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**IMSA Oral History – Interviews from July 18th 2009**

Participants: Dr. Leon Lederman, Stephen Moore ’89, Jill Mitchell ’89, Rebecca Arnal ’89, and Dr. Stephanie Pace Marshall

**Stephen:** I first heard about IMSA, I was going to a tiny high school, a parochial high school called Central Catholic High School in Bloomington Illinois, which was a great little high school. And I had a lot of friends there and was having a great time, but I didn’t feel like … the teachers ended up having to put me in other classes by myself. They would send me out of class to play around in the physics lab because I was sort of, I wasn’t disruptive in a disciplinary way, but I was disruptive because I had too many questions about what the next thing was that we were going to learn about. And so they sent me off with the book to explore on my own, which was great in its own way. But I knew there were other smart kids out there that I could interact with if I could only find them. And then somebody from the guidance counselor’s office gave me a brochure that had been passed out apparently to all of the schools. And I brought it home, and I begged my parents to let me apply. And they were a little worried. It seemed like a young age to let somebody go off to boarding school. But we came up and had the first meeting. I remember over the course, of how many was it in July before we actually started? And they could tell that I was so excited to come that they had to let me come. So that’s my story

**Jill:** I can’t remember exactly how I heard about it. I was going to the Elgin Academy, just a little bit up north in the Fox Valley. Both my parents were in education, so I think they were probably just keeping tabs on what was coming, and saw this was a good opportunity and probably planted it in my brain without me realizing it. And then I convinced my best friend at Elgin Academy to apply with me. We thought it would be fabulous to be roommates and that we would have a lot of fun away from home. So we both applied, and I got in and she did not unfortunately. So that was a very rough moment. But after looking at it, it was such an amazing opportunity. It was really hard to say “no” in an adventure. So while Elgin Academy was a great school as well … I mean nothing can compare to what the promise of this was, and then it turned out to be academically. So even though it was difficult to leave her, I decided to come down for the adventure.

**Rebecca:** Well I went to DeKalb High School, and I think I was spending about 15 minutes a night on homework and getting straight A’s and a couple A-pluses. And the guidance counselor told me that “you can’t add extra classes” because they didn’t have room. But I could work as a secretary in the office, so I said, “well we need to look for something else here.” So, I think I sort of applied on a whim, and got in. And when we came to hear about the school, I remember being in the auditorium and I remember one of the things that they promised us was a TV studio. And I thought well that sounded exciting. We didn’t get it when we were there. Yeah it sounded like a fun adventure and a little bit like going away to a long-term summer camp. And I had this feeling that I could go and try it out and sort of see what it was like. I remember too that before we started, we were asked to read Megatrons. I’d love to go back and read that now. It was a great book too because reflecting back on it, I think one of the major points was that we were going to be entering the Information Age. And this was before e-mail and the Internet, so it would be interesting to go back and read that now.

**Stephen:** I see it every time I go into a thrift shop. It’s always there.
Stephanie: I’d totally forgotten about that. That’s true. That was a very big decision. Did you have any idea about the academic environment when we talked about the IMSA promise, what did we promise beyond the TV screen and what else did we promise that resonated with you because you’re fourteen or fifteen? Sometimes when adults promise it’s yadayadayada.

Rebecca: Yeah but I think if you have a drive for education and you enjoy it, and you are smart and you are craving that knowledge, or if it’s of high value in your household, as I know it was in mine, you’re constantly seeking that out. Even though I was going to what was considered a pretty good school, I wasn’t always extremely challenged and I think that this was described as a place that was kind of going to be a bridge between a little bit of high school and a little bit of college. And that was the feeling that we had. And I think that was exciting for all of us. And we were all kind of craving that, even if we didn’t fully realize it in our young minds. It was something that we can tell was the right thing to do. And then we would all get terrified before coming back here every weekend. But then when we got here, we were fine again, that Sunday night angst, you know.

Stephanie: Well we were terrified too when you left because I remember the first extended, Connie and I went into all of your rooms because there weren’t any dorms, you were living here, just to see if you had taken all of your bed things with you. And would you come back?

Rebecca: We lost a lot of people.

Jill: How many did we? Did we know?

Stephanie: Well, you know, I can’t remember.

Leon: Were the defections worse in the beginning than the ones from this class?

Stephanie: Well, you know they are real numbers so I don’t even want to speculate, because I don’t remember losing a huge number. But now our quote/unquote attrition rate is around fourteen percent.

Jill: It’s hard, I mean your coming so young, and it’s just a hard transition.

Rebecca: It was so intense that first year too because I remember coming in and we were taking eight classes at a time or so, and I think the teachers were told that we were college ready. And I think the level was a little too high.

Stephen: It was pretty high.

Leon: Looking back now at your experience, is there anything that stands out, a great teacher, someone who inspires you in string theory, or other social study breakthroughs?

Stephen: This is a bit of a general thing that has stood out to me for years is that, I mean, when I came I expected that there would be a fantastic faculty for math and science. And indeed there were. But I also was very surprised and delighted to learn that there was absolutely fantastic faculty for the humanities, Bill Stepien, Bernie Hollister. All of the English faculty were pretty cool. Elia Lopez. I mean they were great. And I don’t know, I don’t think that either of you know this but I spent fifteen years as a playwright after I got out of college. And that spark was instilled in me, back in those days by Babs Taylor and that crowd. And there was a lot of performance energy and humanities energy. And you guys did a great job of making it a place where you could a very well rounded education and be inspired by cross disciplinary.

Rebecca: All of the faculty were wonderful and they were also for that first year they had to be supportive in more ways than most high school faculty because we were living here, so you now it feels
like family in that way. But social science, humanity, support, incredible. And we did so much. One of the appeals for me to come here was just the innovative approach, and the cross-disciplinary, interdisciplinary approaches. And we were always sort of working outside of the bounds in the social sciences. Always doing the graves.

**Stephanie:** We've heard that story three times.

**Leon:** How many scientists did we turn off?

**Jill:** Also yeah don't just read The Tempest. Dr. Clark had us all directing it and putting on scenes from The Tempest for each other. And that's the way it should be done.

**Rebecca:** It just encourages so much creativity, which I think you know encourages the scientific approach. And for me that carried though with everything I did because I ended up getting a doctorate in medical anthropology and psychocultural studies. And my dissertation crossed psychoneuroimmunology and health psychology and anthropology, and that was a very unique thing. What I have recalled is that before we came here in that July meeting or so we were hearing about, coming here and still deciding, we were told that the dorms would not be ready for about four to six weeks.

**Stephanie:** And we really believed that.

Rebecca: I agree. I think everyone believed that, and I think we were also told we would have no more than six or so roommates in a room. And so we show up the first day and we have thirty.

**Jill:** It was like that Goldie Hawn movie where she joins the army and we were all like what are we doing?

**Rebecca:** For eight months.

**Jill:** What's happening?

**Stephen:** Was it really eight months?

**Rebecca:** It was eight months, we moved in the last month.

**Stephanie:** We thought it was going to be thanksgiving right? And that didn't happen.

**Rebecca:** It was an intense bonding time, and I wouldn't of traded that. It was very much like boot camp in the way of intensity of academics. And the fact that there was not, we had to set up all the clubs, we had to set up all the sports. So we didn't have those outlets naturally. So people got creative there too.

**Jill:** Yeah it was creating our school while living in it at the same time and that was something that you can't trade. And I almost feel bad for some of these classes now that they don't have to go through that because part of that was half of our IMSA experience. That we got to create our own.

**Stephanie:** You know it was a co-creation. I mean it really was.

**Jill:** I think we all feel honored to be able to have done that, I know I do.

**Stephen:** I wonder if its evolved over the years? I Unfortunately have had to live so far away I haven’t had a lot of contact, but the IMSA way back then seemed to be, it had a lot to do with this cross-disciplinary approach. Had a lot to do with kind of willing, being willing to open the doors to exploration in a deep way. You would be really encouraged by teachers not only to discover truths for ourselves that were already waiting out there in their mind to be discovered, but to truly explore as partners with them into a space. And I think that's extremely rare, certainly at the high school level and I think even at the
college level it's going to be very rare. So, it is a big influence to feel like your empowered to be inventive with your peers and collaborators, into really new space.

Leon: Did you pick teachers (which I didn’t know anything about that process) that would be congenial to this sort of thing?

Stephanie: Absolutely.

Leon: So each of them was picked with that quality in mind of throwing the textbook on the garbage can.

Stephanie: There were two questions that I always used for faculty, how does the language that you speak inform and enhance the language of mathematics and science? If it was a humanities person, how does the language that you speak, poetry or whatever, inform and enhance the language of mathematics and science, and then conversely. How does the language of biology, or whatever inform and enhance. So it was always a question, and it was the rare faculty person who could answer that question. The people that we hired were typically those who said, “that’s a fantastic question, can I think about it and get back to you?” I tell them, that's a perfect answer. Somewhat I didn’t expect people to have an answer, but many said I have never thought about my discipline as a language. I have to really think about that, which is true to your point. So it was very intentional.

Stephen: There was a combination I mean looking back at it those teachers had a certain combination of obviously they were brilliant at pedagogy themselves, but they were also, they had a certain humility about being with students, and they had a feeling that this was really an effort to be taken on in cooperation. And that’s, its hard to find someone that functions at such a high level and who’s still willing to step away when they feel like […]

Stephanie: So there wasn’t an expert in the classroom?

Stephen: Well they certainly were. They were experts and we looked at them for expertise.

Jill: Yeah there was definitely leadership there, and they drew energy from us I think and were excited for to learn from what we were discovering, and then enhance their own teaching and excitement as well. It was just like this sort of self-generating energy machine I think in terms of education you know.

Rebecca: I think they had to be that way because there were some students that were literally geniuses right. There were some of us that were smart but worked hard. And you know, but they were really, you’re right a lot of the faculty were able to work with that challenge and build on it, and encourage the creativity and encourage the pioneering approach. I think pioneer does fit innovative.

Jill: I think there’s a reason that what we call the pits in the school are so symbolic to us. And it’s because I mean I remember being so fascinated the first time that I walked into a class and they announced that if it was a language class I was in or an English class they announced that we were literally joining some other math class or some other classroom that day, and we would converge in the pit and have a couple of co-classes together where the subject matter would cross over or all of the conversations we had in there and all of the club meetings and it was in terms of the IMSA way it’s just this bringing together of all of these people, all of these thoughts from different disciplines, and they would all assemble in this town center that would be the pit. All of us living together too is such a key part of making that educational magic happen. And to me it’s just symbolic of all that.

Stephanie: When you look at your careers now do you see any seeds or do you personally attribute the IMSA experience and what you were allowed to do and encouraged to do and hear, do you see any seeds
that link right to who you have become and what you’re doing now with your life? You’ve alluded to that and your playwriting and you certainly have in your research.

**Stephen:** I certainly have. I mean there many ways to answer that question. The first thing that comes to mind though actually is in terms of my parenting. I have a 13-year-old son, and I am very adamant that he get, not just a good education, but that kind of education. He’s very bright thankfully. I would have loved him anyway, but it’s great to have enough of an understanding when I go into parent/teacher meetings of, here is what I need this to be like and if you can’t do that then we’ll have to have more conversations. I’m not unreasonable but I want him to feel like there is that kind of education is available to him.

**Leon:** How many of your plays were produced?

**Stephen:** All of them.

**Leon:** All of them.

**Stephen:** Well I produced them myself.

**Leon:** Where did they get produced?

**Stephen:** In Austin Texas and in New York a little bit.

**Jill:** Well I work in advertising so I don’t know if I can draw direct line to it, but in some ways I think you gain a lot of insight into society and culture through all of the things that we studied here and I actually was an art history major and a lot of that I attribute to Dr. Clark and English. But I remember when we graduated and I was going out to Wellesley College in Boston, and he made me promise that within the first month of getting there that I would find the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, that I would go there, I would sit in the courtyard, and I would think about my IMSA experience before I launched into my next one. And that became my place of peace and solace in Boston. Whenever I had to figure something out, I would go and sit in that courtyard and think about him and think about just a lot of the experiences that we had in terms of education. And I still go back when I visit Boston and I try to get there and I realize just the art in there and all of the lessons and everything. And I became an art history major, which actually had a lot of influence on my career in advertising in terms of being able to analyze things and understand society and culture and that was an important part of our studies here. So it doesn’t seem like it might be a direct line, but this place has influenced everything that I’ve done in education and the way that I think. Just the way that I think as a human being.

**Stephanie:** Well you were the reason for everything, so that’s wonderful.

**Leon:** One of the first words my new Senator said to me, his name was Obama, he’s the other guy that was involved in that school out there in Aurora. So he knew about it. So I hope he’s continuing to know about it.

**Stephanie:** Oh yeah he knows a lot about it. So this is a part of our oral history. Is there anything you all want to say? For the record?

**Jill:** This place is amazing. It needs to stay open. I’m just grateful. It’s the only word that comes to mind. It’s the singular most fantastic educational experience that I’ve had. I mean I went to a very well respected college. It was great, but nothing can quite compare to the unique experience that we had here and started here and I’m just honored to have been a part of it.

**Leon:** That’s very true.
Jill: We were talking about the bus down to Springfield that year.

Leon: Well that was this class that went down there. They were going to give us just enough money to finish up.

Stephanie: Well they gave us half. The deal was, the handshake that I had the first year was you add a class a year and we’ll increase your dollars. And they didn’t do that and so the recommendation was just un-invite the second class. And I said to the Board, my recommendation, it was the Board’s decision but my recommendation is we run till the money runs out and close on December 31st if we don’t get our money. And I was very serious about that. Most people thought I was not, but I very serious cause I said to the General Assembly if children and their families can’t trust the word of this institution, you don’t have an institution so just end it right now if you’re going to do this all the time, it’s so unfair to the families and the kids so just end it right now and we’ll go back and we’ll go on our way. But that’s not what happened. But I do think you guys coming; I mean we brought everybody to Springfield. And Niell Clark, when we got on the bus, he had made an aluminum foil dog, and he called it the IMSA Dog and Pony Show. Course only Dr. Clark would think of this, it was great.