Oral history interview with Susan Clark Thayer (SOH-036)

Susan Clark Thayer  
*Suffolk University*

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Oral History Interview of Susan Clark Thayer

Interview Date: March 24, 2009

Interviewed by: Farrah Chamseddine

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Interview Summary
Susan Clark Thayer, Associate Dean Emeritus, discusses her career at Suffolk University as both director of the Ballotti Learning Center and associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. The interview covers her role in the creation of the Ballotti Learning Center in 1982 and her work as associate dean in developing assessment programs, managing accreditation and strategic planning for the College. She also discusses her early life and career, her time as a graduate student at Suffolk University and the challenges of establishing herself in the workforce as a woman in the 1960s and 1970s. The interview concludes with a discussion of her passion for educational support, her contributions to the field of developmental education and her post-retirement activities.

Subject Headings
Suffolk University
Education, Higher--United States.
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This interview took place on March 24, 2009, in the Suffolk Law Library at the Suffolk University Law School, 120 Tremont St., Boston, MA.

Interview Transcript

FARRAH CHAMSEDDINE : This is Farrah Chamseddine interviewing Susan Clark Thayer on March 24, 2009, in the Suffolk Law School Library. Where and when were you born?

SUSAN CLARK THAYER: I was born in Columbus, Ohio, on June 30, 1943.

CHAMSEDDINE: Where were your parents born?

CLARK THAYER: My mother was born in Flatwoods, Kentucky, which I never heard of until Billy Ray Cyrus. And my father was born in Danville, Illinois.

CHAMSEDDINE: What did your parents do for work?

CLARK THAYER: My father was a manager of a [JC] Penney store. My mother was a housewife until he died, and he died when he was in his forties. And then she became manager of a gift shop. She did that off and on in various locations. And she was a counselor at a woman’s hotel in Boston. Back then, this is the sixties, there weren't a lot of things women could do, but she did a pretty good job.

CHAMSEDDINE: Where did you grow up?

CLARK THAYER: All over the place. I was born in Columbus, Ohio, and then we moved to Hamilton, Ohio. And then when I was in the second grade, my father got transferred to New Hampshire - Rochester, New Hampshire - and I lived there until I was in the sixth grade. And then halfway through the sixth grade, we moved to Greenfield, Massachusetts, and I lived there until I was a senior in high school or, just after I'd graduated from high school. My dad died at Christmas that year, and so my mom sold our house. And she and I took off that summer to go work at a resort hotel up in New Hampshire. She was manager of the gift shop, and I was a
waitress. And we didn't like it, so she dropped me off at college and said she’d let me know when she found a job.

So after a week or two, I heard from her and she went to Hartford, Connecticut. So we lived there for quite a while, at least for the final two years. And then into my junior year of college, and then she moved to Boston. And I've lived in the Boston area ever since.

CHAMSEDDINE: What was life like moving around so much?

CLARK THAYER: When it’s all you know, you know— I was an only child, so we didn't have any family. So, it was just us, but we were a close family and I never felt it, really. I was just kind of used to that, being always new. When I moved to Greenfield, we were there longer than— at least that I can remember, and I pretty much made a home there. But, when I left there, that was fine. I didn't have any problem with selling the house and getting rid of everything to move on. So, kind of interesting, I fell in love with traveling. It was okay. I always had a best friend, you know, and then you move on. But eventually after I got married, we made a home for the first time since I was in high school, in Scituate. That really felt good, and I've had homes ever since.

CHAMSEDDINE: Where do you live now?

CLARK THAYER: Now, I live at Linden Ponds. It's a retirement community that is just amazing. We just moved there a few months ago, in November. Before that, we lived in Boston for a couple of years, and then in Scituate before that.

CHAMSEDDINE: What high school did you attend before college?

CLARK THAYER: I went to a girl’s prep school called Stoneleigh Prospect Hill School for Girls. It’s not there anymore. Now it’s called Stoneleigh-Burnham. I was a day student there. One did those things back then.
CHAMSEDDINE: Did you have any experiences there that influenced your career choices?

CLARK THAYER: At high school?

CHAMSEDDINE: In high school?

CLARK THAYER: In high school? I got an art award, so I thought that maybe I would end up being an artist. Well, I wasn't sure. I was always going to go to college, and that was just a given. But when my dad died, we weren't sure we could afford four years, so I went to a two year to begin with. And back then, there were a lot of two year colleges that were fairly rigorous and even had some reputation. Anyway, I went to Colby Junior [College] and it was so exciting there. Kind of like you, you know. When I was a freshman, I was taking these classes and they were wonderful. I loved them, and I realized that I couldn't be an artist. I'd always do art, but I wanted to have English classes and I was taking French and I just— So, that changed me from taking art. So when I graduated from there and went on to Syracuse, I majored in French.

CHAMSEDDINE: Did you?

CLARK THAYER: Yeah. And that changed my life where I readjusted to— I went and lived in Poitiers [France], I [studied] abroad, you know, a year abroad kind of thing with Syracuse and became fluent and that was cool, that was great. My whole world opened up.

CHAMSEDDINE: What were your memorable experiences at Syracuse?

CLARK THAYER: The biggest was living in France, going to France. It was the first time—Historically, this is in the sixties, the early sixties. And back then, people didn't travel like they do now. Now everybody travels, you know? Back then, it was very unusual to travel and I just loved it. I got on a boat. You didn't fly, either, for the most part, as much like we do now. It was not uncommon to take a steamship over there. So, I was on my first boat. It went out of New York, and for the first time in my life, I was in an environment where everybody wasn't American. And in fact, the majority of the people weren't American. And for an American back
then, to suddenly understand that there's a whole world out there that isn’t us, you know? Oh my gosh, it was fascinating. I loved it, I was fascinated. When we got there, [there was] this whole other country.

And then I learned how to speak French fluently instead of just studying it for years. You know, I never was able to speak it. I was pretty quiet when I got there for the first— We lived with a family and everything. It was a life-changing experience for me. I've just never been the same since.

**CHAMSEDDINE:** What did you do after you left Syracuse University?

**CLARK THAYER:** Well, I had thought-- I minored in philosophy-- I had thought that I would do something amazing. I used to think Plato, Aristotle and Clark, you know? I wasn't sure what, but I was going to be amazing. So, I went out to try to get a job. I figured I'd start out as an administrative assistant or something, some kind of administrative thing. I was living in Boston and there were no jobs for women as an administrative assistant. I couldn't believe it. I could be a teacher, except I hadn’t taken education. I hadn’t wanted to be a teacher. I became a teacher years later. But, I couldn’t get anything. They wouldn’t even send me on interviews. The management trainees were all men and they were— We were told that.

So, I finally, after three months, got a job as a clerk typist. I had to go back to typing school and I learned shorthand and those kinds of skills. And I had jobs like that. So, the first job was a clerk typist for a small brokerage and I lived in an apartment on Beacon Street and did the clubs, you know? (laughter) I had a life. And then I learned everybody’s job in the place, and so when the administrative assistant there left, I asked for his job. And they were amazed. “What?” But, they gave it to me and it was without his pay and I couldn't have his secretary. And I think I eventually couldn't have his office, either, when they moved, but I had that title. Not his salary, either, but still.

And at the end of two years, I'd saved up enough money for my girlfriend and I to leave. I quit my job and we went to Europe and we youth hosteled until our money ran out. And I had less
money than she did. I lasted a year, she lasted even longer. She got all the way to Australia. I left after Morocco. (laughter) But it was wonderful, wonderful time.

CHAMSEDDINE: Wow, that's amazing.

CLARK THAYER: You don't know what to do with that one, do you? (laughter)

CHAMSEDDINE: Were there any memorable experiences traveling to those countries?

CLARK THAYER: Oh, lots of different ones. No one [experience] stands out. The thing is, back then, again, you have to understand these decisions in the context. Back then to hitchhike around Europe was not dangerous. Loads of people did it. There weren't drugs in the hostels or anything. This was just before the drug culture. So, I graduated from college in ’65. So, the drug culture was coming in in ’66, ’67, ’68, kind of. It wasn't really until the late sixties and early seventies that there were hippies everywhere and college kids got into that.

So, it was pretty safe for us to wander around. So we would be invited— we’d get picked up by locals in France or England or Scotland and we would be invited home and get to know them. So, we lived with a family for a few days in Scotland and England and Morocco. That was the best. I'd never been to an Arab culture and back then, the women were wearing the veil. I just never had seen anything like it. I loved it. They spoke French there, so I could speak. It was a wonderful experience. And then, I was ready to go home. I needed mind work, I needed problems to solve. And it was fun, it was just so free and fun. But after a while, you want to get serious. So, I was ready to come home and do that.

CHAMSEDDINE: That's true. (laughs) And what did you do once you came home?

CLARK THAYER: Well, the first thing I did, and after being with my mom because I missed her, was go out to my grandmother [in Columbus, Ohio] who had had a stroke while I was gone. So I stayed there, I moved into the Y[MCA] [got a job typing automobile titles] and stayed there for a couple of months to see her. Then, I had a girlfriend who was just graduating, getting her
master’s degree from San Jose State and she said that she was going to be driving up the west coast and did I want to come out and go with her. And then her mother was going to pick her up in San Francisco and I could drive back with them. I said, “Sure.”

So, I went out there. I got a ride with somebody or other who was driving out there and wanted somebody to help them drive, a woman and a couple of kids. So, when I got out there and we camped, and we went up the coast, and we ended up in San Francisco. But when it came time for her mother to come and have us leave, her mother refused to take me.

CHAMSEDDINE: (laughs) That's awful.

CLARK THAYER: I know. So, I was more or less stranded in San Francisco. It was a cool time to be there, but I wasn’t into the drug culture. Anyway, I had to go job hunting pretty fast and we found— They had places out there that were guest houses; you could get a room there and pay by the week and eat in the cafeteria. It was a wonderful place to be because there were people from all over, you know? So that was fun and there were guys, and it was fun. But, I was frantic because I had to find a job, so I became a Kelly girl. Now, it's called Kelly Services; back then, that's what women could do. You could be Manpower or Kelly girl. It meant you could be a secretary on a temporary basis, a temp. So, that's what I did.

And it was the only time in my life that I've had to be worried that I wouldn't have [enough money to meet my expenses]— Because if the check didn't come on time, I couldn’t pay my rent. I've never had that before. That was a good experience for me. Although I can say, my first year in Boston when I got the job as the clerk typist, I had to get a second job in order to make ends meet. I had a studio apartment and I had a phone. And just to pay the bills, I had to get a second job. That's good for you too; you need these things.

CHAMSEDDINE: Yes, you do. What was the second job?

CLARK THAYER: Oh, you're going to laugh at this. It was an usherette at the Cheri Movie Theater. It’s not there anymore. But back then, they had ushers with the flashlight that would
show you to your seat in a movie, so I saw the movie “The Chase” 457 times. (laughter) It was an interesting time. I was there during the Great Blackout, you know the New England Blackout.

CHAMSEDDINE: How was that experience?

CLARK THAYER: It was interesting times. Well, can you imagine? You're in the city and all of a sudden there are no lights? It was bizarre. Luckily, my studio had a gas stove and a working fireplace. So, I at least had heat because —

CHAMSEDDINE: What was Suffolk University like in 1972 through 1974 when you were studying for your master's of education degree and reading specialization?

CLARK THAYER: That — I found Suffolk then because when I got married, my husband was a teacher and I never wanted to teach, particularly, but he was so happy doing what he did. And what he did made such a difference. And at the time, I had a pretty good job for a woman. I didn't do my own typing anymore. There was a pool of secretaries. They had a man in charge of them, but I would dictate. It was an international division. And so, I had a caseload, it was Kendall Company. I had a caseload of various countries where Kendall would sell their products. But it was just meaningless compared to what he was doing.

So, I wanted to retrain. And I'm kind of, I don't know, I just wasn't the elementary ed. type. So, I was looking around for a program that I could go to easily that was in Boston because I worked in Boston and that would have night [courses] because I was working. And Suffolk had a program, so I could take a couple of courses and see how I felt about it. And I loved the courses here. I loved the faculty. You know, I'd had some pretty good faculty at Colby Junior and at Syracuse, and pretty demanding stuff. The faculty were fabulous here. It was a little cheaper if I went to Boston State. I tried that, but I just didn't like it as well.

So I came here. I chose reading specialization just because I was more cerebral and I liked the idea of doing testing. I just thought that was a little more challenging for me. What I didn't understand was, until I got invested in the program and had matriculated, was I couldn’t get
certified as a reading specialist unless I already had certification as a teacher. So, I ended up having to take elementary ed. anyway. And let me tell you, that was tough at first because you have to be very creative. You have to— It was an amazing experience and I changed. I turned into what it was necessary to be. I opened up. I changed. I grew. It was wonderful. It was really wonderful.

Now, years and years later, I'm getting back in touch with a lot of the earlier things that I used to like, like French and art. But from that moment on, I abandoned all of that. And my road then was education in various formats. So, being at Suffolk then, it was a commuter school back then. I just came at night. Everybody— It was reading specialization, they were all adults. They don't have that program anymore. But actually, when I came back here to work years later, one of my professors was still here. And I took over his classes when he retired and I went part-time as a dean and taught some of his classes. It was just kind of small world.

But anyway, Suffolk was just a school, from my point of view, that was convenient, that had fabulous faculty. I never had a bad faculty member. They were phenomenal; equal to anything I had anywhere else. And I got what I needed. I got certified, I got hired for a job right out of student teaching. So, I went to teach at a junior high, because that's who hired me. What are you going to do, you know? And I ended up loving it. I taught seventh grade reading, the learning disabled are kids with learning disabilities, the kids who but— When you're a teacher, you can teach anything and anybody. So, I enjoyed that and I taught there for five years.

When I graduated from Suffolk with my master’s, the graduation then was in the Hynes Memorial Auditorium. (laughter) And where I went to everything was in Archer and Donahue. I don't know if there was a Sawyer Building, actually. I never had occasion to know. I'm trying to think if the library was there, maybe. I can't remember where the library was. Maybe there was a Sawyer Building1.

1 Suffolk University’s Frank Sawyer Building, which opened in 1981, is located at 8 Ashburton Place.
CHAMSEDDINE: I think it was the library in the beginning until they changed it into the café and everything.

CLARK THAYER: Yeah, okay well, back then, I spent most of my time in Donahue and Archer, and there was a cafeteria downstairs.

CHAMSEDDINE: How has Suffolk changed since you were a student there?

CLARK THAYER: Oh, it’s not commuter anymore, it’s not totally commuter. The big change for me to talk about Suffolk isn’t from when I was a student there; it's from when I started working at Suffolk in 1982. That -the difference between Suffolk in 1982 when I started working here and Suffolk now - I got to watch all that evolution and it has been phenomenal. It's just amazing.

CHAMSEDDINE: What was your first position at Suffolk?

CLARK THAYER: Okay, that was the Learning Center. When I was home with the baby, because I had left on maternity leave and then I didn't go back. I stayed home with the baby for a while. And because I was bored, I got involved in the reading associations. And by getting involved in them and ending up running their conference and being president of it [the State Reading Association] and everything, I networked with a lot of people. And one of the people I networked was a faculty member at Suffolk University. And he had been hired to start a new learning center at Suffolk. Accreditors had come in and pointed out that Suffolk didn't have support service, adequate support services for students. So, they were told they really needed to do something about that. So they wrote a federal grant and got a lot of money to put various things in place. And one of the things to be put in place was a learning center. And Kevin Lyons was the faculty member. He was not tenured at the time. He’d just gotten his doctorate in reading and actually, he was one of the reasons why I got a doctorate, because he’d gotten his doctorate there. He and some other people that I networked with encouraged me to go to BU [Boston University]. They knew the advisor there, and so I was in a program, a doctoral program, in reading at the time.
So, I started out as assistant director part-time. My daughter was three when I went part-time. We were given a room, it was in the Archer Building, it was an empty room, and that's what we had. And Suffolk at the time had a writing center and that was run by a well-liked tenured faculty member in the English department. It was a reading/writing center. I can’t remember if she called it a reading center or not. I know she gave the Nelson-Denny [Reading Test] to everybody who came in, and I'm not sure. But we weren't supposed to do reading, even though both Kevin and I were reading specialists. But she was too, so it wasn’t that. But, we were given this room and we were given another little room around the corner and we were supposed to turn that into a learning center.

So the first thing we did, we had six months that we didn't open, and all we did was visit learning centers in the area and read up on everything about learning centers. Back then, this is in ’82. Suffolk at the time was not diverse except for Southie and East Boston and Charlestown and stuff like that. And it was 100 percent commuter. So, it was very different. The students were amazing, hard workers. Everybody had a job as well as being in school. Almost all of them were first-generation college students. Now, that's not the case because it was their parents who were here back then, you know? But back then, most of the kids’ parents had not gone to college and they saw college as a way up. And Suffolk was less expensive and they could live at home and it was a good school. So, that's really pretty much what was going on.

So we started a tutoring program and I hired students for it. They were really good workers because they were very, very serious, for the most part, about trying to do a good job and trying to pay for their graduate degrees and you know, just— The law school was here and completely overshadowed the college and the business school. Now, it’s not as bad.

CHAMSEDDINE: It's not as bad, but when people are mentioned, like if you mention you're going to Suffolk, they'd be like, “Oh, you're going for law?”

CLARK THAYER: I know, it is amazing. Back then, it was like a given because the law school was in the same building as the rest of us. And thank heavens for them, actually, I guess.
CHAMSEDDINE: So what were your responsibilities at the center?

CLARK THAYER: So in the beginning Kevin—we couldn't do reading—so Kevin and I, we would be doing study skills; learning strategies is what they were called. And one of the things he had us do was go around all over campus and interview people to see what would they like a learning center to do for them. We had read up, we’d done the research and everything, on the kinds of things that were best practice at that time. So, that gave us some ideas. So, we started--He gave me the tutoring program, so I started the tutoring program. And if you go into the learning center here and you look at the plaques on the wall, you go back and look at the very first, those are when I was running—You know and there's one for every year. In the first year, there were three [tutors]. (laughter) Actually, we didn't have a plaque that very first year, we had three work-study students. Now, there's God knows how many in how many programs. I mean, we’d just grown it and grown it.

But anyway, we had a tutoring program that I started. We had something called course component and that was partnering with faculty because computers were new back then. So, we had computers in the learning center. And so faculty who wanted students to do things on the computer— and we had self-study on computer and things like that. Then, they would put that piece [software] in there and assign that homework in the learning center. As the years evolved, that was no longer relevant because everybody had computers. But back then, it was a big deal. Everybody didn't have computers. This is before Windows. I remember one of my tutors coming in and saying, “You know, I just saw this new thing.” I was using Screenwriter, that's what I used for my doctoral dissertation. He said, “It's called Windows. Look at this, let me show you this.”

And so he showed the whole Windows environment. We’d never seen anything like that before. And, of course now, you don't—Nobody doesn't have a Windows, kind of. Even the Macs still have the same kind of framework. But back then, we had to do a kind of course programming to get into a computer and start it. You'd have to do it in basic language. It was very different.
CHAMSEDDINE: What changes have you witnessed at the center over the past sixteen years?

CLARK THAYER: Well, after two years, Kevin got a job at BC [Boston College] starting a new learning center there. By the second year, our tutor program, I think I had—I forget how many. You could look at the plaque for the first plaque, how many tutors I had that year. But I had money, we had the grant money, and I had money. We opened the doors the first year with just a few tutors. But by the second year, I had a cadre of tutors when [Kevin] left. And actually, when he left, we had— There was him, the director, me, the assistant director. We had a full-time coordinator, we had a secretary, and we had our students. And when he left, he took the secretary. (laughter) And so I applied to be the director and they told me that— Well, okay. The president pulled me in after a year. They made me acting director for a year and I had to get a new secretary and the coordinator position couldn't be funded. So, it was me and a bunch of tutors. Thank God they were so good. They were awfully good. I was paying them, and so that was their job and they took it very seriously and they helped me run programs, you know? They ran whole programs for me.

Anyway, the president pulled me in after a year and the learning center was reasonably flourishing. And [he] said, “Okay, we will allow you to be director, but you don't have your doctorate yet and you need to know that if you don’t get it, then you can’t have the job, we’ll take it away.” So, I told him that as far as I was concerned, that if he had pulled me in and told me that I could be director, but I'd have to drop out of my doctoral program, I would have refused him. That nothing was going to keep me from getting my doctorate. I wanted it all my life, I loved it, and he doesn’t have to worry about my completing it. And I did.

Anyway, so then the learning center was fairly small. We were in a place in the Archer Building, those two rooms, and we had gotten furniture. We used the back room for tutoring, private tutoring areas. Originally, I had a desk in the corner of that. The office was a little tiny thing that Kevin had had, and I moved into that. And it had a window onto the bigger room. And we had tables, and we had stacks because we had the course component stuff. By the third year, I went for a grant. We’d lost the federal grant because federal grants are start-up grants. And when you become successful, then they don’t think they need to fund you anymore. So Suffolk had taken
that over. But I went for a grant because I heard of a new program that was called—Well, supplemental instruction. At Suffolk now, it's the study group program. But it was a new idea being put out there nationally because I was going to the national conference in developmental ed. to learn more about the field and everything.

So, I got money from a private foundation to hire a full-timer and to start a study group program. So, now we had three strong programs. And, we offered the services to undergrads and graduates and to law students, too, because the law school was in the same building and they were always demanding services. But, we were mainly supposed to be for undergrads, most of the services were.

Anyway, through those years we just kept growing. I added staff and added staff and added programs and added staff and added students who used us and followed best practice and did my thing. Meanwhile nationally, I was working with the national organization on standards of best practice for academic support programs, learning centers all across the country. So, as I worked on standards, of course I brought them here. But I also learned a lot. I learned about accreditation, I learned about standards, I learned about data, along with my doctoral work.

And that allowed me to have a name, the Dr. Clark Thayer was a name that I— I'd give keynote speeches and do training and eventually we published, we published the standards\(^2\). We’ve just published a revision, it's just out. We had a champagne launch of it last month. But in ’95, we published the standards and then we started a certification program because programs who had gone through the trouble of getting—doing the self-evaluation for best practice standards wanted to be recognized. So then we started up a certification program and that took quite a few years, too.

In the meanwhile, I was running the [Ballotti] learning center and I had— We’d moved down to the building on Cambridge Street, Ridgeway, and we had a beautiful setup there. Originally, it was beautiful, it was big. It got smaller and smaller and smaller as we grew and grew and grew.

\(^2\) Dr. Clark Thayer edited the *NADE Self-Evaluation Guides: Models for Learning Assistance/Developmental Education Programs* (H&H Publishers Company, 1995) which has been called "the primary standard in the field of developmental education against which to measure program effectiveness."
We got more and more staff, more and more students. It just got smaller and smaller. Then its final move was up to where it is now.\(^3\) I wasn't there then, though. Somewhere along the line there, because of my work in standards, because doing it, I was also working at another organization that was developing standards for higher education; so, standards for every office, registrar and financial aid and every kind of office, what's best practice. So, I had a lot of experience in accreditation.

And Suffolk, the College, was coming up for accreditation and so the dean had had me— That's one of the things, I should go back. I was reporting to the head of the counseling center, Ken Garni, at the time, and so was Kevin. But that was just on paper. I really was reporting to Dean Ronayne\(^4\) and going to see him regularly. And eventually, I just went directly— I didn't report to Ken anymore at all. I mean, he ran the counseling center. But we always had a collaborative relationship and we used their doctoral interns for the counseling that we did with our tutors, because our tutors needed counseling. It’s a wonderful program because you want to support tutors. You want to train them so they know what to do, and you want to support them emotionally. And so the whole program is best practice. It’s got all those features.

Anyway, I went to Dean Ronayne and said, “You know what? I'm a director of a department now. I have three”—“ Well, at the time, I had two, “associate directors.” I ended up with three associate directors and two assistant directors and a bunch of— An office manager as it grew and grew. [I] said, “I don't have any home. I have no home. I'm not considered a department chair, even though I am a department chair. And I know that [directors in] the other divisions, they have meetings. You know, the directors all get together with the dean of students. And so I want to come to the chair’s meetings. I want to be one of you and have a home.” So he said, “Okay.”

So almost immediately, I got to start going to the department chairs meetings as a department chair. And I appreciated that. It made such a difference because I could tell what faculty wanted. You know, a learning center is a support service for faculty and students, and you have to stay in

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\(^3\) At the time, the Geno A. Ballotti Learning Center, was located in Suffolk’s Donahue building.

\(^4\) Michael R. Ronayne, Jr. (1937-2005), was dean of the College of Arts and Sciences from 1972 to 2004.
touch with that. So by being part of the department— But then it meant that my colleagues were the other department chairs, and I was on committees and working on the committees and eventually, the dean asked me to chair committees. And eventually, they asked me to be the speaker of the Educational Policy Committee and I was doing all this different stuff. So, when it seemed like the dean’s office was going to expand, seemed like a good idea to all of us, to promote me. And why it could be done because as dean, I could still have the learning center report to me [and also work on accreditation and other dean’s office assignments].

And at the same time, the [Ballotti] learning center had grown to such an extent, there was a special ESL program, but the learning center, one of the ways we grew, was we had a second language program in the learning center. The ESL program was a special entry program, but English as a second language, then, I used a well respected faculty member in the English department and hired her to run an English as a Second Language program because we were doing much more with diversity. We’d had a new enrollment management dean and she got us completely diversified from all over the world. It was fabulous. Oh my God, it's so wonderful to see that change. That was a huge change, you know? The diversity that—

And so, we wanted to grow with that and be able to support everything that was necessary in order to have such a diverse environment that Suffolk was becoming. So, when I became dean, the second language,[and ESL] were separated. It had been all the same, when the second language services was one part of my learning center. But when I became dean, second language services was actually melded with ESL program and the learning center, Ballotti Center by then, went one way and the second language services went another way and the two of them reported to me as dean.5

And then the third piece of it was the advising center, and I started that and David Gallant reported to me also. Since then, the learning center has evolved. Still, it continues to do that.

**CHAMSEDDINE:** What changes would you like to see at the center?

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5 Eventually the ESL program and Second Language Services department were combined into one program.
CLARK THAYER: I haven’t kept track with them for the past few years. We hired a good director who was a developmental educator. The original director was a developmental educator, which means they read the literature. They're not a faculty member who would rather be a full-time faculty member and has to work on academic support kinds of things. These are people whose careers are in best practices of academic support, learning theory and comprehension theory and what programs look like that really help students.

One of the things about a learning center is it needs to be comfortable for everyone. It’s not like a special needs classroom in high school. No, it's a vibrant growth-oriented become-your-best-facilitator. So usually, when you look at the numbers, the data, for people who utilize the learning center, at least— Well, you're doing well if it’s 50 percent. Sometimes, it's more than 50 percent, are the good students because good students use resources and they want an A. And the minute a good student thinks they're not going to get an A in a class, they come rushing into the learning center because they freak and they want to have help with it. And, of course, that's what learning center’s main [goal] is, how to be the best student you can be. There's techniques for it, you know?

So, that’s what it's about so it was open to everybody. So that's why students who are on academic standing, for instance, will be directed to one of the programs there which is for them. But students who use the study group program or the tutoring program, everybody uses those; students who are at risk as well as good students. And it’s important to have that environment that you don’t feel somehow you're lacking because you utilize those services. It's part of our life here, it’s part of what the university offers. And it’s true in universities all across the country. They all have them. Some of them have separate developmental courses, which we never did. Although, yeah, in the English [and Math] department they had a couple of them. I don't know if they still do, and math.

But it was always an evolution so that through the years if somebody needed, like in the beginning, the math department had no tutoring. So the learning center did tutoring for them. I negotiated with the head of the math department. He would throw some money my way and I would hire and train the tutors so they could tutor his courses. When he didn't need it anymore
and he started his own, then we just collaborated with his own [tutor program]. You know, I mean it was like that, where the economics department, different departments want to do their own thing. But until then, we would do it for them. Always you tried to collaborate and figure out the goal is to help the students. That's what it’s all about, what will help the students. And all students, all students, regardless of their level of expertise, their background, whatever it is, the mission of a learning center is to facilitate every student to be the best student they can be, to reach their goals even if their goal is to leave. Then a good learning center will facilitate a student being able to leave comfortably while still being able to come back when they're ready. It’s about the person. And the minute you get a learning center that isn’t about the human being involved, then it’s just not as successful.

**CHAMSEDDINE:** Can you tell me about some memorable experiences at the center?

**CLARK THAYER:** Too many. Let me think if there's anything that would be of interest to you. — I'd say the memorable experiences were the growth. Watching it from this empty room to the big, huge center that was down at Ridgeway, and that getting too small and then to the center here and seeing it flourish so, seeing it still go on, seeing it still make a difference. All the different times,— working with the tutors was a wonderful thing, too. That's a good one. Because when I was having to write up what we’d achieved after the first few years, and so I'm looking at the data of how many students utilized us, how many stayed at least five sessions. Because we’d figured out, we could make a change in a grade for someone if they stayed at least five. If they didn't stay five sessions, then we couldn’t manage an impact. But if they came to a tutor at least five times, then we could show data that their grade was improved.

Looking at those kinds of things, and seeing people who had been upset and now they're feeling better about themselves, because part of it is how you feel about yourself, don’t feel like a failure, you feel good about yourself. When you come in, you might feel hopeless. You don't feel hopeless when you leave. You've got tools, you know what you're going to do and so that's what it was about. Then it dawned on me, wait a minute. We've made a huge impact on the tutors. These are the good students who had no home, you know? I mean, now, it’s not like that. In the beginning, in the very beginning, good students didn't have places to meet each other in classes
and everything. When they were at the learning center, here you were, they were math students, they were business students, they were English students, they were history students and they were really good. And they were with all the really good students, and they were all talking about where they were going to go to graduate school and they could share those things. And the camaraderie, because remember it was initially a commuter school, so it was their home on campus. It became their home and that's how they made friends. Now, you don't feel so left out because there's no residence hall. There were activities, but the hangout of the learning center for the tutors then became a huge issue.

So, I named it the Advantage Program and I started taking credit for it. That what we did is we offered something valuable to give to students as well. So, we were helping all levels of students in various ways because this Advantage Program was every bit as meaningful in terms of retention of good students as the other programs were for the retention of students who were at risk. And that was tremendously satisfying. In working with those kids year after year, just wonderful.

When I look at those plaques on the wall, I remember those kids and how hard it was when they graduate. (laughs) And we were having hundreds of kids working for— There were some that worked for the front desk and they didn't have to have good GPAs or anything. They were working the front desk, but they could be part of the community working at the front desk. They’d be work-study students. It was really great.

**CHAMSEDDINE:** That sounds really interesting. Why did you leave the center to become the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Suffolk University?

**CLARK THAYER:** I was ready. I was ready to get— I love administration and I loved running the learning center. But it had grown and grown and grown, and I'd been doing it for quite a while and I loved the stuff I was doing. I loved being the speaker of the Educational Policy Committee and I enjoyed working on the second language— I pulled a group together, the dean
asked me to do that, pull a group together to work together on [second language issues]. It was very challenging, very. But ultimately, I really liked it and I liked working on accreditation. After working on standards for all those years and working on that higher ed. thing, I was getting really skilled on it. So to work on that all the time was just a thrill. And, I could still help make some of the decisions for the learning center and the academic support, all the academic support services, because they reported to me. So, it wasn't as though I wasn't going to participate at all or be able to consult in any way. But somebody else would run them, the people who I put in charge I felt really confident with. And then I was free to work on this other stuff. And everything the dean gave me, I loved, no matter what it was. And he gave me everything. Anything that came down the pike, if I happened to be standing there, he’d ask me to do it. And I loved it all, I just loved it.

At first, I didn't have an office. At first, [after] I left the learning center and I had an apartment on Mt. Vernon Street that I stayed in a couple of nights a week. I shared it with some other administrators, and I was working out of there. Then, they gave me an office over in another building, the Claflin Building. We don't own that anymore, but we used to. And so I had an office over there. My secretary was down in the dean’s office, which was in the Archer Building at the time. And then I started, because it was so hard to work up there when everybody was down here. So, then there was the Munce Conference Room. I don't know if you've ever been in there for an event, but the Munce Conference Room is the one up on Derne [Street], and it has a closet so I put my stuff in the closet and worked in the conference room if there wasn't any meeting in there.

If the Associate Dean, Robbins, was out, was gone on a trip or something, he traveled a lot, then I could use his office because my secretary was right there. Or, if a secretary was out, I would use their desk. Then, they gave me a desk upstairs in what is now the faculty lounge. So, I had that as my office. I had all my stuff there, that was nice. I mean at least it was a real office, and it was in the same building. My secretary was two— However many, four flights down, but still

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6 The committee included representatives from the English Department, ESL, Second Language Services and Counseling.
same building. Then the dean’s office moved over to Donahue and we all got our own office and everything, you know?

**CHAMSEDDINE:** What was your role as the dean?

**CLARK THAYER:** Mainly accreditation, academic support services, which is advising, second language, learning center, freshman year experience. Accreditation was big because the university was being accredited and I ended up taking over the whole university accreditation. Strategic planning, I did a lot of strategic planning. I ran committees, lots of committees. It evolved through the years. First, it was just college stuff but eventually it was— There was an academic support services committee that included the directors, of course the learning center, second language services, but also the student retention director, the math support services, the writing center -- anything in undergrad, not law school, but in undergrad that had anything to do with support services. It was a way to get them to communicate with each other so that if a student's name, for instance, came up as at risk, that poor soul wouldn't be getting fifteen phone calls from all these different departments. They would coordinate their efforts around who was best to reach out to this student, who could help the most, those kinds of things. And share with each other what they were doing, that was one of them.

Another one was the testing coming in and data collection for evaluation, because that's what accreditors want. They want you to be able to prove that what you did worked. And by what you did worked, it isn’t just— the first year we had ten students and then we had fifty and then we had a hundred and everybody loves us and they keep coming in. No, they want to know if what you are learning here did you grow, did you change, did you learn it? What is it they want you to know as a journalist? What are you supposed to know when you leave as a journalist? Somebody somewhere has identified what that is, and they have a way to prove that you learned it by the time that— Or, at least fifty percent of everybody learned those basic things by the time they graduated.

In the learning center, it would be that we could help students be successful and would have to come up with ways to do that. But it was the case all across the college so that we’d look at
everything and say, “Okay. You have a freshman year experience. Is it working? How do you know?” And they have all kinds— Now, we have this wonderful freshman year— Well yeah, the freshman year experience, but we have the seminar in the college. There's ways that they take a look to see, did those— are you getting from that seminar what you're supposed to be getting from it, and how do we know? That philosophy is what I worked with, along with anything else that came down the pike.

**CHAMSEDDINE:** What were some challenges of this position?

**CLARK THAYER:** Not the learning center position, you mean the—?

**CHAMSEDDINE:** Being a dean?

**CLARK THAYER:** Being a dean?

**CHAMSEDDINE:** Yes?

**CLARK THAYER:** You have to be very patient. To make change, when you're a dean— You can make change. It’s very exciting. You can have an idea and you can make it happen. You can do that as a director of a department, too. It’s so exciting. But, you can’t force it. The best leaders are not dictators, you know? You need to bring people on board and to be able to do that, you have to have patience. So, if I get an idea or I learn something, I go to a conference and learn what best practice was and it’s supposed to be this way, and we're not doing it that way, we're not doing it best practice. It’s not working and we're not doing it best practice and that's why it’s not working. But, nobody wants to hear me walk in and say, “Okay, I've got the answer. This is how we're going to do it from now on.” That's not the way you work. You have to go through a process in order to make change.

And it takes usually a little while, maybe a year or two. But start small, do pilots. There were so many times that I've done that and as long as you're patient and you don’t have to have a change immediately, the sense of satisfaction when you finally achieve it, you know? Wow, that's
awesome. Because you know everybody's going to be better for it. But, you know, first pass, actually that's good, something for you to know in your life. If there's something, not in a negative way, though, I don't want you using it. (laughter) But sometimes you come up with a new idea. Like, “Gee, I'd like to go study at this Madrid campus.” And your parents freak. Like, “What, are you kidding me?”

Or, I go into— Well, here's the story, here's how I learned this. It was in the early days of me being the director of the learning center and I was trying to come up with funding any way I could. I was being creative. And the math chairman, his office was next door and so we were talking quite a bit and collaborating and we came up with some kind of idea. I've never remembered what it was, but it was some kind of idea that we felt would be good for the students and we could collaborate on it, but we would need some funding.

So, Dr. Ezust said, “Let’s go ask the dean.” Now, the dean had always been wonderful with me. I just thought he was wonderful. He was kind of like a father to me. Anyway, so we go in there and we sit in the chairs in front of him and we pitch this idea. And he had a fit. He’s yelling [about budgets], I'd never seen anything like it. And so we leave, and we're walking down the hall and I say to him [Dr. Ezust], “Well, so much for that idea.” And he says, “No, no, no. First pass.” And he was right. He was right. We had to wait for the dean to get used to it. So we mentioned it the first time. And when the timing was right, we’d mention it a second time. And you bring it in in different ways and eventually, it’s not a new idea anymore. And then you figure out how can— If you say, then, “Let us try it for one year, or six months, a pilot, just six months,” so that way you wouldn’t have to—Or, I used to do it by getting somebody else to pay for half. “If you pay half, I can get Communications to pay half.” Then, by the second year, if it was any good, then it was making a difference and they'd be willing to pick it up.

But you know, it's very hard to start something new. Those kinds of things are tricky and you have to hear other people's issues. You have to hear what their concerns are and see how you can reach the goal. If you could find that you have the same goal, and to do that it had to be pretty high up. So if the goal is to help students stay in school, for instance, and I have shown that there's a group of students who come from a certain feeder school that tend to come here and
always fail, there's something about that feeder school they're not getting. So, what do we do about that? Either we don’t recruit from that school because they can’t succeed here, or we do an outreach either with the school and partner with the school, or we identify those students and as soon as they come on campus, we have a special program for them. Whatever, it’s a new idea, it needs new money. There's so many places to put money, how do you— But that's part of having that kind of a job, to make those things happen. It’s so fulfilling. But it’s very challenging, too, and frustrating.

CHAMSEDDINE: How does this position as being the dean relate to your career goals? Was it ever a goal?

CLARK THAYER: I think I always wanted to be an administrator. It was very frustrating when I got out of college and a woman couldn’t be an administrator. And I didn't know how to ask. I didn't know how— I just knew I liked making things happen. So, probably it was that. Yeah, I would have just gone on and on and on.

CHAMSEDDINE: How did Suffolk change during your career there?

CLARK THAYER: It has become a school with residents, which it was commuter only when I first started. It is incredibly diverse now. The enrichment of the school is just phenomenal. The mission of the school has always been the same, which is nice. I've watched that and the mission is opportunity and excellence, which sounds kind of glib and everything, but there's a huge commitment to that. There's a huge commitment to respecting diversity, to respecting everyone, to giving everyone the richest education that's possible to give, but in a supportive environment so that faculty know your name. So that people are humans, so that teaching— Research does not trump teaching like it does in some of the research institutions where the students are kind of a by-product kind of thing. This school has never had that mission. And has have grown and become more and more and more excellent in the kinds of things like the scholars program— There’s wonderful things going on in all the schools, the law school, the business school and the college, that have strengthened them tremendously in terms of enrichment.
But the mission has never changed. The mission is about students and students who you want to take a chance on and you want to help them through the struggle and help them go on and be what they want to be. That's a great mission. That's why people stay here so long, administrators, because you can believe in that mission. It’s something that you can give your life to. And many of us have.

**CHAMSEDDINE:** What are your impressions of Suffolk students?

**CLARK THAYER:** I love Suffolk students. I've taught them, I've had them as tutors. I've had them as clients, back in the beginning when I was tutoring. Suffolk students have traditionally—this has changed some with the residence hall—but traditionally, they were first-generation college students who were not wealthy, particularly, but hard working, valued an education and really wanted it. It wasn’t that they couldn’t play. The Red Hat\(^7\) has been there forever. That's probably not so big anymore. For the longest time, the Red Hat was the only place that everybody went. Now, there's so many more places.

But they're creative. Now, they're tremendously diverse and tolerant, which I love about the university because the students seem to reflect the tolerance that is the mission of the place. Do you feel that, do you experience that?

**CHAMSEDDINE:** Yes, I actually do. And honestly, this school is completely amazing. I love it, I don't know. Like the professors, they're all kind. They definitely try everything in their power to help you become better. I don't know, first semester I was helped so much with my writing skills and all the professors would help you become better. And it's like they care about the students a lot here.

**CLARK THAYER:** They really do.

**CHAMSEDDINE:** I think that's what makes the students—

\(^7\) The Red Hat restaurant, located at 9 Bowdoin St. on the edge of the Suffolk University campus, has been a popular neighborhood restaurant and bar.
CLARK THAYER: It’s the ethic of the place. There's always been this ethic, this mission, this sense of humanity that has continued on, even as we grew, even as we added buildings, even as we added students; bigger, bigger, bigger. You know, all of that? But we've never lost that, really. And I just retired last summer, so it’s still— And as emeritus, I can come back all the time. It's a wonderful, wonderful place. And the students have always made it a joy. They're not particularly entitled. I mean, the students that I went to college with at Syracuse were nothing like the students here. They didn't value it particularly, it was just something you did, you know? But Suffolk makes an enormous effort to get everybody engaged if they possibly can. And certainly if anybody’s in academic trouble, there's a million ways to reach out.

CHAMSEDDINE: So many ways.

CLARK THAYER: So many ways to reach out.

CHAMSEDDINE: Which I think is really helpful because a lot of schools don’t really do that for you.

CLARK THAYER: Yeah, that's part of what I was involved with from ’82 to 2008; making that happen. And it was tremendously fulfilling.

CHAMSEDDINE: Are there any other specific memories from your Suffolk career that you would like to share?

CLARK THAYER: I'm trying to think, is there anything you need to—You know I'm sure there's something.

CHAMSEDDINE: Anything that you remember that you would never forget, other than—

CLARK THAYER: What I've already said?
CHAMSEDDINE: Yeah, basically? (laughter)

CLARK THAYER: I don't know if there's anything much left. (laughs)

CHAMSEDDINE: Okay. Can you tell me about some of your publications?

CLARK THAYER: Well, my major contribution to the field has been not like a historian or a Shakespearean scholar, that kind of thing where they write books and contribute to the field that way. My contribution to the field has been in developmental education, which is academic support. And that has been this work, life’s work, of preparing standards of best practice for a learning center, any kind of academic support service. So, all across the country, academic support services— See, if you follow the standards that have been written, there's a self-evaluation guide. And so it’s something that’s— You look at it and you ask yourself— You look at these statements and see if you follow them. Do you have a mission? Does everyone know your mission? Do you have training for your tutors? All these different components that research shows us good programs have.

Any time we could look across the country at programs who could prove that what they do for students makes a difference. That if a student comes to their tutor program or their study group program, or whatever it is, that student will do better and they can prove it. So, you look at that. Okay, so here's ten programs who can prove it. What is it about those ten programs that they're so successful when so many others can’t prove it? They can’t. They just think that they— You know, but they can’t prove it.

And if you try to get them [a program] to prove it, they discover suddenly, “Oh my gosh, we weren't as good as we thought we were, because we just thought. But actually, we have a lot of people coming in, but actually we have no evidence whatsoever that they did better in school.” So you look at the ten programs that do it, do better, and see what's common about every one of them? Every one of them has a mission. Every one of them has training for their tutors or study group leaders, training and support. Not just training, but training and support. Every one of them have evaluation so that every one of them is looking at the end of every semester and every
year about what happened, what were the patterns, what worked, what didn't work, and tried to strengthen it, those kinds of things. Those are all behaviors that it is known will bring success.

So, when it was published in 1995, and people all over the country started using it, the quality of programs started going up. Programs started being able to get more funding because suddenly they had the ammunition to say, “Look, we're making a difference and I can prove it.” And so there started to be a change all across the country in terms of what people did in designing their programs. And then when we started certification and programs started applying for certification and going through certification, that's just made it even better because any program that's certified— And now, there's a lot of programs (laughter) across the country that are certified. I don't remember exactly how many. But every one of them, every one that gets certified is a program that can prove that it makes a difference in students’ lives. Not just say it, not just think it, they can prove that they do the right thing so they know that they make that kind of difference in everything they do.

[Having a self-evaluation guide and certification program], that's a huge contribution to the field, and I am thrilled to be recognized for that. So, I was made a fellow because of that contribution to the field. And when I went to the conference last month, when we published the revision, an update on those standards, it was going strong, it was going strong. The certification that we started, two other women and I started it a few years— I don't know, five, ten years ago and now it’s just flourishing and it’s not going to stop. The fact that we're not doing it anymore won't matter because it’s going to go on. And so will the standards, too. That's my major publication. I had other publications, journal articles and stuff. But they're nothing compared to that.

CHAMSEDDINE: Why did you decide to retire?

CLARK THAYER: I got burnt out. I just got exhausted because I lived for work for a real long time. I loved what I did, I loved it. So, I used to come in during the week and stay at our apartment in Boston and then go home on the weekends. So that when I came in— so Monday morning when I came to the office, I would be— That whole week, I would just focus totally on work. And I'd work late, I'd come in early. You know, I did it for years and years and years and
absolutely loved it. But after a while, I got tired. And I had some losses that I think stressed me out in a row. A best friend, and then my dog, and then my mom, and I was very close to my mom, and then my brother-in-law. I took each one, but they wore me down. You know, each thing kind of wore me down.

And I think I just— I just got exhausted. I couldn't get enough— I couldn’t breathe anymore. I needed freedom. I needed to be free. And so I negotiated that. It was such a thrill. First I thought, “Okay, all I need is a sabbatical and then I'll come back and I'll be fine.” Didn't work. A whole year out, then I was working on the standards and I just— And I was preparing my classes. I figured, “Well, I'll teach instead because that's not as rigorous a schedule as being administrator is.” But even that, I loved being in the classroom, but correcting the papers and preparing the classes and just coming out, I had a late night class where I'd be going home at ten at night, 10:30, just dragging. Just so tired, I can’t— Oh, it was just— I just felt overwhelmed by it. And instead of having fun, I always used to love meetings; I started being bored. I always used to— Give me a new project, I couldn't wait to get going on it. Not anymore. Tired. Just tired. And since I've retired, it's been the most wonderful thing. It’s just been wonderful. I am so happy. I look back on my life and I have so many wonderful memories, wonderful memories. I loved what I was doing when I was here. I loved the people, I loved everything.

And now, we've moved to this community. I'm in art class again. I just joined a French conversation group. I just finished a citizen’s police academy course, which was a lot of fun. And I read, read and read any time I feel like it. And I travel and this is a wonderful, rich time in my life. And, I can come in here any time I want to and go into any of the presentations. It's a wonderful time in my life and I hope other people will understand. It's [retirement] not something to fear, it’s another time in your life. It's not that you're put out to pasture; it doesn’t have to be that way. You know, it can be a really vital, exciting, vibrant time. So, I've been blessed, so blessed.

CHAMSEDDINE: Are you involved in any new endeavors, other than painting or—?

CLARK THAYER: (laughs) Ping-Pong.
CHAMSEDDINE: Ping-Pong? (laughs)

CLARK THAYER: Painting class. Eventually, I'm going to do a sculpture class. I just finished the publication. I don’t want to do publication, although there is one article that I would like to write. It’s on the politics of making change. I would like to write that. I gave a keynote on it a couple of times. I'll see if I feel like it. The beauty is I don't have to do anything I don't feel like. But the art class I'm very excited about. There's a sculpture class I would kind of like to take. They have a broadcast studio there and they encourage anybody— Like, if you want to learn about broadcasting, then you just join the group that does the broadcasting. They have a TV station that they— Channel Six is their TV station. And if you want to learn to work the cameras, if you want to be a director, if you want to be in front of the cameras, if you want to work the computers, they'll teach you any of that. So somewhere down the line, it's like unopened presents. I think I'd like to do that.

I just was in a style show for Chico’s, what a hoot that was. I mean, all my life, what have I done? I have gone to school, I have run committees, thought about education; all mind work. And really, when I was home with the baby when I was younger, I hated not having mind work. This is just a really neat time. There's so much of interest that is tickling, I think, new parts of my brain. Probably my right brain, whereas I was charging my left brain so much. So that's nice. There's lots of things. They have a series of courses, my husband signed up for Frontier Women, which I thought sounded interesting, and a digital camera class. There was one, Understanding China, that I thought I would like to do, but I'm not ready yet. I mean, classes again? Give me a break. I want to be free for the moment.

CHAMSEDDINE: Yes. Do you miss working at Suffolk University?

CLARK THAYER: No. It’s nothing against Suffolk, I just don't miss working. I just don't miss working. But when I think back on how I loved when I was here, how happy I was, I was so happy when I worked here. I would go into meetings and love seeing the people in the meetings. That's why I like going to meetings, because I love seeing the people. I used to love it. I'd walk in
my office in the morning and just feel so good. You know, if you could find a job that you love, there's just nothing like it, the feeling of it. It's just wonderful.

**CHAMSEDDINE:** Is there anything else you would like to add?

**CLARK THAYER:** No, I don't think so. I think I've done enough. (Chamseddine laughs) I'm sure I'll think of something that was so important and pithy, but we'll have to do without it.

**CHAMSEDDINE:** Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW