

Rock Voices: The Oral History Project of Slippery Rock University
Mark Chase Interview
January 14, 2009
Bailey Library, Slippery Rock University, Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania
Interviewed by Sarah Meleski
Transcribed by Angela Rimmel
Proofread and edited by Morgan Bonekovic, Rebecca Cunningham and Judy Silva
Reviewed and approved by Mark Chase

SM: I'm Sarah Meleski, and as part of the Rock Voices Oral History Project we have Dr. Mark Chase with us. How are you today?

MC: I'm doing well, thank you.

SM: Well why don't we start out with you giving us a bit of biographical information.

MC: Okay, biographical information: my name is Mark Chase. I was born December 18, 1960. I'm originally from Westchester County, New York—Yorktown Heights. I moved to Slippery Rock in 1970 when my father became a professor here on campus. I graduated from Slippery Rock High School, came to Slippery Rock University my freshman year, then transferred to Indiana, PA where I got my degree in communication media. For a brief time after that I worked for the *New Castle News*, for about a year. Then I got a job here on campus as the media specialist. That was in 1983 and I've been on campus in a variety of positions since 1983 up through today.

SM: What Slippery Rock era have you been here for?

MC: What era? Let's see. I was here for the Watrel era. [Laughs] I was here for all of Aebersold's period, as well as the interim period with Dr. Reinhard and currently with the two Smiths.

SM: What department were you first hired into on Slippery Rock University's campus?

MC: I was actually part of the library, the media services area. I ran the Media Services Department which actually was housed in the basement of the library. The way it was set up originally was the Instructional Support Services, and the Instructional Support Services included the Instruction Materials Center which is on the second floor of the library. Then I was the director of Media Services which was in the basement. We had a TV studio in the basement of the library; we had a graphics department with two dark rooms, and then an audio-visual equipment service and two rooms for technicians who did repair on equipment. So, the IMC and Media Services were then headed by a faculty member, Dr. Bill Price, who was kind of the director of Instructional Support Services. So that's where I first started out.

SM: What changes did you see the department go through?

MC: Well [pause] we were involved, obviously, in technology. One of the first things I did when I came here was, we bought our first VHS player. So one of the things I had to do was begin to implement VHS technology on campus. Faculty started to want to use tapes, so we had to have televisions and buy players, and then set up carts and move those around. We began eventually of course, to install equipment into classrooms, but at that time we were still trying to decide whether to buy VHS or Beta tapes even, because there was the format change. So we saw some of the first portable video equipment coming in at that time and using that. That was one of the challenges.

I remember though, one of the first jobs I had when I came here, one of the first days, we had just become Slippery Rock University instead of Slippery Rock State College. At that point, I think Dr. Aebersold was an interim president. And he wanted all the “SRSC”s that were painted orange on equipment, he wanted the “SC”s taken off and wanted them to be changed to “U”s. So I had to go around campus with some students and we painted over the “SC” and we added the “U” on to all the things so we didn’t have anything say “SRSC.”

SM: What other buildings have you worked in?

MC: I was asked to take a position as a temporary faculty member in the Secondary Ed Department, so I was in McKay Education Building for a while. I had an office on the second floor for a while, and then the dean, for whatever reason, decided my office should be the old men’s locker room in the basement of McKay [laughter]. So the shower stalls and toilets were taken out and a desk was put in, and actually two of us shared the locker room for a year as our office. So I’ve been in McKay and then I came back to the library. I was on the second floor of the library for a while—or third floor of the library. Then I’ve been in ECB [Eisenberg Classroom Building] since then.

SM: You’ve been part of Slippery Rock, the campus, since 1970, since your father started teaching here. What were your first impressions when you got here and then how did they change when you actually started working here?

MC: When I first lived here Slippery Rock was a totally different town. I mean we had one stoplight, and there were all these little businesses in town and it was a quiet little place. Obviously, over the years [we’ve] seen a lot of growth and increase in enrollment and industry in the area. So we’ve seen continual growth throughout. But what was the second part of the question?

SM: How it changed when you started working here.

MC: When I started working here, I'm trying to think . . . I guess to me it's been so gradual a change that it's been hard for me to kind of point out any big thing. Obviously we've seen a lot of change lately with buildings, facilities, and changes there that have taken place. [Pause] that's about it probably.

SM: What were some of your campus activities while you were working here?

MC: Let's see . . . campus activities. I was the advisor for the men's ice hockey team [and] the women's ice hockey team. I've been involved with some media production groups that we've had on campus. [Pause] I'm trying to think what activities . . . when I first started here I played intramural basketball and things like that. I know in '85 I put together a basketball team with kids who were working for me down in media services and we were actually the intramural basketball champs in '85. So that was kind of fun.

I've worked with WSRU [campus radio station] here a couple years ago. We put on a concert, brought a major recording artist in and worked through [how] to do that. I hope that was a real rewarding experience because students got a lot of professional-type of experience out of doing that. I've been involved in a variety of committees and those types of things over the years, search committees and all the regular work that goes into [that].

Obviously technology's my area, and so I've been on some sort of technology committee since the very beginning. First the Technology Advisory Committee when we were looking at initially putting in fiber. There was a telecom committee at one point that put in new telephones and fiber at that point. But, the fiber had to be all been terminated. We sat here for a couple of years with all this great fiber in the ground and nobody could really figure out how to get it all connected into one network, and how to get it all to work. So we could do that, we brought in consultants who met with us. And I was on several committees where we sat and listened and tried to figure out what it was we were supposed to do and how to get this all to work so . . . I did part of that.

I've been a big part of instructional technology on campus; I was a part of the group that did the first, what they called Prometheus project. That's kind of been information that people don't quite understand because, not so much now, but for a long time, any room that had a projector and a computer in it, people called Prometheus classrooms. What that referred to was the fact that the state gave us a grant called the Prometheus Grant, and that was money for technology in classrooms. So what we did with ours was we took forty-some different classrooms and put in projectors and did all that. I supervised the initial purchase and getting them and installation of all those, and that was our first major push to get significant technology in the classrooms. So I was part of that and [the] decision-making process and then helped do some of the additional auditoriums and those types of things.

SM: What about any campus activities while you were a student here?

MC: While I was a student here? No I didn't do anything . . . I tried out for the golf team, that was about it. I didn't make the golf team but that's alright, I wasn't quite the golfer . . . but I did that. And you know—well I worked for buildings and grounds. I was a student worker really for one semester, so I remember that very well. I remember having to get up here and be here at six o'clock in the morning and shovel snow off the walks and do some of those things. So, I wasn't very active in too many organizations other than my coursework and working.

SM: What do you feel are your biggest accomplishments?

MC: My biggest accomplishments? [Sigh] I don't know, I guess . . . obviously the technology pieces that I've been part of: trying to be a part of the decision-making process or contributing towards change on campus and really hoping to move us in the right direction. So I've been either directly or indirectly involved in a number of those types of decisions.

SM: Who were the leaders when you were first here and how did they change?

MC: You mean in terms of the presidents? The university presidents or provosts . . . ?

SM: Presidents, [or] part of your department. Any of the leaders that you—that were significant to you.

MC: So you're talking about people on campus I saw as movers and shakers, is what you're looking for.

SM: Yeah.

MC: Okay. Well I think obviously Dr. Aebersold was a big part because he was—when I first came I think he was provost or interim president here. I'm going to say when I started working here . . . so he played a big role. I tell you, I knew Bob Macoskey for a little while, he was in the Philosophy Department and I worked with him originally on the first Alter Project. I helped him do some slideshows and some promotional materials when he was first trying to get the sustainable systems project going, and so I helped him with that. I always respected Bob. I always thought he had some really good ideas and worked hard and was committed to the classroom and to his philosophies. So I was always interested in contributing and putting in extra time in any projects he was working on. So those were good.

I remember also a project I worked on with Lou Razzano in Cascade Park. We teamed up [on] a grant with the city of New Castle and some people at Slippery Rock University and we were renovating. At that time Cascade Park was just a mess—it was garbage and nothing there. So

they wanted to renovate it and make it into a facility where people could use it. So I put together a multimedia slideshow showing some of the historical photos, showing current photos. Mr. Razzano helped write a script and do some of the PR work and then I went around to different civic organizations in New Castle and showed that show in order to try and raise money for that. So I thought he played a significant role there.

Ted Walwik, who I see you are going to interview; he was the chair of the Communication Department. We worked closely with the Communication Department when I was in Media Services. I've also known Ted through Rotary and the work that he's done with Rotary International. So I have respect for the work he's done as well. Probably that group I could mention offhand

SM: For major events, you were a part of the cable system that came into Slippery Rock. How did that come into—?

MC: Yeah, that was kind of interesting because up to that time, Armstrong Utilities was providing cable for all the residence halls. We were paying—I'm trying to remember—sixty thousand or seventy thousand dollars a year for that—just for the program to do that. So at the time I was working with Ted Walwik, Roy Stewart and myself as part of a committee to try and evaluate the system and what options [we had]. We tried to work with Armstrong to customize a package, because at that time you didn't have as much flexibility with cable; you got A or you got B and that was it, alright? And so we wanted to provide the students more flexibility in terms of choosing programming. We wanted to have more educational programming like—things like C-Span and things that we knew were currently available but weren't being offered. So we tried to work with Armstrong, I'd say almost two years. We'd meet with them: "Here's what we want, come back to us with a proposal; we'll work with you." And nothing.

So finally we sat down and said, "You know what? We can do this ourselves." And so we started to look around and put the bidding process together and we ended up mounting dishes on the roof of the building. We brokered our own programming so we could pick our own package. So, it ended up we probably doubled the number of stations that we offered, we could choose exactly which ones we wanted. What we did once was we surveyed the students saying, "Which of these do you like and which don't you like?" And of course they all wanted the entertainment types of things which were fine, [pause] but then we added in some educational components, of course, that we thought were important and put that package together. And I think we figured out that the turnaround or the payback on this was three years. With the equipment installation, what we were paying for brokering programming, which turned out to be about twenty grand a year as opposed to seventy, and what we paid to put the equipment in . . . I would say, I don't remember

exactly—I think we paid \$150,000 for the equipment—that [in] three years it was payback and we were going to be ahead. So it was really a no-brainer in terms of what should we do.

Of course Armstrong Utilities wasn't too happy with us, but I think there were some negotiations on the side after that. We ended up actually—my recollection is that the administration actually paid them off for some of the cabling things that were in the buildings that they claimed they owned and et cetera so, it's fine. But there's no doubt that at that point it was a much better way to do it in terms of handling it, not only financially, but in terms of what we were going to be able to offer the students.

Now I'm on the Technology Advisory Committee. We're about to switch and go back the other way because suddenly it makes more senses—financially it makes more sense to switch back to Armstrong Utilities and to no longer try and maintain the equipment. The pricing of programming has come way down and the package that they're going to offer us and the flexibility they can offer us now of course is what we wanted. So I think in October—we are supposed to switch over in the middle of October. I'm not sure, I haven't met yet to find out if they've done that for sure, but that was [when] the cut-off time was going to be.

SM: What are some other memories that you have from being here? Not just in your Communication Department but just on campus

MC: Memories [pause] I was trying to think back. I remember for instance in the '70s, [I] would come with my parents to a lot of athletic events. I can remember being up at N. Kerr Thompson Stadium when they won. It was '73 and they won the championship and the kids tore down all the goal posts and that all happened. I remember being here for a number of the basketball games and the basketball team was going to Kansas City and began playing in a number of championships. So, I remember early, particularly in the '70s, going to a lot of those types of games.

Other things that happened here—I mean I was thinking back—you talked about how things have changed, and one of the areas I know that changed [were] the fraternities: the socialization that took place on campus in the '60s and '70s here, versus what happened before. It used to be that there [was] a row of fraternity houses up where Sheetz and McDonald's [are]; all those were fraternity houses. There were fraternity houses all down across from where the Keister Apartments are now. There was a lot more happening here on the weekend and things, than there are now. So I remember much more wild weekends that took place here on campus, to the point where it finally got so bad that we had riot police down at Keister Apartments on the weekends and it only took about two or three of those before all of that came to a screeching halt. But I remember that.

SM: Do you have any words of wisdom for any current or future rock students or community members that you want them to know?

MC: Words of wisdom . . . hmm, well I think that particularly in our program, and I think in a number of programs, we've seen the quality of the student that we're getting continues to increase. I think students have got to continue to work hard. Things are becoming more competitive and the marketplace is more competitive, and they need to be sure they are well prepared. And we've worked very hard to modify our program to make sure that students aren't just getting through and getting a degree. I feel bad when I see a student who we've had for four years and we've taken their money and they get out of here and I think, "Gee, they're not even qualified to do anything more than when they came, but somehow they got through." And so, we're working hard to make sure that doesn't happen—that when they get out they're really ready to go to work. I think you've got to be committed; you've got to be involved. You know I'm all for having fun while you're here, but I think you've got to prioritize and make sure you get your primary focus [done].

SM: How do you want to be remembered at SRU?

MC: [Pause] I think if I'm not remembered that might be better than if I'm remembered, right? If I am remembered then it's probably something I've done to . . . I don't know, I feel pretty good because about once or twice a semester I'll get emails from former students saying nice things, saying, "Gee, I wanted to let you know what I'm doing, what I learned in your classes . . . I still remember what you said in that one class and I'm using that now." And "somebody said something in a meeting and I brought it up and it made me look good." And "thanks," and that kind of thing. So I like to believe I made some impact on some of the students' lives that have gone on, so if I can be remembered by that, that would be terrific.

SM: Well I don't have any other questions for you. Do you have anything else that you want to add?

MC: Well, let's see . . . no, I can't think of anything.

SM: Okay. Well I'd like to thank you for allowing me to interview you.

MC: Sure, you're welcome.