every time they brought one of their employees with an Indian background, he wouldn’t last here more than three or six months and the guy would, or the woman, would just quit. And they were desperate because they needed this skill and they brought this skill over here and then the guy would disappear. What I heard that Hewlett Packard had to do was bring a bunch of the same background, so suddenly we had a lot of people from India working for HP in town because you had, you need a certain mass, I need to have people like me to whom I can talk to. So at the beginning, it was very hard because I didn’t have any to—recent hires at OSU, several new faculty actually from, not only from Latino, but actually from Chile. For me, have been very great to be able to talk about common things that we can share. I mean, I thought if we don’t share anything it’s difficult to have conversation which leads to friendship and leads to relationship. At the beginning, when you don’t know each other, you need to have something in common so you can have a seed in which something can grow. The reverse is it takes a lot of effort. So, being an immigrant takes a lot of effort because you come from totally different background.

Student: Are there any events or programs that stand out to you that either helped diversify Oregon State throughout the 30 years or kept Oregon State from diversifying, kind of held it back a little bit?

[00:35:02]
AT: I mean, the most important one for diversity has been the cultural centers. I mean, there’s no question that the cultural center have made a big, big difference. They have been grown to have an even a larger impact within all the new infrastructures that have been built or within the construction. Again, because you need to have a place where you can go that you will find people with that common thing that allow you to survive, okay. So that has been very important. I have to recognize that, in recent years, I have not participated very much there, but there was a time where I was, every week, in the cultural center doing things over there. My daughter, for example, was the coordinator for the cultural center for two or three years. And that happens for one reason; because she, when she was a little girl, when we first came over here, we started going to a cultural center; so for her, a cultural center was a natural place to be in, therefore later on to be a leader there. Things that held back—perceptions that are negative. There is always this perception that...[break]

Student: What do you see as Oregon State University’s role in for supporting faculty or students of color?

AT: The most important thing to remember--this role for the host. I mean, if I invite you home, I’m the host. And if I want you to come to my home, I need to make it comfortable for you and I need to make it welcome to you to come to my home, otherwise I can invite you, but you’re not going to come to my home--I said, I don’t like that place, I get treated badly, why should I go there? You’re not going to go. So that’s the role of OSU, it’s an infrastructure, it’s an organization, it’s like being a good host, okay. The problem that this is an organization with a lot of hosts at different levels. I mean, we can have a campus president at the top level saying wonderful things, but then each individual student eventually goes to a classroom. And there are cases when teacher faculty eventually faces a department head, etc. etc. etc. So, there are many hosts and I would say there’s still a lot of work to be done to make all hosts understand that they have a role.

Student: And that goes into my next question. What suggestions would you have for OSU, I guess, to be better hosts for these people of color?

AT: First of all, there has to be a recognition for being good hosts. There has to be part of the assessment of all the different leaders that we have from the instructors and the teaching assistants to department heads, the deans, blah blah blah. They all need to be recognized when they’re doing a good job—there are many on campus that do a fantastic job at being a good host, but they are not being recognized. So, I would say recognize them. I would forgo punishing, I would go recognizing. I think that if you recognize, people will say, “Wait a minute I’m not getting recognized, what’s going on here?” Eventually people will change—some of the people will never change, okay. I
always remember that there’s only one person you can be sure of that you can change, and that’s yourself. The rest, good luck.

Student: What would you, or if you have anything to say, on the season that Oregon State is currently in and where do you think this university is heading?

AT: This city?

Student: Yeah, the campus of Oregon State or just the city of Corvallis.

AT: Okay. I mean, obviously OSU has grown tremendously in the last ten years; I mean, it’s been amazing to see. At the same time, I think we’re reaching the limit on how much we can grow. I think it’s—everybody’s realizing that if we grow more, we’ll have to change the city, and I’m not sure there’s a need or whether I want to do that. I would need to be convinced that it’s worth the effort of changing the city. I think that we’ve had a lot of underutilized spaces, a lot of underutilized facilities, and a lot of underutilized resources, but now, we, I would say, it’s the opposite—we have overutilized our resources and its getting very difficult to work on this campus. Last year, for example, I had one day that there was electrical shutdown, only one building was effected on the campus—this one, where I was teaching. I could not teach my class. I couldn’t find an empty classroom on an entire campus. And I said, I don’t care where, just tell me where I can go—there was none. That’s too much of utilization. You must—things will always fail, you must have some spare because things will always fail. The—one of the things that OSU could do to make it more welcome—I mean, obviously, the diversity of this country will keep going. Immigrants will flow into this country like never have happened in the past; I mean, it’s impossible to stop. I think that this century is gonna, we’re gonna see much more migration than we saw last century, for many reasons. First of all, communications. I mean, people see what this look like, what you can do, traveling become a lot easier, so people will travel and they will see. And a lot of countries overseas are doing well, they will have the means to travel, and they will see, they will meet people here, they will fall in love, and or they will like this place. But, for many reasons, there will be more migration, so the diversity will get worse and worse. I’ve been in Europe a lot, and one of the things I like in Europe is the acceptance of multiple languages. In the East by people, accept and learn other languages. Unfortunately the U.S. being lazy and we only speak English, and that’s a problem. I think that with the language—when you learn a language, particularly when you learn a language well, you also get the culture behind that language and there’s a lot of value in that. I was fortunate is that I went to a full-immersion German program, and even though I don’t look like German at all, when I go to Germany, I feel it, okay. And there
are certain things that I like about Germany, for example, I always tell my friends that what I like the Germans, is they’re always singing—Germans sing, they are constantly singing, I like that. They’re constantly walking, they like walking—a lot of things that you learn from the language. What else?

Student: Going back to what you said about how being a faculty member here is different than being a faculty member overseas somewhere, do you want to expand a little bit more on that?

AT: The relationship between students and faculty is much more friendly, it’s a—there’s a, in most countries, you have a very structural organization, you have the super professors, the assistant professor, the assistant to the assistant—very structured, okay. And you never see the super professor. Here, you can go to a class and have a conversation with the best professor on campus and he will teach you the same way. The other thing, the other thing that’s also very different is that when you become a professor here, and you begin as an assistant professor, which is the first rank, you have almost the same power as a full professor. You have the same privileges, the same obligations—you’ve got to get funding, you got to teach classes, you supervise graduate students, and you decide what are you going to do a research to do your work, okay. And that’s very important because most PhD will finish 26, 27, 28—most of them, that’s the age when they finish.

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That’s the age where you still are changing, okay. By 31 you become an established person, your personality will become—you’re still growing and so when you become an assistant professor, you are still growing, you are full of energy, full of an idea, full of innovation, and you grow. And, you cannot do that in other countries. So, in other countries, you become an established professor when you’re 45—it’s too late, you’re old, you didn’t have the chance to bloom and get all the rules and the branches as you could’ve had. That’s very sad to see a lot of faculty that burn out before they start their careers because they’ve been squeezed and not given any rights or privileges to exercise what is a wonderful job. I mean, this job of teaching others, it’s wonderful. I mean, I’m helping to create the next generation, that’s a beautiful job. And I work with people, what’s more beautiful thing than people? I mean, it’s much more beautiful than this computer or a car or this desk—a person is a beautiful thing. So, that’s why you have to have people that have not been destroyed by the system.

Student: And then you also mentioned how you go down to Mexico and teach that graduate student course, are you currently doing that now?
AT: I do that one in one term, the winter term.

Student: You’re doing it winter term? Alright.

AT: And the rest of the year, I have PhD students and other graduate students that work with me and I go on there on a less-frequently basis. But, in the winter term, I go every two week or every week.

Student: And when you’re down there, are there things down at that university that you see that you enjoy down there that you wish you could bring back to Oregon State?

AT: Yeah. One thing is that—this is, I’m sorry this is going to be a complaint about our students, for some good reasons, and some—not good—some valid reasons. When I say to a student, one day I’m coming next Wed—next weekend, and I’m going to be teaching on Saturday between nine and one o’clock, then want to go for lunch together, and want to work from three to seven, and then afterwards want to go for a beer? So, there’s a lot of informality in that relationship, but also a lot of flexibility upon the students. They appreciate the effort of their faculty, they go over there, and they say, whatever time you want to teach, I’ll be there, okay. If I tried to do the joke over here, I would have revolution, okay. They would say, “Oh I cannot do it on Saturday, I already have plan, and not only plans”… and sometimes, yeah, you have a job, I understand that. That’s an unfortunate reality of how costly U.S. education has become, I think that, yeah. It’s too costly; it should be a lot less costly. Then we can talk about the many reasons why it could be less costly, beginning with books—I find it ridiculous. I mean, at my class in food packaging, I want to use a book, it’s a wonderful book. The last time that I checked, which was about eight, ten years ago, it was $360. I mean, how can I ask a student to buy a $360 book? Eight years ago, which today is probably $450, I thought, I cannot do it.

Student: Are there any experiences that you’ve had—maybe with students, as you said that in the U.S. it’s a little more informal—experiences of, like, one-on-one time with students where you’ve really—or, they’ve helped you grow in your experience here at Oregon State, or you’ve helped them grow that you really enjoyed that?

AT: Yeah. I mean, one experience that I came from sabbatical in industry, that was, kind of, the initial conception of the idea. I went on sabbatical in ’93 to Kraft foods in Chicago. They have a big research center North, Northwest of Chicago and had the privilege to work there for a year and a half. And one of the—there was one idea that was always in all the discussion we had was because of leverage. If you have a little bit, you have leverage to get more, okay. So they said if you have 50,000, you said 50,000 to get 100,000.
So I said, I’m going to try to establish a scholarship program for students of diversity, but I know that I will never have enough money to make it an important program. And, the other thing they also said, I want it to be visible. I said, how can I make something because I was just a single person with a couple of people from EOP, from Fishes and Wildlife, a few colleagues that we’re working with—maybe six people? How can we make something that would have an impact? And then we came with an idea—first of all, to focus on students with leadership skills. I said, because student leaders are visible, so just by choosing student leaders, our program will be visible, okay. And the other thing we said, we’re going to negotiate, we’re going to get some funding and with that funding in hand, we’re going to negotiate to get more funding. And so, we got a grant from USDA to recruit students, and we got less than a $100,000. And, with that money, we started negotiating with Food science, EOP, Housing, Fishes and Wildlife, Horticulture, Animal Science, what else negotiators. And we said, give us something. So from Housing we got, for example, some free housing. So, there’s always a free room somewhere, so they said, we’ll give you free housing so you can offer the students a scholarship in the form of free housing. And from the different departments, they all chipped in money. And we recruited about 26-30 students through the scholarship program. And our target was every organization that we could get into and become, one of our students become a leader of that institution, of that organization, we will attempt. And I was proud that we got the first black female as association of OSU students president, was one of the students from the program—Melanie Spraggins. And so, we had the visibility. All students were of high risk because—and we lost a few. We lost one, for example, who was very promising, and we couldn’t understand why he was having so many financial problems. All his scholarship money he was sending back home. So, after a term we had to say, “We’re sorry, I mean, you cannot do that, we have to drop you.” But, except for a few—that was the only one we dropped—everybody graduated, most people went to either law school, medical school, or graduate school, or business school afterwards. I said, one of them just called me this summer and said that he finished with an electrical engineering degree, and now he’ll be working for Motorola for a while. And he took some food science courses, in particularly a lot of chemistry courses, which is not typical in an electrical engineering program. Are you electrical engineering?

Student: No, but I’m a chemistry.

AT: Okay. No, there’s no chemistry there, okay. And he said that Motorola, they found his chemistry background was very important when litigating patents. So Motorola is now paying him to go to law school to get his law degree so that he can become a patent attorney. So, you never, there was—never expected it to happen. Or, I had
another—twins, they were twin students, both electrical engineer students. And they come to me one day and said, “I need a letter of recommendation,” and he said, “Me too.” And I look at them, I said, these two guys, they have the same background. And they said, we’re applying for the Millennium Gate scholarship. And, I don’t know if you heard about that one, but that’s a dream of a scholarship; it pays everything, everything—books, travel to meetings, computer, graduate school until you finish whatever you decide. So, once you get it, you can get a PhD fully supported, okay.

So both of them, come to me, they’re both strong students, both great soccer players, great student leaders, they look the same. How can I write two letters that are different at the same time? Both got the same chance, both them got the scholarship. So and, both them went to grad school—Stanford, and etc. So, those are the pleasure of working with any student who has enough motivation to go beyond just the classroom. And, those kids were everywhere—were playing soccer, great players, students organizations, doing well in school, it takes an effort. And they both come from a family of seven kids; both parents were immigrants. So immigrants going back and forth to Mexico and still were able to get seven kids through schools, all of them through OSU.

Student: Incredible. What would you say are some of your greatest accomplishments?

AT: Greatest accomplishments, wow. My students. My students, I mean, there’s no question that my greatest accomplishment is students. I mean, for example, I had a recent PhD from my group, he went back to Chile. He was, he—his parents got a PhD in, at OSU in forestry. So he had grown, lived in as a kid, going to elementary schools here in Corvallis. So, his dream was to come back to Corvallis and get his own PhD. He did. He was being stolen by my home university in Chile, and his current university fought back, and offered him more because he’s incredibly good. He has told me this week, he got a, close to a million dollar to stay. Okay, so they said, “We’ll build you a lab, everything you want, we’ll give you this, we’ll give you, but you have to stay.” That’s great to see. So, when they’re so successful, it’s great to see. Or my first PhD student, who was a Chinese, and I knew he was the best to be a faculty. And went back to see him in China two years ago, and he was department head, he’d done a wonderful career as department head. He was the same person. And I had—the second was also a Chinese, but he was a business guy. Although he did a PhD, he was a business person. I knew it from the beginning. And I went to visit him too, and he and his brother had built two very successful biotechnology companies in China. So, those are things that say, yeah, I did okay, I did okay. I mean, their success is what makes you feel good, makes it worthwhile working here ‘til late so that they can finish. And, you know, as I said, the key is to motivate them while, at the same time, not to quench their dreams.
So, don’t squeeze them; let them bloom, and kids will do incredible things. I mean, my two current PhDs that I’m talking about right now, the work that I’m working here on the computer, one of them has a crazy idea. She’s from Thailand, and I had a crazy idea that’s send her to Spain for a year and a half. I had a project with a colleague over there, and we needed one student. And I said, “You want to go?” “I don’t speak Spanish.” “It’s okay, just go.” And she went, okay. So, it—one thing is important, they have my—I’ve gained their confidence that I’m crazy but probably they will be okay to do the greater thing they do. And the other Chinese student that came to me one day and said, “You know, you have all these connections in Latin America, I want to have an experience in Latin America.” So, I sent him to Chile for one whole year, okay. And finished two publications, he did okay. It’s a lot of fun; he knows more of Chile than I know. He went to Easter Island which is part of Chile, went to the desert in the North, went to the South. So, he did great. He didn’t want to come back from Chile, okay. And did, at the same time, his work—he did what he was expected. So, students are the most satisfactory part of the equation.

[01:00:19]

Student: Is there anything else you’d like to discuss at or talk about in these last minutes?

AT: I think that also my kids. I mean, that’s a—if you want to go to a Beaver home, choose any of my kids, it’s Beaver all over the place. I really like how much they have learned to love OSU. And, both of them are doing great professionally, and their support for OSU is unquestionable. My daughter, she works in Anheuser-Busch in Virginia, Williamsburg. She’s three or four times a year here, she manages somehow to come over here. And now that she’s a recruiter for Anheuser-Busch, her first mission is to get another Beaver working for her company. So, I like that. Anything else?

Student: No, that should be it.

AT: Thank you. It was fun.

[end of interview 01:01:29]