

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

Early mentors and colleagues on the faculty

Barrett: Who were your early mentors? Your colleagues, those to whom you turned: "How would you handle this?" Or, "You got any thought for me?"

Christian: Right.

Barrett: I'm thinking really of the early years, before you assumed that role yourself, those who were formative.

Christian: Right. Yeah, certainly, you know, Jerry Downs was a wonderful presence. Cary Woodward, Bob Bulkeley, Bruce Daniels, who was such an interesting, quirky guy, but what he used to do--you know, he was a piece of work. And what people didn't realize about Mr. Daniels, too, was that he was a three-sport college athlete at Amherst. He played basketball, he played tennis. Exactly. He was a quirky guy, but he would hardly ever call me "Dan." It was just "Brother Christian." You know, he was just that kind of guy.

Barrett: That unmistakable voice.

Christian: Exactly. He sounded like Richard Kailee, the original Don Quixote. And I would eavesdrop on him when he didn't know, because our English offices were kind of clustered back in on the second floor back there, so my office was curved around where his desk was, so I would sometimes eat lunch in there when he didn't know I was in there, and I would listen to him talk to kids about poetry and about books. And it was literally like a nine-year--from 1981 to '89, so it would have been eight years--that I got to hang around the corner from him. It was like a nine-year literary appreciation course. Because I thought that it was the coolest thing, because I could point out to kids that this is awkward, or this is unclear. Mr. Daniels could not only do that, but he could help a kid fix it. I mean, I could point it out, he could fix it. But his love for language was so contagious. He retired in January of his year--he didn't go to the end of the spring--and he came in one time and he brought me a folder of poems, some that he had written, some that he had collected from kids had written over the years. And he's sitting there and there's nobody around--the best thing about Mr. Daniels, the most impressive thing about him, was he never tried to be impressive. He was just who he was. And he sat there and said, "Brother Christian, let me read you a poem." I said, "Okay." It's just me and him. It's not show time or anything. And he read me a poem that a kid had written in his poetry class back in, I don't know, the late sixties, whose brother had been born with some brain damage issues. And Mr. Daniels is sitting there and he's reading this poem to me out loud and he just has tears running down his cheeks. And I sat there, and I was so honored to be sitting there and to have this man who had been teaching at the school a thousand years to be sharing this moment with me. I got to be there. I got to be present. And then he paused and said, "Brother Christian, I'm so sorry. I've never been able to read this poem dry-eyed." Daniels, okay.

So without singling people out or anything like that--and certainly Mr. Nick Schloeder. Coach Schloeder was exactly like the people that were my coaches in high school, and I knew that even though I was 26, 27 years old. I recognized him, that he and Mr. Hyde were cut out of the same piece of cloth kind of thing. He and I didn't always agree, certainly, on everything, but

he was a reminder of the kind of people I was lucky enough to have had. But Mr. Daniels just-- he jump-started my entire appreciation for language by just eavesdropping on him.