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[Michele] So we are doing our Personals is Pedagogical podcast and I am honored to have Mitchell Tropin from Takoma Park the Communications Department thank you so much for agreeing to interview with me this afternoon.

[Mitchell] Well I'm very glad to be invited, Michele.

[Michele] So why don't you tell me about your educational your professional background and your experiences?

[Mitchell] Okay um I've been very fortunate in that uh my career choices really worked out better than I expected especially when I got into teaching uh when I was in college I actually thought I was going to be an editorial cartoonist but uh I just didn't quite have this the right stuff. So, I turned to journalism and actually journalism made a lot of sense for me my older sister who's always been one of my heroes she was a very successful journalist who had the gift of being able to go into any publication or newspaper and do well. So, I switched to journalism, and I was very lucky. I became an intern for a Washington-based news organization the bureau of national affairs BNA publications just when Watergate was breaking out just when the whole scandals involving the Nixon white house were sort of permeating every aspect of Washington life and I'm going man my while my sister traveled around the country I said this is Washington is the place to be it is the news center of the world now, and it was very exciting to see things play out where you never knew what from day to day what news would break out you you'd be at a press conference and someone would run into the room shouting Nixon's top aides have just resigned and go ah you know it just was very exciting. So um I was able to turn that internship into a full-time job with BNA and with BNA I was able to really enjoy the news reporting process, and so I did that for several decades. After doing that for so many years, I still was interested in more and as luck would have it my two colleagues on my publication told me how Johns Hopkins had started a graduate program on for creative non-fiction a few blocks from where BNA was located. We were like in walking distance of DuPont circle where Hopkins was holding those classes so I signed up for graduate school, I actually took extra classes because I enjoyed grad school so much but it made me more of a complete writer, and I also saw that just writing for BNA was, was not going to be enough, so I started doing freelance writing. So in 2003 I earned my masters in creative nonfiction and the head of the Hopkins writing program, you know met all the graduates and addressed us and said you know 87 percent of you will never use your degree for any reason in other words you've wasted your time being here and I was going well I'm not going to be part of that 87 percent and I was trying to think well I am freelancing already how can I make more use of my degree and I said well gee I've always thought about teaching why not give it a go? Then the next day I got a call from the English department chair who said "I'm having a really hard time uh filling this 1pm class could you teach a class at 1pm?" I'm going gee I mean I'm still working full-time at BNA but my magazine editor god bless her said "yeah it'll be your lunch hour" and uh so all sudden I was teaching with actually no prior background. I mean when you start teaching as an adjunct

my uh experience is not unique, they give you a syllabus they give you a book and they go “go get them” and so what was that first day like because you had no experience. Oh it was funny cause I was there's a famous movie um involving Burt Reynolds where he becomes overnight a uh a college professor and he just stands up there and he talks and he realizes after 15 minutes he has nothing else to say and that's how I felt. Everything went so fast so having no real direction on what to do I did what I thought a traditional college professor should do. I gave out writing uh reading assignments I had people reading in class I was you know sort of went over uh through the anthology book we had and so that went on for about a week...but during that time I noticed maybe two weeks I noticed a young woman in my class she always sat in the back in the room, sort of leaning her chair against the back wall, and as I was trying to lecture or asking people to read or do something she would like roll her eyes and I found myself just watching her and every time I said something she just rolled her eyes. So, one day so after class I went up there and I said what's going on you're always like rolling your eyes at me and she looked at me and said this is so high school and I went my god you're right. I realized I was not really being me and I think I was not really doing what I wanted to do but trying to do what I thought I should do.

[Michele] How did you pivot from that?

[Mitchell] The next class two days later I said this is not working, we're gonna start all over going to get you a new syllabus I'm going to start doing things where I feel I can really show you not only how to write but I want to convey with you my love of writing and the class like sat up and I said I'm not going to call on you to read we're not going to worry about getting through this page of the book or not and I sort of abandoned the book the, the anthology we had and I started xeroxing articles that always meant a lot to me and so I brought in writers like Maya Angelou, Amy Tan, Frank McCourt um I'm blanking on the names uh the great Native American writer uh Alexa his last name was like, anyway and then I also brought in my own writing, and I read to the class which was something I always had enjoyed when I was an undergraduate in college. I had a professor who taught that way and as I read to them, I would point out why, how they achieved the result in their writing and how they were able to do things with writing that made their writing personal and then I shared them on my own. I shared things from my Master's thesis, you know which was a series of articles and personal essays, and like most of my students at Montgomery College are immigrants, so they really loved when I read them a story by Frank McCourt the great uh Irish American writer who did Angela's Ashes. He'd written an article from the New Yorker about his first day in New York from Ireland and what was like coming to America, and you could just see everybody in that class they could identify with Frank and you know you could see they really loved that essay and I could just see students responding, and I said okay this, this is not for everybody but this is what works for me, and that's how I started teaching writing. So I had my students go out and find something interesting about Baltimore and share it with the class and uh wasn't sure was I going to come up, with but then when they started doing the presentations they discovered all these wonderful things about Baltimore, Edgar Allen Poe, the history of National Bohemian Beer, Cal Ripken, uh burgers cooking you know just one thing after the other but the thing that is the big surprise, the thing that really grabbed me how happy and excited the students were to share

what they had discovered with their classmates. You could feel that buzz they had saying I can't wait to tell you about you know the feast of Saint Anthony's at St. Leo's church.

[Michele] What do you think is uh one of the most...because that to me sounds like you really put a high emphasis on student engagement with your students?

[Mitchell] Yes.

[Michele] What do you think is the most important thing for faculty member to consider when it comes to promoting that student engagement in their classroom activity?

[Mitchell] It has to be something where the student gets rewarded in something more than a grade. It has to be something where they're going to say wow, I didn't think I was capable of doing that or boy did I enjoy it, and sure enough, it was the project called I love Baltimore the students discovered something, that I had discovered many years earlier as a journalist, that joy you get when you have something incredible to share with an audience. I remember getting a big story and you know couldn't wait to get to the computer to type in and get it published. The same thing for these kids they couldn't wait to let us know what they had learned, and it was contagious, in the classroom also they were all smiles. They loved hearing the stories and then it just sort of came to me you, know I had that epiphany, there is a joy in communication and sadly we don't teach that. That students should know communicating is much more than an obligation it's a lot more than drudgery, it could be joyful. The experience is, is its own reward. And that's how the students felt, and so I started doing I love fill in the blank wherever I taught and like I did it at Trinity and I also then said, you let me know how you want to share the information be creative. So, some students created videos some students did both presentation and had YouTube videos, others, one person did the history of crab dip and brought in crab dip for the whole class and there was always at each place where I was teaching something magical. One of my fondest memories of Trinity, we were doing I love DC and one of my students, her mom was best friends with Marvin Gaye, and his sister, and when Marvin Gaye would come to town to perform at the Howard Theater, her mom, and Marvin's sister would be his backup singers, and she did it as a long interview of her mom and there wasn't a dry eye in the room. But as I said this is such a great experience and you could see it just...and I said boy, this is like I've had many great experiences, but this will be probably one of the most memorable. But the important fact is that I was able to get a student to do something that great, [I] went wow, you know you sort of look at yourself and say yes this you're on the right path. So, in 2012 I'm teaching at the community college of Baltimore County CCBC and um out of the blue of the Maryland's Commission on Higher Education hands down an edict that um students who are in the vocational program learning HVAC and Auto Repair, they have to take a speech class. Now I had actually been talking to my Journalism chair about teaching speech and she says I'm sorry it's not my it's not my area it's not my jurisdiction and so I said oh well but um the chair who was responsible for speech classes who's like down the hall from my Journalism chair she just sort of stands in the hallway and says where the hell am I going to find someone to teach a class on such short notice, and god bless my dear my uh chair she says I've got a guy who is chomping at the bit to teach speech, and I guess the woman said well, how

badly could it go, because I had no prior experience teaching speech, but she gave me my chance. These, these were young men and women who dreaded speaking in public and I said don't worry, you're going to talk about things you love, and they looked at me like I was crazy I said no, no you have this incredible wealth of knowledge, and you're in this program because you love cars, show that to me. And, and they, they took full advantage of it um years before we saw the movie Ford versus Ferrari, I learned all about uh the famous Carol Shelby about the famous Shelby cars, the rivalry with Ferrari, I learned about great drivers like Ken Miles, I learned actually from one really brilliant student that there were defective auto impact bags and learned the history of the Mustang, learned about other great cars, the students really just took it to heart. One person did again, a great presentation about he how he and his dad would restore classic autos together, and the class you know the class again, there was that vibe, where people were talking about things they loved, and learning how to present it well, and giving them the tools that they want. They were not intimidated about sharing their stories because they had the right tools, and I approached teaching speech the way I approach teaching writing, lower the intimidation factors. I think letting them know that what matters to them is important. I think they have been too easily discouraged from sharing their life stories, sharing what they really love, and feeling that what they have to say is not important enough. So they try and grab some topic that they're not really that interested in, certainly not passionate about, and they get really boring stuff. If I can get them to say I know there's things that are important to you, and you don't have to worry about whether they're important to anybody, else if it's important to you that passion, [it] will really make that speech resonate and your audience will thank you. There's just so many great things I've learned through my students presentations and uh you know not once you know and sometimes you know even something is meant to be light-hearted was still a matter of joy and delight for both the class the presenter and for myself uh basically just following that gut reaction to say what works for me will work for my students and that you know brings us to the present where I'm continuing to teach at MC um and teaching at other schools, uh but MC is where I you know where my heart is.

[Michele] Well, I think this is great I really appreciate the time that you have shared with me this afternoon I know you're very, very busy but I know that I really appreciate you and, and that enthusiasm that you have um, I appreciate you letting us take a peek inside your classroom, your philosophy of teaching, where your head is at and, and just the way you value student success and that the students have their own voices, I mean that's so important so thank you so much for spending this time with me this afternoon.

[Mitchell] Well thank you very much for giving me this opportunity I know I've you know said bits and pieces of this you know some place here someplace there but to actually sit down and have this you know time to put it all together has been very rewarding, very satisfying to me so I'm, I'm very appreciative of this opportunity and thank you thank you Michele. It's also isn't it's nice every once in a while to have reaffirmed that I'm where I am where, where I want to be.

[Michele] and we're lucky to have you here thank you.

[Mitchell] And likewise I'm really you are exceptional as one of the Instructional people uh it's, it's been a delight working with you through ELITE through SRT, you know I'm glad I'm, I'm glad that you're part of the MC community.

[Michele] The feeling is mutual.

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