

Rock Voices: The Oral History Project of Slippery Rock University

Elliott Baker Interview

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Interviewed by Sarah Meleski

Transcribed by Morgan Bonekovic

Proofread and edited by Angela Rimmel and Judy Silva

SM: This is Sarah Meleski and I am working on the Rock Voices Oral History Project. Today is September 25, 2008, and we have Mr. Elliott Baker with us. How are you today?

EB: I'm fine, thank you.

SM: Well why don't we start out the interview with just telling us a little bit about yourself.

EB: Okay. I was born and raised in a suburb of Boston, Massachusetts called Newton, Massachusetts. The "Newton" in Fig Newton is from my home town. [SM laughs] My mother and my brother still live there, and I was educated through the public school system. I was at the time very active in the YMCA, which has something to do remotely with how I ended up here. I [was] very active as a camper and then a junior counselor, [then a] counselor; so every summer I spent the summer at a Massachusetts YMCA day camp.

When it came time to make a decision about going to college, I hadn't really visited many of them. I had a number of coaches and teachers and people I was associated with through the Y who recommended Springfield College to me. Springfield, besides being the birthplace of basketball, was also founded, in part, as a training school for physical educators and for people wanting to work within the YMCA. So through my connection with the Y, I ended up at Springfield College where I majored in English education. I wanted to be a secondary [school] English teacher at the time, and completed my bachelor's degree in English with certification. Then [I] decided to stay and ended up running a residence hall as a graduate student.

SM: That must've been fun.

EB: It was fun, the first year. After student teaching, I decided maybe teaching high school students English wasn't my life-long ambition. I looked around at what I had done while I was in college, and I had been an RA working on a floor of a residence hall and said, "I really like the collegiate environment." I also liked what college did for me in transforming me from a high school student to an adult, if you will, and I said, "Maybe this is where I belong, in the collegiate environment." I had been a tour guide in the admissions office, and of course they were offering now to pay for my graduate education and I got a free room. I thought I was, you know, so wealthy. I couldn't believe it because I was making twelve-hundred dollars a year. That was a lot of money when you were an undergraduate and weren't making anything and had your own apartment.

So I ran a residence hall, got my master's degree, and then decided I really wanted to go into admissions, not residence life. I was [thinking] "What's lacking on my résumé? What is it that's going to make me more attractive than the next person?" Clearly, it's experience. So, I worked something out with the Director of Admissions, who was a good friend. That year I only ran the residence hall; but my second year I ended up working full-time, but for half salary in the Admissions Office. The idea [was that] I wanted to have on my résumé that I had a full time experience working much the way an admissions counselor would work. I really set my goals on trying to get my first job in admissions. I worked there for a full year, and by then the residence hall was getting a little old. I was very happy that I was trying to transition out of residence life to admissions and it ended up working.

You know, my strategy for having the master's degree and having a full year of full time admissions work must've, at least in the eyes of the people that hired me, put me above the rest of the candidates. So I moved to Columbus, Ohio [and] worked for Ohio Dominican College, a very small Catholic school in Columbus. [I] stayed there for four years, the first two years as Assistant Director of Admissions and then when my boss left, I spent two years there as Director of Admissions.

[This was] before applying and eventually getting the Director of Admissions job at Slippery Rock. Most people here today wouldn't know that I was ever in the Admissions Office, because I stopped working in that office in '86, which is now . . . twenty-two years ago? So most of the people have no memory or recollection of me ever being the Director of Admissions; most of them know me as the Registrar or Director of Academic Records. While I've been here I've been trying to find something I was actually capable and confident in doing [laughs]. I've held a number of different titles over the years, but now I'm in charge of Academic Records, Summer School, and Graduate Studies. So that's where I am now and only the future knows whether or not I'll be asked to assume any other responsibilities prior to retirement.

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

EB: I came when we were Slippery Rock State College and then the transition to Slippery Rock University. So I was here when we became a university system and no longer were called a state college. I was not here when we were a state teachers college and goodness knows I wasn't here when we were a Normal school! So I've been here through two of the at least four main changes that Slippery Rock has had.

SM: What kind of changes did the department that you worked in go through while you were here?

EB: Well a lot of it is technology. I mean clearly, I came into the Academic Records Office in '87, and we had no ROCKtalk/Web-based services. The students registered in person, at a computer terminal, which they still have the opportunity to do today. So what we've seen in our

area is the influx of technology: students being able to service themselves, using at first the telephone.

We first introduced ROCKtalk and the reason it's called ROCKtalk is because it was purely a phone system. Now the name has stuck, but of course the vast majority of our students no longer use the phone. We now have expanded it to do a lot more than just registration, and of course it's now primarily a web-based system. So the name ROCKtalk came about because initially, our first automated registration was entirely telephone based.

So I guess the transition . . . the use of technology, the ability to offer services to students over the Web so they don't have to physically come to the office, they can do a lot: get information, print out forms. I'd say technology, and we're still not state of the art, you know, there's still so much more that potentially we could do in terms of introducing technology into the office. But, I would say that is unquestionably the biggest change in the twenty-something years that I have served in the Academic Records Office. Absolutely.

SM: What buildings have you worked in since being here?

EB: Well, when I first came here I was in Maltby, that's where the Office of Admissions was located. Actually we moved around to various offices in Maltby, [and] that is the only place that I worked in that was Admissions. Then I had a transitional year when I was doing some admissions work, it was called "enrollment management," and I actually worked out of Lowry Center, the house. It wasn't called Lowry Center at the time, but I had an office in there and worked for the dean.

And then a year later they asked me if I would take the place of the Registrar, Mr. Marks, who was moving from the Registrar's office into the faculty. Back in the old days you see, managers and administrators were also faculty. He was one of the last remaining administrators who also had faculty rank so he could move from the Registrar's office to the faculty.

They asked me if I would think about moving over and assume the Registrar's job. I did that and we have been in the same place in room 107 of Old Main ever since. Now rumor has it eventually we'll probably leave Old Main. That's a future story to tell but if in fact they should develop the Student Service Center in the old University Union, if that should come to pass, then it's very likely that the Registrar's office will move with a number of other offices down to what is now the University Union. At that point in time, we'll be called the Student Service Center.

SM: You came from just outside of Boston and then you went to Columbus, Ohio. What sticks out about Slippery Rock? When you first got here, did anything stick out in your mind?

EB: I thought it was beautiful, quiet. Certainly coming from outside of Boston and going to school in Springfield, Mass., which is another urban center in Massachusetts. Going to Columbus, Ohio which is of course the capital and a large city. This was the first time really—

other than [going to] visit friends who went to schools in a more rural setting—this was the first time that I had gone to a small town. Now, I had traveled back and forth near here for four years, whenever I was going home from Columbus to New England, never realizing of course that I would end up at Slippery Rock.

I was always impressed going through the state of Pennsylvania by how beautiful it was, how green it was. Certainly when I came to campus, moving from an urban setting, somewhat suburban setting in Columbus, [from] a small school with one thousand students, to an institution that has a three hundred plus acre campus, I was blown away by the facilities [and] by the size of the school. I mean it was a major step upward in terms of size from little old Ohio Dominican, which was a great school but was a little small, private, Catholic institution. So this was quite a transition for me because my alma mater is a private school but it only had about two thousand students. I had only worked at smaller private schools and this was my first step into public education and at the time, I'm guessing that in 1980 Slippery Rock was probably in the six thousand . . . somewhere in the high six-thousands. So yeah it was a major step: much bigger and I was really excited about that transition.

SM: Besides technology, what other changes have you seen the campus undergo?

EB: Well there's no question in terms of . . . there was kind of a lull there for a while in terms of facilities, but then things really took off. I mean, for years the last building built was the Swope Music Building and that was completed before I came. I've seen the building of the ARC [Aebersold Recreation Center] building; I've seen the Advanced Technology and Science Hall; I've even seen the completion of the Gail Rose Stadium Lodge. Then under Dr. Smith, the building of the new residence hall complex, plans for the new University Union, the Alumni House. I think that the campus has undergone a wonderful transformation.

For years and years and years the state was very stingy in terms of giving us money to maintain our facilities, and so a lot of projects that would assist with the upkeep of the facilities had to be put on the back burner. Then through a change, I think probably with it becoming a state system, those kinds of things freed up. We had more autonomy from Harrisburg and so the leaders of the university—and I've served under four presidents—the leaders of the university were far better enabled then to prioritize how to use money. The presidents, once they had that authority, started putting some money, badly needed money, into resources, into facilities so things got painted, roofs got fixed, really basic stuff. [Doing that] had a very, very positive impact on the living and learning environment at the university.

SM: Here at Slippery Rock you started the Saturday visitation program, and it's helped a lot of students choose Slippery Rock, and I am one of those students. Coming to the Saturday Showcase, that has helped me choose [to come] here. What are some of the other accomplishments that you have experienced here?

EB: Well of course, the Saturday Showcase goes back a long way and it's much bigger than anything that we ever did. Yes, at the time that I came here, I really tried to stress the importance of prospective students seeing the campus, number one. I thought if they saw the campus and truly compared it and the people to other institutions, we'd have a leg up on the competition.

But also I was a firm believer right from the very beginning that it's very difficult to, you know, buy a pair of shoes without trying them on first. My goodness you can bring them home, then you try them [on], [and] if you don't like them you have to return them. That's a pair of shoes, but a college or a university? I mean this could have such [a] tremendous, positive impact on a student's life if they make the right decision. And it could be a waste of thousands of dollars and time and energy and students can be upset and depressed if they make the wrong decision. So I was constantly amazed at the number of students who selected colleges and universities without actually seeing them, even if it's for a day. So I really tried to stress the importance in our literature of getting prospective students to the campus.

Now I've been away from the Admissions Office for twenty-two years and the people who took my place have built upon that and are doing things that I never would've dreamed to do. In the Academic Records Office, my primary goal was to try to make it more user-friendly; to make it more service oriented. We have a number of constituencies: we don't just deal with students, but we work with faculty, and we work with other administrators, and we work with alumni. So again the advent of the Web certainly has helped a lot just in terms of trying to streamline process and procedure.

[There are] things that a student at Slippery Rock today would never be aware of, because they didn't experience Slippery Rock twenty years ago. But I remember first coming in to Slippery Rock and we would register for summer school, separate and apart from fall. You know, now you can register simultaneously for summer and fall, but summer had its own registration. So, if you were a student registering for fall, you would get a time and a date and you would go to a computer terminal on campus and someone would register you. But, you couldn't register for summer at that time, so on the first day of summer registration I saw the line out of my office, out of Old Main, down the stairs and out the sidewalk towards Miller Auditorium. I said, "This is crazy!" you know? "Why in the world do we register students separately for summer than for fall? And if they can bring their paperwork to a computer terminal for fall, why can't we have them register simultaneously for summer?" Apparently no one had ever asked that question before.

Now a student who is registering today who gets on the Web and registers for summer [also] registers for fall; does it from the convenience of their residence hall or their off campus apartment or their home. They're never going to have any idea that if they were here twenty years ago they would've been in a monstrous line, and things would've been done in a far more archaic way.

So I have seen the streamlining of things, but you know we still get concerns today, "Why isn't ROCKtalk open 24/7?" Well there are reasons for that, but students today are used to having whatever service they want available to them online whenever they want it. So I come from the perspective of "Wow you should've been here twenty years ago if you're complaining now!" But they weren't here twenty years ago. To them, this is what could be done today, these are my expectations today, and we need to do a better job of trying to meet today's students [expectations]. I might have a historical perspective on all of this but they don't, and no matter what I say to them about the way it used to be, that's ancient history to a student. They may not have even been born when we were doing things the old-fashioned way.

So yeah, I think just trying to keep up with technology and trying to find the balance between giving the students as much access as we can to their records but also understanding that we still have some older ways of doing things, trying to find the balance of that has been one of my challenges.

SM: Who are some of the leaders that you've seen pass through Slippery Rock, and what were your impressions of them?

EB: Well, Dr. Herb Reinhard hired me, so I thank him for having the confidence and faith in me. He stayed a few years at Slippery Rock after I was hired and so the president prior to Dr. Smith who we have now, the president I spent the most time [with] and knew the best was Dr. Aebersold, who the ARC is named after, the Aebersold Recreation Center. He had been a faculty member here, but more importantly when I came he was the provost and he moved into the president's seat. So I had known Dr. Aebersold before he became president, and even though he didn't go to Slippery Rock he was clearly . . . you know he bled green and white. So he was a tremendous role model and he was the president here for quite a few years until Dr. Warren Smith came.

Dr. Warren Smith's tenure was not all that long and so I would say after Dr. Aebersold, certainly Dr. Smith, the current president, is the one whom I've worked the closest with and have a tremendous amount of respect for. I have respect for all of the gentlemen; they were very different. I think we need a different style of leadership at different times in the history. I don't know if there will be another president during my tenure or not but I guess we'll see how long Dr. Smith chooses to remain. But I've truly enjoyed working with all four of the presidents and some of the vice presidents and deans that I've known through the years. For the most part, one of the things that endears me [to] Slippery Rock is the quality of the people, their sincerity, the fact that we can get along and solve problems together, and really try to put the students' well-being as our number one priority.

SM: Who are some of the other people [who] have influenced you or were very significant for you?

EB: Well there's no question: Dr. Bob Watson. Bob picked me up at the airport when I first flew out here to interview. I knew nothing of Dr. Watson at the time. A friend of mine had attended Slippery Rock and had known Bob, but knew him as a student. Bob had been in the Registrar's Office part of his life here as an assistant registrar to Mr. Marks . . . and served [in] a number of capacities. It wasn't until I got here that I found out that Dr. Watson had a long history with Slippery Rock, from being a student to having many family members at Slippery Rock. His father was the postmaster here in Slippery Rock. Dr. Watson wrote his doctoral dissertation at Pitt on the history of Slippery Rock, so he literally wrote the book on Slippery Rock. He was brought up in Slippery Rock, his mother still lives right outside of downtown Slippery Rock, so clearly not only the kind of man he was, but his love and commitment to this university rubbed off on me.

Even though he ceased being my boss when he became the vice president of Student Affairs, his love for the university was very much apparent. He still served, on occasion, in interim positions: development and other places. The man really is "Mr. Slippery Rock," so I had a very good role model. He was a man dedicated to the well-being of students. He was a man who was highly ethical, [and] that was very important for me, particularly when you're in admissions and people are trying to influence you to accept their child or maybe their child didn't have as strong an academic background as they should have. He was supportive of me; he let me run my shop. There is no question, of all the people at Slippery Rock, Bob Watson unquestionably was my greatest mentor, my closest friend, and the gentleman who I felt most strongly about in terms of the kind of role model he was for me. So, no oral history of Slippery Rock, at least my oral history, would be complete without mentioning Bob.

There was Bob Lowry who was his boss; Dr. Lowry was the assistant vice president for Academic Affairs. Lowry Center is named after him. Dr. Bill Meise, who was the dean of Graduate School when I came here. These gentlemen have given their lives to Slippery Rock, and were just tremendous role models. I saw, not knowing how long I would be here, it was still very good for me to see people who truly love this place, and really gave their lives to it and were wonderful individuals and I think very fine administrators. So it's one of the things, now that I'm becoming one of the older, more senior or tenured managers, that's one of the things I aspire to. Can I somehow convey that same sense and feeling to some of the younger administrators and managers that I might not work with.

SM: What were some other major events or activities that happened on campus while you were here?

EB: Well of course the changing of the name to the university, the celebration of the university centennial was clearly a major, major party. Of course, any time new buildings opened up; but I think the biggest was unquestionably the celebration of the university centennial and when we converted, well changed, from the state college to the state university system, there's no doubt about it.

I mean there were some exciting things when I first came to Slippery Rock. My very first year we played at Michigan Stadium; it was the second game we had played in Michigan Stadium. I think we played there two years prior to that, but I was lucky enough in, I guess it was 1981, and as it would happen, I made that trip with three other people and I ended up marrying the woman that I went with—one of the members of that group. So I actually met my wife here at Slippery Rock even though we lived literally one hour apart from each other in Massachusetts. [We] knew nothing of one another in Massachusetts. We both ended up at Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania: me in 1980, she in 1981. We and a couple other mutual friends traveled off to Michigan to see the Rock lose even though it was a fun time, and as things turned out in 1986 we got married.

She still works at the university today so I think it was kind of destined, you know? How could we come from one hour apart in Massachusetts? She almost went to my alma mater; she almost went to Springfield College. We [have] talked about it, she thought it might even have been possible that I might've interviewed her because she's five years younger [so] I would've been working in the Admissions Office, interviewing prospective students the year she was a high school senior. It turns out it wasn't me, but . . . how ironic that she chose three colleges to apply to and . . . Springfield was one of them and I was working there at the time. Her closest friend works at Slippery Rock in Cooperative Activities; her closest friend was the assistant director of Financial Aid at Philadelphia College of Textile and Design; that was the second college that my wife had applied to. Years later her mother was going through her drawers and found a letter from the woman who today works at Slippery Rock, is her closest friend, and that letter was written to her as a prospective student from this woman when she worked at Philadelphia College of Textile and Design. So she ends up going to Boston University, which is the third school; she didn't go to Springfield and she didn't go to Philadelphia College of Textile and Design, but all three of us ended up within years of one another, here. We got married, and she and Cathy turned out to be best friends. Our lives all crossed in the past.

SM: [Laughs] It's a small world!

EB: It is unbelievable. We, we just shake our heads constantly thinking that it had to be fate that all three of us would show up here and we would get married and she and Cathy would be best friends, because our lives all potentially crossed years ago. Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania, of all the places in the world to end up, we all ended up here. And we're all still here, so it's worked out well.

SM: What are some memories you have from hosting the Miss Slippery Rock pageant?

EB: Now where did you get that—did I tell you that? [SM laughs] Well my wife unfortunately . . . no, she suckered me into that! President Reinhard had the idea of having a Miss Slippery Rock pageant, an affiliate of the Miss Pennsylvania pageant. And my wife was assistant director of Student Activities then in the University Union, so she got the job. She was never a beauty pageant contestant herself, and of course this was the '80s and some people on college campuses

weren't reacting well to the whole idea of beauty pageants, just as they don't today. But she took it on, and we met some wonderful, wonderful women.

And since I had a background in college in broadcasting that I never pursued, and since I feel reasonably comfortable in front of a group of people, she naturally went to the one guy who couldn't say no, and asked me if I would please host the Miss Slippery Rock pageant. So as long as we ended up having it, which was during the tenure of President Reinhard—I think it ended up stopping when President Aebersold came—I, as the dutiful boyfriend/husband-to-be, served as the pageant emcee.

I met a woman who was at the time the runner-up but she then became Miss America, and she came to our pageant and entertained us. And some of the women who participated in the pageant are still in touch with us today, I mean they were—think what you will about pageants—they were wonderful, wonderful women that we worked with and some of them still keep in touch today. So yes that was kind of . . . an exciting time for me. But I don't think the Miss Slippery Rock pageant will probably be coming back anytime soon [SM laughs] [inaudible].

SM: What are some other memories you have from being here?

EB: I thought you were going to tell me, I thought you were going to tell me some of the things that are on your little cheat sheet [laughs]! I was—again this was supposed to be a recruitment tool but I really enjoyed it. We developed a College Bowl program here for local high schools. I was the questioner, the emcee of College Bowl. We would invite local high schools to have teams come in, and this was affiliated with the regional and state college bowl so the winner would go on. I really enjoyed it because—again my broadcasting background—I enjoyed doing that and although it probably wasn't a great recruitment tool the way I had kind of hoped it would be, I think the participants really enjoyed it. I really enjoyed it, and we had quite a few teams from the local area that participated in the college bowl. So that was another thing that I served on.

In my younger days I would be called upon because I was the director of Admissions, and most of the students then were familiar with my name because I had signed their acceptance letters. I was often asked to come and serve as a guest judge for the homecoming king and queen or band competition. As I got older and was less known, not as visible because the Registrar's not as visible as the director of Admissions, some of those invitations waned a bit.

But yeah, I enjoyed my earlier years, being a little more actively involved in this and because my wife was the assistant director of Student Activities and for a short while the acting director. I was always back here with her; we had no children at the time. So she was working late, had an activity, and we both loved the arts and entertainment. Whenever she had a speaker series or an artist series (and that's what she still does today, the artist series), I'm right there by her side. Number one, I enjoy helping her; but I also enjoy the arts. I enjoy dance and music and theatre and film and so it was exciting for me. I think if I had to do it all over again, I would certainly

consider as a possibility a career that centered around the arts because I love them so much. So that came along with the marriage, but I worked a lot at those events and still do now—still to this day I work a lot of her arts events to assist her and then get to watch the show.

SM: Is there anything you miss from your earlier years here at Slippery Rock?

EB: I do miss the interaction with the students. There's no question when you're the director of Admissions, even though many of them are high school students or transfer students, your life really centers on the student. Here, as the director of Academic Records, my responsibilities are so far-ranging, I don't interact on a personal level as often as I wish I could with the students, and sometimes that interaction is not quite as positive.

You see when you're in Admissions, at least until you've made the decision and sometimes that decision is not to admit somebody and then things become uncomfortable. But up to that point when you're meeting with a prospective student or student on campus, you're just meeting with them. You're conversing with them, you have no authority over them, you're not making any decisions, [and] you're not being asked to weigh this or do that.

Well, in my current position, since we kind of enforce the academic policies and regulations, some of our interactions with students are not as positive as I would hope. I'm here to try to help students, but I'm also here not to roll over and just give in. So I guess the job now deals with a far wider range of university constituencies than it did before, and it's not quite as student-focused as I might have liked. Let's face it, I initially got into the business because I liked working with students. Well, in my current position we don't work quite as closely with students as maybe some of the people in residence halls or student activities or those disciplines. I've enjoyed what I've done, clearly, and I've enjoyed the different positions I've held. But yeah, we are a little more removed from working with the students than I might have preferred, since the early days.

SM: Do you have any words of wisdom or anything you want any future or current Rock [community] members to know?

EB: No, I mean nothing that would sound probably . . . corny. But I, like many people, when I came to Slippery Rock I had no idea how long I'd be here. I knew that I had the ability to be very loyal. I knew that if I was treated well, if I believed in what the organization was doing, if I felt that Slippery Rock liked me and appreciated me and respected me that there'd be no limit to how long I could potentially be here. I had been at my previous job for four years and at one point in time I thought, "Gee, might it not be nice to go back and work at my alma mater?" I'm very loyal to my alma mater, but as things have worked out and you talk to other people they never would've guessed that they would've been sitting in front of a camera twenty-eight years later saying, "I'm still here, and I still have eight more years to go!" You know, who would've thought that I would've been here for thirty-five years? I was a young man when I came here and

like I said, once you get up into the twenty-five, thirty year [range], now more people will come after you than are left before you.

But I really enjoyed Slippery Rock and that means the people. The institution, it's going to be here after we leave and after the people watching this tape leave and we have to be cognizant of that. We have a responsibility to this institution, but the institution is the people. So hopefully people built a foundation here. I mean the founders of this university, if they hadn't had the foresight to do that we wouldn't be sitting here today. Our job is to continue to improve Slippery Rock so generations in the future can take advantage of its high quality education.

I hope that in the future the collegial atmosphere between the faculty and administration doesn't change. I hope that this continues to be a warm and friendly and caring place. I hope the quality of the students continues to improve as does the quality of the facilities and education.

You know those of us who work here, even the students who attend, we're just stewards, we're just here for a short period of time. Thirty-five years sounds like a long time and it is, because that's pretty much giving your entire life to an organization, but when the university that you're working for is a hundred and something years old and you know that there have been many Registrars or professors or presidents who have preceded you, and God willing there will be many more beyond us. We have to view our role as only temporary. It may be a large part of our life but hopefully we will have moved this university forward so that generations of student to come will have the same kind of positive experiences that those who preceded them had.

So that's the way I view it, I certainly wouldn't have been here for twenty-eight years looking, I hope, to retiring from Slippery Rock in eight or nine more years if I hadn't felt that it was a positive experience, that we were doing good things for the students who are attending here.

When you leave just hope and pray that you are leaving the university in good hands, [someone] who will have that kind of loyalty and kind of warm feeling for the institution, its faculty and its students. I don't know if that's wild, crazy words of wisdom or not but that sort of sums up my feelings about the place and the dedication that I try to show and why I'm willing to work so hard for this thing called Slippery Rock University, which is nothing more than brick and mortar. But it's the people, and it's the impact this institution has on people, that I think will be its legacy.

SM: Well, I don't have any other questions and I'd like to thank you for setting up the Saturday Showcase and helping me choose Slippery Rock.

EB: Well like I said, it was a little bit before your time [SM laughs] but we certainly started it. Some other people took the ball and they made it far better than what I started. But it was my pleasure to start that if that's one of the reasons that got you here.

SM: Mhmm. Well, thank you for letting me interview you and have a nice day.

EB: Well thank you! Thanks a lot.