

The College at Brockport: State University of New York  
**Digital Commons @Brockport**

---

Interviews With Students Past & Present

Brockport Oral History Project

---

Spring 5-9-2020

## Dan Burns, interviewed by Joe Hickey

Jacob Tynan  
jtyna1@brockport.edu

Joe Hickey  
*SUNY Brockport*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/student>



Part of the [Oral History Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Tynan, Jacob and Hickey, Joe, "Dan Burns, interviewed by Joe Hickey" (2020). *Interviews With Students Past & Present*. 8.

<https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/student/8>

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the Brockport Oral History Project at Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Interviews With Students Past & Present by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@brockport.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@brockport.edu).

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 0:04

Alright, this is Joe Hickey interviewing Dan Burns at the College at Brockport in the library. So my first question for you, Dan, is can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your family?

Dan Burns 0:14

Well, I can tell you a lot. I'm not sure I'm going to tell you I, but I was born here in Brockport, or excuse me, I was born in Herkimer and lived here since age one in Brockport. My dad was a school teacher. My mom was a housewife. I had a brother and a sister, older sister, younger brother, went to parochial school here. Then I went to the high school, the Brockport High School, then graduated in 1964. I spent about two years over a year and a half, at SUNY Brockport dropped out, went to work in a factory making tin cans, which was quite an awful job. Then I went to work for an uncle who had a funeral home, had no sons and was grooming me to take over. So I served my apprenticeship. Then I went to Syracuse and went to Simons school and take the New York state exam and went to work for my uncle for several years. After that, I didn't really like what I was doing there and I had an opportunity to go to a writers and artists colony in Georgia on an island called Ossabaw, privately owned, and they had a group there that may be between 25 and 40. Artists of various types painters and musicians and writers etc. would come and they could work there. And it was a pretty pristine Island there wasn't, wasn't built up at all. And I worked there on and? off for five or six years. I started out as a cook, I ended up doing general maintenance work. And then finally I advanced in their eyes to being a quote, "cowboy" and helping with livestock and catching pigs and wild cattle etc, which we would ship over the river on barges, so we can make enough money to pay the taxes there. After that, I came back to Brockport, I finished my degree in 79. And I had the opportunity to go to Rio de Janeiro to do my student teaching which was quite amazing. And from there I was possibly, it was I found a job in Asuncion, Paraguay where I taught in the American school for four years. And I left there under rather traumatic circumstances which I won't go into. I came back to the States. Rather than go to graduate school and get my masters, I went to work at Lakeside hospital at the lowest job they had mopping floors. And I did that for a while and eventually raised into position until I became the department manager and worked at the Lakeside Barker nursing home and Lakeside hospital as environmental services director and after many many years there, we came to a conflict of ideas. So I left there and I went to work for the Mariette Corporation. And I worked for them for three years and then I retired. I have no children. And I've been married to my wife for 25 years. She was a dietary manager at Lakeside, but I had known her as a little girl. And we had always kept in touch. So now I do volunteer work at the link Center at the Brockport community library and at the Emily Knapp Museum, and try to take classes here at SUNY Brockport through lifelong learning and want to move south and get out of this weather but my wife won't move. So that's about all that I'll let Joe ask any questions he wants to.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 5:04

Well, yeah, that is quite a journey.

Dan Burns 5:05

Yes it was a journey.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 5:07

So you mentioned you attended Brockport high school. So what were your, what are your educational experiences like for your high school?

Dan Burns 5:15

Well, to be honest, I didn't work very hard. I did as I did as little as possible. And I had a really good time and crammed for exams and that's about it. So in the subjects that I was good at, I did well in the sciences and maths I did poorly. And it really, I was not a good student, but I sure had a good time. When I finished my - I wanted to go away to school and my father said, Well, you proved you couldn't do it here, so why should you go away to school you better go over here to Brockport where, it was really inexpensive. Now, my father was a Notre Dame graduate. And course I had aspirations as a young child that I was just going to be, you know, going to that type of school. And that surely did not happen. Oh, excuse me.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 6:22

So, so would you say that you end up, why did you end up choosing Brockport then, like who influenced you? Would you say that?

Dan Burns 6:28

Oh, well, I didn't have any choice. It's about all I couldn't afford anything else. I worked all the way through college. I worked at the dietary buildings and I forgot what they call it now. Anyways, I worked out I started out as a dishwasher and ended up as a cook. I worked terrible hours, but I had to go around what my class schedule was. And then I used to work nights at the commissary making rolls, which was about the most boring thing I've ever done in my life, but it was a job. So it was hard to make ends meet. But luckily Brockport tuition was pretty cheap.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 7:19

So you had to do a lot of working around during school was that like

Dan Burns 7:21

I always say always had a job when I was in school,

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 7:26

was it difficult to time manage work and school, and

Dan Burns 7:30

It was it was it was not easy. I missed a lot of classes. Back in those days they didn't care how many classes you've cut. They really didn't. And my first couple of years, I had a lot of withdrawals simply because I didn't show up. And I was doin' the counterculture thing and you know, just school meant nothing to me my first couple years, but when I came back to finish, I was really motivated. I was past those introductory classes that I had no interest in, and I was taking things in my major, and I did really well. And it paid off for me. In that sense that I graduated with a good well, a high GPA, you know, good degree and, and teaching cert,

certification and I should have been on the road to success, but I had a few pitfalls along the way.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 8:37

So you, you major was a teacher, you want to be a teacher, as your major?

Dan Burns 8:41

Yeah, well, I my, history was my major and that's what I graduated with. And then I got teaching certification after my history degree. So I didn't get them both at the same time. It took me another semester, so to take the education courses I needed and then I had to go and do student teaching. So it took it probably took another year and a half.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 9:06

What was what was the process like of like choosing your major when you were going into college? And why you chose a history major?

Dan Burns 9:14

Well, I don't think I had a major when I first started because I had no idea what I wanted to do. I really wasn't interested in going to college. But you know, let's face it, Vietnam was going on, what else am I going to do? I'm not going to join the service. I had the Mohammed Ali thing, you know, I got nothing against those people. And I'm not going over to kill them or get killed. So, so college was a way out, and I took advantage of it. But I don't think I ever chose a major until I came back in 77 or eight. And then I chose history simply because I had a lifelong interest in it.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 10:01

Could you tell me a little bit about your social life at Brockport during your time here, any extracurricular,

Dan Burns 10:05

I didn't have a lot of social life here at Brockport, I didn't live on campus. I met very few people in my classes. I worked all that time. And because I was living in this area, I hung around with my friends who were mostly Brockport people. So I didn't, I didn't integrate with the college socially very much at all. If, if at all. I went to the athletic events and etc. but that's about it.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 10:39

So you so you didn't live on campus would you

Dan Burns 10:42

never lived on campus? No.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 10:44

So what was that experience like just to commute everyday was there any

Dan Burns 10:48

Well, God I had to do was walk the first two years that was pretty simple. Although, you know, it's not fun walking in this weather. I had a walk maybe close to two miles. But at that point I, you know, at that time I was young, I didn't think anything of it. And later on, when I came back, I started to commute from Rochester. And I mean, it was all right, but it just was time wasted as far as I was concerned, it was just time that you couldn't get back. So it didn't really affect me a great deal commuting as far as, as far as infringing on my studies or what I was doing. It just was a one of those necessary things you had to do.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 11:44

So what are the major differences with Brockport from the time you went to college that you see today at Brockport,

Dan Burns 11:52

I see a real increase in the quality of the professors that that I think that's really something. Back then when I was in college, a matriculated student, there were a lot of people who I felt didn't belong here. There were a lot of Nigerians here. There are a lot of people who graduated from a New York State course that basically was what they call the equivalent to the high school. And I didn't think that they were qualified students. So I thought the student body as a whole was pretty weak. I think it has improved now, but I'm certainly dismayed by the communication around here because there isn't any - everybody is into their electronic devices and don't talk to one another.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 13:01

So would you say that, what do you think lead to the big change? What do you think maybe led to the changes of the improvement in quality professors and the student body?

Dan Burns 13:18

Well, I think New York State really got behind pushing SUNY. And they, they started some building programs, they added some, some dorms and started doing some advertising and started looking for people. And the, the base of the students grew twice. You know, when I was there, there were four or 5000 students now, there are a lot more than that. But also when I was here, when I first started in the 65, or 66. Almost everybody, there very few commuters. Everybody lived pretty close. If not on campus, they live probably in the village. And that started to change 78-79 there were a lot more commuters. And now I think it's probably more commuters than kids who live on campus. I don't know if that so or not, but it just seems like there are a lot of commuters. Incidentally do you live on campus?

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 14:30

I do live on campus yeah. Are you familiar with Benedict Hall?

Dan Burns 14:37

Pardon me, Benedict. Yeah, one of the old ones.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 14:40

Yeah, yeah I know yeah, that and Dobson those are old parts of the college. Was there any major events or highlights from your time at Brockport that you just remember, as something that you always remember?

Dan Burns 14:57

As a student? Not really. No. I mean, I was busy. I worked a lot. And I really didn't get involved in social activities. I know at one time there was kind of a black student uprising on campus. And that got a lot of attention. I certainly wasn't a part of it. But, you know, I didn't go to the rallies on one side or the other. I think they even took over the administration building in for a while. But it was quelled pretty quickly. But there was a lot of racial animosity on campus. I don't see that anymore. But I also see the races seem to stick together you know, all the black kids are in a little clique getting the white kids are in another and I don't see a lot of mingling or mixing there, or trying to make friendships with people who don't seem to be in your sphere.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 16:13

So you said that the uprising took over the administrative building?

Dan Burns 16:17

Yeah.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 16:18

What kind of what kind of effect did that have on the college?

Dan Burns 16:21

Well, I think it shook everybody up a lot. And I think it made them look, you know, at what's happening in the country, but you know, it was a, it was a racist society, then it's a racist society now. It really hasn't changed. You look at what happened and, and Charlotte and all of that. I mean, that's so much. The white supremacy stuff is basically a racism they have studied this problem for God knows how long and you know, I don't think you're ever going to solve it. Racism is racism. It's, it's inherent in you I think that's my thinking. Whether that's scientifically true or not, I don't know.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 17:10

So you so you didn't. Your first time at Brockport you never fully attended and you said you dropped out of

Dan Burns 17:16

I dropped out yeah.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 17:17

Well after you dropped out what was your immediate plan of what you wanted to do?

Dan Burns 17:22

I didn't have one. I just was lived day to day. I mean, I had to find a job and make some money. I didn't have a specific plan. I always had that funeral home as a fallback. I didn't know if I wanted to do that or not, but I also knew that you can make a pretty good living doing that. And it was there if it was something that I wanted to commit to. So it was almost like I had a lifeboat waiting in back of me. But I didn't take it until I was 21 or two. I didn't take it too seriously. I go out and make some money and have a good time. Drink a few beers. And that was about it. I mean, it was I certainly wasn't a very mature person.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 18:15

Would you say it was, was it easier when you came back to college to get acclimated more even like did you have a better experience coming back to college from your first time around?

Dan Burns 18:22

Well, I had a much better experience but especially academically, because I enjoyed what I was doing. I liked the work. I liked the classes. I liked the teachers, again, I didn't have a lot of involvement with school activities or school people. I didn't live on campus. But academics I really enjoyed. I got to know quite a few of my professors and it just it went well, but that's the only part that I focused on as far as being a Brockport student. It wasn't there. I had no social life here.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 19:05

So your second time around you had you had, you had better professors? Was there any specific ones who had like a personal impact or really kind of helped you along your way here when you're

Dan Burns 19:16

well some of the ones who helped me along were Dr. Larry Davis, who was in the history department. Dr. Frank Mano, he was in the history department. Some of the ones who I, Dr. Wayne dedman, I really respected him. He was a great professor. I had Margie Blackman who's our mayor, for a class of the first year she ever taught. So she doesn't like me to remind you that those were the ones who stood out in my mind.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 20:01

More like, what were they able to do that kind of separated themselves from maybe your other professors?

Dan Burns 20:08

Well, good question. They taught without lots of - they didn't necessarily follow the script. It wasn't like we went from page to page to page to page. I had had for professors before, who sat in front of the class and read their notes and never even looked up. These people were up on their feet, they were animated. They involved students, they wanted you to ask questions, they would ask you questions. They give you articles that they expected you to read critically and be able to report on. I didn't find that true when I first came to school, but it improved dramatically. The, the teaching style.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 21:09

Next question is what impact has overall, has the college of Brockport had on your life as a whole?

Dan Burns 21:15

Well, for me, I'm not sure. Well, it gave me the opportunity to do my student teaching in South America and from there get a job in South America, which was, you know, eye opening. I just that was fabulous. It gave me that. It always gave me a resource base. I can always use the Drake library anytime I wanted to for whatever because I had alumni privileges, and I followed a lot of the sports teams but rephrase your question for me.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 21:57

Maybe what opportunities. So yeah what opportunities

Dan Burns 22:02

That was basically the opportunity it gave me.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 22:05

So you spent time in South America What? Or South? South America?

Dan Burns 22:09

Yeah.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 22:10

Where in South America did you

Dan Burns 22:12

Originally I was in Rio de Janeiro. And then I was in Asuncion, Paraguay. You couldn't find two cities that were more opposite, Rio was absolutely wild and crazy. And Asuncion probably had three spot three stoplights and but, but I liked, I liked Asuncion much better because it was a more peaceful, tranquil, tranquil place and you could get to meet people where Rio was just, just over the top, over the top. But I stayed in Asuncion four years and I liked it very much. I considered staying there. That wouldn't have been a bad choice if I did, but I had some personal things come up that got me off track and so I came back to the States.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 23:13

Do you mind me asking what personal thing maybe brought you back to the states?

Dan Burns 23:15

I don't mind. I had a drinking problem. I had a semi drug problem. You could buy any drug you wanted to in pharmacies in South America as long as you knew how to pronounce it in Spanish, it was there. You could buy it. It was just available. And I was dating a person who I really, really liked. She had two kids. She was married. She had been married in an arranged ceremony to a

man who was 30 years older than she was when she was 16 and that was a real trouble some problems, problems and thing because our family, you know, being they're all very Catholic. They're all very strict. And you know, it, we had a sneak around all the time and it was awful, just awful. And she had two kids to be responsible for. And she's still in, she lived at home still. So she was responsible to the whole family basically. So it just did not work out. And that probably was the biggest reason that I couldn't get her a Visa, I couldn't get her and divorce was not possible in Paraguay, it was against the law because it was a Catholic country. So I ran out of options and fuel that with some with too much scotch and too many Valium and I just one day decided I'd get on a plane and come home.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 25:15

Well, your time of South America you were you teaching

Dan Burns 25:18

I was teaching.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 25:20

Did you, Was there any differences that you noticed, like with maybe students at South America and then in like the United States?

Dan Burns 25:26

Well, I didn't teach really in the United States, but I had, I had a mixed group of students at the American school. I had Paraguayan school students who took a full Spanish course that the government had them take. But they were for the most part, wealthy, elite kids whose parents wanted them there to, to learn English because English was the lingua franca of business. And most of these people had businesses and money. And the other kids that I had, I had American kids or U.S. kids, you should. America is South America also. I get U.S. kids and they were military kids, and they were missionary kids. And there were people who were down there doing different jobs. There's a big CIA, presence in Paraguay. A big military presence, which people really didn't know about. So what I found was that the Spanish kids worked a lot harder. I think innately were smarter. They were smart kids, they were, they were the cream of the crop. All these kids, when they graduated, went to the best universities in the states. Where the kids I had in the Americans program, and I'll for the most part, they want to mediocre schools or they went into the military. They didn't really apply themselves as students. And that that was a huge difference that kids who, that Hispanic kids really took school seriously. Great students. But we're talking about the elite, and their parents expected it and they came, you know, it was kind of it was kind of like the Oriental thing where, you know, you're, you do this and your parents are watching every move you make, and you have to produce.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 27:46

So you mentioned there was secret military involvement in south in a South America.

Dan Burns 27:50

Well, I won't say it was secret, but I don't think many people knew about it. We had a large CIA station in Paraguay, which I don't think people were aware of but, excuse me, we had radio towers etc. And it was the central place for tracking transmissions in South America they could intercept transmissions down there and you know there were communist splinter groups and that was the time everybody was you know, so afraid of the communists taking over and we had our military down there training the Paraguayan military in air force and in infantry stuff. When I was there, the dictator and he was a dictator was Stroessner and he was very pro German, he was a Bavarian and he was very pro German. He let all these Nazis in the country afterwards, but he was very, very anti-communist in our - that's all our government had here at the time if you're anti-communist we back you to the hilt we give you aid we give you money will give you basically anything you want. So that was our military presence of money and training. A lot of their officers went to the officer training school in Florida but that the that the US had for you know foreign soldiers

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 29:37

looking back on your entire experience with your time in South America and back and forth between Brockport you would you like do anything differently or would you like to take taken any

Dan Burns 29:50

I would have gotten my masters and stayed in education. That's what I would have done. But at that point, I was at such a low point in my life that you know, I didn't have any self-esteem. I didn't have the drive to do it. I took a job mopping floors simply because I didn't want to deal with anything. And that was after I was teaching so you know, that's quite a quite a difference. And I just kind of dropped out of everything for a while. Yeah, I would have gone and got my masters and got and got back into education because I miss it. I was I thought I was pretty good at it. And you know, there were opportunities and I just didn't do it.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 30:39

So what if you had any advice for college students now and students looking to attend college what would you kind of give them as advice?

Dan Burns 30:48

Well, I don't know if my advice it would be much good seeing the life I've lived, but if you don't know what you're here for, I don't think you should be here. You should be doing something else until you figure out what you want to do. And if you would be happier in a trade or doing something with your hands or doing something that doesn't require a college degree, you know, don't feel that you're that, that you don't measure up. I think people should be in college who are serious about college. I think that sometimes people are too young when they start college and they're not mature enough to realize it and they're out on their own, and they can't manage their time and the social life kind of overwhelms them and, you know, we're, we're you need to focus on what you're doing. If you've taken five classes, you got a lot of work to do. That's a lot of work. You need to focus on that. If you're not ready to do that. Then take some time off, do something else and come back when you are.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 32:00

Well that was all the questions I had for you.

Dan Burns 32:03

Okay.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 32:04

I really do appreciate you taking your time and doing this interview with me

Dan Burns 32:07

glad to do it man hope it works out for get two more and, and get an A. It's worth it. Believe me it's worth it once you start getting A's teachers think this is an A student they take that into consideration. So good luck with you like this class?

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 32:24

Yeah, yeah yeah it's a good class.

Dan Burns 32:28

So basically she talks about the type of questions to ask and how to approach people and that is that kind of what she teaches

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 32:37

kind of we kind of go through the kind of go through the interview process you know what tips and tricks you know, you can use to become a better interviewer. What questions could be good what questions might not work out and, you know, trying to shape, shape your questions for your interview, you're interviewee.

Dan Burns 32:54

that's going to be kind of hard if you haven't met the person or know much about him.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 32:59

Yeah, it's nice to get like that information and know a bit about them, but you know, you tailor your questions to fit the alumni, you know. If you didn't get the college student you might ask like current experiences based on, you know, instead of past experiences or stuff like that. Yeah,

Dan Burns 33:19

you got your next person picked out.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 33:21

Not yet no.

Dan Burns 33:22

well, it's getting late. Yeah.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 33:24  
But I'll be getting on that.

Dan Burns 33:26

And I'm sure you got plenty of work to do in your other classes. All right, Joe. ? (did he say something before that)? has a library research class. And it all that you do with how to find books in periodicals.

Hickey, Joe (jhick4) 33:40  
Really?

Dan Burns 33:41

People don't do that anymore. That's something to put in there too. Oh, you want me to fill that out or should D ewey decimal system etc.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>