CHRISTOPHER JACKSON

April 13, 2002

Frank Manista,
Interviewer

Manista:  Today is Saturday, April 13, 2002.  We are in the Union Building on the campus of

Michigan State University.  I am Frank Manista interviewing Christopher Jackson.  This

interview is part of the MSU Sesquicentennial Oral History Project, commemorating the 150th

anniversary of the university, coming up in 2005.  Christopher Jackson is here on campus this

weekend attending the first reunion of the Alumni Distinguished Scholars Program, and

recognizing the founding of the Honors College in 1956.

You can see that we are recording for this session.  Do you give me permission to take

this interview?


Jackson:  Yes, I do.


Manista:  All right.  Well, let's start with a little bit about your family background.  Where were

you born and raised, and where did you go to school before college?


Jackson:  I was actually born in Warwick, Rhode Island, because my father was in the Navy at

some sort of naval air station somewhere near there.  But I think something like two months, or

two weeks or so after I was born, my parents actually moved back to Detroit, which is where

they had both been born and grew up.  And I lived there until I was something like seven.  Then

my parents moved to Traverse City, Michigan.  I basically grew up—I sort of consider that my

home town. That's certainly where I would tell people I grew up. I went to the public school system there. I went to Traverse City Senior High School before I came to Michigan State.

Manista: Where in Detroit did they live? Where did you live for those two weeks?

Jackson: So in Detroit I think they lived in various places. When I was old enough to remember, to sort of know things like what my address was, we lived in Warren. I think they lived in some other places in Detroit before then. Certainly I know—I don't know enough about Detroit to be able to tell you where things are. My grandmother, for instance, my father's mother, used to live actually in the city itself until she got substantially older and moved out to the suburbs. So I think that's where they were born and grew up.

Manista: Who would you say had the greatest influence encouraging you to go on to higher education?

Jackson: That's an interesting question. I guess it's sort of interesting, we had a woman who spoke earlier this morning about how actually getting the Alumni Distinguished Scholarship had been a very big change in her life. It wasn't a family where people expected to go to college, and she was really very happy she was able to go.

I guess my sort of family and certainly my experience was sort of different. It was kind of what you were probably going to do. And certainly I did well in school. I certainly always just sort of assumed that that's probably what I would be doing. So I don't know that I would point out anyone in particular. Certainly my parents were both—certainly had both gotten

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multiple degrees. My father was a school psychologist and my mother was a nurse and then later on became an instructor of nursing, and ended up being essentially executive management of the hospital, running the nursing department. So they were certainly professional and highly educated, and it was sort of kind of assumed, I guess, that their children would do that as well.

Manista: I noticed that you worked for Sun Microsystems. Did you study computer technology? What were your studies here at MSU?

Jackson: Yes, I did. I actually had—it was interesting because I actually did a lot of sort of study before I even got here. There's a community college in Traverse City, Northwestern Michigan College, which is actually where my mother taught for some time. I actually took a bunch of their classes. I took my first class when I was in the eighth grade. So basically I had actually done a lot of that before I even got here. So I did study. I was a computer science major, that's what my degree is in. But I was pretty much—the first year I was here I actually took the third-year sequence that you would normally take as a major. And the second year I took the fourth-year sequence. So I was sort of done with stuff really early. So actually, for quite some time I was a dual major in that and linguistics.

Manista: Oh really?

Jackson: Yes. I ended up not actually finishing that. One of my computer science minors is linguistics, so I didn't have enough to actually get a degree, for a number of reasons; one of which was the fact that I did not get along with my Russian professors. That was one of the

requirements. You actually had to have three or four years, I think, of a foreign language to get a linguistics degree. I had a lot of trouble with that, so I was not able to finish.

Manista: Why did you consider Michigan State?

Jackson: A number of reasons. It's sort of interesting, it was kind of interesting talking to folks yesterday, people talking about how they had been—they sort of, oh gee, they were considering all these other fantastic, I guess, colleges with large reputations and they decided to come to Michigan State. I only applied at three places. I applied here, I applied at U of M, and I applied at MIT. Certainly at the time kind of looking at the program, looking at sort of what sort of classes did they offer in your major, certainly MIT is one of the leading schools in the country for that sort of thing. Looking at U of M, their program wasn't, honestly, really as good. You looked at sort of—the number of classes you would take and what you would learn—it didn't really seem as impressive as what Michigan State had.

I was also somewhat familiar with Michigan State. I was actually here a couple of years earlier. I don't know if they still have this; they have this thing called the High School Honor Science Program.

Manista: Yes, they do.

Jackson: They still have that?

Manista: Yes.

Jackson: So where they have students from high schools come in, it's sort of like summer camp for scientists. It's six or eight weeks or something like that. You're here, you live in a dormitory. I'm saying this present tense because I'm not sure if they still do this or not.

Manista: Yes, I'm not sure if they do it quite like that.

Jackson: Yes, you're here, you were at a dormitory, and you basically were assigned to a professor, and you actually worked on research in that professor's laboratory over the summer. And that was actually a really interesting experience. The guy I worked for is actually here, because he's actually an ADS scholar. He was actually present at the reunion.

Manista: Oh really?

Jackson: Yes, Erik Goodman, who is actually now the director of the Case Center for Computer-Aided Engineering.

But that was kind of the first time I'd really been away from home. So I got to basically experience the campus and you rode around and you had a lot of freedom. So I certainly kind of already thought MSU was a cool place at that point. So I was certainly interested in coming here. So looking at the programs, I sort of thought MSU was really a better place to go than U of M. A lot of my friends had gone to U of M and I actually spent—I went down and visited some people I knew from the previous year who were freshman, and I sort of checked the place out and things like that.

I actually came down when I actually got the scholarship. It was at that point, it was, "Okay, well, I can decide to accept this or—." I actually had not heard from MIT at that point, but we had already figured out that basically the only way for me to afford to be able to go there was I applied for a naval ROTC scholarship, which I'd actually gotten. So it was like, "Okay, I can go to MSU for free, or I can go to MIT at the cost of basically having to be in the Navy for five or six years afterwards." I was like, "Well, it's probably a little better. I'm not sure it's that much better." And it turned out it was a really wise move to come here because it turned out I didn't actually get into MIT. So it was like, "Whoa, there was a great decision." So I guess the familiarity with the institution, certainly all the people I'd ever dealt with here were very nice. When I was here for summer it was just a cool environment.

Manista: Cordial and friendly?

Jackson: No, very definitely.

Manista: What years were you here?

Jackson: So I started in '82 and graduated in, I think I actually graduated in August of '86. I actually was sort of done in May, but I was finishing up an incomplete or something, so I think my diploma says August. It was a standard kind of four-year thing.

Manista: Were there any other things that you remember about that first visit, either the first time you came here as an actual student or during that summer that you were here?

Jackson: I'm trying to think of what would be interesting, what stands out. Certainly when I was here initially for the summer, the cool thing was just that you were really kind of treated as basically someone who could contribute, someone who was a productive person. You weren't just there to learn stuff; you were actually there to find something out or produce something.

The project I actually worked on was basically writing some computer programs to do analysis and graphs and some other stuff of data from some experiments they had been doing in orchards. I think it was something to do—I can't remember all the details anymore, but I believe it was studying pesticides and they measured levels and figured out which ones went away and which ones didn't and which ones actually had good results. I was in charge of actually writing these programs. At that point, especially to make graphics you had to write these programs that printing things on this fantastically expensive printer plotter, which was hidden somewhere in the computer center. So you went and wrote these programs, and basically you rode your bicycle over to the computer center and went to the IO window and said, "Hey, I'm here to get job number so and so," and they would give you these graphs, which it turned out you would say, "Well, okay, you screwed up and all the things are in the wrong place on the paper." But these were things that, I believe, were eventually used as diagrams in papers that professors were writing about this particular project. That was cool. Basically it was the first time that you were producing something interesting. So that was really—

Manista: Yes, participating, sure. What was the university like when you were here as an undergraduate? What were the students like, what was the campus like in the early eighties, mid-eighties?

Jackson:  With respect to what?  On what sort of axis?

Manista:  Well, a lot of people that we've interviewed who were here in the sixties talk a bit about the radicalism that was present, financial cutbacks and things like that.

Jackson:  Yes.  I certainly don't remember that being a big factor, and I don't recall there being—it's sort of interesting.  I think people in my generation sometimes are unhappy.  "Well, gosh, all these people in the sixties  had causes and they had a theme to—."  I didn't necessarily feel that way.  I mean, it was a very nice time, I thought.  It was not something where you worried a whole lot about issues that were not related to, say, what you were doing in school, for instance.  I think certainly in the sixties, people were very concerned about other stuff.  Certainly when I was here I and the people, for instance, who lived in the dorm with me and stuff, we concentrated on school and also obviously having fun and other things like that, but it wasn't kind of outwardly focused; it was kind of sort of locally focused.  You were really more concerned about what was going on around here as opposed to what was going on in other places in the world, for instance.

Manista:  Any kind of involvement with the larger community in East Lansing that you remember?  Or you pretty much kept to your studies?

Jackson:  Well, yes, there were certainly other things besides studying that we did, and that I did.  It was interesting, certainly one of the things which I think might be different than some people

is when I sort of think about my time here, I don't necessarily think about, "Gosh, I took all these great classes, I met all these great people, learned all this stuff." I certainly did do that, but I think one of the most interesting things, or the thing that was sort of coolest here, was that I actually sort of had a job most of the time I was here. Actually there was a—very early on, when I started here—so I started in officially these third-year computer science classes—I saw something that was posted, basically tryouts for the MSU computer programming team.

Manista: Oh, really?

Jackson: I actually signed up for that and was in the tryouts, and was actually on the team. It was a competitive thing, a team. At that time at least, the team was composed of four people. There were certainly more people than that who wanted to be involved. So the coach of the team, who was Dick Reid in the computer science department, basically had tryouts and had simulated—they basically had examples of the sort of thing you would do in the real competitions. They sort of tested people on these and they picked the best people. I was actually lucky enough to be on the team for three years. Knowing him—I think November or something my first year—I said, "Hey, I'd actually like to get a job and work. I would like to actually do something related to my field." And he referred me to a friend of his in the biochemistry department who actually ran, or was part of the team, of professors who were in charge of the mass spectrometry facility in the biochemistry department, which was an area where they used a lot of students to do programming and other sorts of computer-related stuff. So I started working my first year and basically worked for biochemistry that year and the next year and the year after

that, including two summers. So this was basically sort of I never went home again after I came to MSU. Some people go home and work in the summer; I got a job here.

Manista: Your parents lost their son.

Jackson: Right. Exactly, yes. And then my final year here I actually moved. I went and worked for another department. I worked for what at that time was the Case Center for—actually it was the Engineering Computer Facility, and that eventually turned into what is now the Case Center for Computer-Aided Engineering. But that was actually a really cool experience because, again, you're really sort of treated as more of an adult, especially later on. The people that you worked with in your job were kind of another set of people you interacted with, in addition to, like, the people in the dorm or the other students in your classes or other stuff. You certainly learned a lot of things about how the world worked in that sense. Like I said, you were just treated as a real person and not like a student.

Manista: Right. An equal.

Jackson: Yes, which was really—that was kind of like when you really started feeling like an adult when you were doing that sort of thing. I thought that was actually a very important part of my experience here, and I'm sure it's not something the university is going to go sell to people. "Hey, come here so you can get a job." But it was actually very, very beneficial, I think. I think I certainly benefited later on in my career from learning a lot of stuff that some people, I think, don't learn until they graduate from school and go get their first real job.

Manista:  Good practical education.

Jackson:  Well, it was certainly, for instance, I was pretty sure that's what I wanted to do and it was a way of really finding out for sure, that, okay, do you really want to do this for a living or is it something that's interesting in the classroom and it turns out you wouldn't really want to do it, which I think some people find out too late.  "Oh gosh, I thought I really wanted to do *x*, and no, it's really not fun to do that for forty hours a week."

Manista:  Yes, exactly.  Good, practical, land grant.  Sounds like something they would really want to—

Jackson:  Yes, I don't know.  Like I said, it's—I mean, in some sense maybe I would have been better off studying more as opposed to working, because eventually I actually—I finished most of my computer science classes after two years.  I had, I don't know, four or five other ones that you had to take.  There were certainly times where I really kind of neglected my studies in preference to doing stuff at work that was more fun, you know.  I had a number of poor grades in various humanities classes which I can directly attribute to the fact that I thought it was more cool to go write some program than it was to actually study art history or something.  But overall I think it worked out pretty well.

Manista:  Well, that's good.  You mentioned Dick Reid and a couple of other professors.  Would you say that they had the most significant influence on you, or were there other professors that

you felt had more of an impact on your choice and your continuation in this area or your progress?

Jackson: Yes. Certainly, I mean, Dick Reid was really a cool guy. I was really happy to know him. It's interesting, he was the cause of the first time I actually gave money to the university. He retired the year before last and they actually started a fund to fund the Dick Reid Scholarship in the computer science department. I actually sent in some money for that because I really appreciated what he had done for me.

Yeah, there were a lot of—he was cool. The guy, Jack Holland, was actually they guy in biochemistry who I ended up working for, who was a really neat guy. I think maybe this is sort of common, unlike the real world, certainly people who work at universities are not really well paid, for instance, and I think to make up for that, people go maybe kind of do more things to try and promote sort of a collegial, family sort of atmosphere in their research groups or their labs or whatever. So he was very big on helping people out. He had parties at his house and stuff, and he would invite all the people in the lab too. They were always a lot of fun.

Manista: Yes, that makes a big difference.

Jackson: He actually had consulting contracts with other companies. For instance, he consulted for Detroit Edison, for instance. He would actually get some of the people who worked for him, to basically hire out as consultants to these other people. I spent some time driving down to Detroit and helping people at Detroit Edison with computer problems, because they used the same sorts of systems that we used in the lab, so I knew about them. Jack knew so-and-so down

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there and said, "Hey, we'll send one of our people down there and he'll help you out." So that was really cool. Like I said, probably the people that I would point out, not to say that I didn't have a lot of good classes and had a lot of good instructors, but I think those are the people I think of, the people I worked for when I was here.

Manista: Right. They had the biggest impact.

What about the presidents? I believe you were probably here with [M.] Cecil Mackey and John [A.] DiBiaggio. Did you have any contact with either of those presidents during the time you were here?

Jackson: Not personally, although there's certainly other people—I really need to go and sort of go to my basement. I have some boxes of old stuff from college. I forget the names of some of these things, but I was actually on some departmental committees. I was on the—there's the official student government and then there's sort of a separate thing which is sort of parallel to the Faculty Senate. There's a set of students who actually basically participate in some of those decisions. I was actually a member of that. So, for instance, I knew the dean of the School of Engineering, the assistant deans and stuff like that. And there were some other university-wide sort of committees and things that I helped out with. So some administrators, for instance, I have met. I don't know that I ever met any of the presidents.

Manista: Not even after you graduated?

Jackson:  No, I don't think so.  It was interesting.  I remember you sort of knew who was there

and what they were doing.  Especially like DiBiaggio, for instance, was really widely regarded as

somebody who did a lot of positive things for the university, certainly while I was there.  He

really seemed to be somebody who really cared about the place and had innovative ideas and

really helped, I think, improve things.  But no, I can't say I met any of those folks personally or

did anything with them.

Manista:  Yes, it's hard to meet them, a university this size.

Jackson:  Yes, sure.  How many faculty are there here?  I would think it's hard for you guys even

to have a lot of interaction—

Manista:  I have no idea.  Some of the larger departments, you never actually end up meeting

everyone.

Jackson:  Yes.

Manista:  You had mentioned you were on those committees and the Faculty Senate or

something.  But were you involved in any other extracurricular activities, sports or anything else

like that?

Jackson:  Like I said, I was on the computer programming team for three years.

Manista:  Got that.

Jackson:  That was sort of interesting.  It was like I was on the first two years.  Then the third year they had the National Association for Computing Machinery, which runs the contest, essentially decreed that you couldn't go to the nationals more than twice.  I mean individual people could not.  So I was on the team and we went to the regionals and got us into the nationals, and then I didn't get to go because I wasn't there.  And then the last year, the local regional was held here.  I, with another guy, I was sort of the student chairman of getting all that running and doing all the arrangements and doing all the planning.  We did things like we sort of talked to professors to get them to write problems for us, and then we were responsible for writing the official solutions.  One of the things you do, the way the thing works is you have like four hours or six hours and you get four or six programs you have to write.  They basically say, "We're going to give you this data.  You need to write a program that's going to produce this output."  You don't ever get to see the input.  So basically you have to think of every possible thing that could happen and make sure that your program behaves properly in all those situations.  You submit the program, they run the output and say, "Okay, yes, it worked.  You're done with this one."  Or, "No, it doesn't.  You have to got back and fix something."  And you're actually scored on basically the speed it takes you to do all these.  But one of the things you do is actually when all the people leave, you have to, "Okay, here's all the data that we really used.  Here's the official solutions."  So one of the things we did as part of this is we wrote the solutions.  So we actually got to see all the problems before the people in the contest did, and we actually made sure how to solve them properly.

That was a cool experience. We actually dealt with—we had to basically go talk to the director of the computer laboratory and basically get him to allocate us this massive amount of sort of fake computer money. At that time we really didn't have individual computer labs with PCs in them; we had this big massive central computer. Usage for time on that was billed, and that would cost you some number of cents a minute to actually be connected to the computer. So we had to get him to pony up all the fake money that we could use to have thirty-odd teams all connected to this thing for six hours, working on their problems. We dealt with the other guy who worked in this with me, a guy named Duncan Clarke, he went and negotiated with the folks at the Kellogg Center to have a luncheon and sort of get the rate down to where the department could afford it. We figured out what we were going to hand out to people and how we were going to—we reserved this really gigantic lecture hall in Wells Hall to sort of have as where basically everyone came in the morning, and we told them what the ground rules were and how to do it. I think they had all these computer sort of terminal rooms in Bessey Hall, where we actually had the contests. We got everybody over there, and we did that. So that was a really— that was kind of a massive extracurricular activity.

Manista: Yes, definitely.

Jackson: I'm not sure I can think of anything else besides that. Certainly since I was working, I didn't have as much time as I think some people had for some of that sort of thing. We did things like intramural athletics, the IM soccer, for instance. My floor had a soccer team; I was on that.

Manista:  That's good.  In terms of what you've just been describing, would that have been one of the most important things that you experienced here?  Would any others stand out?  Kind of hard to look back and turn four years into one.

Jackson:  Yes, it is.  It's hard to say, okay, what was the most important thing?  There's lots of personal things too.  You sort of think about your career and your education.  You met nice people, you know.  I had girlfriends and got dumped, which is probably eventually important to your emotional development.  Certainly a lot of the stuff I've been talking about is highlights of my time here.

Manista:  I would like to thank you on behalf of the project for your time, and we appreciate your insights.

Jackson:  Oh, you're welcome.  I hope that there's something useful in all of this stuff.

Manista:  Oh, of course.  Institutional memories are always important.  Thank you very much.

Jackson:  Thank you.

[End of interview]

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