

1 Selects from Calvin Butts interview

1 My name is Carol Quirke. I work in the American Studies Department at SUNY Old  
2 Westbury. I'm interviewing Calvin Butts, the president of SUNY Old Westbury, today,  
3 which is March 11, 2014.

4 Let's jump right in. I want to ask you if you could tell us a little bit about your youth?  
5 Both in Bridgeport and then most accounts seem to say you lived in Flushing or  
6 perhaps Elmhurst, Queens and the kind of values you were raised with.

7 Calvin Butts: [01:09] I was born in Bridgeport, that's all. My mother and my father  
8 conceived me in Brooklyn, NY. My mother happened to be visiting her sister who  
9 lived in Bridgeport. During that visit I showed up. Right after that, I went back to—  
10 not Brooklyn—but they had secured a place in Manhattan, in the Lillian Wald  
11 projects, which is right off the FDR drive, 500 E Houston Street. I was raised there  
12 for about seven years—eight years. Then the family, in terms of upward mobility,  
13 moved to Queens and we lived in Corona/East Elmhurst area, over near LaGuardia  
14 Airport. They purchased one home there and then subsequently sold that and  
15 purchased another home closer to LaGuardia.

16 [02:08] I grew up at a time when I attended largely segregated public schools, from  
17 grades four through six. Grades one through three were spent on the Lower East  
18 Side of Manhattan, in a more integrated setting—integrated meaning, African  
19 American, Latino, and Eastern European Jews primarily. After the sixth grade, open  
20 enrollment came in, so you could take a bus to schools outside of your  
21 neighborhood. This was in line with integration or desegregation. I like  
22 desegregation better. I did junior high school, grades seven, eight and nine in Forest  
23 Hills, Queens. And high school was the high school closest to where I lived at the  
24 time.

25 [03:09] There were actually two, one was Newtown and the other one was Flushing.  
26 I attended Flushing High School. I had the option of going to Forest Hills, but  
27 Flushing was a better choice for me.

28 Carol Quirke: Why?

29 Dr. Butts: [03:36] Because I think it was closer to home. I had been in Forest Hills in  
30 junior high school. Flushing was a place I was more familiar with, because we would  
31 go in and out of Flushing to shop and go to the movies, go to see the rock and roll  
32 shows that would come through with Murray the K and his Swingin' Soiree.

33 Quirke: Can you tell me—because I'm unfamiliar with it—what was the  
34 demographic, ethnic, racial breakdown of those neighborhoods, both Flushing and  
35 Forest Hills. Forest Hills was mostly White and Jewish?

36 Dr. Butts: [04:14] Forest Hills was largely white and it was largely Jewish. To say  
37 mostly Jewish would probably not be right, but it was largely Jewish. There were a  
38 number of Greeks, I remember, and some of what you might call "WASP," but not a  
39 lot. Flushing, of course, was much more diverse. There were African Americans;  
40 there was a very prominent African-American section in Flushing. There were large

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41 numbers of Italians, Greeks, not as many Latinos but a few. Not many, not many at  
42 all. Of course, there was a Jewish population of some size.

43 Quirke: [05:11] So when you were in Flushing High then, it was quite diverse?

44 Dr. Butts: [05:14] I would say it was—yes, it was. Quite diverse would be stretching  
45 it but it was diverse. It was diverse enough for me to be senior class president and  
46 the head of the SGA. It was diverse enough for me to enjoy a freedom of movement  
47 that often was challenged largely by some ethnic rivalries that remained. I know  
48 when I was in junior high school there was a very significant Italian demographic  
49 that was often in physical confrontation with African Americans. There was a strong  
50 Irish group in Flushing, but there was also the—and I say this lovingly but I think I'm  
51 just trying to make the point—there was a significant Archie Bunker population in  
52 Flushing.

53 [06:14] So there was this diversity, yes. But we all managed to live through it. We  
54 had, the star of the basketball team was not an African American, it was a young man  
55 named Eddie Fogler who went on to play, I think, at the University of North Carolina.  
56 We cheered for him. The track team was dominated by African Americans. I ran on  
57 the track team for a while. But the student government, I was president. The vice  
58 president was an African American, Fred Fairweather. The other vice president,  
59 there were two vice presidents was Hillary Silverbush, a young Jewish woman. The  
60 faculty was diverse. But it was an interesting time. We're talking about '64, '65, to '67  
61 so there was a lot going on in the country and in the world.

62 [07:17] Groups of young people, young high school students were looking to try to  
63 work together, try to understand each other. There was *Hair*. All these cultural  
64 happenings that helped people try to understand one another a little bit better. It  
65 was a very—there was the Vietnam War. So many things going on. People were  
66 searching for meaning and understanding. I think we were—I think Flushing High  
67 School provided a fertile ground for that kind of understanding. I had a great time in  
68 high school.

69 Quirke: [07:59] Were you the first African-American president?

70 Dr. Butts: [08:02] No, actually I'm told that the first African-American president was  
71 Godfrey Cambridge, the comedian and actor.

72 Quirke: [08:12] What year?

73 Dr. Butts: [08:13] I don't know how much older he was than I am. But it had to be at  
74 least 15 or 20 years. I'd have to look up Godfrey Cambridge's age.

75 Quirke: [08:33] I want to ask you about your parents and their professions. Your  
76 mom—it made me laugh that in the *New York Times*, I was reading an article. Your  
77 dad was a chef and your mom, I'm not sure it said what your mom was. Most of the  
78 articles including from Abyssinian Baptist Church, said your dad was a cook and  
79 your mom worked for the welfare department—

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80 Dr. Butts: [08:57] My father was a chef in his career, in his occupation. I prefer that to  
81 cook because he had the ability to be creative. He made dishes now that people  
82 would pay large amounts of money for. And his evolution as a chef came out of an  
83 earlier profession as a butcher. He possessed a unique skill at being able to cook  
84 interesting dishes that I still appreciate. My mother was a civil servant. She took the  
85 civil service exams and she worked for the Department of Human Resources in the  
86 city, which would be in some of the days prior to that called the Welfare Department.

87 [09:59] That's what she was. She took the civil service exam, rose to supervisor and  
88 retired.

89 Quirke: [10:08] Was your father a union butcher?

90 Dr. Butts: He was.

91 Quirke: Were you raised with a sense of class-consciousness?

92 Dr Butts: [10:17] I had a sense of class-consciousness. My uncle was a union  
93 organizer. He was very much someone who advocated on behalf of the working  
94 class, of the downtrodden, but particularly of the African-American workingman and  
95 woman and those of us who were marginalized because of the color of our skin. He  
96 was aware that we had to fight even to get into the unions. So yes, I was raised with  
97 that consciousness.

98 Quirke: [10:50] Which union was he a part of?

99 Dr. Butts: [10:54] Oh, I can't—you know, I don't have the watch with me. He got the  
100 traditional gold watch when he retired. The local is what I remember. It was part of  
101 AFL-CIO, or Teamsters. I can't remember it.

102 Quirke: [11:11] So it sounds as if your family raised—I guess I'm a little bit curious  
103 about—I just came from a discussion about masculinity and class and that sense of  
104 upward mobility. A lot of folks within the working-class community think there's  
105 less push for that, I'm just curious what your family, if your family from the get go  
106 pushed for you and your brothers and sisters to be educated, to move up, or not  
107 move up, or stay connected to community.

108 Dr. Butts: [11:47] My mother and father—I have no brothers or sisters—my mother  
109 and father pushed for me to be well educated, to have a sense of appreciation for  
110 who I am, to have—to possess character. Character is courtesy; character is an  
111 avoidance of luxury. Character is the capacity to endure. Character is an appreciation  
112 for beauty, and in that, hopefully, I would be able to—or with that—I would be able  
113 to earn a living that would cause me to be able to feed my family, feed myself, my  
114 family and make a contribution to the community.

115 Quirke: Did they hope you'd get a college education? And this is going to sort of  
116 switch me into a separate question. What was it like to go to Morehouse as someone  
117 from New York?

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118 Dr. Butts: [12:48] My mother and father pushed me to get an education. They were  
119 deeply concerned and I can tell you how that goes. When I graduated from junior  
120 high school they took me to a nice dinner. They said, "Now, you know you've got to  
121 finish high school." And I said, "Of course." And when I finished high school I could  
122 have at that time, continued to work because I had jobs at the post office. I could  
123 have taken the civil service exams, because at that time if you passed the civil service  
124 exam then you'd get a good job making \$8,000 a year. That was big money then.

125 Quirke: And permanent security.

126 Dr. Butts: [13:29] And permanent security. Or I could go to college. And both my  
127 mother and father—though they said, "You ought to take the civil service exam, just  
128 in case"—they were saying, "You should go to college." Now I already knew that I got  
129 into the public colleges, Queens, City, I want to say, and Brooklyn. But I wanted to go  
130 away and I had my sights set on Trinity. Not that I had ever been there but I'd seen  
131 the beautiful pictures and I'd read the courses. So when the recruiter came he looked  
132 at my grades, which were very good and he said, "Yeah, they're good but we can't  
133 give you a full scholarship." Trinity was, in those days, a lot of money. He said, "Why  
134 don't you go to one of those little colored schools and maybe if you get straight A's  
135 there, you'll be able to come to Trinity with a full scholarship."

136 [14:25] Well, I went home. My mother said when she was a student in high school, I  
137 think her graduation speaker was Dr. Mays, Benjamin Elijah Mays. She said if she  
138 ever had a son, she would want him to be like him. And she said, "Why don't you  
139 consider Morehouse College?" So I applied and I was accepted. I went to Morehouse.  
140 I got straight A's. They asked me if I wanted to go back to Trinity and I said,  
141 "Absolutely not, absolutely not." I would end up getting an honorary degree from  
142 Trinity years later but I had such a wonderful experience at Morehouse College and I  
143 got such a great education I don't think Trinity could ever match what I got at  
144 Morehouse.

145 Quirke: [15:21] So you didn't initially—I mean I'm very curious because the HBCs—  
146 certainly our student body, a lot of our students really place them on a pedestal as  
147 where they wanted to go—so you didn't approach it that way originally?

148 Dr. Butts: [15:31] No, no. I had—my mother went to college she had two years of  
149 college, Georgia State down in Savannah. My father did not. They did not have the  
150 broad knowledge, even though they knew of these schools, Howard and others. I  
151 think when my mother let me through the process of my own education make my  
152 selections, pick up books in the library with the college counselors and things of that  
153 nature. So she was really supporting me in my choice and my choices. Then after I  
154 guess I was crestfallen when I didn't get to go to Trinity—I was accepted to Trinity,  
155 we just couldn't afford it—so she then took that opportunity to suggest Morehouse  
156 College.

157 Quirke: [16:30] None of the guidance counselors at the school promoted other  
158 colleges and university in the Northeast?

159 Dr. Butts: [16: 37] Cornell, I think I was accepted there. There were some more that I  
160 applied to.

161 Quirke: But financial aid?

162 Dr. Butts: [16:49] Yeah. So money was a big issue. I went to Morehouse and it was  
163 great. There are a hundred stories about that experience that I could tell you that  
164 made it great—but it was great. I am so happy that things worked out that way  
165 because I do not—I think I would be a different kind of person. The acculturation  
166 process at Trinity would've been uniquely different from the one at Morehouse. And  
167 it would have been, I think, based on what I know now, inconsistent with the kind of  
168 vocation and occupation that I enjoy now.

169 Quirke: [17:37] I think being an African-American student, I think maybe the class  
170 jump along with the racial jump, because I'm assuming it was primarily white, like  
171 98 percent, 99 percent—

172 Dr. Butts: [17:44] Trinity? Oh yeah, it was largely. It was largely white.

173 Quirke: [17:55] Okay, I want to ask one more question about your past that will then  
174 lead into Old Westbury. From what I've read you spent time with your grandparents  
175 in the South. It sounds like your mother, it was your maternal grandparents who  
176 were from Georgia. So you spent time in the South—in the Jim Crow South—and I'm  
177 wondering whether you had to confront, in what ways you may have had to confront  
178 Jim Crow and then how your family taught you to negotiate that racism. Then I'm  
179 going to add a third question just to get it all in, you were both in high school and in  
180 college obviously at the height of, as you referenced, the Civil Rights Movement. If  
181 you can discuss ways in which your consciousness and career were shaped by that  
182 movement? That's a lot in one question.

183 Dr. Butts: [18:46] I spent time in the South with both my maternal and paternal  
184 grandmothers. My grandfathers had passed away. I confronted very little racism  
185 during that period of time, any that I could really recall or point out to you. These  
186 were small towns in rural Georgia. My family situation, on both sides, was such that I  
187 was absolutely protected from that. I went into stores—I can't remember any white  
188 person during that time ever using a derogatory term for black people. I can't  
189 remember anybody making me move, or do anything. Now, we were in segregated  
190 schools. The person who owned the store—my grandmother would send me to the  
191 store and I knew what I had to pick up, I would get it—would call me by my name,  
192 give me what I wanted. I'd pay him, I'd come back home. So no.

193 [20:03] And so I was never really given any instruction, like "Watch out, get off the  
194 sidewalk, hide or call him this or that or that or that." Character-building that I  
195 mentioned earlier. Courtesy, so if you were the owner of the store and your name  
196 happened to be Mr. Dominic, then I would just say Mr. Dominic, because he was a  
197 grown man, not because he was white. He'd call me by my name, he wouldn't call me  
198 out of my name. He'd call my grandmother by her name, he wouldn't call her out of  
199 her name. If you were Mr. Stanley and a black man, I called you Mr. Stanley.

200 [21:01] I heard the whites and the blacks, I never heard anybody call anybody boy, or  
201 anything like that. But we were segregated. Schools—I don't recall really going to a  
202 motion picture theater and being segregated. I don't even recall—but then I was  
203 very young, I was 6, 5, 6, in there—I don't recall colored or white drinking fountains.  
204 I didn't come into that until much later. So I experienced a lot of love, togetherness, a  
205 lot of hard work now but no., I had a family—still do—I had a family that  
206 surrounded me with a lot of love and encouragement, a lot of kidding and all of that,  
207 making you work and a lot of hard discipline.

208 [22:10] I had grandmothers who believed in the switch. As I got older you know,  
209 yeah, I ran into racism, derogatory terms. You couldn't help but see what was  
210 happening with the Civil Rights Movement broadcast all over the world. I became  
211 aware of the horrors of segregation, the brutality of slavery, the dehumanization and  
212 discrimination. Particularly when I was a student at Morehouse and interacting with  
213 all facets of not just Atlanta but Georgia and the South.

214 [23:11] So my involvement in the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement came out of  
215 an increasing awareness. Now, I grew up primarily in the Northeast. Here, yeah, the  
216 racism in the Northeast was probably worse than it was in the South. It was a racism  
217 that was targeted primarily at people of color, black people to be sure, but all people  
218 of yellow skin, red skin, brown skin. I worked for an organization while I was in high  
219 school that made undergarments.

220 [24:11] I could never forget the day that I came to work and I heard a lot of racial  
221 jokes around me all the time.

222 Quirke: [24:20] Was this a Jewish establishment?

223 Dr. Butts: [24:25] I think so.

224 Quirke: I read about the white goods industry for my book [ED: District 65, New  
225 York City Warehouse Workers' Union].

226 Dr. Butts: [24:28] I think so. I never really focused on that but yeah. I can't say for  
227 sure but now that you mentioned it and this is totally unscientific, there's no  
228 research on this at all but all the people for whom I worked at the time had Jewish-  
229 sounding names. I remember coming to work one day and in the midst of the work  
230 all of a sudden the place breaks out in a party. They've got alcohol of all kinds,  
231 popping champagne bottles, just celebrating. The war in Vietnam was escalating and  
232 they got the contract to provide the undergarments for the military.

233 [25:28] They were ecstatic. I remember just saying, "Why are people happy that war  
234 is escalating?" I remember one response, said "Who cares about them little brown—  
235 not brown people—those 'gooks'"

236 Quirke: [25:56] This was when you were in high school.

237 Dr. Butts: [25:58] Yeah. And so that had to be around the time, I'd have to look at the  
238 dates on this, but it wasn't too far before or too far after Muhammad Ali's statement,

239 “No Vietnamese ever called me a nigger.” So you know—oh then Greenwich Village  
240 we used to hang out in the Village, I was stopped by police officers so much in the  
241 Village it was just—you know, “Let me see what you got in your pockets. Stop here.”  
242 Racism in New York, there still is but in those days it was very prominent. I can tell  
243 you a million and one stories.

244 Quirke: [26:56] So you’re known as an activist—I’m now going to switch gears to the  
245 Old Westbury years, I’m bringing us up a decade or two—you’re known as an  
246 activist particularly, on police brutality and police racism. It actually was funny to  
247 read that *New York Times* article from ‘87 because I think they portrayed you in a  
248 way as a sort of political firebrand. How am I putting this? I still want to go  
249 backwards. I’m sorry, I’m a historian. Did you do any work on that issue prior to  
250 coming Abyssinian Baptist Church?

251 Dr. Butts: [27:37] What issue?

252 Quirke: The racism of the police?

253 Dr. Butts: [27:44] Not in that sense. But all of my activity for instance I was very  
254 active as a freshmen, or sophomore in college trying to get Horace Tate who was the  
255 first African American that I’m aware of who ran for mayor of Atlanta. I was out  
256 organizing on his behalf. During the massacre at South Carolina State, we went down  
257 there, you know. Kent State, those were the National Guard, but that’s police. You  
258 know what I mean? So I was protesting, organizing, speaking to student groups all  
259 during this period against this type of brutality, militarism. Or, you could go back to  
260 the Edmund Pettus Bridge [ED: site of the historic, 1965 civil rights march in Selma,  
261 Alabama], those are the Alabama State Troopers—I call them storm troopers, they  
262 beat those marchers. It’s all the police to me.

263 [28:53] So yes, maybe not at the level that I can now or some of the years gone by,  
264 but yeah. Any time I could cry out against that kind of brutality I would do it.

265 Quirke: [29:11] Can you tell us what brought you to Old Westbury? What did you  
266 know given that you had, by the time you came here, you’d been at Abyssinian  
267 Baptist Church 27 years, maybe 28 years? You had a long history in Harlem. Our  
268 college had drawn from that community. What did you know about Old Westbury  
269 before you came here? Can you tell us a little bit about your process of coming here?

270 Dr. Butts: [29:42] What I knew about Old Westbury before I got here that it was a  
271 school where there were men and women with whom I had worked across the years.  
272 The primary person who fits into that category was Charshee McIntyre She was an  
273 activist, she was a professor here and she had been on programs that had been held  
274 at the church as a featured speaker. So whether we were celebrating the birthday of  
275 El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, Malcolm X or whether we were doing a program to  
276 highlight the issues around police brutality, or whether it was a cultural program  
277 celebrating the contributions of African Americans to the unique culture that’s here  
278 in the United States, Charshee McIntyre had been a part of that. Whether we were  
279 celebrating black women, Charshee McIntyre. That’s what I knew.

280 [30:37] And I had been invited out on two or three occasions to speak to the student  
281 body about issues around black culture, issues around police brutality, issues  
282 around any number of things related to people of African descent. So I was familiar  
283 with Old Westbury from that point.

284 Quirke: [31:05] Charshee McIntyre, do you know what department she worked in?

285 Dr. Butts: [31:08] I believe she was in American Studies. She was either American  
286 Studies or English. But Charshee McIntyre. Now, the fact that you are unfamiliar with  
287 Charshee McIntyre is a major issue about doing this oral history because she was a  
288 huge figure, as was her husband Ken McIntyre. [ED: Charshee and Ken McIntyre  
289 taught in English and Performing Arts, respectively, and left Old Westbury in 1994.  
290 Charshee McIntyre passed away in 1999; Ken McIntyre in 2001.]

291 Quirke: [31:31] I'm sure there are many Old Westburyites we don't know yet.

292 Dr. Butts: [31:34] Oh, their absence because the period of time that I think you're  
293 covering would capture them, would be a grave error.

294 Quirke: [31:51] We can talk about it afterwards. It would be great if we had the  
295 resources and time to continue the project into that time period. Can you talk about  
296 coming to Old Westbury. How did you become the president? I've read some of the  
297 articles that speak to a process that was perhaps less than a traditional process.  
298 You've been here for a while now, tell us about what happened—

299 Dr. Butts: [32:20] I wanted to—I came to Old Westbury this way. I wanted to do some  
300 writing and so across the years I could not figure out how I could get the time to do  
301 it. I thought about the fact that I had done some adjunct work particularly at City  
302 College, part of the CUNY system. I enjoyed that. In preparation for the classes you  
303 had to write your lecture. So I said, "Gee whiz, maybe I could do some work in the  
304 State University." I didn't know where. So I petitioned the State University and said,  
305 "Gee, I'd like to do some visiting professorships, some teaching." And I got this letter  
306 back that said, "Sure we would be happy to engage you for a year." I said, "Good, that  
307 way I could start writing. I could write my lectures, they can become chapters and  
308 books."

309 [33:21] So then I got another follow-up that said, "Where would you like to do that  
310 year?" I remembered Old Westbury. I said, "Old Westbury." It's not that far from the  
311 city, I remember it had a significant African-American population, Charshee  
312 McIntyre, Ken McIntyre were here. So I said that, they said, "Fine." I remember  
313 coming out here and speaking with, or I got a call from, Ros Baxandall. You've heard  
314 that name?

315 Quirke: I have.

316 Dr. Butts: [34:03] But you didn't hear Charshee McIntyre, it's very interesting.

317 Quirke: Well, Ros was my chair when I came in, so I have heard her name.



318 Dr. Butts: [34:09] Ros Baxandall, she welcomed me. She said, “We know who you are.  
 319 We know of your activism. It’s going to be wonderful to have you here.” I said, “Fine,  
 320 great.” She said, “You’ll be in American Studies, and dah, dah, dah, dah and we want  
 321 you to come by.” So I felt very good about that. I was looking forward to it. One day  
 322 after church, I got a visit of three of the trustees from the State University. They said,  
 323 “Have you ever thought about being president of a college?” I said, “No.” They said,  
 324 “We want you to consider one.” I said, “Where?” They said, “Old Westbury.” Now  
 325 prior to that visit, I had also been out and met with the interim president, a man  
 326 named Hubert Keen. [ED: Currently Dr. W. Hubert Keen is President of SUNY  
 327 Farmingdale.] And Dr. Keen and I sat in what—well it didn’t look like this then, but—  
 328 in this office and he welcomed me. He said, “You’re coming out. We’re glad to have  
 329 you. We want you to be comfortable. This, that and the other thing.”

330 [35:11] Very nice, still respect him highly today, fine man. Then subsequent to that I  
 331 got this visit. Now, there was deep concern about the college. The Foundation was  
 332 under investigation, enrollment was dropping; in fact, the discussion was that they  
 333 were going to close it. And they thought that I could be the person to help bring it  
 334 back. So I showed up, got the job. I remember my first meeting with the editorial  
 335 board of *Newsday*. They said, “What do you think about being there, this college is in  
 336 such bad shape?” I said, “Well, they got the right guy, cause I’m in the resurrection  
 337 business.” They all laughed. So, that’s how I came.

338 Quirke: [36:03] What made you want that challenge? I mean, it’s an incredible  
 339 challenge. I assume you had more than your burdens at Abyssinian Baptist Church.

340 Dr. Butts: [36:14] I don’t know. I think it was really the—as I look back I can break it  
 341 down for you. At that moment, I say it was—in the vernacular of the Black Church—  
 342 it was the Holy Ghost. It was a spiritual thing. I thought about it for all of about 30  
 343 seconds and I looked those trustees in the face and I said, “Yes.” I’d never been a  
 344 college president. I didn’t know what academic administration was all about. Now as  
 345 I look back, I can say it was probably that all the major educators that I’m familiar  
 346 with have been clergy-persons in the African American community. If I go to  
 347 Benjamin Mays, I went to Morehouse College, if I look to my mentor at Abyssinian,  
 348 Samuel Proctor, if I look at one of the giants that I admire Mordecai Johnson, he was  
 349 the president of Howard University. Dr. Proctor was the president of two colleges  
 350 Virginia Union and North Carolina Agricultural and Technical, A&T.

351 [37:19] The person who first met me when I walked into Union Seminary was Dean  
 352 Lawrence Jones. He was the dean of Union Theological Seminary, and then he  
 353 became the dean of Howard Divinity School. He was a minister in the UCC church,  
 354 United Church of Christ. When I think back about black ministers, of some renown,  
 355 many of them were high school principals and pastors of churches. Dr. Proctor  
 356 ended his career as full professor at Rutgers University, down in New Brunswick. As  
 357 I look back I say maybe that’s what I was thinking about.

358 Quirke: [38:00] So you’re here. Tell me about the challenges that you encountered  
 359 over the course of your tenure that surprised you. Then if you could talk about the

360 challenges of leading a public university at this moment right now. It seems like a  
361 horrible time—frankly as a faculty member—to be in the university, it’s a horrible  
362 time. As a working-class kid, who looked at my professors as sort of gods and  
363 goddesses, we’re not in that space anymore. I wonder if you could speak some about  
364 challenges that you didn’t expect to encounter, that were either an obstacle or  
365 unexpected to you and then about today’s obstacles.

366 Dr. Butts: [38:48] When I got here the provost quit, the executive assistant to the  
367 president quit, one of the secretaries of the president’s office quit, the faculty was up  
368 in arms saying that I was coming here because it was a political stepping stone for  
369 me—I was going to step off of here and run for office. All of that was a surprise.

370 Quirk: Who was the provost at that time who quit?

371 Dr. Butts: [39:23] What was her name? Ray was her name, Jacqueline Ray. She  
372 worked with Dr. Keen. So right away I did not have people who were really qualified  
373 —I shouldn’t say qualified—who were not trained for the positions they were in,  
374 many of them. Shortly thereafter the Business and Finance person left. When I  
375 walked into this office, there was nothing in here. There was a desk and a chair and a  
376 telephone. There was no letter from the person who had been in the seat before;  
377 there were no books in the case. There was nothing in here. The only thing I could  
378 do was sit down at the desk and wait for the phone to ring. It was a cold, mean,  
379 unfriendly atmosphere. There were some people who were still here, they were  
380 trying their best.

381 [40:23] A man named Bill Howell who was chair of the Foundation. They didn’t like  
382 him because Bill was just trying to keep the place afloat. I tried to work with him and  
383 get things. Then there was this whole thing about, you know—I’m not qualified; I’m  
384 not a professor anywhere. The students had been revved up against me. He’s trying  
385 to come and bring his moralistic, oppressive ways on us—moralistic, oppressive and  
386 we are a progressive campus. Then the place was like, there was a young man who  
387 graduated from Old Westbury who became a rapper, Cool Moe Dee. One of his most  
388 popular recordings was the *Wild Wild West*.

389 Quirke : [41:32] There is a lot of rap references to you, I didn’t realize how many.

390 Dr. Butts: [41:41] The *Wild Wild West*, during that time he was here, a lot of—oh it  
391 was in disarray. You couldn’t even turn off the lights. We were not getting moneys we  
392 were supposed to be getting from the state. It was a mess. Faculty, faculty salaries  
393 were way out of whack. So that’s what I walked into. And they wanted to close it. It’s  
394 a lot different now. It’s a lot different. I think a lot of it had to do with people just  
395 spewing out their poison. This was not a stepping-stone. I have not run for political  
396 office in my entire career. People have said that I was going to run. People have  
397 wanted me to run. I’ve not run. I argue for fairness. There should be merit raises.  
398 There should be equity raises. We did the best we could. We got money coming from  
399 the state, tried to win the confidence of the faculty.

400 [42:47] Worked with them in and out, up and down. Endured my inauguration  
 401 where some of them walked out, others turned their back on the speaker. Students  
 402 were in an uproar when I made it a dry campus. But the place was—students were  
 403 bringing guns. It was terrible. People were living on campus who were not supposed  
 404 to be here. We did a lot here. We have brought on new faculty. We have encouraged  
 405 more research. We've tried to make sure dollars coming from the Foundation—  
 406 which was under investigation, and now doing a marvelous job, we're trying to raise  
 407 more money—went into providing incentives to the faculty.

408 [43:40] Turned all our money into scholarships. We brought out controversial  
 409 speakers like Bill O'Reilly, but we've also brought more mainstream speakers like  
 410 Jamie Dimon or the Mayor of the City of New York, Michael Bloomberg—who built  
 411 us a radio station, our radio station was in shambles when I got here. So a lot that  
 412 has happened here. We've increased the enrollment. There were no graduate  
 413 programs, we brought on graduate programs. And then we got out of Academic  
 414 Village, we built a new academic building. The dormitories, the contractor they had  
 415 to build the dormitories—it was all in *Newsday*, you know, ripping off the campus,  
 416 and the state, allegedly—we had to redo all of that. So we got new dormitories.  
 417 There are so many things, technology.

418 [44:36] Now, we had to win the confidence of the faculty. I didn't have a Provost. I  
 419 had to bring a faculty member, Dr. Bonnet, up. Then finally we got Patrick O' Sullivan  
 420 to come in, which has been a blessing. Faculty said there's no shared governance.  
 421 Patrick O' Sullivan came out of the faculty. Aubrey Bonnet before him came out of the  
 422 faculty. How did we get all this new construction and the new building and all that  
 423 coordinated and work? Tom DelGiudice—came out of the faculty. You know, I don't  
 424 know what people are talking about when they say, we weren't trying to work with  
 425 shared governance. I don't believe that at all. We continue to advocate on behalf of  
 426 the faculty. We want better salaries. We want to make sure things are fair in terms of  
 427 areas of study. We've got to face some of the realities.

428 [45:28] You're right, it's a tough time but I didn't come into this expecting—I was  
 429 reminded right away that there would be no praise that this is thankless, almost, in  
 430 terms of people looking in. But I came in because I had a commitment to the  
 431 students, to the faculty—and the thing that I love about Old Westbury is its  
 432 commitment to its diversity. There were a number of African American students out  
 433 here, and I applauded that. A number of Latino students and I applauded that. One  
 434 shock, I didn't realize that there were so many white students here, who are  
 435 commuters. I said, "Well, look. They've been broadcasting this all over the world that  
 436 this is a black school, and it's not. A bigger lie has never been told."

437 Quirke: [46:29] Well, it tells us about the racism in our culture. I want to ask you  
 438 another question on the attacks on public education now and maybe we can talk  
 439 about diversity in the minutes that we have left. Public education—higher education  
 440 —is under attack right now. Particularly the humanities and the liberal arts are  
 441 under attack. For you, as someone who has a degree in philosophy, and then a PhD—  
 442 is it in theology, or is it in divinity?

443 Dr. Butts: [47:02] It's in divinity.

444 Quirke: How do you respond to critics of public higher education, that it needs to be  
445 more career-driven, more employment-driven. Where do you sit in this debate?  
446 Particularly given the mandates that are being put on our particular student body,  
447 which may be less prepared for college than most.

448 Dr. Butts: [47:26] You heard me talk a moment ago about character. It's part of a  
449 speech that I give, that King said, "You should not be judged by the color of your skin  
450 but by the content of your character." Most people just take that and run. Most  
451 people don't take the time to define character. I define it as, the avoidance of luxury, a  
452 concern for courtesy, nurturing a love for beauty and the capacity to endure. We can  
453 unpack all those later. But education is that which should, according to William  
454 Burghardt Du Bois, build your character. Therefore, I argue that if I help to build a  
455 man or woman of strong character, they will get a job.

456 [48:28] I talked to a CEO of a huge—it's got to be not in the top 500, in the top 5  
457 corporations—yesterday afternoon. And he said, I don't even think he realized he  
458 was saying it, I know he believes it, he says, "We'll train them to do what they need to  
459 do here." I think that's right. We have to make sure that people understand. Another  
460 favorite expression of mine, this is no longer what we call, the unconquerable globe  
461 of Columbus—it's now a tiny little sphere of intermixing cultures and civilizations. If  
462 I train you just to handle numbers and don't give you an appreciation for the world  
463 in which you live, you're lost, you're no good.

464 [49:24] Philosophy, you know—Islam is hated, but Islamic culture is rich in what it  
465 has given to the world. You can't go around hating somebody just because  
466 somewhere in their name is Mohammad. This is crazy. If you don't prepare young  
467 men and women in that vein, the world is lost. History is absolutely crucial. You've  
468 got to know what happened in this world. I could look at the trans-Atlantic slave  
469 trade in any number of ways, but until I began to study it in those ways—  
470 philosophically, historically, in terms of economics—I just thought that they hated  
471 people because they were black.

472 [50:22] Racism didn't have anything to do with it until it became necessary to  
473 protect an exploitive system because of economics. So then you start telling lies  
474 about people. Slavery was not something that just happened here, it was something  
475 that was worldwide and it wasn't based on race. But here, after the economics of it  
476 clicked in, then race became important. Well, you have to keep these dark skin  
477 heathens; we can base it on the Bible, we can base it on anatomy. Oh come on.

478 Quirke: [50:54] So how do you share that message though? We're in a culture that  
479 doesn't want to hear that message; our students don't want to hear this message.  
480 Brianne was in a class where I shared Charles Murray's op-ed essay, "Should the  
481 Obama Generation Drop Out?" And it hurts me to give students this essay, because  
482 more than half of the students love what he says, they love the notion that they can  
483 get a certificate test and don't have to do anything more, and I try to explain to

484 students that at the elite colleges what they're getting is a liberal arts education,  
485 they'd never get a vocational education. That message, in this time of economic  
486 insecurity, I don't think is being heard. So how do you get that message out?

487 Dr. Butts: [51:32] Well, first of all I have the advantage of a free pulpit, so I can  
488 preach that message. From my point of view, quite divorced from the State  
489 University kind, I believe that that's the message that's encapsulated in the gospel of  
490 Jesus Christ. I say that it that way—and I could say the gospel of Jesus Christ and that  
491 could scare you to death—but I do believe that message is there. That's one way, and  
492 it's a global message. But at the university, I believe that message comes out, first of  
493 all in the mission of Old Westbury. And I believe that message comes out through the  
494 professors who stand in front of the classroom.

495 [52:31] In other words, whether you're teaching economics, whether you're teaching  
496 philosophy, whether you're teaching biology, whether you're teaching chemistry,  
497 there is a message that comes through the professor. That's why it's challenging—  
498 many professors want to teach here and I wish we could afford them because they  
499 would bring this sense of the liberal arts into every subject matter, and that's what  
500 we need. That's how you spread the message. You turn on those kinds of students. I  
501 am against teaching to the marketplace. I am for educating young men and women  
502 to have the broadest education possible to make them constructive and productive  
503 citizens in a world economy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond.

504 [53:26] And you can't do that unless you have some appreciation for philosophy.  
505 Unfortunately for most of these students, they have to learn more than I had to learn.  
506 They've got to wrestle with more than I had to wrestle with. But I'll give you one  
507 example. In my early years I had a chance to travel to China. I lectured in major  
508 universities while I was there. The one incident I will never forget is, I went into one  
509 university after having been in some others. The host—as I was preparing the  
510 lecture I looked around for my interpreter—he said, "You don't have one. And we  
511 want you to speak in your normal cadence and of course in English." So I did, when I  
512 was finished the students gave me a huge thunderous applause, which I was happy  
513 for. But when it paused, he said, "They understood about 95 percent of what you  
514 said. The reason we didn't give you an interpreter is because we want them to know  
515 English. And we want them to know English the way it's spoken, because it's one of  
516 the major languages of the world."

517 [54:47] Now you come in and you teach a student—accounting period, chemistry  
518 period, physics period, and they don't have to take Gen Ed courses in philosophy and  
519 religion—they might as well forget it. Their competition is brutal. And these young  
520 men and women coming from different parts of the world, speak English; they are as  
521 familiar with the black church, for example, as I am. They come and they want to  
522 join the gospel choir and they're from Japan. Our students don't know a thing about  
523 Japanese culture, they don't know a thing about Islam. They buy what Fox television  
524 tells them, and it will destroy them.

525 [55:47] Old Westbury—if it is the last place on earth that does—holds to. Many  
526 people on the faculty think that I’m opposed to that and I’m not. But you know, as  
527 president and as administrator I have to work hard to keep us. So I’m negotiating  
528 here, and negotiating there but I am really for general education. But then I have to  
529 look at what is it costing me? Is there a better way that we can do this? What’s three  
530 hours as opposed to four hours? Higher enrollment? Because the students won’t  
531 come, they’ll run to some place where they can get a quickie. I got to be worried for  
532 my faculty members, and keeping the strong tradition that’s meaningful for the  
533 world here. So I have to try to figure out, how do I keep my enrollment up, what do I  
534 offer?

535 [56:46] I’m killing Patrick O’Sullivan trying to figure this stuff out. [Laughs] Your  
536 book on labor—fascinating—to try to understand what took place on behalf of the  
537 working class in this nation, you know.

538 Quirke: Who are many of our students, or the children of our students.

539 Dr. Butts: [57:11] You’ve got to know, Carter G. Woodson—I’m talking about the so-  
540 called, Father of Black History Month—talks about the young woman whose mother  
541 washed clothes to send her through college, washed other people’s clothes. So when  
542 the young woman graduated from college, or graduate school, whatever, she goes to  
543 work for another company, a major corporation. Now Carter G. Woodson says, “What  
544 did they teach her? Why didn’t—this is *The Mis-Education of the Negro*—why didn’t  
545 she come back, study what her mother did to give her a million dollar education and  
546 go into the laundry business.

547 [58:11] See? That’s not a good message just for black people, that’s a good message  
548 for everybody. But if you don’t, if you’re not in a class that helps you to understand  
549 that there’s a culture here that hasn’t been explored—Who is A. Philip Randolph?  
550 Why was he so important to Civil Rights? Not just for black people, but civil rights,  
551 human rights for all people. Who is Bayard Rustin? He’s a laborer. So these things are  
552 important and I think we should hold our ground, but we should work more  
553 cooperatively and not competitively and try to understand everybody is for general  
554 ed, and everybody’s for liberal arts, on this campus, I hope. The president certainly is  
555 but the president has some realities, that means—that he’s got to face if he’s going to  
556 keep this place alive and thriving and growing.

557 [59:19] We have to think together about how we do that. Old Westbury, when you  
558 consider that it was born in an age of activism and innovation, the men and women  
559 who came here to work and teach believed and knew that the world was changing.  
560 That through education we can build a better world, that’s what this school is about.  
561 I’m committed to it. I’ve been here 15 years. Ask some of my detractors have I run  
562 for office? Have I walked out on the school? We have suffered many indignities in  
563 order to get where we are today. And we’re not going to abandon this.

564 [01:00:17] In the city, in my work, I’m for public education, I’ve issued charters [ED:  
565 charter schools] and then they say it’s public money, I understand it, but I’m for it,

566 because while I've got issues with the UFT and their racism and all that across the  
567 years, I also know that there are more dedicated teachers there, who need the  
568 resources, so why are you going to snatch that? And most of the children, no matter  
569 how many charters you build now or in the future are going to be in the public  
570 schools. So what do you do, you abandon them? I believe education ought to be free,  
571 so I don't even like the idea that you have to pay tuition to come here. But it's small  
572 and we need to keep it that way. So that the working class families can send their  
573 children here, get a quality education that prepares them to lead.

574 [01:01:17] Now, when I go out and meet our students, they're everywhere. They're  
575 stewards and stewardesses on airplanes, they are lawyers, they're musicians, they  
576 are judges, they are police officers, they are—

577 Quirke: [01:01:37] Federal Reserve?

578 Dr. Butts: [01:01:39] They're at the Federal Reserve, Oscar winners, *Chernobyl*  
579 *Diaries*.

580 Quirke: We're at time, I'd like to ask you one more question if there's time or  
581 otherwise we'll wrap up. I'll leave it to you. I wanted to ask you about diversity. We  
582 are an incredibly diverse place, when I first walked in the door I was shocked at the  
583 conversations I had with students. When I first walked in the door in 2004—lots of  
584 Latinos, lots of African Americans and lots of white kids—it seemed increasingly  
585 diverse ethnically in these ten years. I'm always intrigued at how hard—that we  
586 have this incredible resource, but digging into it, excavating it, making it be alive for  
587 us, instead of having it be something that people struggle with or want to walk away  
588 from. How do you encounter our diversity and how do you see using it, enriching the  
589 college experience as the college president?

590 Dr. Butts: [01:02:49] I encounter our diversity with great enthusiasm. I'm extremely  
591 comfortable with it. I think that I would like to see more of the white students  
592 participate with the activities on the campus—they commute in, they commute out.  
593 That's causing us to think more about, maybe we should become more residential.  
594 We work hard to maintain the diversity in terms of recruitment. I think the best way  
595 to celebrate our diversity is culturally. I want to see more dances—I mean dance  
596 troupes—I want to see more singing groups, I want to see more instrumentalists, I  
597 want to hear more poets, I want to see more, I think, culturally.

598 [01:03:53] I think we need to bring the culture in. These Latino students—at the  
599 Abyssinian Baptist Church I had Celia Cruz come through, Tito Puente, Mario Bauzá  
600 through that cultural experience. Now that's Cuban, coming into an African  
601 American church—that's black Cuban, that's different from white Cuban. I think we  
602 need to experience all of that. What is the difference between Latino and Hispanic?  
603 What's that about? Who—do we have any students here from the Ukraine? Do we  
604 have any students here who are of Russian descent? So how do we, what are we  
605 doing? What are the songs? What's the food? We need to celebrate more of that.  
606 Then I think then, you will begin to see our diversity work.

607 Quirke: [01:04:58] The students are uncomfortable with it I have to say. I was  
608 intrigued to walk in the door and students called themselves urban—urban was a  
609 euphemism for African American and Latino. I’m a historian, I care a lot about  
610 justice, so we unpack those issues over time, and it takes time to unpack the  
611 meaning of these things. But I’m always surprised how much work it takes to  
612 unpack, it’s there but it’s not there sometimes. It’s interesting.

613 Dr. Butts: [01:05:34] That was one of the great programs, American Dance and  
614 Theater, and SUNY cut the funding. So you get an alum like Ron Terenzi, who’s a  
615 lawyer—he was an American Dance and Theater guy. He came up with a complete  
616 understanding of the African Americans contribution to music, so he knows a lot  
617 about that. But he’s a lawyer, but he’s a better lawyer, a great alum. Culture is the  
618 epoxy that holds it all together. Take Lincoln Center out of the middle of Manhattan  
619 and see what a mess you got. Culture, Jazz at Lincoln Center now, finally recognition,  
620 culture, the ballet, the opera, the Apollo.

621 [01:06:36] That’s what we need now. We’re sequestered, we don’t need to let our  
622 cultures deteriorate to the baseness of the misogyny in some rap lyrics and the  
623 violence, or rock, some of the violence that’s perpetrated, we don’t need to let that  
624 happen. The labor movement, the poor working class, Guthrie, what was his name?

625 Quirke: Woody Guthrie?

626 Dr. Butts: [01:07:04] Woody Guthrie, and what was the other one’s name, a little bit  
627 later on then Woody, who just passed away?

628 Quirke: There’s Earl Robinson, he’s earlier though.

629 Dr. Butts: Come on now, this is a senior moment. When I say it—You’ve got to serve  
630 somebody. There’s a lot of them, of course there’s Pete Seeger, but no that’s not who  
631 I was thinking about. But there’s culture right, these are singers, songs. Paul  
632 Robesen.

633 Quirke: [01:07:50] I think, if there’s anything else you’d want to share, that you  
634 haven’t been able to say and want to say.

635 Dr. Butts: [01:08:01] No, no, no. I appreciate you coming in. I think what you really  
636 ought to investigate names like Charshee—I’m not sure when Charshee got here,  
637 and Ken, they’d be an important part of this. I want to be careful that we don’t in this  
638 oral history project, leave, you’ve got to turn over every stone.

639 Quirke: In a comprehensive history, one would do that, this was not a  
640 comprehensive history. This was the beginning [ED: The pilot Old Westbury Oral  
641 History Project was funded to cover the years 1965 to 1975].

642 Dr. Butts: [01:08:39] But Carol—

643 Quirke: It’s a great project. The fact that you wanted to be interviewed indicates that  
644 it’s a good project.



645 Dr. Butts: [01:08:50] Don't—even in this brief—make note of that. I'm not talking  
646 about any particular name, but I'm saying, be sensitive to that, because respect for  
647 the diversity and the contributions is going to be extremely important.

648 Quirke: I think what we're missing right now—if you've looked at the site—is we  
649 don't have the Latino voices we would like to have, and at this point we have way  
650 more men than women. So those would be two giant gaps—

651 Dr. Butts: You've got Pablo Guzman, he's a journalist, came with the Young Lords—

652 Quirke: That would be lovely. And Mickey Melendez, who was part of the Young  
653 Lords as well, and came to that original thing [ED: The "Planting Fields Reunion" in  
654 May 2011]. And Denise Oliver-Velez, who writes for the DailyKos, who was a  
655 student. And also a person you may not know, whose name I'm going to forget, [ED:  
656 Gary Delgado] who ran the Third World Organizing Center in San Francisco for years  
657 and years—

658 [Audio ends]