

Interview with Lowell Gess
Gabriela Helf, Interviewer
September 25th, 2020
Interview Conducted over Zoom

[00:54]

GH: My name is Gabby Helf, part of the Macalester Class of 2023, conducting interviews for the Macalester Oral History Project. Today is September 25th, 2020, and I am interviewing Dr. Lowell Gess, Class of 1942, over Zoom. Dr. Gess, can you please start off by saying your name, where you are from, and what year you came to Macalester?

LG: I'm Lowell A. Gess. I'm from Alexandria, Minnesota. I first came to Macalester in 1938.

GH: Wow.

LG: *(laughs)*

[01:36]

GH: So how did you get to Macalester?

LG: We [my family] lived in Saint Paul, Minnesota. I attended a high school, Central High School, and the graduates of Central High School were noted because they had outstanding English department credits. That school was one of ten of the [most] prominent in the United

States. It was so strange that while there were about a half a dozen colleges to go to in the Twin Cities, the top students usually went to Macalester College! *(laughs)* Macalester had a reputation for excellence.

GH: And you were one of those top students.

LG: Well, I wasn't to begin with. In fact, they didn't think I was college material.

GH: Oh really? *(laughs)* Why not?

LG: *(laughs)* [I] was from a rural school, and I wasn't up on what they required, and they thought that I would do better in a commercial stream, doing carpentry or something—not go to college.

GH: Yeah *(laughs)*.

LG: But, I wanted to be a Christian teacher or preacher and that would require college. My mother, a teacher herself, intervened for me, and the principal even got involved. There were a thousand students in my class in Central High School!

GH: Wow.

LG: It was so large at that time. But they just tried to reason that I was not college material! *(laughs)*. Finally, they gave in and they conducted some IQ testing and all that, [and] were quite surprised. So they said, well if he has some private tutoring for a while, maybe he'll manage.

GH: Mmhmm.

LG: Well—I ended up in the top of it, so I got to Macalester College!

[04:21]

GH: Yep! *(laughs)* That's incredible. So what was Macalester like when you got there? What were your impressions of the school, what did you think?

LG: [It was a] small school, hardly two thousand. It was a church school—Presbyterian. The students were from various parts of Minnesota and out of state. The best students. It was high-caliber in those days.

GH: Yeah.

LG: I—*(laughs)*

[05:05]

GH: You mentioned that you wanted to be a Christian teacher. Did you do a lot of religious classes? Or, what other academic areas were you interested in?

LG: I majored in philosophy with minors in psychology as well. But, I had had a calling, as a youth! Eleven years old! To be a medical missionary. I had never—

GH: Can you—

LG: I had never known [computer sound] a doctor except when I was born, apparently. I had never met a missionary, but somehow or other, I had this feeling that I should be a medical missionary—I didn't want to do that—that was incredible, because I wouldn't want to be a doctor in the first place, and I certainly didn't want to go to some big, dark jungle. So I didn't accept that call. [At] Macalester I averted any pre-medical subjects, but had to have some science to graduate. So I took zoology, a study of rocks (*laughs*). [Possibly meant geology. Macalester offered both zoology and geology courses during that time.]

GH: Oh wow (*laughs*).

LG: But, on my way then to seminary that fall, I stopped at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, at a lake where I'd been before for camps and in a time of reflection and prayer I suddenly realized that unless I do what I'm supposed to do, maybe I won't be a good teacher or preacher. So instead of coming home and preparing for medicine, I did go on to seminary and I spent three years [there]. But across the street was a college. And I was able to pick up all my pre-medical courses at that time.

[07:23]

GH: Oh wow! So you were able to do both. I'm really interested in what you said about the calling that you experienced. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

LG: It was real. In fact, one time [my] grandson said, "Grandpa, does God really *talk* to you?" So I said, "Well maybe not like Charlton Heston in (*laughs*) *The Ten Commandments*," but it was very real and I was to be in medical missions. But I didn't want to be, so I avoided it until after graduating from Macalester (*laughs*).

[08:09]

GH: Did your time at Macalester at all push you in that direction? Or were you focused more on still avoiding it?

LG: In that day Macalester was very unorthodox. It was a Presbyterian college [a college that is associated with the Presbyterian faith], its roots were deep, spiritually. They had compulsory chapel services—students had to go to chapel! In fact, it was my job to take attendance for one of the sections and I wasn't easily (*laughs*) bribed to put somebody present who wasn't present. Macalester was deeply spiritual in those days with lots of organizations, Christian organizations, and so on.

[09:13]

GH: That has definitely changed. I think those roots are still there. In your visits back to Macalester, do you feel there have been a lot of changes since your time there?

LG: Well, in those days, there were all kinds of groups and clubs. Peace Corps, peace and all that, because you see we were facing a world confrontation in World War II [a global war that lasted from 1939 to 1945].

GH: Yeah.

LG: And there were peace movements and so on. And lots of religious activity.

[10:00]

GH: What other types of clubs were you involved in, were you involved in any extracurriculars or clubs?

LG: I was a hockey player—

GH: Oh wow!

LG: —and they had Berarucci [?] at the University of Minnesota. However, they won. We had good sports! In our day, Macalester was a powerhouse athletically. I became captain of handball. Softball was one of my favorites. But, a lot of the activity at Macalester. Somehow or other they de-emphasized athletics so that Macalester then was not really that prominent. But in those 1930s and [19]40s, they were athletically inclined (*laughs*). *But*, they were still tops scholastically.

GH: So, it's like the best of both.

LG: (*laughs*) That's funny. In our, time they didn't know that.

[11:38]

GH: (*laughs*) I don't know if the athletic greatness has continued. I'm curious, do you have any particularly memorable staff members or faculty members who kind of guided you on your academic journey?

LG: I think President Charles Turck [former President of Macalester College] was outstanding.

GH: Yeah.

LG: And then I remember people like Dr. Sverre Norborg, a philosopher from Norway [visiting professor]. He was great as the head of the department. And then there was Dr. Alexander [a] geologist. But I had the most relationship with Dr. McLean [Milton McLean, Professor of Religion] of the English department because I needed to have summer work, something to pay for tuition and so on, and because of my record in high school with this English department, they hired me to grade papers! Of my peers!

GH: Oh wow! (*laughs*)

LG: And I never, never failed anybody. If it were poor, I gave it back to the professor. And I didn't tell anybody that this was my work until our fiftieth reunion.

GH: Oh wow.

LG: I finally admitted that I was the one who was grading their papers.

GH: How did they react to that? (*laughs*)

LG: After the talk, one of the fellows said, “Thanks, Lowell, for the A!” (*laughs*)

GH: (*laughs*) That’s funny, you let the cat out of the bag.

LG: Well, that had been such a secret all those years.

GH: That sounds like a good job though, for improving writing skills.

LG: That’s what this course in high school was all about. Sentence structure, spelling, and so on.

[14:06]

GH: So, now I want to transition a little bit to your life after Macalester, but I have a question:

What were some similarities or differences between your time at Macalester and your time at the seminary and then you mentioned the college you were taking classes at?

LG: I *really* enjoyed Macalester. But I also enjoyed the seminary because that was geared to what my calling was—in preparation. But when I hit medical school, that was a different life entirely. Instead of spending maybe a quarter or a half a year on a book, we would take care of

that book in a matter of four to six weeks. Everything was so hyped up and you really could hardly live, you could hardly sleep in order to keep up! In fact, you remember I was ordained by the time I got to seminary. My wife, Ruth, and I didn't have resources! We paid for the tuition by selling our car! *(laughs)*

GH: Oh wow.

LG: We hardly could make ends meet. Until finally, it became known that I was a pastor—was ordained—and a Presbyterian pastor said, “There’s a church in East St. Louis that has no pastor. If you’ll just give the message on Sundays, you can have a nice parsonage.” It was beautiful! It was large, and so, a friend of mine who was starting to be a missionary to India. He and his wife and two children, and Ruth and me with our eventual three children were in that [parsonage.] Being that there was a pastor there on Sundays, it began to grow. There were funerals, weddings, Sunday schools, and so on. I was doing poorly in medical school. The dean called me and said he doesn’t understand this. According to my grades, I’m ranking near the bottom of the class! What in the world has happened? I finally admitted that I was engaged in a pastorate. Well he said, you cannot do both. [He told me] “If I give you a Jackson Johnson [?] scholarship, will you just be a medical student?” That scholarship was only reserved for the outstanding students! [And] here he was giving it to somebody at the bottom. Well, I rose to the upper fifteen percent, and everything was okay *(laughs)*.

GH: Did you take the scholarship?

LG: I sure did!

GH: Yeah

LG: Then I was able to really engage in medical school. So then, as I mentioned, I went up to the upper fifteen percent, not the lower.

GH: Right. That's amazing! Now, just so I can get my timeline straight, what years were you in medical school?

LG: 1947 to 1951.

GH: Okay. And then when did you go on your first mission?

LG: 1952.

GH: Wow.

LG: Because, I spent a year of internship in Anchor Hospital in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Then was commissioned as a missionary. By then we had a family of four! And we landed in Nigeria, Africa, in 1952.

GH: How long were you there?

LG: Three years. It was a different world. It was so primitive that some of the tribes were like in the days of Adam and Eve. No clothes. It was so *very* primitive. From day one, I had to do emergency surgery! I was the *only* physician for hundreds of thousands of people.

GH: Wow.

LG: In a remote area, we were isolated three months every year during the rains. We couldn't go in or out. So I was doing emergency surgery from a textbook! I mentioned this to our officials and they agreed that I could take a residency in general surgery. Instead of sending me back to Nigeria there was an opening in Sierra Leone, West Africa [computer noise]. A prominent hospital with a famous doctor, but a doctor who didn't know surgery. So that's why I was sent there. Immediately, we were overwhelmed. They sent another doctor—but he was not a surgeon—to help the three of us, but during that time, doing surgery *every* day. I noticed that there were all these people sitting around who were blind. I couldn't stand that. I wrote to a friend, an ophthalmologist friend, come on out for a month or so, take care of some of these blind people. Well, in those days there was no email, there were cablegrams. But about six weeks later, six weeks later, I got a package, a little set of eye instruments with a how-to manual. So—we practiced on cow and pig eyes—

GH: Wow.

LG: —and eventually we were going to do human eyes. But I didn't want to just do one—in case it failed, that would be the end. We scheduled three! All three of them turned out beautifully. The floodgates were open. This country of seven million—remember Minnesota is only five million. Sierra Leone was seven million without an ophthalmologist, fully trained. So, we could hardly manage. The mission board said, oh we'll send out an ophthalmologist for all of you. They couldn't find one! So, at the end of our first period there, they [unclear] came to them and said, by any chance could you be willing to do a residency? In ophthalmology! Another three years! [unclear] been in residencies, colleges, and seminaries.

GH: Yeah.

LG: [unclear] but I was still in school! But I liked eye surgery. The patients don't die on you like they do in general surgery.

GH: Yeah.

LG: Well, I did take—and then we established eye hospitals and clinics in that country.

[23:09]

GH: What year did you establish the eye hospital?

LG: 1982.

GH: Okay.

LG: The thing is, I had spent almost twenty years in mission work. Now I had a family that needed secondary education, too. Four of our children were ready for post-graduate work and so on. I decided to take a leave of absence and help send the children to school. But after a period, we went back to Africa for our final tour and we finished that in 1975. I didn't forget Africa, I would return three months of *every year* to do eye surgery, conduct eye clinics, and so on, and did that for over thirty years. (*laughs*)

[24:29]

GH: Wow. That's unbelievable. Now, did your children grow up in Sierra Leone?

LG: Yes, they did. They were educated there. My wife homeschooled some [and] we also had some mission schools. People said, "You're not doing right by your children, not having them in good schools." Four of them have doctorates and the other two [children] have multiple masters.

[25:03]

GH: Yeah—they did just fine (*laughs*). That's amazing. So you left in 1975 and came back to Minnesota. That's when you started the eye clinic here, right?

LG: Alexandria, Minnesota.

GH: What was it like now doing the private eye stuff as opposed to working in the hospital?

LG: That was a very crucial time in ophthalmology because on the scene was intraocular lenses [a lens implanted in the eye as part of a treatment for cataracts or myopia]. I happened to be friends of prominent doctors in London who did this initial work. And when I was doing intraocular lenses in Alexandria, Minnesota, I was suspicioned as a buccaneer [a reckless person]. [People said,] “This guy you can’t trust him! He’s doing things to eyes that are not proper.” But I *believed* in intraocular lenses and did research on it and they made models of implants for me and now today everybody receives an intraocular lens!

GH: You were the pioneer. (*laughs*)

LG: My wife was my real support even though they thought I was a big liar saying that the patients were doing alright (*laughs*).

[26:48]

GH: So you mentioned that you had the calling and you became a medical missionary and then you moved on to working in the hospital, working in the private practice, but did that spirituality remain in your work even though, I guess, the focus shifted a little bit?

LG: It carried on, thank you, Gabby. I couldn’t charge children for care because often they were members of another group of children in a family. I wouldn’t charge for them. We had a Christian emphasis so much so that—members of my family became interested in the challenges that people had. One from blindness, some lady can see and become independent, walk on their own, begin to work again, provide for their family, and have a new dignity. My children realized that. As it turned out my oldest son became a surgeon—better surgeon than I was! And my next

son went into optometry. Then I had three grandchildren who all became ophthalmologists so—*(laughs)*

GH: That's an incredible legacy!

LG: It was nice. And they are the best. They are *top* in their class. One at Stanford. One in the Twin Cities [who is] a skilled surgeon, who does forty cases a week, right here, my granddaughter *(laughs)*. It's so much fun, I watched her do some surgery one day, five of them in a row. I couldn't believe this *skill*.

GH: That's *unbelievable*. And they were influenced by you!

LG: Well they were exposed, but the Holy Spirit led *(laughs)*.

GH: I've read all about your trip to Sierra Leone in 2014 during the Ebola crisis. Can you tell me more about it?

LG: That was a terrible thing. They were losing patients so often that they couldn't take care of them, they were lying in straits[?] Our staff at the eye hospital kept emailing me. I was assuring them I was praying for them, but that wasn't quite enough. Finally I decided—they had called away the ophthalmologist, away out of harm's way, and those doctors who could, left. But Sierra Leone of seven million only had a hundred and thirty doctors. Minnesota, with five million, has

thousands of doctors. When they were losing doctors, eleven out of the first twelve doctors to get Ebola died. Well, I was in my *mid-nineties*—I would be dying of a heart attack or a stroke or something. I knew the situation, I knew the facilities, I knew the people. I was a general surgeon, I was an eye doctor. [I thought] Why not go and help? I bought a ticket—but I didn't tell anybody, because I didn't want my children to think I had gone around the bend. But I finally got out there and spent several months [there] and was able to diagnose some real problems. Most of the people died with Ebola to begin with. Ninety percent of them died! But then when other countries came to help, more patients were saved. *But* they had complications with their eyes, and that was very serious. I happened to be on deck. I was present to see what was happening during their infection. I realized that something was going on in the eye, but I had medicine to prevent it, so that in case the patient *lived*, that patient would have the chance to see again! I wrote to [the] World Health Organization Switzerland, Doctors Without Borders, CDC [Center for Disease Control] in Atlanta [Georgia]. And finally, representatives from all came and embodied the protocol that we had, so that this old, retired ophthalmologist could help in a situation because I was expendable! (*laughs*) But I took all the precautions. I'm a very fast friend of bleach (*laughs*).

GH: That's incredible. How long were you there?

LG: January, February, and part of March in 2015. It ended in 2016. I was there when it was important to see how to save eyes.

GH: Yeah. Did you perform any surgery or anything?

LG: Well, why would you ask that? You know, the general hospital of our church, the United Methodist Church hospital, is only thirty feet away from our eye hospital. Their surgeon contracted Ebola and died.

GH: Wow.

LG: So I thought, I'll take along some instruments and some anesthetics because I can't be thirty feet away from some young mother who has complications and is dying in childbirth! So I made preparation[s] for that too (*laughs*).

GH: Wow—you delivered a baby?

LG: Well, the problem was the people had misinformation. They thought that they got Ebola from visiting a hospital. I did cesarean sections while I was an ophthalmologist (*laughs*)! Not one case in two and a half months came because it was forbidden. Nobody would go to a hospital to get Ebola.

GH: So what happened—when they did get Ebola, then they would go to the hospital?

LG: What's that?

GH: But when someone contracted Ebola then they would go to the hospital? Only then?

[35:26]

LG: They were abandoned by their families. The family would just leave the patient at the gates of a hospital. It was, you know—you were talking about Ebola, but we're in a pandemic right now.

GH: Yeah.

LG: Ebola was contracted by touch, by bodily fluids, any fluid, even perspiration. Saliva, tears, anything. But, we now are in a situation where you can just be *near* a person and contract it. Now outbreaks, epidemics, are inevitable. They happen around the world. *Pandemics* though, are *optional*. You can control them. We did not do a proper job with Covid-19 [virus that caused a worldwide pandemic starting in the year 2020]. We let it get from a zoonotic—animal to a human. And then somehow it slipped away from Wuhan, China, and got to the rest of the world. And it was more lethal in transmission than Ebola. You had to actually *touch* an Ebola patient or be in contact with bodily fluids. Not so with coronavirus.

[37:23]

GH: How has working with Ebola shaped your attitudes towards what we're facing now?

LG: Well, cap, gown, mask, full gear, gloves, and so on. And preparation of food. All of that was so important. I even learned how to handle bread. I would put bread in the sun and let the sun—I would keep turning it in the sun and—I lived with Ebola intimately for months, but didn't—

GH: Yeah.

LG: *(laughs)* Yeah, but the point is, if I would have gotten it, I had a *good life*. How many people get to be ninety-nine?! My next birthday is a hundred. *(laughs)*

GH: It's amazing! It's amazing. It's incredible. I'm so honored to have the chance to speak with you.

LG: Well, this oral archive is a good idea, to sort of see what has happened in times past.

GH: Yeah. It's fascinating to get to hear what has happened in the past.

LG: You have a good job.

[39:12]

GH: I do, I have a great job. I actually have a couple more questions just based on what we've talked about. I'm very fascinated by the calling you experienced. It influenced your work going to Africa. How does it [your spirituality] play a part in your everyday life?

LG: Thank you. You know, there's a verse that says, "In everything, I do it for the Gospel. That I will share its blessing." That has been a driving force. To share the good news as well as the *best* in medicine. I don't think that anybody would have believed one's words and did a shoddy job. So it was so wonderful to have the best training in surgery and ophthalmology. I was able to take care of almost anything! But it was all done in the name of Christ, in that spiritual vein, that was

the driving force. You're very sensitive, Gabby, in wanting to know what it was that prompted it in me (*laughs*).

GH: I'm interested in learning about spirituality and different religions, so I'm just interested in hearing about that. I think that it's really unbelievable that God has been something that has driven you through your incredible career.

LG: Thank you.

[41:16]

GH: It's unbelievable. Now I want to pivot a little bit back to Macalester. Did you take any sort of values from your time at Macalester with you throughout your career?

LG: The—the values—the best intellectually. They had excellent staff, but they [also] had caring staff, and they were Christian staff. Somehow or other they were so selective that everybody had realized that there was supremacy there at Mac. So I had the best background that you could get!
(laughs)

[42:05]

GH: And it carried you through. I think we've touched on all of the topics that I had prepared, but do you have any memories or special moments from your time at Macalester that you want to share?

LG: Oh, I enjoyed Macalester so much. But I—(*laughs*) I didn't have enough money to pay for tuition. But as a junior at Macalester, I was offered a church to just to sort of keep going. So that

allowed me to be a resident in Kirk Hall, Section 9, and we had a wonderful time there with the students. I would do this pastor work on the weekends. I did that for two years, as a junior and senior. I wondered, how could I prepare sermons and do the work at Macalester? And still do hockey, and softball, and handball, and all that. Well, in those days sleep was not all that important. But it also prepared me for later in life as a physician. I don't know that I would go for weeks without a full night's sleep! Because I was the only doctor. I thought that I would die young. In fact, my wife and I made our wills when we were in our seventies. My wife lived to be ninety three [years old].

GH: Wow. And here you are!

LG: *(laughs)* Well, I guess you don't need sleep! *(laughs)*

GH: Yeah. Did you have a congregation that you were leading when you were a junior and senior at Macalester?

LG: Yes. An entire church!

GH: Wow.

LG: I even had weddings and funerals *(laughs)*! Course, nobody knew this, because they—I still ended up on top so it must have been okay.

[45:06]

GH: Yeah, it sounds like great experience. I guess my final question is, do you have any advice that you would give to Macalester students now? Just about living in this moment, or living in a pandemic, or just being a student in general?

LG: They have a tradition and that is so superb. And we will be praying that Macalester keep on top. But when you stop to think of all the people that have received their education there who are *prominent* in the world today—Kofi Annan was Nobel Prize winner in 2001! He was the secretary general of the United Nations. And there were others. And when I was there we had people come like E. Stanley Jones. A doctor [cannot recall name]. Rosa Page Welch, the mezzo soprano, a colored lady, daughter of a sharecropper in Mississippi. Macalester recognized all these people. Walter Judd was the doctor that I was trying to remember. He was a missionary to China. He became a representative to Congress in the United States Senate. We had prominent speakers—governors of the state and so on. Macalester really does all the right things. (*laughs*)

GH: They do. Yeah. It's amazing to get to be a student there and get to do amazing things like *this*.

LG: (*laughs*) I'm grateful.

GH: I'm grateful as well. I think those are all the questions that I had, unless you have anything else you want to share with the Macalester community, or the world, whoever will be watching this.

LG: Well much success in your English major.

GH: Oh thank you so much!

LG: That is so wonderful.

GH: Thank you. And much success in everything you do in your life. I'm so grateful that I got the chance to speak with you.

LG: Well, I'm glad we had this chance because I can't promise you the coming months or so *(laughs)*.

GH: And I will email you when this gets posted—would you like to see it before it gets put online?

LG: It would be nice, just in case something came out that was not right on.

GH: Okay. So I will make sure to send it to you before it gets posted. Okay, Dr. Gess—

LG: So pleasant to be with you.

GH: It was so pleasant to be with you, too. Thank you so much.

LG: You're welcome.

GH: Have a great weekend and it was, again, great to talk to you.

LG: Bless you, bless you, Gabby.

GH: Thank you. Thank you so much. Ok, bye Dr. Gess

LG: Bye.