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Interview with Professor David Borkowski

It is the first day of school at William Paterson University in Wayne, N.J. The air is crisp with possibility. Deadlines haven't been missed because they haven't been set. Everyone looks markedly healthy and rested from the summer break, especially Professor David Borkowski. He is fair, and tan, with twinkling eyes and a kind face. Fresh from teaching at Chicago State University, Professor Borkowski is one of the English department's newest faculty.

He talks about the welcome he has received so far from the faculty: "I like the writing department at William Paterson," says Borkowski. "It's more progressive than other schools I've looked at."

As he settles into his seat, he explains "Although I grew up on Staten Island, I am new to the area. I've been hunting in Montclair for an apartment for my wife and me. She's still in Chicago." He chose Montclair so that his wife will be near the bus routes or train stations for easy access to NYC. She will be transferred to the mid-town office of the financial company she currently works for in Chicago. "The movie theaters in Montclair are a big draw," he admits. He talks about looking in the newspaper movie timetables to find a dearth of independent movies playing outside of New York City – except for Montclair, which is known for its many movie theatres, not to mention the variety of ethnic restaurants.

For his undergraduate work, Professor Borkowski went to Boston University, majoring in English with a history minor: "My early interest in

literature often was linked to its historical component, how it was related to that time or era. I never viewed literature in the abstract. “I wasn’t a very good student,” he adds, “until about junior year.”

After graduating from college, he worked for three years at a group insurance company where he wrote dental brochures for the marketing department. Every other month, the employees took turns giving presentations or what he calls ‘Snoozers’. His colleagues sent everyone to sleep with their lackluster recitations of facts. When it was Borkowski’s turn, everyone stayed awake! “I decided to conduct a more interactive seminar. I had them do a task in a group. I didn’t know what I was doing. I just figured I didn’t want to talk for an hour,” Borkowski beams at the memory. “And I really liked it! I thought, this must be what teachers do.” That day he found teaching.

Although his parents were outraged, he quit his solid, well-paying job and spent one year at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst getting his certification for secondary education. “It should have taken me two years,” he confesses. “But I overloaded myself and took courses in the summer.” Then, with his new, hard-earned credential, he taught high school for a few years in Ocean Township, NJ until layoffs within the district put him and 18 others out of work. He decided to enroll in graduate school right away. “Because as any teacher knows, you must have as many degrees as a thermometer,” he says.

While full-time at the graduate center at City University of New York, he raced through the program, finished his oral and comprehensive

exams in three years. “Then I got a little burnt out,” he admits. He pondered the magnitude of the dissertation looming in his near future. “To think that after all of that writing, all of that research, all of that thought, and only three to four people will read it...It was daunting,” he says. He refers to the dry writing contained in most dissertations as “Writing only a mother could love.” With a healthy case of self-doubt, he began to question the value of the Ph.D. he was working towards. He considered returning to the corporate world until a professor persuaded him that a dissertation in English did not have to be the analysis of shoe imagery in Moby Dick. David Borkowski began to develop the idea to analyze the pedagogy involved in teaching “the very basic stuff” to undergraduates, not just the pure theory,. During his year of research, “The 5th Avenue library in New York was my office.” He finished his doctoral work the following year.

David Borkowski talks calmly and candidly, and not only about his academic career, but also discusses his life off-campus. He prefers tennis to the football and basketball he played in high school. “It’s easier to find one person to play with than it is to find 10.” He adds “If I had another life to live, I would be a ski bum.” Every year, he and his wife take a ski trip. So far, they have tested the powder in Taos, NM, Banff in the Canadian Rockies, and Whistler in British Columbia. A stuffy professor, he is not.

Now that he is in the working world again, he has resumed reading for the mere enjoyment of it. “After all that purposeful reading on my

dissertation topic, it was hard to read anything except a newspaper,” he says. “It took a while to get back to reading for pleasure.” A recent favorite, *Poisonwood Bible*, by Barbara Kingsolver, he read “even though it was on the Oprah Book Club.” At the same time, he read *The Money and The Power*, by Sally Denton and Roger Morris about Las Vegas as a metaphor for contemporary America. Currently, he is reading *Mason & Dixon*, by Thomas Pynchon along with *Arrogance of Power: The Secret World of Richard Nixon* by Anthony Summers and Robbyn Swan.

“In the classroom, I look forward to the moment when I can see the students are getting something.” He notices “the expression on students’ faces” when he asks them to work through a question. He breaks them into small groups, sees them debating in a way that is so involved, that he feels “dispensable.” Professor David Borkowski smiles broadly and says with great satisfaction, “I can’t think of anything else I’d rather do.”