

Dan Christian
Excerpts from June 13, 2018 Oral History
Interview by Mac Barrett '67

Tradition of selecting a book for his basketball team

Barrett: You're known for your books and stories. Now I may not have this right, but was, or it may still be your practice, to pick a book for a team--

Christian: Yes.

Barrett: Is it a morning that's devoted to the book and maybe the author comes?

Christian: Often we talk to the author on the phone.

Barrett: Okay. Tell me how that evolved.

Christian: It started in 1998. I was just noticing--and, again, this may have been right, 1998, so it was maybe a year after the internet began to percolate, email and stuff like that. I was sort of noticing that the kids weren't reading very much, and I thought, well maybe, was there any way--Gilman guys are busy, right? So it's not like you can just start: Hey, do this, do this, do this, do this, because they have an awful lot to do. So I thought, Well, maybe there might be a way--because we had been doing--

I had a boy in our Dante class back in 1989, I think, who was very ill and our classroom, we actually had--we met in this classroom, we actually did, the first one, and he couldn't review for the exam because he was too ill. So, I asked Mercer Neale back in the--could we just buy a speakerphone, call him, and have him be in his own living room and he could review for class with us. Simple, you know? It's not a particularly profound idea. Bought a phone, there he was, boom. It just worked so simply. And it struck me that maybe--because it was so easy. It was just dial tone, hit the number. It wasn't like you had to go through a whole lot of hoops. I wonder if authors would be willing to talk with us about what they care about, just on the phone. You know, put their feet up on their desk.

And so we started making phone calls to authors in each of my senior electives and in Dante, or in ninth grade English. Just once a year we would call some author somewhere around the world, just to keep the conversation going. So I decided that we would do that with--so now we do it every year. I didn't even keep track until, like, four years ago. I went ahead and just made a list of the people we've gotten the chance to talk to, because I didn't even think to do that. And this year, this upcoming year will be our 87th author that we've spoken to. And it's just been such a ridiculous blast to talk to these people. So I thought maybe we would get a chance to talk maybe a basketball book. Maybe the kids could read a book, they could come to my apartment for, you know, sweet rolls on a Saturday morning, and we would talk to the author. Because I have this kind of fantasy, I guess, that if we become better readers of books, we're going to read defenses better. It has not yet materialized, but it might still eventually materialize.

So our first book, in 1998, we spoke with Darcy Frey, who wrote *The Last Shot*, and it was such a nice experience--I had hoped for the kids--that we decided every season. So now, this will be, I think, our 20th book in a row. And every single author has said yes. Now, we had a problem--even the three inner years where I was just Timmy's assistant, helping him keep the book and stuff before I went back to be the head coach, a guy that writes for ESPN, he had to change our plans the Friday before, but every author has said yes. But we've only been able to talk to 19 of the 20, but we've had a chance to talk--we had a chance to talk to Pat Conroy. We

had a chance to talk to John McPhee, from Princeton. We had a chance to talk with--just, I mean, the cool thing, too, a really cool thing, books.