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## UA1B2/1/7 Oral History

Lydia Kullman

Gary Ransdell

*Western Kentucky University*

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**Western Kentucky University**  
**UA1B University Wide Committees / Events**  
**Series 2/1 Anniversaries Western Kentucky University**  
**Item 7 Gary Ransdell Interview**

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**Biographical/Historical Note:**

Records regarding anniversaries celebrated by the university includes founders day, 75<sup>th</sup> and centennial celebrations. This oral history interview was created for Andrew McMichael's History and the Internet Class, 2004.

**Description:** Interview conducted by Lydia Kullman with Gary Ransdell.

**Dates:** March 30, 2004

**Formats:** 1 audiotape, 1 wav file, 1 mp3 file

**Subject Analytics:**

Admissions (WKU)	Downing University Center (WKU)
African Americans	Draft --United States --History.
Anniversaries	Education
Apartments	Fraternities & sororities
Audio recording	Garrett Conference Center (WKU)
Barnes-Campbell Hall (WKU)	International students
Blacks	Journalism & Broadcasting (WKU)
Cafeterias	Kinesiology, Recreation & Sport (WKU)
Centennial celebrations	Minton, John Dean, 1921-2008
Class of 1973 (WKU)	Ransdell, Gary
Class of 1974 (WKU)	Residential facilities
College Heights Herald	Vietnam War, 1961-1975.
Community service	West Hall (WKU)
Diversity	Western Kentucky University
Dormitories	

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**Access Restrictions:** none

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# Oral History Recording List UA1B2.1.7 ~ Records

09/19/2013

Media ID	Side	Start time	Subject
Tape 1	1	00:00:00	<p>Tape starts in the middle of Lydia's question.</p> <p>LK: [unintelligible]</p> <p>GR: Well, I grew up in Louisville. I was attracted to Western because my brother who is five years older than me attended Western so I was here some to see him, liked it. Did not want to stay in Louisville to go to college, I wanted to go away. Western was an attractive, exciting place and seemed like a good fit.</p>
Tape 1	1	00:00:21	<p>LK: What were your majors and or minors? And did you switch them at any time, and why?</p> <p>GR: Actually I don't think I did switch. I declared a major my sophomore year. I enrolled in the fall of 1969 and was undecided at first. I selected mass communications. Started out in the broadcast sequence in mass communications, but after listening to this southern accent on tape a few times realized that that wasn't going to work very well. Switched to the public relations, journalism sequences in a mass communications major and graduated with that degree in '73, and then a masters' in public service and public administration in '74.</p>
Tape 1	1	00:01:15	<p>LK: Did you live off campus, on campus, or both? Where and why?</p> <p>GR: My first residence was Barnes-Campbell Hall room 715. I wonder who has been living in 715 since then. Lived there for my freshman year. My sophomore year rented a house over across the railroad tracks on off from Adams Street, Stubbins Street with a couple of fellows that I met my freshman year. We went together and rented a house. And then my junior year I lived in the fraternity house for the fraternity that I pledged and did that for three semesters. Got married in the middle of my senior year and Julie and I then rented a God-awful little house right across from Junior Food Market on Adams Street in what is now a gravel SKyPAC parking lot. So I was responsible for tearing that house down and putting in parking spaces in this job.</p> <p>LK: Did you feel good about tearing it down or did you cry?</p> <p>GR: Well. No, I didn't cry. But it was pretty crummy. I think we paid \$97 a month rent for that place as a young married student.</p> <p>LK: Is your name in that Barnes room? Gary was here?</p> <p>GR: Oh, I don't know. Probably not, but I've thought about going up and visiting whoever lives in that room a few times but decided that wouldn't work.</p>
Tape 1	1	00:02:57	<p>LK: What were your memories, specific memories of your dorm life or off campus life? For example, curfews, commuter life or lifetime relationships made from that Greek society.</p> <p>GR: Some of the friends that I made that freshman year in Barnes-Campbell Hall remain friends ever since. At least one of them was in our wedding. And two of them were roommates in that house that we rented our sophomore year that were fellows that lived on that floor, both of them from Russellville as a matter of fact. Great memories, great, great friendships. Curfew, I don't remember what the curfew was rather it was a men's, male hall. We may have had a curfew, I just don't recall. I know the women's residence halls had curfews. I do remember that. Living off campus lot of fun, some independence, some compromises, walking back and forth and so forth I didn't own a car until my sophomore year. I pledged a fraternity the spring of my sophomore year. Met a girl attending a pledge function before I'd even, a rush function before I'd even pledged that fraternity whose name was Julie and who was quite attractive, and but she was dating an active in that fraternity. So I had to pledge and then get initiated before I could make my move. We started dating the fall of our junior year is when we first went out. And after about three months we were pretty, we were beginning to talk marriage. It was a pretty strange phenomenon for me because I'd never dated the same girl more than a few times for the first two and a half years at Western. And then we did get engaged the spring of our junior year and got married December 30th of our senior year. And I graduated that May. She went to work at a local department store so we could eat and pay that \$97 a month rent. And then she finished up after I finished my masters' degree. She put me through graduate school and then she went back and finished up in 1975.</p>
Tape 1	1	00:05:24	<p>LK: That's great. Specifically what traditions on campus do you remember participating in?</p> <p>GR: Oh I got really caught up in a lot of the great traditions at Western that meant a lot to me as a student and mean even more to me now as president. And that we work hard to continue to nurture in the minds and hearts of our current students. A lot of those traditions are steeped in our special spirit. The special architecture and the beauty and the magic of this place itself which we're working hard to rebuild and restore these days. Athletic traditions I was certainly into all the athletic excitement of that era which was an exciting era with a lot of success. And</p>

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			<p><i>the family environment that Western had always fostered and certainly was important to me at that time closeness with members of the faculty and administration. My mentor was John Minton, Vice President for Student Affairs at the time and eventually was president for a year in the interim between Dero Downing and Don Zacharias, was a great influence on me. And his son ended up being my roommate in my junior year.</i></p> <p>LK: Oh, interesting.</p> <p>GR: So the human relationships and the traditions and values of Western were very important to me as a student and are even more so today.</p> <p>LK: Probably shaped what you do right now.</p> <p>GR: Yes. Shaped my values as a person as a professional. Caused me to want to pursue a career in higher education, never knew that I'd end up back here in this position, but I always kind of thought in the back of my mind that "wouldn't that be neat if?" And fortunately it worked out that way, but not without a lot of hard work in the eighteen years that I was away from Western at Southern Methodist University and Clemson University building my career to the point where those experiences and insights that have served me well in this position the last six and a half years.</p>
Tape 1	1	00:07:45	<p>LK: Any prominent memories you'd like to share of your student life or we can go back to this question after [unintelligible]?</p> <p>GR: Well, of course, there are many, relationships with faculty members some of a very few of whom are still on our faculty today.</p> <p>LK: Name any that you really, really liked or hated.</p> <p>GR: Well again, John Minton was the mentor for me that meant the most to me, but I remember having Joseph Uveges who just retired a couple of years ago and my graduate courses in public administration. Oh I guess most are retired and gone now. Bob Blann recently died. I had him for several classes in mass communications. Bob Adams is still here. Dave Whitaker just inducted into our Hall of Distinguished Alumni was a faculty member in journalism of course, was a giant in the journalism field. Irene Erskine was one of my favorite professors, a Biology professor who just retired a year or two ago. Just some terrific people and but clearly the most prominent memory for me had to have been meeting and dating Julie and getting married. Having that marriage shared with all of her friends and my friends and our mutual friends and that's a pretty special experience. I wouldn't recommend that every student get married while an undergraduate but for us it worked and it's been 32 years in the making.</p>
Tape 1	1	00:09:29	<p>LK: That's really great. At what time as a student at WKU did you work on campus or off campus?</p> <p>GR: I did. I worked I had a job as a work study student. My father was retired and I pretty well worked my way through school. I did get a he got a social security check because he had a son who was a fulltime student so he retired and he forwarded that to me and that was about the only support I got from home. My father was worked hard but we were middle class at best growing up. And he was a plant layout engineer at International Harvester. We never had a lot of income but the values I received from both my parents are awful important to me to this day.</p> <p>But I did have a campus job qualified for work study worked in a biology lab one of my jobs. And even though I was not a science major, thank goodness, I did work in a biology lab cleaning out petri dishes and feeding the lab animals and those kinds of things. It was kind of a neat job. I enjoyed that.</p> <p>LK: [unintelligible]</p> <p>GR: Right up until the time I tried to bring home one of the rabbits that was a blood donor and the only existence this rabbit ever knew was a human hand reaching in a cage pulling him out and injecting a syringe into his heart and withdrawing blood for scientific purposes. Well after a while scar tissue forms around those animals' heart and they have to be put to sleep. Well I didn't want that rabbit put to sleep so I brought it home. Julie and I had just been married and that was the worst possible pet because it's only knowledge of humans was terror and fear. It wasn't a very good house pet. So I had to end up taking it back over to the biology lab to meet its' demise. But that was an interesting work experience from my time in the biology lab.</p>
Tape 1	1	00:11:36	<p>LK: Did you have any scholarships or so to back up on?</p> <p>GR: No. I didn't come in as a great student. I was an average student in high school, did not work that hard at it. I was a, you know a good average to above average student here. I didn't, I wasn't, I just didn't set the world afire until we got engaged and all of a sudden life got a little bit more serious and then I got focused and it was straight A's from that point completing my undergraduate and through graduate school. But the values that I gained and I have a strong opinion that the best leaders in our society are not always the brightest students but the students who have intellectual potential but need to be challenged to bring it out but who have</p>

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			<p>experience and observe and learn and capture all that's around them and put all those experiences and thoughts to work in leadership capacities. And sometimes individuals of the highest intellect for which I have great respect and many are across our faculty and across our student body begin to get frustrated with significant leadership roles because they aren't always the most patient or the most driven people because they haven't had to work their heart out to achieve something. Sometimes when you have to work hard to achieve something you develop a sense of balance between patience and persistence and you learn the values of human relationships and how to get things done and those are significant leadership traits. And sometimes it takes coming up from a modest background and maybe not being the best student, but having to work hard for you achieve to develop those kinds of traits</p> <p>LK: Probably what Western did best for you?</p> <p>GR: Yes, I'd say so. I'm not saying that the four point students all through undergraduate school can't be great leaders. They can be. I have a son who has about a 3.85 but his ACT score was you know it wasn't off the charts. It was a good score, but it wasn't great, but he works hard and he'll be a great leader and very successful because of his work ethic. And he'll blend the intellect that he has into that those personal qualities and I think that's a good way to describe me as well.</p>
Tape 1	1	00:14:19	<p>LK: Did any of your future careers get based off communications while you were a student?</p> <p>GR: As an undergraduate I had the intention of going to work for an ad agency and writing ad copy and being in the creative end of the advertising business. That's what I thought that I wanted to do. And I had a couple of interviews with ad agencies in Louisville. But as I was finishing up John Minton Vice President for Student Affairs encouraged me to consider a graduate assistantship, come back and get a masters' degree, consider a graduate assistantship in the admissions office. And I thought "Well, okay, that's neat. I never thought about that, but I'll give that a shot." So I went right into graduate school and as I was finishing my graduate assistantship he began to talk employment as a what we called a field representative who traveled the state recruiting students for Western. And I did that. That was my first job right out of graduate school. So I had all the high schools east of I-65 in the state of Kentucky from which I was to recruit students for Western. Great job I did that for three years. Then I decided that I liked higher education better go get a doctorate. Went up to Indiana University completed a doctorate in higher ed. administration came back to Western and started charting my career from there.</p>
Tape 1	1	00:15:44	<p>LK: What was life like on campus? For example, what did you do for fun? What did the students wear at the time?</p> <p>GR: What did I do for fun? That's a dangerous question.</p> <p>LK: The interesting part.</p> <p>GR: I tell students today that I didn't do too many things that they, I mean most of what I did are the same kind of things students do today, but I say that with some trepidation because I'm sure there are a lot of things that students do today that we didn't even know existed back then. But on the other hand, a lot of the same kinds of things, friends, intramural sports, fraternity life was important to me. The best friends I have today are men that I went through that fraternity with that are now pediatric urologists, a Kentucky Court of Appeals, attorneys, stock brokers, highly successful, great, great friends, entrepreneurs that are our core friends that are the best friends that I have in the world today. And several of them here in Bowling Green.</p> <p>But the social experiences were important. I got a lot out of my classes. I loved my major area of study. Loved the experience there, worked on the Herald for two semesters was on the ad sales staff for one semester and was a writer another semester.</p> <p>LK: Maybe I should check those out.</p> <p>GR: I don't, probably not, probably not. Some great experiences that served me well.</p>
Tape 1	1	00:17:22	<p>LK: What did you guys eat on campus and where?</p> <p>GR: Oh geez. In the basement of West Hall which is now Southwest Hall was the cafeteria at the south end of the campus. The Downing Center was just, actually wasn't there when I enrolled, [it] was built while I was a student. And then the cafeteria, the main cafeteria up on top of the hill, was what is now the renovated food court in the Garrett Conference Center, that ground level, but we entered down where the credit union is now next to the Faculty House and that was the cafeteria on campus.</p> <p>LK: I imagine you guys didn't get to eat sushi.</p> <p>GR: No. We probably wouldn't have eaten it had it been offered but no that was the last thing on anybody's mind in 1969 and 1970 and so on. But Garrett Conference, the Garrett Center and West Hall were the places where we ate.</p>

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			<p>LK: Did they serve sort of meat and potatoes or . . . ?</p> <p>GR: Oh yes, yes, just basic. Not nearly what the Fresh Food Company now offers which I think is an exciting opportunity for students in the newly renovated, I don't even want to call it a dining hall. It's . . .</p> <p>LK: I like to call it Topper still.</p> <p>GR: There you go. But at any rate I mean food was fine but not nearly the options and variety and quality that we have today. You know I like to tell students that some universities invest a lot of money in a training table for the football team. I don't want any part of that. I want a training table for all of our students. High quality, as much as you can eat and top of the line nourishment value I think that's what we created.</p>
Tape 1	1	00:19:07	<p>LK: Okay. We've already gone over this several times, but if you'd like to revisit it, what specific class experiences or faculty that you enjoyed or didn't like?</p> <p>GR: I think we covered that, but my mass communications classes were terrific. I had some classes in Grise Hall that I valued in business and in social sciences but mass communications were the courses that I got the most from and remember the most.</p>
Tape 1	1	00:19:41	<p>LK: Your organizations that you were involved in, were there clubs as well as the Greek society and maybe the intramural sports teams?</p> <p>GR: Oh, there were some mass communications clubs that I belonged to as I recall and the Herald, but between the Herald and working and fraternity life and intramural sports that then dating, dating Julie a lot that was pretty much the hallmark of my social life.</p>
Tape 1	1	00:20:18	<p>LK: Did you do any community service specifically?</p> <p>GR: Oh.</p> <p>LK: Probably some.</p> <p>GR: We were involved, there was a, WBKO had a phonathon every year that was a pretty big deal that was three or four days long that was kind of done simultaneous with the Danny Thomas Muscular Dystrophy phonathon that's still done every year out of or no, I guess the Jerry Lewis. Doesn't Jerry Lewis have a big phonathon on each year that serves some I think it's muscular dystrophy? Anyway, but WBKO had an annual two or three day phonathon that raised money for charity and it was a big deal and I remember volunteering for that a couple years in a row. Beyond that, you know civic engagement and service wasn't as important then as it is today. Or at least it wasn't a matter of focus as it is today. It should have been, but I was involved in a few things, but not a lot.</p>
Tape 1	1	00:21:33	<p>LK: Do you think it was more, how to put this, people did it out of wanting to do it back then more than needing to do it for resumé and stuff?</p> <p>GR: Probably although today I hope people want to do it today too. Yes it helps on a resumé sure it does and communities need it and not for profit organizations need it. That's why I'm so pleased we've created a American Humanics program on campus that is actually a certification program that has courses that train people to go to work in the not for profit sector. It's important that a university and its' students and faculty and staff be engaged in the community, the region where we are and perform in responsible ways that help communities develop and how not for profit organizations help people who need help. It's important that we do that. So I hope there's more altruism than just padding a resumé, but if that's what it takes, hey.</p> <p>LK: My personal view is that the campus and the community has gotten to a level where they can commit more time . . .</p> <p>GR: Yes.</p> <p>LK: . . . beyond their own friends . . .</p> <p>GR: We have to to each other, very important.</p>
Tape 1	1	00:22:50	<p>LK: Were there any major issues or events in the country, on campus or around the world that affected you as a student while you were here?</p> <p>GR: Oh a modest little thing called Vietnam. And Western was never, never had the same hostilities and tensions that were found at Berkeley and Kent State and a lot of campuses. But we had protests and we had that atmosphere and there were sit-ins in the administration building and all that. I never got too involved in all of that. I had other things to do and just usually didn't pay much attention, give much thought, although that was pretty active I mean, it was an important social issue at the time.</p> <p>On a lighter note that was an era where there was a lot of streaking, didn't get involved in that</p>

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			<i>either.</i>
			<i>The draft was just never an issue for me after Vietnam. I was fortunate that when I was of draft age it was when the government started the lottery and my lottery number was 285. So I was very fortunate to draw a high lottery number and therefore from that point on never had to worry about the draft so I never got caught up in a lot of the social issues of the day. You know I had a brother who served two terms in Vietnam. But I'm normally fairly patriotic and trusting of the government although I'm a bit more, less naïve today than I was then, but those were major social issues of that of that day.</i>
Tape 1	1	00:24:28	<p>LK: <i>Anything that you remember writing in the Herald about issues on campus?</i></p> <p>GR: <i>Oh goodness.</i></p> <p>LK: <i>Or reading in the Herald?</i></p> <p>GR: <i>Well there was a lot of coverage about I mean student government at that time centered around campus protests and social issues far more than today. And much of the Herald's focus were social issues more so than today. I think today the focus is more on campus issues and so that's a big difference, but I think that's characteristic of most campuses at that time. And I'm sure I did write about some of that. I have no idea at this point what they may have been, different day and time, different day and time.</i></p>
Tape 1	1	00:25:45	<p>LK: <i>Was the cultural diversity on campus as varied as it was back then or . . . ?</i></p> <p>GR: <i>We did not have as a diverse a student body then as we do now from two perspectives, African American population probably was three or four percent at the time maybe five percent now it's around ten percent but we've achieve a lot of that growth just in the last few years. I don't recall much international influence which is a major priority for us today with almost 550 international students on campus. So those are two big differences much more culturally diverse from a racial and from an ethnic standpoint. I do not recall nor do I believe that there were racial tensions at that time, but those were among the social issues that the nation was dealing with, integration and but that was never an issue here. Integration of this campus and African American activity and embracement on this campus I never observed it to be an issue at least when I was a student here. Had great friends in the residence hall, Howard Bailey our Dean of Students has been an employee for thirty some years was a student a couple years older than me in a fraternity. We knew each other he was again a little bit older but he's been around ever since so. He's seen a lot come and go, but I think he would concur that while it may not have been the most tolerant or had the most offerings for African American students who had special needs perhaps socially it was not a place where tensions existed or people felt unwelcome from my standpoint. Again there could be elements that I was oblivious to or naïve about, but I don't think so.</i></p>
Tape 1	1	00:27:55	<p>27:55</p> <p>LK: <i>What did you specifically feel affected you after your graduation from WKU?</i></p> <p>GR: <i>My career. I was, you know I was young, married just finishing my graduate work and went to work in admissions and shortly thereafter determined that I wanted a career in higher education. And set the course in motion, set my life in motion to achieve that. But when I left Western the second time, the first time to go to get my doctorate at Indiana University, but the second time I left taking a permanent job at another institution, you know the likelihood of ever coming back was probably remote. Once you, once you break away, you know the adage you can't go home again it's usually pretty true except maybe if you come back as president. Then you have some capacity to affect the environment in which you find yourself. But it's been pretty special to be able to come back to your alma mater and, you know being away eighteen years, I've been, for the last six and a half years I've used both sides of the coin. I'm an insider when it's been good to be an insider and I'm an outsider when it's been good to be an outsider, but being away eighteen years I didn't have loyalties or relationships that would have caused a decision to be made for less than most meaningful reasons in Western's best interest at the same time I knew the place, knew its history, knew its heritage and knew its passions so I had the best of both worlds. Knew and lived and felt deeply about the Western experience, but was coming back into it [?] and with complete objectivity hell-bent on rebuilding the campus physically and growing us in ways that would allow us to achieve national prominence rather than regional importance.</i></p>
Tape 1	1	00:30:02	<p>LK: <i>That's pretty much it unless you'd like to mention anything further that has really touched you.</i></p> <p>GR: <i>No, its', Western's history is important to me. I hope that in time history will show that I've been important to Western. That would be very important to me and I think we've got a chance to achieve that in the next few years.</i></p>
Tape 1	1	00:30:22	<p>LK: <i>I really appreciate you taking time out.</i></p> <p>GR: <i>You're welcome, glad to do it.</i></p>