

Interviews of the Margaret MacVicar Memorial AMITA Oral History Project, MC 356
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Institute Archives and Special Collections

Alaina Bixon – class of 1968

Interviewed by Nafisa Syed, class of 2019
June 10, 2018

Margaret MacVicar Memorial AMITA Oral History Project

Alaina Bixon (SB Political Science 1968) was interviewed by Nafisa Syed (SB Biology 2019) at MIT on June 10, 2018.

Bixon, a freelance editor and writer, was involved in Dramashop, *The Tech* and social psychology research while an undergraduate at MIT, and studied at the Institute of Political Studies and the Sorbonne in Paris her junior year. After graduation, Bixon enrolled in a PhD program in French Literature at Johns Hopkins. She left the program and moved to San Francisco, where she became an apprentice electrician in the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. Bixon later worked at many other jobs, including as a mortgage broker, wine salesperson and public relations representative. She went on to complete an MFA in Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts at the University of California, Riverside – Palm Desert, with a focus on creative nonfiction. She edits and publishes books and is writing a memoir that will touch on her time as a student at MIT.

SYED: To start, could you tell me a little bit about your childhood and upbringing?

BIXON: My father was a Navy doctor, so we moved a lot. My mother was an artist. She painted, she wrote and she made beautiful gardens everywhere we lived.

SYED: That's wonderful.

BIXON: Even from a very young age, I knew that I was going to grow up to be a doctor. That's what you did in my family. They were second generation from Jewish Russia or Latvia, Lithuania – the borders kept changing all the time. But my mother's grandmother left Riga in Latvia at the age of 16. She got on a ship and waved goodbye to her mother, knowing she would never see her again. I am so grateful to the courage of those people who did that. My great uncle – I used to sit next to him at family occasions – he was four or five when he was in a hay wagon with soldiers sticking bayonets through the hay when he crossed a border.

So thanks to some very courageous people, I got to grow up in Syracuse [New York], Providence [Rhode Island] and Hyannis [Massachusetts]. I remember being about three and looking outside the front door and thinking, "There's sand instead of grass." We weren't there very long, but I remember it. Then we lived in Brookline [Massachusetts] – I went to first and second grades there, and

Medford [Massachusetts] – I was there fourth to 10th grade. Then Belmont [Massachusetts] High School.

When I was in the fifth grade, my father taught me algebra and was sitting on the bedside reading Gray's Anatomy to me and showing me diagrams.

SYED: That's very cool.

BIXON: In fact, in high school, between I think junior and senior year, I was accepted into a biology lab at Brandeis University. I had my own experiments. I had my own irradiated Petri dishes, and I counted plaques before and after. So that was my path.

I got into BU six-year med, and when I went to visit the campus, suddenly I thought, "It's going to be six years around the calendar." That was going to be undergraduate and medical school, and then off to internship, residency. And at the age of 17, that looked so far away. To be 30 (or almost) when you get through – it looked like a long way.

I really wanted to go to Radcliffe. But Belmont, where I was when I applied to colleges, was where many Harvard professors lived, so their kids got into Harvard. There was a quota for each area.

SYED: Oh, I see.

BIXON: I remember my high school English teacher being astonished that [my classmate] Vita got into Radcliffe and I didn't. But her father was a professor of Slavic languages there.

SYED: I see.

BIXON: So I came to MIT. I had toured the campus, and I thought, "OK." I had been very good in math and science. I got 800 on my SATs, I placed out of all kinds of advanced placement things.

I realized later that when you take some of the brightest people in the world and put them together and grade on the curve, you guarantee that half at least would get C or worse. That was very shocking and demoralizing for people.

SYED: I'm really glad that they don't do that anymore. They've abolished the curve here, which is really nice.

BIXON: They finally did! But the experience for me was depressing, isolating.

I talked to one of my friends, Will Roberts, about it. I didn't meet him until we both lived in San Francisco, years after MIT. We figured out we were in the same year; we were in the same physics lectures. We must have been one of 700 people in a room, but we didn't know each other. One of the things I wrote when I was in the creative writing program [at UC, Riverside – Palm Desert] was a history of my time at MIT and some of the jobs I had here, and I had to read a section in workshop. One of the guys – Mark Takano – is now an assemblyman in California, from Riverside County.

SYED: That's very cool.

BIXON: He went to Harvard. He was teaching high school history in Riverside, a very bright and kind person. And after I read this section, he said, "That was total misogyny." I told that to my friend Will, and he said, "No, the guys were miserable, too." So there were a lot of people who felt isolated, completely overwhelmed – with no way to deal with it. I knew I was depressed, so I even went to see a psychiatrist here. He was so terrible that I never went back again. He was just like the institute: distant, cold, impassive.

I had a terrible freshman year, with bad grades in physics. I could do the calculus fine, chemistry fine, but physics was just so elusive to me. And finally, I think I got a D one semester, dropped it the next semester and petitioned to take computer-something instead in the summer, which I did. The computer room was bigger than this one, and it was completely filled with one machine, and we had to do the punch cards. It was beyond tedious.

But then I thought I wasn't going to be able to transfer anywhere with grades like that. So I moved home. I was in McCormick for freshman year, and at the end of the year, two girls slit their wrists in the bathroom on our floor. After that, my roommate – my best friend here, my only friend – left. I don't know where she lived after that. She might have finished a second year, I don't know. And another woman left and never came back.

I lived at home, because from Belmont to here was very doable by bus or car. So then I was really apart from the community. I had a very good humanities teacher, Dr. William Bottiglia. I did his classes in humanities and French. I was always good at languages. In fact, I was taking German sophomore year, and it came very easily to me. But classmate Mark Green [SB Mathematics 1968; UCLA Professor Emeritus] was in Dr. Bottiglia's class, and he told me that he had applied to some kind of junior year abroad in Paris and got in. And I thought, if

he can do it, I can do it. So last minute, I applied and got in, and that was really the turning point. There was so little choice then. You couldn't major in English literature, I don't think. I was taking sociology classes, social psychology. They had no umbrella for it, so it was called political science.

SYED: Oh, interesting!

BIXON: So I got to Paris. I spoke French very well. I stayed with a wonderful family. I was enrolled in the Institute of Political Studies and the Sorbonne for some literature classes.

SYED: That's wonderful.

BIXON: The French system is so different. There are no assignments, there is no homework. You show up for the lectures, the professor sits there and reads. I didn't know until near the end of the year that you could actually buy the book of the lectures and then just take the test because they didn't know keep track of who attended class and who didn't.

At the end of the year, you had one oral exam, your grade for the whole year. There are three people at the table, and you get a question. You have a minute to organize your thoughts, and then you talk in French for five to 10 minutes with the answer. If you get a question that completely baffles you, you have one chance to fish again (repêcher) out of a hat. You draw another question. And then that's it – those are your choices.

I was taking this one course on the history of China. I thought, "This is so weird, I'm not going to be able to pass this." The professor spent weeks lecturing about the canal system in sixth century China and how it affected who knows what. I thought, "You know, whatever this course is, I better take something else just in case." So I read through the text of International Relations. I took both exams, and I passed them both. So between all the political science courses, I got a degree there: a certificate for foreign students from political science. I also took a couple of classes in literature, theater and literature.

I had the most wonderful time in Paris. It completely opened up a world of culture and fun. They gave us theater tickets, museum tickets. We went to every gallery, every art show. I had cooking lessons there, I had harp lessons. It was really a fabulous year.

By the time I got back to MIT, I had so many credits I spent my senior year in my dorm room overlooking the Charles River not being able to crew, because women weren't allowed to be in sports.

SYED: Oh, that's horrible!

BIXON: I want to find out who the guy was. Someone told me that there was one man at the time who decided that coeds couldn't do varsity sports. If he's still alive, I want to find him and choke him! I've always been athletic, and that would have been the one saving grace.

As it was, I stayed in bed reading French novels all year and then graduated. And I never set foot on the campus again until I came to reunion five years ago. Why did I come? I wanted to see William Roberts and his wife, Paula. I knew a few people who were coming. I knew hardly anyone while I was here.

By then I had a boyfriend at St. John's College, in Annapolis. On a whim, I applied to the Johns Hopkins PhD program in French. They took me, so I spent a couple of years there, and I loved it. I taught undergraduate French literature. I made my own curriculum. There were no women at Johns Hopkins at that time, except for graduate students. So I taught two classes, a whole roomful of guys who were usually first or second year. They were trying to get language credit. They were all engineers and pre-med, so this was their 'soft' class. I got letters from some of those guys years afterwards about how it was their favorite class while they were there.

SYED: That's wonderful.

BIXON: Yes – it was a fun time to be in school. And then in my third year, I went back to Paris, so that was enjoyable. But this is way beyond what you asked!

SYED: Your early years--

BIXON: My childhood years, we were really treated so well. We had piano lessons, dance lessons. We went ice skating in the winter. We had a beautiful community in Medford, where all the kids – we were on a cul-de-sac. And all the kids – we had Irish Catholic, Greek, Swedish, Italian. We all played softball in the middle of the road, and in the spring, our mothers would give us a bucket and say, "Go into the woods and pick blueberries, and don't come back until the bucket is full." So it was that kind of very, very good childhood. And I was such a bookworm from an early age. I remember practicing, printing my name at the age of 3, so I could get a library card at the Boston Library.

SYED: Oh, that's so exciting.

BIXON: I was always reading, but I was so interested in science. Even my time at MIT didn't ruin science for me!

SYED: That's good to hear.

BIXON: In fact, I get *Technology Review*. I get *Wired* magazine. If I were in school now-- after hearing the talks this week [at my 50th class reunion] -- I thought I want to go back to school and study AI and robotics. But it was a very demoralizing experience [here]. It took years for me to put myself back together after MIT.

As you know, every now and then, someone calls and ask for a donation. I said I will never give a nickel to MIT. Well, Claude Gerstle [Dr. Claude Gerstle, SB Biology/Life Science 1968], who was the fundraiser for our group for the reunion, the 50-year contribution, called, and we had some very nice conversations. He's from Florida as well, very close to where my father lives. He said he speaks to many people who had a terrible time and will never contribute. So it's not a one-off story.

SYED: There's a job for students here that helps with their financial aid if they call alumni, and there are quite a few people that do say that.

BIXON: It's a shame. There was no need for it to be so oppressive.

SYED: No, definitely not. Well, there doesn't seem to be one.

Well, you had spoken a bit to me about wanting to be a doctor. Was your first-year experience what drew you away from that?

BIXON: Absolutely.

SYED: Because medical schools definitely are very adamant about good grades?

BIXON: Right.

SYED: And MIT is not extremely conducive to that, even now, I would say, to a certain extent.

BIXON: As I've said before, if I had gone anywhere else, I would be a doctor now. I met someone here who had read my bio, and she said, "Do you regret not being a

doctor?" Well, I think I'm having a good life, and I do a lot of interesting things that I wouldn't have done. I've gone in some very different directions. But I would have been a research doctor, so maybe the world missed out. But it's just one of those things. It would have been a parallel but different life.

SYED: That makes sense.

You mentioned that you studied social psychology, and that it was lumped in with political science. What were the humanities departments like at the time? Because obviously now they've specialized a lot and diversified.

BIXON: Right, right. There was very little choice. You should be able to look up the catalogs from back then.

I did take a political science course. It was a graduate course in war games. They were doing computer models of what will happen if this country takes this or that action. I was just an outsider looking at it, and I thought, "What if your assumptions are wrong here? Then there's no point." It didn't attract me at all, so I took an anthropology course that I really liked, and then probably social psychology.

I don't know, I'm not the best one to ask. First of all, I was gone for junior year, and I took as little as possible senior year. All I remember is French humanities, German. Oh, I had a poetry class.

SYED: I've taken poetry classes here.

BIXON: Yes, mine was with Barry Spacks [poet and novelist who taught at MIT from 1960 to 1981]. That was a good class.

SYED: What was that class like? Could you tell me a little more about it?

BIXON: I liked the way he talked about the poems we read. I'm not that much into poetry. In fact, it's the one area I don't even read. But he made it interesting and showed looking at the different levels.

SYED: You had spoken a little bit to this earlier, but what was your experience like specifically as a woman at MIT? It seems like it was quite stressful.

BIXON: Well, you got used to being the only woman in the room: everything was aimed at men. And there was nothing artistic. All the buildings were grey. The scale is all wrong for people here. Coming down the Infinite Corridor, it's high, you're

like a speck in there. It did prepare me for-- When I became a union electrician in San Francisco and I was building high rises, I was absolutely, every time, the only woman on a crew. So I was used to that [because of MIT]. And then in the mortgage business, which I also was in for a while, there were very few women.

I remember once on a construction site – I think it was Four Embarcadero – I heard women's voices, and it was so amazing to me. I looked down the hall, and here were these two young women sheetrocking. That was a really physical job. So was electrical [work]. I was bending pipe and installing it. I loved seeing what was inside the walls and the floors of buildings. I really liked that job. Plus, they had to pay you as much as the men.

SYED: That's great.

BIXON: In those days, I was really ahead of my time. I wanted to pump gas in a miniskirt in the '60s. I wanted to wear a little white go-go boots and gloves and pump gas after high school. They didn't take me seriously. Everything I wanted to do, I couldn't do. I couldn't crew. And I wanted to pole vault in high school. I just went and watched them, because I couldn't do it. So I was used to having people say "You can't do it because you're a girl." Much later, when I got into fields where it was almost all women, it was so refreshing to hear other points of view. So I'm glad things are going the way they are. It was just not soon enough for me.

I've written about this. When my memoir finally comes together-- I took a big break, because I've been editing other people's books. You know, you always have deadlines, it takes over your life, so my own work has been in a drawer for several years. I just finished my 14th book of other people's work, and I'm taking a break, but I want to finish working on my memoir.

But the other thing to mention were the jobs I had here. One of them was washing test tubes in a food science lab. The guy who ran the lab was hardly ever there. So a couple of afternoons a week, I would go in and wash test tubes. I liked it because it was bright. I don't know where it was. Wherever it was, I'm sure it's not food science anymore. It was a sunny room, and I could sing and wash test tubes. Near the end of the year, the boss came in – he was probably a graduate student – and he said, "We have an inspector coming. Wear these gloves and wear this apron." I said, you know, "Why?" And he said, "Well, there's some radioactive stuff in them." So I had been washing radioactive waste with my bare hands for the whole time!

SYED: And he didn't tell you anything.

BIXON: No.

SYED: That's horrible.

BIXON: Yes. So that was my total experience of MIT. There was no saving grace.

SYED: I'm really sorry to hear that. Well, what's it like to come back after all these years?

BIXON: I feel like a survivor. And luckily, we have nice weather for this visit. Also, because I grew up in the area, I have friends and relatives here. And I was so happy to go back to the museums, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the Isabella Gardner.

When I was growing up, my mother was taking a painting class. She took me and my sister, who was probably four or five then; I was a couple of years older. We would go once a week to the Museum of Fine Arts [in Boston]. My mother would set up her easel in front of whatever painting she was copying. And she would tell us, "Go look at art." It's an enormous place. My sister always loved this one painting by John Singer Sargent. It shows the four daughters of someone who lived in the time when the painting was done [The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit]. She loved that painting, and she was artistic. So my grandmother painted, my mother painted, my sister painted. My aunt taught oil painting classes.

My sister didn't do any art while she was a doctor. She did internal medicine in Minnesota. Then she retired and moved to Palm Springs and took an art class again. One of her early assignments was to paint a section of an old painting. She chose that big Singer Sargent painting, and she cropped it, just to take two of the daughters, one of whom is leaning against a vase. I have a picture of the original that I just took when we went back to the museum.

SYED: I love the museum. I'm excited to go back there this summer. Every summer I'm here, I try to go.

BIXON: My husband took a photo of me, leaning against a vase standing next to that painting. Well anyway, her section of it is on our wall, and I love looking at it.

SYED: That's wonderful.

BIXON: But otherwise, from Boston I went to Baltimore and then New Hampshire for one year. It snowed so much, I thought, "I never want to see another snowflake." I got to North Carolina just to say hello to someone, and she said, "Oh, they're hiring teachers." It was the very beginning of Head Start, and I went and saw about it, and they hired me. So I spent nine months in rural North Carolina, teaching in a Head Start program, which I liked. But you know, I was a single woman in rural North Carolina.

SYED: Was this right after school?

BIXON: Well, no. It was something like two years of John Hopkins, one year back in Paris, then a year in New Hampshire, then almost the year in North Carolina.

I was trying to get back to Baltimore, which I liked and where I had friends. But on a ride board, this person said she needed someone to share the driving to California – so I went. And I told whoever I was staying with in North Carolina, "I'll be back in two weeks." And I stayed 35 years in San Francisco. It was just a magical time. That was wonderful, because all the things I didn't get to do in college you could do for free at City College of San Francisco. Now I think they charge \$14 a unit, which is still a bargain. But it was free when I was there. I took women's studies, I took geology, tap dancing, a trampoline class. Anything I was interested in that I never had time for in college, I took there. And that was a really joyful time for me.

SYED: Have they been talking about what MIT student life is like now at the reunion?

BIXON: No. I haven't heard anything about it. When I came to the 45th, I was talking to a woman who graduated in the '80s. I told her a little bit about my experience, and she said it wasn't so much different when she was here.

SYED: Interesting. I feel like I feel like it's fairly different now.

BIXON: Well, I would hope so. There are more women for one thing, and more choices. And there is pass/fail, which makes life tolerable.

Oh, I was starting to tell you why-- The three ways you could get paid as much as men in the '70s was to be self-employed, do commission sales, and do union work. I did all three of those, because otherwise you were not going to get paid as much as the men.

After MIT, I went to Madison Avenue. I wanted to write for an advertizing company. I went to some companies, and they always said, "Can you type?" I

didn't want to sit and type, even though I was a good typist, and I said no. Years later, a friend of mine who was in advertising said, "You would have been vice president of a company" – because they always started you in the typing pool and then you moved up, just like in *Mad Men*. I didn't know that. I said I couldn't type, and I didn't get any jobs. But commission sales was great, because if you sold as much or more as the guys, they had to pay you. I sold tires, commercial cleaners, theater subscriptions, I don't even know how much stuff – many different jobs.

SYED: You do a lot of writing now. Have you been interested in writing from a young age?

BIXON: Yes. My mother told me when I went to France, she said, "You should write once a week and send it to the *Belmont Herald*." And I should have, but I didn't. I was pretty busy.

I took writing classes in San Francisco. I took food writing, which was a wonderful course. I took investigative reporting with a really great guy. I was always taking extension classes. So when we moved to Palm Springs, I noticed that we had box after box that said "My Writing" on it. That's how I got into the writing program. I thought, "Wow, maybe I should take this seriously." Plus, moving from San Francisco, where I had been in financial services for at least 10 years, I came to Palm Springs, where nobody knew me. There were already so many real estate agents and it wasn't a good time for mortgages, so I decided to get another degree. I had one in fundraising – nonprofit management – from the University of San Francisco. This time I went for creative writing.

SYED: Do you have any advice for women at MIT?

BIXON: I just think they're very lucky to be here now. I was at the MIT Museum, in the café. There were two women sitting next to us and one was wearing the brass rat. I said, "I'm noticing your ring, when were you at MIT?" They graduated in '65 or '66. We were talking about people who came to MIT planning to do one thing and then ending up doing something very different because the science was crushing the first couple of years. So one of these women had really taken a left turn, and the other had gone on to do what she planned to do. So there are people, and there are women, who came to MIT and got the education they wanted and had the career they wanted. Two of my friends from our year became doctors. I remember one of them, especially, and we're going to stay in touch more now.

SYED: That's good.

BIXON: Both of them became doctors. One is ready to retire now. One went from here to Harvard Medical, and then her daughter went to Harvard Medical and just graduated. So it was possible; it just didn't work for me.

SYED: Is there anything else that you'd like to address? I've lived in McCormick all four years that I've been here, so I'm curious to know what living in McCormick was like back then.

BIXON: It was so new. I thought it was lovely. And especially-- my first year I was on the second floor, 201 was my room, with Pat Saunders [Patricia Saunders Moore, Mechanical Engineering 1968]. And then I lived at home one year, then I was in Paris. And then I was on the fifth floor for the last year. There was a lot of camaraderie on the fifth floor. We would all meet at 1:00 and watch a couple of soap operas. I have never watched soap operas at all, except for that one year. Never before, never after. But it was so much fun. I think Charlotte Babicki [SB Political Science 1968] sat here knitting while we watched. There were maybe five of us. So it was a nice break. We would share snacks. And the thing about McCormick was guys we knew wanted to come and have meals with us, because it was the best food on campus at the time. I don't know what it's like now.

SYED: It's still pretty good, and plenty of people want to come.

BIXON: It was a very pretty place. I remember the housemaster. The Bryants were the housemasters then. [Lynwood Bryant, Professor Emeritus of History, and Louise Bryant, the first housemasters of McCormick Hall, 1963 to 1967]. They would invite us up for tea now and then. That part of it was very enjoyable. And Kresge was built somewhere in there. Oh, I wrote for *The Tech*.

SYED: You did? I write for *The Tech*.

BIXON: I did theater reviews. I created that position for myself. I did it because I wanted to go to shows. And so my boyfriend at that time was very lucky. We would go to these shows, and then I'd write about them for the paper.

SYED: Well, that still goes on. I don't know if you've gotten to pick up a copy of *The Tech*, they're in the hall.

BIXON: I picked one up.

SYED: I've started a brand new science section, which has been a long time in the making, but I'm excited about it.

BIXON: Oh, that's wonderful. How did you get to MIT?

SYED: I almost didn't apply, because I was under the impression that I might not get in, just because I had done so many humanities-related things. But I noticed that they had a stellar science writing program, and I was really excited about that. And I really loved biology, so I gave it a shot. And it worked out. My freshman year was also kind of rough, like yours. But since then, I think there are a lot of really good support systems in place now for students to go to. And the humanities programs here are really wonderful now. Because they're a bit smaller, they're kind of like hidden gems, and you have access to the faculty. It's really nice.

BIXON: Very nice, that is great. I wish it had been like that when I was here. And science writing is such a wonderful field.

SYED: I love it a lot.

BIXON: Because I get *Poets and Writers* magazine, I see all these MFA programs with different specialties. And medical writing is one that several places are offering. So those areas are just so interesting and in demand. Did you just graduate?

SYED: No, I'm graduating next year, so one more year.

Could you tell me a little bit about working at *The Tech*? I had looked at your alumni profile online. It said that you were involved in Dramashop, but it didn't say *The Tech*.

BIXON: Oh, I barely remember *The Tech*! I was editor of my junior high school paper, and I worked on the high school paper. The junior one was called Mr. Roberts, it was Roberts Junior High School. That had to be Medford. Drama was because I took a course with Joe Everingham [Joseph D. Everingham, Professor of Theater Arts], and we were reading plays and talking about them. He was wonderful. He also put on plays at Kresge. He said to the class, "You can either write a 20-page paper or work on sets backstage," so he had a lot of helpers. I did sets, which I loved. I did lighting. One time, someone was chatting with me backstage, and my cue was, "Evening is falling." And I was supposed to do it gradually. But I heard the cue, and it was suddenly like, bam, it's going to be dark now! I loved the backstage aspect of going to see all the plays and helping mount them. That was really fun. He was excellent.

SYED: Can you tell me about any other professors or classes that were particularly memorable?

BIXON: Well, Dr. Bottiglia. We stayed in touch after his classes. He was very happy that Mark Green and I went to Paris. After I came back, he took me to lunch at the faculty lounge and I felt so sophisticated. I wore a sleek powder blue cotton coat and matching slacks. By then I had had all these champagne and wine tasting classes in France. I stayed in touch with him for a while, not as long as I should have. And Barry Spacks. I had very little humanities. I had wonderful high school teachers, though. In Belmont, the English and French teachers we had were wonderful. Lots of reading novels – actually, current novels. I was very lucky because in the Boston area at that time, public school was a wonderful education. And they started French classes in my school in fourth grade.

SYED: That's great.

BIXON: So every year from all the way through high school, I had French. I got the top grade on the advanced placement exam, so I could get into the humanities and French here. And then I had Latin from all through junior high school. That was with a wonderful teacher. I can't remember her name, but I can picture her. I had really, really good teachers. Then there was Mrs. Jamison in high school. She was finishing her work at Radcliffe, but she taught at Belmont High School. And we had an excellent English teacher. So we were doing just much more than English Composition. We were really reading contemporary work and discussing it in a way that would be college level.

SYED: It's great that you had that opportunity.

BIXON: And then Johns Hopkins was fabulous. They let us take whatever. Oh, there was one other class I listened to when I was at MIT.

Jerome Lettvin, was that his name? [Cognitive scientist Jerome Lettvin, Professor of Electrical and Bioengineering and Communications Physiology] He kind of looked like Jerry Garcia. His mind associated things that you wouldn't normally connect. And someone said to me, "Come to lecture. This guy is amazing." And I went, and he was. He was just fantastic. He was kind of a mess – disheveled, we would say. And his wife, Maggie Lettvin, I think, was her name, taught yoga on television. They were so different. She was trim and orderly, and he was all over the place. But they were both really brilliant.

Then I took dance, the little bit that I could at MIT. They didn't offer very much, and they didn't offer what I liked. Maybe it was modern dance. In San Francisco I did a lot of Latin and ballroom and Afro-Haitian. They didn't have anything like that here.

SYED: They've recently started having advanced dance classes, because they built a huge new theater building.

BIXON: Oh, good.

SYED: It's really exciting. The theater department has expanded a lot. There are a lot of students who are really involved in theater on campus.

BIXON: I went to the science museum, the MIT Museum, and that was really fun. All the robots and contraptions that people have made here.

SYED: You had mentioned a little bit that the science courses you took were quite impersonal and pretty stressful to be in. Could you speak a little bit to that, if you feel comfortable?

BIXON: I don't remember chemistry at all. I remember that my roommate was very good in organic chemistry. Maybe I took one semester of it. I said to her – oh, I must have taken it, because I thought I was pre-med at the time. I could figure out inorganic chemistry. But for organic I said, “How do you have any idea what's going to combine?” And she said, “Oh, you just have a feeling for it.” And I knew I was never going to have that feeling. So that was one problem. And physics was just-- There was so much homework. I did have one class that I could figure-- I mean, it was probably just one little segment of it. It was estimating, and I still remember some of those problems, because they were so unusual. You know, what was the probability that you will inhale a molecule of air that's the same that Julius Caesar exhaled on his last breath, or something like that. So you have to bring in orders of magnitude. So that little section was kind of fun. Otherwise, I had a slide rule. I'm pretty sure I did my two full years of calculus. At the end, the final exam on the final course, I was walking out, and my slide rule fell and broke. And I thought, “That's perfect.”

SYED: Could you tell me a little bit about the social psychology courses that you took?

BIXON: I had a very good advisor – I can't remember his name. His specialty was helping behavior. You know: under what circumstances do people act altruistically? We devised an experiment--

SYED: That's very cool.

BIXON: Yes. I had my younger sister stand in Harvard Square and pretend she had lost a contact lens and see who would help her. Well, she was stunningly beautiful at the age of 13 (or however old she was when she was doing this), so everyone was helping her look for her contact lens. I'm not sure it was really a good experiment, but you know, we had to do the research and describe the methodology, and I got it done.

SYED: Well, thank you so much for your time. It was wonderful to meet you.

BIXON: Thank you, Nafisa.