

University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives

Krannert Center 50th Anniversary Oral History Project

Interviewees: Doug and Janet Nelson

Interviewer:

July 19, 2018

Length: 00:11:35

Deborah Miller: Alright. I'm Deborah Miller. I am the senior director of development at Krannert Center, and I am here with Doug and Janet Nelson. Doug, would you like to tell us your role here at Krannert Center right now as a volunteer?

Doug Nelson: Right now, my wife and I are heading up what's called the "50th Anniversary Community Celebration Committee." And so this is a group of Krannert volunteers, people who are passionate about Krannert and its role in the community and doing a celebration. Helping to plan the celebration that will happen at the actual 50th anniversary is in April 19th of 2019. But it's really a two-year planning period and celebration period so we're helping to just add input from the community side of what that celebration might be.

DM: Wonderful. Do you remember some of your first moments at Krannert Center or some of your most memorable moments here at Krannert Center?

DN: Well actually, in terms of me as coming to Krannert, the thing I remember most, actually I'm gonna switch this as a business owner, I came to Krannert, I saw the program, thought, "Oh, this would be a good thing." I remember putting ads in the program and then being invited in to the corporate nights and the people that I was able to meet, and I've never felt that much gratitude and appreciation from any ad I've ever put in.

And it was a way for me to kind of drop in to see more about what Krannert was because I think in those first few times of me coming, all I saw was the performance spaces and the performance. But somehow, honestly, that being a part of corporate side and just it was intriguing. I felt like I saw a part of Krannert that I, that was under the surface that I just didn't see, and the more that happened, the richer and deeper it became. And that began to kind of unfold itself into the volunteer aspect. And it also made me look back to think of those first few times when I went to Krannert, and I was new to the community, didn't have very much in terms of financial resources, but I remember being thrilled that I could afford to see the Chicago Symphony. And it was a little lost on me that somebody else actually donated money to make it possible for me to afford the Chicago Symphony. Only later did I realize that. And for that, not only was I grateful, but the sense of "I want to return that back and make that possible for somebody else cause I was in that position."

DM: That's wonderful. Thank you so much for doing that. So how would you say that the Center has impacted your life, both personally or for your business or as far as friendships or experiences, culture, cultural experiences?

Janet Nelson: I think as Doug said, once he was a corporate sponsor we started attending programs here much more frequently and it's had a profound effect on our lives, I think personally. I think the Krannert Center is a place that changes one's soul. It enriches your life and exposes you to different cultures and different types of performing arts. So it definitely has had a really deep impact on us. Just in giving us inspiration. And I actually didn't realize I was going to get so choked up about it. But also just the community. When we come here, we know so many people and it is a huge part of our social network now too.

DM: That's beautiful. I really do think that that is the thing I would like everyone to know is that it does change people's lives, it does connect them to new people that maybe they would not connect with otherwise.

DN: For me, one of my favorite things too, like Janet said, sitting in the Great Hall and looking around and seeing how many people that we know. How many people that we don't. But the people that we don't we are there sharing the same experience. And for me, again, one of my most powerful moments is to have some incredibly moving piece and then to look at people, perhaps next to me or the row behind me. And you look into their eyes and I don't know them, but we know that together we just shared something that binds us. And that's powerful.

We were just last weekend visiting some friends of ours and they were talk, we were kind of just, when you retire, you know, where would you want to go? And they talked about different places around the country. And Janet and I were looking at each other going "There's no way we are going anywhere." As I told them, yeah but where we live, you know, we can see just a myriad of performances and the quality of life. We would never consider going anywhere else. And really it was the first time, I've not really considered that retirement thing. It was the first time it hit me of, I'm not going anywhere. And probably Krannert's the reason. The major reason.

JN: And I've heard many people say that [laughs].

DN: That's right. I've never felt it in such a visceral way as I did this last weekend.

DM: Is there a way that you can describe that to somebody else? Like to tell them what they might be missing or to encourage them to come in some way? You think they just need to try it, just come for the first time or? I don't know if you have any suggestions for those people who have not yet experienced it in the way that you have, the powerful way you have.

DN: Yeah, yeah. I think for me it's, you know, it's a little bit like somebody describing scuba diving.

DM: Uh huh, yeah, yeah.

DN: You know? Like, you know, I look at the ocean and just “Okay, that looks nice.” And they just look at you like no, you don’t really understand. And when somebody puts a mask on your head and shoves your face in the water and you see there’s a whole world that you don’t see from above. I think Krannert is like that. That there’s a richness and a deepness that you have to be here a little bit. I would encourage people to take a tour, to see beyond the surface. That’s when the richness happens, and in the relationships with people. There’s something special and the arts have always provided that.

DM: I think that’s a beautiful analogy. Is there anything else you guys would like to add at this time?

DN: Well, just that I guess the common theme is it’s about quality of life and Krannert I think is front and center for us about that. You know, when I’m teaching, people always kinda remark on my schedule. It’s like, well, how do you have, where’s the renewal come from? It’s hard to describe cause it’s really, this is a big part of that renewal.

You know, the other thing I’m thinking about is, was describing to a colleague of mine who lives in Denver that we’re, you know, involved in supporting Krannert and we have this wonderful performing arts center. And I could tell he was like, “Oh that’s nice.” You know, “Oh that’s nice.” I could, you know, it’s not, was a little dismissive, a little whatever. And I thought, “You do not understand.” So I sent him the season booklet, and as soon as he got it, I got a phone call right back. And the “Oh my goodness” kind of thing, you know.

JN: And we did bring him here to visit, and really whenever we have people coming from anywhere else, we bring them to Krannert because we want them to experience it too.

One of the things you’d asked is what surprised us, and there were actually several things. One thing is I had no idea that there were hundreds of students going to class and rehearsing in this building. Because, you know, we just see the stages.

DM: Right. We teach over 130 classes each semester.

JN: So that was really eye-opening to me when I went on a tour. Like, “Oh my gosh! I had no idea.” Another thing was, I didn’t know about the youth series and the huge impact that you’re making in the schools with students and the amount of community engagement. I mean I just did not, I was not aware of any of that really until we served on the advancement council. And so letting people know about those things I think is really important.

The other thing is what would we like to tell people is that this is such a great place and the Krannert Center needs their support if it’s going to continue.

DM: That’s absolutely true.

DN: Yeah, it’s not something to be taken for granted or taken lightly. I think it’s easy to look at something that’s that marvelous and just assume, oh this is wonderful, but I think again when

you look under the surface and when we did that tour and saw the cramped spaces underneath and kind of people jockeying for rehearsal space and it's things stored in places where there doesn't even look like there's storage, you see the need. You know, this building is amazing. It's also fifty years old. And fifty year old buildings are fifty years old. And what was needed fifty years ago is not necessarily what is needed now. Any house, any thing, it changes but the structure of it also needs to adapt and fit the new needs. And also think about the next fifty years.

DM: Absolutely.

DN: So I think for both of us, we talk about often Herman and Ellnora Krannert. What their vision was and uh, I don't know, at some level I think we both feel like stewards of that even though we never met them. I feel like we resonate with the spirit of their gift and we have benefited from it and we just wanna help steward that gift and do something that fifty years from now they would be proud of where it would be. That would be lovely cause it was a tremendous gift in turbulent times and turns out it's just as resonate now as it was back then. And I guess fifty years from now it will be as the arts are always.

DM: Absolutely. Well thank you so much for your time.

DN: Our pleasure.