
Professor Doellinger Oral History Transcript 2022

Narrator: Professor David Doellinger: DD

Interviewers: Dawn McNamee: DM; Ella Tenido: ET; Amanda Larios: AL; Anya Kramer: AK;
Natalie Montalvo: NM; Professor Kimberly Jensen: KJ.

Date: November 7, 2022

Place of Interview: Bellamy Hall 236, Western Oregon University, Monmouth, Oregon

Media:



Overview: Students of History 404 interviewed Professor David Doellinger about his experiences of WOU's tour of the fallout shelter and the importance of knowing the history of the Cold War.

Transcript:

[Beginning of Interview]

DM: This is the Practicum 403 class interviewing Professor Doellinger. The interviewers are Dawn McNamee, Anya Kramer, Ella Tenido, Natalie Montalvo, Amanda Larios [and Kimberly Jensen].

DM: We are interviewing him at 4:02 pm in Bellamy Hall room 236 on November 7, 2022, and for starters why did you take students to view and experience the fallout shelter materials on campus?

DD: Yeah so, I am going to throw a wrench into the whole line of questioning here. Because I never actually ever took students there. Now I can [Laughter]. So, I was – would you like me to explain a little bit? So early on I am not sure what year it was, I think it was the first time I was here when Professor Jensen taught the Cold War America class. I was invited to go on the tour. And it was an amazing tour, oh my gosh. We went down a ladder underground. We came up

somewhere over there in Rice Auditorium. And then we went to the room that we were in and where we saw all of these materials in the steam room sort of place. And this was all preceded by a showing, as I recall, of Bert the Turtle. So, I had this amazing experience and as a European historian who teaches about the Cold War, I talked about this a lot in my classes. But I never actually organized any tours, I just went along with Professor Jensen. I told students that they should take the Cold War America class as something that they should look forward to doing in that class. So, in hindsight I should've done maybe more tours on my own, but I was always thinking that it would be a meaningful thing for me to talk about in the class, but also talk about how it relates then to what was going on in Europe in terms of preparations there and then a recommendation to take this class that Professor Jensen offered, I think every other year. Cold War America. So, I feel this deep tie and bond to all those materials there, but I have not led a tour.

DM: In any of your classes have you ever shown any photos of the fallout shelter?

DD: I think that I have shown photos of other fallout shelters, but I don't think that I have ever shown photos of that one. I gave very vivid descriptions of it and what it felt like to be in there. And you know, the sounds, the smells, of what was there, maybe less smells [Laughter], but in terms of the general feeling of it and what was there. But I don't think that I've ever shown any pictures of what was over there.

ET: Yeah and I know you didn't take any of your actual students down there, but you were experiencing it with students...

DD: Yeah.

ET: How did they react seeing the fallout shelter and the materials in it?

DD: Yeah, that's a great – and so I would say all together I had maybe three or four tours of it, at different times and once with my son as well, who came over and joined. I regret that my daughter didn't get to join in any of the tours unless I can sneak her in somehow.

Group: [Laughter].

DD: But the reaction, I think was similar to what . . . I think we saw a couple weeks ago you know others – I remember being much hotter in there too, in that room and noisier too and it was a less pleasant place, I think in some of the earlier tours. So, I think the discomfort was something people, students on the tour really could count on, but there is – maybe a feeling of surprise that – you know that these materials were still here? I mean why is all this old stuff still here – why wasn't this ever updated but maybe, but also a sense of oh! there are crackers and food here just sitting out and so I think a sort of sense of surprise, there's something very real about seeing those materials. You hear about – I would say for me personally – you know, I grew up hearing stories about, you know, either my parents or others who were going under their desk as little kids in school – and or teenagers in school in the fifties. But there is something about seeing the materials there that makes it very real and I think that's the feeling I noticed from students too, seeing that. When you hear about this, but then you're in that situation, you're imagining, okay, what if I'm in here and it's kind of an unpleasant place, it's dark, it's drippy, it can be really hot and steamy, we didn't have the steam affect [Laughter], when we were there. And then seeing you know the packaging of this and it's pretty crude and thinking about that's all you've got to survive. So, I think those kinds of reactions is what I recall students and you know memory's a strange thing, so I might be conflating what I remember feeling [Laughter], when I saw these materials too from the first time, you know.

AL: Regarding these materials, which items stood out the most to you, and why?

DD: Yeah. The crackers, and the candies. I call them candies; they're not really candies. The little, the little gem – like sugary treats. What are those actually? They're carbohydrates?

AK: Yeah, they're carbohydrates. Yeah.

DD: Carbohydrates, yeah. And I think they stand out the most to me because on my very first tour there, they sampled each of them. And I took...

KJ: [Laughter].

DD: [Laughter]. And I wasn't the only one. Peer pressure is a powerful thing.

Group: [Laughter].

DD: And Professor Jensen and I were maybe dared, or challenged, to take a bite of the cracker and to try some of the candy, carbohydrates...

ET: What did, what did it taste like?

DD: And it was not pleasant, in any way.

KJ: Don't ever take them.

Group: [Laughter].

DD: But I was not exaggerating when I said that. The taste stays with you for a long time. It was embedded on my tongue for a while. So that stayed with me for a long time. And I meant to bring, there's a picture of Professor Jensen and I with these in our hands as we're about to bite, I mean we had already had a bite, I can't remember. I'm gonna go find it real quick when we're done here.

Group: [Laughter].

DD: So, that's what you'd have to live on – and I have things in my cupboard that's been there just a year [Laughter].

Group: [Laughter].

DD: They're not always so pleasant either. I was eating some pretzels the other night that had been there for maybe a week, opened. They lose something!

Group: [Laughter].

DD: So, you picture them, okay, this is all that is being provided for in this dark, damp, dreary place. That's sort of an unpleasant thing. But that stayed in my mind most. And then I would say the second thing that I was really drawn to, and I still am, is just the packaging of them. The labels, the symbols of it. We're in a room now where these materials are sitting, and I've got in my clear line of sight, I can see the little Civil Defense logo and the stamps, I love that. I just want a poster of it hanging in my office!

Group: [Laughter].

DD: And I think there's something very real about that. It's very, sort of, utilitarian. They didn't make those boxes pleasant in any way. They're kind of intimidating, you know, the cardboard – they're not really designed to store stuff. I mean, a cardboard box? Okay, there's metal tins inside some of them but – that's what stays with me. And so, what I have in my office from our visit there is a box that I can carry around to a classroom and with one metal tin inside, 'cause I like the packaging. I love the packaging, the packaging an interesting thing to me, how is something being presented. And I love the fact that there's a hand – stamp on that gives the date and the year. I mean you're – I think that's really interesting.

Speaker: Yeah.

DD: You know, there's something very real about that, that somebody – this wasn't just manufactured, but that it was given that kind of stamp – of – approval, or expiration, or whatever it was. And the mailing labels I find really fascinating, too. So, to me, those are the things. But the taste of the crackers, that exceeds...

Group: [Laughter].

DD: And I will just add, for the record, that the candies, the carbohydrates, actually tasted pretty good!

Group: Oh!

Unclear: Sweet?

DD: I could do that again. Okay, it's been 20 years, 19 years, 18 years? But those retained a sense of flavor in the way that the crackers didn't.

Multiple: What was the flavor?

DD: It was almost fruity.

ET: Like a candy?

DD: Like a candy! Almost like a hard candy. Now not one you want to pop in repeatedly, but compared to the crackers, it stood out in terms of what I remember.

Group: [Laughter].

DD: At least that's my memory of it, was being a much more pleasant sort of thing.

AK: And why do you think these artifacts and bunkers are important to the community?

DD: Well, when they're placed there, it was about survival. Right? This is where you go, to survive however many weeks 'til the radiation clears up. [Laughter]. Sorry.

Group: [Laughter]

DD: But, I mean there's this human element of survival. You know, humans, whatever hardship we face we do the best we can to try to survive it. So that's meant for that survival. And, you know, having watched what happened, just with the hurricane in Florida a couple weeks ago. You know, that's horrific what they've...what they're experiencing. It's an inconceivable thing to imagine

until it actually happens, I think. And that's something that doesn't involve radiation or fallout. There's probably long-term pollution, but you know with this, this is about survival. And I would imagine that people rushing into that place, seeing the piles there, would have had initial feelings of, okay, there's something here for us. Now, once they start opening it up [Laughter]. In four weeks in, six weeks in, seven months in, I don't know what the feelings are going to be. But I think there's that feeling of survival, that there's at least something that's been provided, someone has thought about this. And I think it's also about knowing that it's there beforehand too. Right? I mean, we haven't seen it yet, but we were told by Rebecca Chiles, who oversees Public Safety, that there's a stockpile here of materials and food for the big earthquake, right? Or some other natural disaster. That's reassuring knowing that. Because, to me it's reassuring thinking, okay, they've given better thought than this stuff, right? [Laughter]. Then and that they rotated stuff through. But that's sort of reassuring, knowing that, that there's that. But until we actually have to turn to that, what does that really mean? And I don't know.

But then there's also the fact that...so what does it mean? And this is the question, right? I'm also finding myself thinking, well they were put there in 1964, is this meant to be it? I mean, they didn't rotate stuff through. They didn't. The population of Monmouth has grown since 1964. I would imagine by 1966, there were even more students on campus. So, I didn't see any updates to what was there. So, it seems to also be sort of, you know, looking back, it was sort of a checklist of things to do perhaps. And...so yeah, I don't know. Those are the things that I find myself thinking about. So, it means different things in different ways. And now I'm looking at it thinking okay. [Laughter]. I mean, we've all seen what's inside there. And in the, you know, in the space, and thinking about there's an element of you know; East Europeans call this sort of like "black humor" or "dark humor", there's something kind of absurd about this. It's kind of a coping mechanism, where we kind of laugh about it. Cause it's related to such a scary thing, in terms of what it would have meant, if we had been running towards, where these supplies are. And that's still a terrifying thing today. I think, I am a...I came of age in the seventies and 1980s, and I think that what that means for me seeing this, is that there were times where I really expected or thought that there was a great likelihood of a nuclear war. It seemed like a very real possibility. And it made it seem – I remember being scared. So, part of my coping mechanism was reading a lot of books that were written. And there were all sorts of novels that were written about survival experiences. And there were films that were made, and they were made for TV mini-series. There

was one that was British that was called *Threats*. I remember watching that and you're seeing people, though it's set in England and kind of this, kind of...you know there's some tension leading up to it. I just remember people taking mattresses and putting them against their windows and things like that to kind of prepare for, or some people were, you know, loading up their cars and leaving. And then there was the mini-series called *The Day After*. Have you ever heard of that one? I've never seen it. I've always wanted to. When it came out – 'cause it was a multi-night series on – you've got to keep in mind, this is really before...this is back when there were three channels plus whatever local TV station you had. Or TV stations and maybe PBS [Public Broadcasting Service]. So, I forget which network aired this, but it was a mini-series in the mid-early 1980s. And my parents would not let me watch that. We were banned from watching it, because it was about, well a nuclear war and prep – lead... lead up. I've never seen it. I only know what I saw in the TV commercials leading up to it. I wanted to see it so badly. And I think for my parents, it was too frightening of a thing that they didn't want...I was the oldest, so I was probably a young teenager, maybe 13 or 14. Do you recall what year? Was it '84? '83? Oh...

KJ: I'd have to check

DD: ...Don't worry about it, it's okay.

KJ: I think it's a little earlier, so...

DD: Yeah, it might be. I know where I lived at the time and the place that I was ten when we moved there. So, sometime between the age of ten and fifteen. This mini – so the first half of the eighties.

KJ: '83

DD: '83. It aired. And so...

KJ: It's really scary.

DD: It's really scary. And that's what everybody talked about, about how scary...that's what I heard in schools, because I was the only kid who hadn't seen it. And when I lived in Pittsburgh, our public library had a VHS [Video Home System] of the series. And I remember I was thinking,

I just want to check it out and finally watch it. And then I thought, well, maybe I don't. And I was in grad school at the time, so all of my time seemed to be focused on other things. So, I never got around to checking it but I was always determined to watch it. But things like that really made the possibility of a nuclear war...to me it was always a very real possibility. And so, I think part of my coping mechanism was reading these sort-of fictional accounts to try to understand, how did people survive it? There was a book I read, that was called *Warday*. And it's set, it begins in New York City and there's a nuclear blast outside of New York City. And there's a man, who's a journalist. And, their plan had been, if there is ever a nuclear attack or disaster, we go to the school, where the kids are. And that's what both of these characters do in it. And then they are living in this school, in the city, with whatever supplies they can scrounge together. They've got some supplies, like this. There's a science teacher, who's able to rig up some sort of device to measure radiation. And they're there for a period of time. And then they realize they need to leave the city, and they move somewhere else in the United States. And then this journalist is making... It's a journey back to revisit the place. And go make it back to New York City. And see what's there afterwards. And so, the coping mechanism of the, this is where it's, this is where I'm trying to, this is a helpful coping mechanism. Knowing it's there, but also these sorts of ways in which these things appeared in film and in books. They were part of my life, and I never had duck and cover drills when I was in school. We never had that. I don't know when we stopped doing that.

Okay. I had tornado drills, right? We, in Georgia, we got under the desk, in the hallway we would find whatever safe place there was. But I never had – which was scary enough, 'cause we had tornadoes come through all the time. And they would just completely obliterate houses. The house next to our house was just gone, from its foundation. So that was a scary thing, to me. But, yeah, the possibility of a nuclear war, that was very real. And there were all kinds of other mini-series on TV too. And there were shows I saw that I wish I knew the titles of. Just to watch them again. But that would be a great class if we just watched all of these, you know. My son wanted to watch one of the movies, *Red Dawn*. The original 1980s version. Not the remake that they did with Patrick Swayze and other casts. I remember when that came out, I got to see that in the theaters. And I saw it multiple times. It's that coping, right? How do you deal with this kind of an attack, so. And that was very real.

NM: Yeah, I mean, I don't know if you guys saw it too. Like in, during COVID, we had a lot of TV shows who were doctors and stuff like that, they had COVID built into their TV shows. And it was a coping mechanism for a lot of people who saw it.

DD: Yeah, yeah. It's a way – you're working through scenarios in your mind. I mean that's what Bert the Turtle...you've all seen Bert the Turtle? By now? OK. I mean, you know what to do throughout the picnic, right? You know what to do if you're riding your bicycle, right? find that adult, who's going to help you, who knows best. Or if you're riding a tractor. [Laughter]. So, there's those different scenarios that you know, you know what to do. So, yeah.

NM: We plan to have an exhibit with these materials. What do you hope students will learn from the exhibit?

DD: Yeah, I hope they can capture the tone of that environment in which these materials were created and the place in which they were stored. You know seeing the piles there. And if you go to some of, you know, certain museums. You can read about what a trench was like from World War I but there are museums that you can go to in Europe where you can go to reconstructions of a trench and see what that was like, and I think that's a powerful thing. You're not going to recreate a trench in the hallway out here or in the exhibit and you're not going to recreate a bunker. But capturing – helping convey the scene of what these materials are and why they were there, and what they were meant for and the feelings of the time period that produced them. I think that will be some – that's a hard thing to do, I think. And the taste of the crackers [Laughter]. No, but you've got to keep in mind when they were created the taste of the crackers did not taste bad. Well...

Group: [Chatter]

DD: ...I don't know. How will we know? Yeah, so.

KJ: Professor Doellinger is there anything else that you would like to add that we haven't covered that occurs to you?

DD: Well. Yeah, I don't know. I kinda went off in some other directions there.

KJ: It was fun.

DD: Was it? Okay.

Group: Yeah!

DD: Yeah, well you know where we are living now. I mean today's date. You know we are in early November 2022. I used to be able to say how many days we were into this war. And I am saying we because we're not Ukraine. We are not fighting, but we are in this war in many, many ways. And this is scary and this should be scary. I don't feel as scared as I was in the 1980s, but then I am really scared. I mean it's something that maybe I'm compartmentalizing in certain ways. I mean a couple days ago, maybe a week or so ago. So, the US government has been really interesting in how they handle intelligence, during this war in Ukraine. Usually, intelligence is used to shape things behind the scenes. And what the US government has been doing is, it's releasing intelligence ahead of time. There is going to be an invasion! And they announce that information. And they released that Russian military commanders had discussed the possibility of using nuclear tactical weapons. These aren't long range missiles but this would be using fairly destructive nuclear devices on the battlefield in Ukraine. And Vladimir Putin in Russia has been talking and hinting and kind of reminding the United States and NATO and the whole world that Russia has nuclear weapons but to learn that these generals were talking about the usage of them is a really frightening thing. That means it has been considered as a possibility and once that happens – I mean how do you respond to that? How does NATO, how does the United States, or how does anybody respond to that? So, I think you know there's – I forget their name but, I think it's the Atomic clock. Which measures how close we are to a nuclear war and nuclear destruction. And we've always been fairly close. I mean for as long as I could remember we've been a few minutes of it. But we're like seconds away from it now. And what it is is an actual clock and what it's got is the hands moving closer and closer to 12 and we are really close right now. And that's their analysis, their assessment as to how close we are to nuclear engagement and nuclear conflict and the technology is just so destructive right now. That is terrifying what can be unleashed. And we've seen this with Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And those were really inefficient quickly-put-

together atomic bombs, which captured a fraction of their potential energy. And in what is capable now and what is possible now, just far exceeds what we can even conceptualize. That should be scary and it is scary and so that's one thing I guess I would say.

Have you all ever seen that film – movies are such a great way of thinking about this. [Clatter]. Have you ever seen the film *Doctor Strangelove*? I watched that. We have a movie night and that was my choice earlier, maybe at the end of the summer, we watched *Doctor Strangelove*. Because of what happens in that – I'm not going to give much away. But it's not the political leaders who are making decisions about a nuclear strike. I'm not going to say any more, because it's too brilliant of a thing. It has one of my favorite actors Peter Sellers, Slim Pickens oh my gosh it's just brilliant. And, to me I think that's a great example of how this sort of cultural production, you know of films, and novels, and mini-series that may help us think about and raise awareness about these issues that shape the world that we're in. Because they can talk about the idea of a rogue general and what kinds of system checks are there to prevent something like this from happening. There was almost a nuclear war during the Cold War. There was – I should have brought in the details but, there was a Soviet general who called it off, but there was a – the warnings were triggered that there was going to be a nuclear attack and the Soviet Union were this close to launching all those missiles and, I forget the details, there was a general, who realized that there were not actually missiles launched and was able to call it off at the last second. This really happened. And that's a scary thing. Thinking about that, because it means that the mechanism of a nuclear war it's a decision that is made within seconds. With little time to be able to verify and check and find out what's really going on. And the type of weapons we were talking about that would potentially be used in Ukraine are not these missiles that are flying from one continent to another, you've got half an hour or fifteen minutes to make a decision. They are launched within seconds and they're hitting their targets. So, there's really no time, that to me, is a terrifying thing to see who has control of those, what would trigger them.

Group: Thank you so much!

DD: Thanks for letting me be a part of this.

NM: You provided so much insight, I appreciate it.

DD: I'm sorry that I never took the class on a tour. [Laughter].

Group: [Laughter]

KJ: Don't be sorry! You were there and you had a lot of students that we had in common but you were always there, so you were.

DD: Yeah.

[End of Interview]