

Charlie Quimby
Narrator

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Interviewer

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At the Quimby Home
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BB: My name is Betty Bright, and today, September 24, 2015 I am interviewing Charlie Quimby, a novelist and former Chair of MCBA's Board of Directors, at his home in Minneapolis. This interview is being conducted on behalf of Minnesota Center for Book Arts' 30th Anniversary Oral History Project, which has been financed in part with funds provided by the State of Minnesota, through the Minnesota Historical Society, from the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund.

Charlie, thank you for visiting with us today. Your involvement at MCBA as a member of its board of directors begins in fall 1998, as MCBA began to consider a move to what eventually became Open Book, a shared space with the Loft Literary Center and Milkweed Editions. You were on the board through 2006, and served as Chair from spring 2004 through 2005, as MCBA adjusted to its expanded space and larger audience in Open Book. We have plenty to talk about, and we have some wonderful things to look at a little later on. To begin with, could you share any background or early interests that may have positioned you to respond to the idea of a book arts center?

CQ: Sure. There were a couple of important events that brought me to MCBA. One of them was discovering the book arts on a trip to Santa Fe. Actually, living here in the Twin Cities I had missed out somehow in the early days of MCBA, but I was with my wife during a book arts festival in that city, where all the galleries had book artists that were exhibited. We ran into work by Julie Chen that we fell in love with and bought, and that was the first thing where the light bulb really flashed. I may have been aware of some things before, but the love started with finding this work by this one artist that spoke to me. And the second thing was, MCBA was in the neighborhood. When I started my company, Words at Work, in 1988, we were located just the next block over on North Third Street, from where MCBA was in the McKesson Building. So, I began to notice it as I went down the street, and I would go in and look around and there would be exhibits going on and people working. And then, Jim Lenfestey, who was one of the founders of MCBA, also was in our office building. Jim and I were in the same marketing business. He handed a client over to me that ended up being a very good long-term client. And I

thought, gee, how can I thank you for this, and he said, well, make a donation to MCBA. And so that was the next hook that pulled me in.

BB: And I think you mentioned the other day that you knew a few of the other board members.

CQ: Yes. Some I met later, like Gail See. Eric Madsen, who is a renowned book designer and graphic designer was involved early on, and he designed the original logo for MCBA. Jim Sitter, of course—I didn't know him personally, but I was very aware of him, because he had also started a book distribution business, Bookslinger was the title in those days. So Jim, in addition to his MCBA days, was a big friend of small independent presses, and starting that distribution business that got [books of small press publishers] like Coffee House Press, or Graywolf, into bookstores around the country. So Jim was another figure I was aware of, even though I didn't know him personally. But Eric and I were good friends.

BB: You mentioned that the Warehouse District, where MCBA's first site was located, was also where you worked. Can you share any impressions of that neighborhood, since you must have known it very well, having spent a lot of time there? Take us back to the early to mid-1980s.

CQ: When I moved into what is still is called the Savoy Building, which is on the corner of Third Street and Second Avenue, one block up from the old location of MCBA, that area had undergone a conversion and was still in the process of changing from a garment district. Across the street from us was a building called the Furtex Building that had the Furtex Café, which stood for furs and textiles. There were a lot of artists that had begun to move into the neighborhood. Those were the days of the gallery crawls that were very active from a visual arts standpoint, so there were a number of galleries in that neighborhood.

There were also artists still living—not necessarily legally—in some of the warehouse spaces where they had loft and living facilities. Doug Beasley, who is a photographer, was living in the building and had a studio. Jim Brandenburg, the wildlife photographer, was in that same building, [as was] Darrell Eager, who was a photographer. There were a number of photographers in our building and painters in other buildings. New French Café was a focal point. Some of the bars in those days were also focal points for that scene. It was very different now from the club scene and the sports facilities that have moved in there, so it has really changed the character. It is sort of like what is happening in Northeast. Northeast is a little more distributed, it is not quite as dense as the Warehouse District, but it is very similar to the early days of what happened in the Warehouse District and what we see happening in Northeast. It is a little bit, if not depressed or underused, [it] has gotten new commercial life or residential life and artistic life, partly because artists moved into those spaces because it was affordable and friendly.

BB: It sounds like, through your business and your own inclination, you hung out with a lot of the artists who were active down there.

CQ: Some, for certain. Because my business was in marketing and communications there were also a lot of graphic designers, so the graphic designers were probably the [greatest number of] people that I knew and hung out with.

BB: You said you would see MCBA and occasionally stop in. Can you describe what it was like to walk toward the building and enter the building back then?

CQ: Yes, for people who know the neighborhood a little bit, the Nami sushi bar is in the space where MCBA was [Nami has since closed]. [Nami] opened up [the space] with windows and is a brighter space, but it is in the same physical space that MCBA was in. So you go up a few steps into this kind of dark, warehouse-y looking building, and you would come into this work space where to one side there were tables and a place where you would do folding work or assembly work, and there were presses to the back and to the right. The shop, which when you go into Open Book and the gallery space are the things that welcome you when you arrive, those were much smaller, sort of towards the back. The shop was really kind of a cabinet that you had to get somebody to open for you, so the retail presence or even the street presence was almost non-existent compared to now, where we have beautiful windows and we are part of Open Book, so the whole way of entry was very different. But it was a very welcoming place, it was just physically much smaller and much more focused on the work that went in there rather than on the people who would walk in the door.

Because it was a block from my office, because we are in the creative business and I am a writer I worked very much with visual elements in the work that I did, and worked with designers, so it was a place I would go and get inspired by the work that was being exhibited. [I would also] go through the work in the shop; unfortunately some books that I bought in those early days are out in Colorado, in our house out there, so I don't have them to show. So as I bought work there I met artists. Wendy Fernstrum was the first big piece I bought in Minneapolis, and I met her through that. She just happened to be there the day I bought it. She was doing work on one of the presses, and they said, oh hey, somebody bought your book! So, it was the kind of place where, and we can talk about this more, but one of the things about the book arts in particular, is that it is very easy to meet, particularly in this community, the people who have created the work. That is a fulfilling aspect of owning or buying art, or having a relationship with the artwork, also having a relationship with the person who created it. MCBA was very conducive to that kind of interaction, so I was really coming in more as a consumer, I wasn't coming in as a book artist myself or anything else. I was coming in to learn and be inspired. It was very easy for me to keep making steps into the place.

BB: Did you ever spend any time in the studios, and if so, what was that like back then?

CQ: Yes, I am trying to think about the presses. I was a little more ignorant about the various presses at the time. I think they added presses and equipment when they moved to Open Book. But I did, for example, do a Dirty Works very early on, which has been revived and is now happening with beer I understand.

BB: It is an option.

CQ: It is an option, so that is a good.

BB: [Dirty Works] used to be all day, right? It was an all-day experience?

CQ: Well, you could do more extensive things. We did an all day or half day one with my employees as a team building exercise after I had done it myself. We did sort of a custom Dirty Works session that was about making book art; it was also about collaborating and the way different people solved creative problems, so it was kind of a neat thing. So those were some of the early things. The old presses were there and the type was up against one of the back walls, but it was a much smaller facility, much more crowded, and in some ways maybe it wasn't, I won't say it was uninviting, but because there wasn't a lot of space and people were working, you felt less comfortable just wandering through or being there in an informal basis. Now it is very open and inviting to make that trip and see what is going on.

BB: So you did take a few extra steps, and joined the board in 1998, and this is such an interesting period, because it was a period of transition leading up to Open Book. When you joined the board was there clarity on the board about what was going to happen, where MCBA was going to move, or if it was going to move at all?

CQ: I got in about the time that things were still being figured out among the three different partners that were going to do this, and I could be a little foggy on some of the details of how they got to the combination of MCBA with the Loft and Milkweed. I have this vague recollection that maybe Coffee House or Graywolf [were involved] at least in early discussions, [and] there might have been other organizations that were in that early phase that took place to figure out who those three partners would be. I came in when that had been decided. But then the three partners, each non-profit had its own issues, its own financial issues, its own management issues. Are we ready to make this size of commitment? And for MCBA in particular, it was clear that we were going to have to step up significantly in terms of our fundraising, in terms of our programming. We were committing to much more space than we had, [and] even through it was going to be favorable terms it was still going to be much more costly. We were going to have a much more public profile part of this larger entity called Open Book that was still in concept, but these three organizations had not really collaborated together. In theory we all related to books and literature, but we were all different. So one of the key things that was really not decided and was not known until we got in there, was whether we could make that move up to that next step. I would assume the Loft and Milkweed had similar issues, but

for us that was the big one. It was maybe, again, these are off the top of my head, but maybe growing by maybe a third, in a very short period of time, so that was a big thing.

There was [also] some internecine sort of concerns between the three organizations. Because there were three floors in this shared building, because of the nature of MCBA and the heavy presses and all that, we really needed to have that first floor, substantial heavy floor and the basement to support the presses and the lead type, and it was decided that we would be a much more retail welcoming sort of presence on that first floor. The Loft had very different issues, classrooms were one of their issues, and Milkweed didn't have a lot of editorial offices but they had to store books. Each organization had its own needs within the building.

So we are all kind of working that out and figuring out issues of fairness, and that was happening more at the staff level than the board, but the board was kind of coaxing or coaching or agreeing with Peggy Korsmo-Kennon who was our Executive Director at that time [and] who was really taking the lead on that change. So it meant a lot of things, and here is a really simple one. I spent a lot of time with Peggy thinking through and talking about, and I thought her solution was brilliant. You know, in MCBA before when you came in there might be somebody at the front door, but there might not be, and there might be somebody at the back who can answer the phone and come to the front and meet the person, but now we were going to be in this public building with a lot of traffic through it. We had to do our administrative type stuff, we had to greet people, we had to deal with our Co-op members and the artists coming in, and Peggy's solution was to expand the shop and create this retail space that was also a customer service space, sort of a concierge at the entry. I know that is all in process of being redone at MCBA now. But for us that was very, not only effective as a retail presence, but it allowed us to use our staff in a very efficient way so we didn't really need someone just to run the shop. We needed somebody to attend the front door but we didn't need somebody to just attend the front door. So, even in the design of the facility [Peggy] was able to work with the architects and everybody else to figure that out and separate the functions and make it really efficient for us so that we could take on these bigger challenges with the resources that we had.

BB: It is almost as though the Center was turned inside out to be able to see that as a solution.

CQ: Yes, [the Shop] was the last thing that you saw before. And that brought it forward and made it accessible to people. People could begin to see, oh, it is not just people standing at the presses going like this, this is the artwork, these are the materials, these are the products of this, and they could see the variety of it. Before it was all closed up, by necessity.

BB: That is really interesting, to hear about how decisions were made, how key points were crossed. So, when you came on the board that key decision to go in with Milkweed and the Loft had already happened.

CQ: It had happened, but my recollection is that, you had the three people at the table but you all had to ante up. And people are still kind of, hanging onto their money for a while, to be sure everybody else was anteing up, but not sure exactly how the game was going to turn out, so there was a little period of uncertainty, because then there was a whole separate entity called Open Book that was separate from our three institutions that had to raise the money for the building. Jay Cowles led that. He was a former MCBA Chair, he was going off about the time I came in, but we overlapped a bit on the board. So Jay moved from the board to leading Open Book. And Jay, my perception of what his thinking was, was that he was trying to look out for the whole entity, not just be the MCBA guy who was making this happen. He also had a vision of, maybe more so than it turned out to be, Open Book being more of a performance venue. It is certainly used that way for book openings and exhibitions and so on, but that was a third, a fourth concern that wasn't really a big concern of any of the organizations. In that sense it was a fourth party, a fourth force that had this vision for what Open Book could be, and also had to manage the building and find tenants for the other spaces. So that was another way that this was going to finance itself, was to rent the space, office space. You may remember we had Ruminator Books in there for a period, and there were design offices and other kinds of things, so that was another way of helping to subsidize the rent or the overall operating expenses for the organizations. But it was this Open Book governing body that had the various executive directors and representatives that Jay spearheaded. So there was that fourth element as well. It was a fairly complex with a lot of moving parts, nobody had ever done it, [and] it was an innovative solution for non-profit organizations. There was a case study done some years ago and I talked to the writer about that, and that exists for people who are interested in the story of Open Book. But it was a very innovative and kind of a Minnesota solution, I think that came out of that.

BB: Were you involved in any of the fundraising efforts that Jay Cowles was leading? Do you have any memories of that?

CQ: Yes. I guess I have a couple. I seem to remember working a little bit on some of the case statement. I can't remember how much. Being a writer I know I had some opinions on that. I also did some research on the buildings. Open Book moved into three; there were actually three original storefront buildings that were made into one building when Open Book brought the property and redesigned the interior, so part of telling that story in that case statement, was telling the history of the buildings. And that portion of the city, which when we moved in in the early 2000s, was really underused both residentially and commercially. Historically that was a huge community for the workers in the mills and the railroads all along the river right there. So, our buildings were, I guess, architecturally and historically insignificant in that they were just very typical of the time

where you had these retail shops. I think one was a retail shop and one might have been a haberdasher.

Things tended to turn over, as retail does, and then there were families that may have owned or worked in the businesses below, that had apartments above, so in the building you can see remnants, where they show the old stairways and some of the wallpaper that was on some of the old apartments. In researching that I learned much more about what the area had been historically. And there was a very big tenement across the street near Eleventh and Washington that was, [according to] my understanding, the largest tenement between Chicago and San Francisco. So the renaissance of that area, with the coming of the Guthrie [Theatre] and residential density, the restaurants and shops and everything else, we were the pioneers in that area. It was very interesting to come in and look at this building that had been an electrical parts supply building with dropped ceiling, dark and dusty and empty, and walk through with Chuck Leer who was the developer we worked with, and Garth Rockcastle the architect, and have them help us see what we were getting into.

BB: What was that like? What did Chuck Leer provide? How did he describe it? Do you remember any of the ways he would pinpoint how this would best work for MCBA?

CQ: Oh yes, I had listened to him several times. In fact, when I was a Chair I brought him back to speak to the board so they could understand the history of how we got there and what it meant. He is a good and articulate person, but I am not going to be able to quote him here. But the thing that impressed me is that he had worked in the whole Warehouse [District] from way [up] in the North Loop area to the other end where we were, and had spent a lot of time visualizing what that whole area could be in twenty years or more, and so he was the person in my recollection that the Open Book entity worked with to find a property, to find a location when we decided that we were going to do this thing. He was the one who steered us to that end of the city and to that property, as I recall. Not so much the words, but the confidence that he gave us, even though physically it didn't look like anything—the Liquor Depot was across the road, there was Valspar paint over there, there was some dodgy apartments, there was a recycled plumbing supply place on the other corner, Washington Avenue was a four-lane thoroughfare with a lot of traffic rushing through. It was not, if you were just on your own and said, Oh, let's open a book arts center. Let's put it right here at Tenth and Washington; that would be the last thing you would think of. You might have looked at Uptown, or Northeast or somewhere else, but he convinced us that it was going to transform and that we were going to be part of that. So he made it exciting and not frightening.

BB: You know, it is interesting the whole side of the street and the older buildings, but the other side of the street was, pretty much....

CQ: All been leveled.

BB: All been leveled. So it is even more extraordinary that he could see or imagine that kind of vitality. I am trying to think of [which] businesses were there when MCBA moved in. Are a number of them are still there today?

CQ: Periscope was down there. The graphic novel comic book place came in later, [and] Adsoka the ad agency came in later. Periscope had an office the next block over. There was Maxwell's Pub, which was up the road, and Grumpy's, so some of the bars were there, but in terms of this as an art district. I don't remember the exact timing, but I know that very early on we realized that the Guthrie may be heading in that direction. I don't know at what point Chuck Leer and some of those people were aware of those plans, the Guthrie didn't come until after us, but I think they were also looking long term. So I in addition to having vision, he certainly had knowledge of some of these things that were going on.

BB: Were there other finalist sites?

CQ: This was the only one.

BB: This was when you were brought in.

CQ: Yes. And this was the only one that I ever saw. By that time we had settled on that piece of real estate.

BB: So, the board, the staff, the artists' community are all preparing for this move. Were you in on any of the discussions about how the programs might shift? Did Peggy share that with you?

CQ: Oh, yes. Peggy was really great in terms of programming and thinking imaginatively about programming. If I can just back off for a second. One of the things in the history of MCBA and some other arts organizations in this area that have been around for thirty or forty years, is they have started from a sort of Co-op artist perspective, that is sort of how, in a way, that MCBA got started, the Playwrights Center got started that way, the Loft got started that way, so in a way that was sort of amateur hour, people who were there because they loved things. I am saying amateur in a love sense, not necessarily in a, they don't know what they are doing, sense. They were there because they loved whatever it was they were trying to get started. Then, as the organization moved, they get somebody like Peggy, who is a professional, has an affinity for the art form, but is a professional programmer and thinker about how you run an organization, so that is really essential in the iteration and survival of these small organizations: you can move to the next thing and you are not dependent on those first people who have the passion [and] somehow pull it all through. Peggy really had a good handle on, how are we going to have to program differently when we are in the space? How are we going to attract people, and who are those people? What are the opportunities in the neighborhood itself? I worked with her and talked a lot about the graphic design community. Graphic designers, of

course, have an affinity for the visual materials and printing, all that sort of thing. So we spent a fair amount of time together, just thinking about those aspects. And I think it was very important to the success of MCBA, and I give Peggy a lot of credit for really having the talent and the skills and the ability to sort of make that happen, by getting the right people together and thinking about it strategically.

BB: Do you have any memories of MCBA cooperating with the other two organizations? It seems like they are all co-tenants, they all have that shared nucleus of the book, but as far as co-programming, that seems to have been a little less active...

CQ: It was very much less active. And I hesitate to say why because I don't know exactly why. Each organization really had its plate full when it came in, and so theoretically it sounds wonderful, you could think of all these wonderful things, but in fact every one of them was extra. And so I think [that] a publisher like Milkweed, even though it seems like, ok, books, there isn't a huge amount of crossover with MCBA. And the Loft, again, they are primarily teaching, but they are teaching writers. So we kept seeing opportunities, but because of resources it was hard to collaborate. And I think there was just a period for all of the organizations where you have been on your own, you have been paddling all on your own, and all of a sudden you are in with these other people and you really have to figure out how to do it and whether the thing they are interested in is in your interest. So, I wouldn't go so far to say it was jealousy or that sort of thing, but there were cross purposes that were understandable, the organizations had to get stable enough and trust each other, because they were in a relationship, all of a sudden, with these other organizations. It wasn't, oh, let's collaborate and we will see you next year. You are going to see each other in the elevator every morning. Stuff really has to work.

BB: And I can say that I know that there has been some co-programming that has happened organically over the last three years I have been a little more involved: family programs, just some [programs] that have happened naturally. That is a good point that everything [would have to be offered] on top of the services that they are already providing.

CQ: And that was something as a board member that you have to be careful. You can sit back and say, oh, I've got this great idea! And then you go to the Executive Director and you see them go, oh, how are we going to do that. And so you kind of have to watch that. And I think Open Book was a place where you could have a lot of those ideas, but you still had to execute them well, that was always a challenge.

BB: And it is interesting [that] you mention Jay Cowles talking about having the performance hall, talking about having tenants. In a way the organizations had public programs, especially the Loft and MCBA, and the design including that turns it out to the community, and that chemistry is good. Well, I have some. I was going to just list some names of people who have been on the board through your tenure. I know that folks were

on a short time or a long time, but one of the great things about being on a board of a non-profit is this sense of people moving through it and then returning back to it.

I was going to mention a few [and] if any stories come to mind you can share them. [Of the] people on the board, three preceded you as board presidents: Bill Myers, Dik Bolger and Sandra Davis, also on the board were future board presidents Dick Crockett and Dan Leavitt; returning board members who had also served as a member and chair included Gail See and Ellen Breyer. And then other fellow board members included Karen Wirth, a noted local artist, Tom Hoch, Uri Camarena, and Mary Lee, so just an amazing—Diane Merrifield as well, and she is presently board chair-elect. Just an amazing selection....

CQ: I remember all of these people of course, but there are a couple I would pick out of that list. One, Gail See was one of the founders, was a bookstore owner in Wayzata, a renowned bookstore, and to have her back on the board, she is...saintly isn't the right word for her presence, but there is just this sort of calm wisdom that she always brought to things, that was just really fun to be on the board and just say, I am with Gail See. It is kind of silly in a way. Ellen Breyer was another one of those people who, these are very experienced people and very accomplished in their fields, and so they were excellent board members. So, coming in and being able to serve with people like that was a really great development experience for me.

The other one that I would pick out was Dik Bolger. Bill Myers was [Board] President when we were getting ready to go [into Open Book], but Dik was the President when we came into Open Book. Dik is part of the great Bolger printing family that has been a huge supporter of the arts over the years, and Dik's firm has been and continues to be a big supporter of arts organizations. He has also given his time as an executive. He did it with KFAI [non-profit radio station], he did it with MCBA, he has done it with the Playwright's Center, and he is an example of what I will say is somebody in the business community who is connected to the arts, and doesn't just write the check, doesn't just do the pro bono work. He actually gets in the trenches and works with the leadership to build the leadership capacity of an organization. And Dik, I literally followed him to the Playwright's Center as a board member and became the chair there, and because he was there, after I left MCBA. I served at the Playwright's Center just to serve with Dik because I love the guy and I think he is an example of the good business people in this community that do more than just write the checks. They help with the leadership and continuity of these organizations.

BB: Can you share any stories about the physical move? Were you present when it moved from the McKesson Building to the Open Book building?

CQ: I tried to be as far away as possible, actually. I mean, some of these presses weigh tons, they weigh tons, and it was better for those of us who were board members not to be anywhere near when that was going on. Bill Myers as a printer was very, very conscious of just moving things, and what had to be done to get those presses from one place to the

other, and have them be in condition, and there are old floors so they have to be level. There were people like Bill [Myers] and Peggy [Korsmo-Kennon] who were very, very involved and conscientious. So it wasn't just a matter of picking stuff up and moving it, there were a lot of adjustments, and how do we get this heavy thing into the building and get it downstairs, so there was a lot of that. That was the biggest part of the move, just moving iron. The other organizations [like] Milkweed had to move some boxes, but boxes are supposed to move. But those presses weren't really made to get shifted around.

BB: And the paper studio. They were setting up a new paper studio, and putting the beaters in a new beater room.

CQ: Yes, so it was a lot. Like moving a factory.

BB: Once the renovation was complete and MCBA opened, can you describe that space as compared to that old space, if you were literally to walk from one MCBA into this new one?

CQ: I remember the excitement of the opening. They had the Gail See staircase, which Karen Wirth designed, and which was named for Gail. It is that beautiful staircase as you come in the entrance. And of course the whole community was really excited about coming to see the place and be there. And Dik Bolger and I were just giddy. We are standing at the entrance by those big bi-fold doors going into MCBA to represent the opening of a book, and so we are standing there greeting people as you come in, and we are these two middle-aged guys in our Hawaiian party shirts. And we are standing there and being so friendly, and after a while we looked at each other and, you know, there are all these young female book artists, students, coming and we are just chatting them up, and we thought, they don't know what we are doing, these old guys hanging out!
[Laughter]

BB: You probably had a nametag, right?

CQ: I think we might have, but it was such a happy [time], part of it was a relief, this thing you had worked for was real and people were coming through the doors and everybody was having a great time. So that memory of just standing there and saying hello to people as they came in the doors was the greatest memory: this is going to work.

BB: You mentioned young people, and that has been a phenomenon in the field. I think MCBA has seen numbers of young people who have come into the book arts. I wonder if the move into Open Book helped accelerate younger people finding MCBA and the book arts.

CQ: Yes, I think it did. There were initiatives that started when we moved into the new space. There were children's programs already at the other place and those have continued, school programs coming in, but we started aiming at high school age. All kids

are creative at a certain level and you can engage them in literacy and books, but then kids start picking paths, and they go down the sports path or they go down the hoodlum path or they go down the artist path, or whatever it is. And the sports path and the hoodlum path and the nerd path are much more well supplied in schools than the arts path, unfortunately, the way arts funding in our schools has gotten. One of the things that we were conscious of is how do we identify these kids who have artistic potential—it didn't necessarily have to be book arts—it might be visual arts in general, it might be cinema, or some other thing related to visual arts, or even literary arts. So, when we moved in to the new facility we started a program called By Design, which paired a book artist or other kind of visual artist or (in my case) a literary artist, with a student in a mentoring capacity, where they could come in, use the facilities at MCBA, work on projects together with their mentor, work in some group settings, and really get their hands on resources that they couldn't otherwise.

[This was] a really important thing; this happened for me with a teacher when I was in high school. To give a kid the sense that they can be an artist, that this is really an option for them, that it is not just a dream, or this thing you have to set aside and go do your real job, and then maybe do a little of. But, to give kids with talent and the inclination this sense of I can do this as a career or as a substantial aspect of my life. And begin to see what it means to be an artist, and what it means to think and behave as an artist, and to be responsible as an artist. So that was one of the programs that we initiated aimed at youth. There have been others that I am less intimately informed on. But that was a great one because the kids got this different, [not a] classroom, it was a working sort of environment.

BB: It was a studio.

CQ: It was a studio.

BB: It was exactly that age group that was so critical. And now, thirty years on, they are getting families coming back, and those families participated as kids. That is amazing, to have the second generation participating. To turn back to board and staff initiatives, as I mentioned you served on the board through 2006, with Board Chair from 2004 to 2005. Your board service overlapped with Peggy Korsmo-Kennon's departure for future challenges, and with the hiring of Dorothy Goldie. Were you involved with Dorothy's hiring, and if so, could you share any memories about that decision and how MCBA was repositioned at that time?

CQ: Yes. I chaired the search committee that hired the Peggy replacement. Obviously we were not happy that Peggy got a better opportunity. She was hired away from us by the Bell Museum, believe it or not, to help them build their new building, which is only now ten years later or whatever it is, coming to fruition. But that was the reason she left, for that opportunity with the Bell. So, it just shows the caliber of person that we had. So we had to say, ok, what do we need now? Peggy got us through this transition, got us on a

great footing, so what is next? We looked at people from all kinds of quarters of the book world. We looked at artists who had some kind of programmatic background—and this was a national search, not just in the Twin Cities. We looked at some book artists who had programmatic and teaching reputations, we looked at some people who were educators, again, on the arts side, I can't recall, I don't recall exactly if we looked straight on at some non-profit executives, but I think we did. At last in the early going, I am not sure when we got in the final round.

Dorothy was kind of a wild card in this group. The program people from the arts world are expected, the artists are expected, and the non-profit executives are expected. But Dorothy was more. She had worked for B. Dalton Bookseller in the early days, so she had this book connection, and then she went into US Bank, into marketing, and so she had a very strong marketing background, and then [she] was fundraising for Saint Paul Academy. So she was in a development position at SPA but that hadn't been her career path; she had this considerable retail marketing background, which made her attractive, as one of the finalists when we were looking at what is it we really need here. And ultimately she really shone both as a strategic thinker about what MCBA could be, and also as somebody that really had managed people and had those kind of skills, which Peggy had as well, but not necessarily some of the people who came from a teaching background: they have the programmatic side, but they may not have the management side. So Dorothy was our recommendation and Dorothy was the one they hired, and it was really that combination of having the marketing mind as well as having some management experience as well as having been on the development side raising money for a private school. She had all of those things, and I liked her, which also helps.

BB: It is so interesting seeing how each Executive Director has brought their own tool kit.

CQ: Yes. And I will say that when we hired Jeff Rathermel, Dorothy and I were, that was really a staff decision.

BB: For the Artistic Director position.

CQ: For Artistic Director. That was really a staff decision for her to decide, but she brought me in on that, so I was in on the interviews. And Jeff was, again, he was a little bit of a wild card, because he was still working for state government but he was a book artist. But if you just look on paper or conventionally thinking, are you going to hire some guy who is working for the state government? To be your artistic director, are you nuts? But of course, we could see that he had this perfect combination of stuff, and now he is the leader of the organization, so it was clearly the right choice. But again, that was one of Dorothy's attributes as a manager and a judge of people, to say, this is the kind of person that we are looking for.

BB: I have some general questions to wrap this up, but I would love to take a break here and look at some of the work you have brought with you, maybe get the camera repositioned.

Ok, Charlie, it looks like we have some great work here. Whatever you would like to talk about, we would love to hear about it.

CQ: Well, one of the great pleasures of getting to know a place like MCBA is that you are continually exposed to the varieties of book arts. Both how they are made as well as how they get finished, and of course when you are around stuff that is beautiful and you love, it is really easy to buy it and take it home. So these are some things that I pulled off the shelves that I thought were worth talking about.

This one, for example. Regula Russelle is a long time teacher at MCBA and one of my all time favorite people on earth, and not just as a book artist. But one of the things that she does in addition to the beautiful work with the slipcase of the William Stafford poems [*You Reading This, Be Ready*]. I am a writer, and so most of the time I am relating to the text, and when I have a novel published, it is designed and it is published, and there are thousands of pages that run off the press. And with a book artist, the book artist is making choices about how to present your text; she is spending the time. I don't know if she handset this particular book, but in some cases they may be hand setting each letter and each page.

BB: Yes, you can look at the page number she has over there.

CQ: So there are design decisions that are made, and then there is the time; each book is made by hand. Each page is turned by hand on the press. So there is this relationship that the book artist has in reverence to a text. [A] writer would love to have every reader experience their work in that way. When you get [an artist's book] as a reader you can't help but take the time, you can't help but interact with that work in a way that is different than you would in a regularly published work. So I wanted to talk about Regula in the beauty of her work, but also the fact that it changes the way you interact with the text from someone else.

Then there are others who may be creating. Karen Wirth: this is an early work of hers [*Spatial Geometries*] that is experimenting with the form of the book, it is not just the printing, or the materials, actually, the whole physical concept of the book challenges the way you look at the material. And that is exciting and one of the things that I used to do at work was to go over to MCBA and, because I was working in books and working with print, look at how the artists were dealing with that. And so to make sure that I was thinking about, could I be presenting this in a different way or in a different sequence, or breaking up the text and the images.

Then there is Jody Williams, another favorite of mine. I don't have my glasses on, so I am opening it from the other side. So, is this a book? Well, of course it is! You open this up and it is about escape, and it has these little hidden drawers, and then you pull it out and you have this wonderful little fold-out book, and then there is another one hidden on the other side, [a] whole concept of the book and the execution of it. And this is a little screen that you can peek in through the book, and there is another hidden drawer back here with another book concealed within. There is this delight, there is a concept but there is this delight and humor in these things that is wonderful. And then there is the exquisite craftsmanship that goes into this. This is why I am not a book artist: because of the craftsmanship part.

I took a course in box making at MCBA, and this is a box that I made in a one-day workshop, very satisfying. I came home and put the handle on it myself after the workshop. This has a couple of our cats' ashes in it. So this is an object that I made that has some utility but also has some sentimental value as well.

I mentioned the By Design program. This was a project that I worked on as part of that. I got a little carried away with this, but at the time I was concerned about the fraud and abuse going on in the corporate world. It was in the early-2000s when World Com and all those companies were going bankrupt. And I started developing this book that involved manipulating images of money with text, and taking the eyes of the photos of some of these executives and superimposing them over our founding fathers. On the back, these are close-ups of these eyes, with sort of the public thoughts of the person, and these are more the private thoughts: I never made time for simple friendships. I couldn't see the ROI. That project I would never have done if I hadn't been involved in that program and had the resources of the teacher that gave us the assignment as part of the project, the inspiration of time, and the idea of working with other artists and sort of feeling competitive saying, oh, I want to do something cool here.

I want to tell a little story about this. This is one of the books that combines the sort of beautiful craftsmanship and the physical: you sort of have to go through a process to open this up. So you see it is a lot higher quality than the one I have over here. You have a box that opens up and then you get this question mark. It opens up and it's called *A Riddler's Compass*. And it has these little riddles and illustrations that show locations in Rome without telling you where they are. And you may not walk around Rome with this but you could, and find these places. This was done by a woman who was an employee of mine at Words at Work. She was a design student that had just come back from Rome, and was living in Fargo, doing decals for a truck company, custom decals and things that you can apply to trucks with her design skills. She has a beautiful notebook that sort of looked like this, the illustrations were just gorgeous; her name was Chandler O'Leary and I said I am going to hire this kid, but she had to go back to Fargo for her truck job, and I said before you leave you have got to go down the street to MCBA. So she did, we hired her, she came back to work, and became, started taking classes at MCBA, she produced...

BB: She is a respected book artist.

CQ: She produced this book collaboration with her father called, *A Faery Gardener*. It is kind of a weird book. The text is by her father and the production of the book is by Chandler, and she now has her own press called Anagram Press in Takoma, Washington. [She is] making her living doing letterpress printing and illustration. You get to know the artists and the people; that is part of the fun of it too. You get to see their careers advance.

The one other thing that I want to talk about is the exhibition aspect of MCBA. This “Designer Bookbinders of North America” show was from some years ago; it was a traveling show; we didn’t put it together. But it came to MCBA and it brought us just these spectacular examples of bindery. It was a phenomenal show, gorgeous. This is why I have the catalogue; so I can remind myself of how tremendous it was. It opened your [eyes]—you know, we all see these old books that are leather bound, and we think, that is what bookbinding is. But then you see the materials, the presentation and the craft that goes into just putting covers on things [and] it is just so amazing. That is an example of the kind of exhibitions either started by MCBA or brought in by MCBA that are just like you would see at the Walker Art Center, or, I guess you have the say MIA now, Minneapolis Institute of Arts. For the book arts, MCBA is the kind of place where you can come in and just get your eyes knocked out every six weeks or so with something new.

BB: Thank you so much, that was great to see. We have five or six more questions, and these have to do with perspective at a thirty-year point in the organization. For example, would you like to share any thoughts about how you view MCBA’s position or role nationally as an artist service organization? What kind of a role have we created, nationally or even internationally?

CQ: Obviously MCBA is one of the premier book art centers in the country. I don’t know the world picture as well, but certainly the country. We have been the one that the other book centers come to and say, oh my gosh, how did you do this? And it is not to say that the other ones aren’t great, it is just the combination of educational mission, outreach to the community, the facility, richness of programming, and the kind of physical facilities available to artists. I don’t think anyone else has that combination, and that is what makes MCBA so great. There are others that are great in one aspect or two, but I think the way we pull those together, if I had to make the argument that we are the premier organization I would tick off those kinds of things.

BB: As far as the neighborhood, to circle back around, how would you describe the Open Book Downtown East neighborhood as it is called now, to bring us up to date with what you had said earlier historically about that area? Obviously it has changed a tremendous amount.

CQ: On a personal note, my office was a block from the old MCBA, and when my wife, Susan and I were discussing downsizing from having a yard and all the rest of the stuff, we actually purchased a condo right across from Open Book. And ultimately we weren't able to make the move, and the renters who were in it for us wanted to buy, so we ended up selling it to them. But we were actually very excited about coming back downtown, coming to that neighborhood where the Liquor Depot was in those early days, and actually living downtown and being right across from Open Book. That felt like a neat full circle kind of thing. So that whole area just continues to develop. If you look at what happened when they built the Metrodome, which is not very far from us—nothing happened, zilch, in the way of development. Now, would building a new stadium somehow have changed it all? I don't know, but the fact is that a lot of development had already occurred before the decision to put that [new stadium] back on that same spot came about, and we know the Wilfe brothers [owners of Vikings football team] are big developers and presumably know what they are doing. I think that little decision—that big decision for us, but really a little half a block, a third of a block that we were concerned with, was really one of the instigators of a lot a change that blossomed out in that area and is still going on.

BB: [It is] almost primarily residential now around there, and I think we predated a good deal of the redevelopment of the riverfront, which folds into that, too. You touched on this before, but how would you characterize MCBA as an organization today, compared to the organization it was or the impact it might have made originally?

CQ: I alluded a little bit to this before, but maybe I will say it a different way. MCBA has done a very good job of combining this artistic core of the organization in terms of artistic excellence and variety and engagement of high-quality artists in the organization, with a public outreach, and not just outreach. That sounds like you are on a mission, but it is really attracting the public, too, it is bringing people in and showing them things that are meaningful to them, so they want to be there, and that's the educational component. And arts organizations, it is very easy for an arts organization or arts entity to pick one path or the other, and so you are a gallery but you are not going to have people who are not professional come into your gallery. Or you are a school and a classroom, but the real artists wouldn't come into the school or the classroom.

I think what MCBA has done, and other arts organizations like the Loft and Playwrights Center have done as well, is that they have brought this very high level of artistic standard to the public in a way that you can engage with it in different ways. You can engage it purely as a consumer, or as an observer, and look at that and say, that is beautiful. Or you can look at this and say, I can own this. I can afford this art. I can have this, or I can learn how to do it, or my kid can come here and be inspired by this. It is the successful bringing together of this. You can't do that if you have crappy artists, the public isn't going to respond to it in the same way. At the same time, the artists aren't going to have that experience unless the public is really engaged, buying their art and attending things. That I think is the cool thing that is different from when we were in the

old location. [In McKesson] it was primarily the Co-op side, it was primarily the artists working, it was their workspace, they used the presses, they had work there, but it wasn't the main thing that they were doing—selling it in the shop. It was mainly the Co-op going all the way out to the community, and then bringing people back into the Co-op. So, it seems like it is kind of a Minnesota thing, you know.

I was thinking about a sports metaphor. If you look at the great sports figures that come out of Minnesota, we produced some really great distance runners and some really great wrestlers and some really great mountain bikers and bicyclists. And all those sports are really individual. But there is also this team component to every single one of them, too. And so it is not like football or basketball where it is primarily a team sport where you are an individual within that. You are really on your own but it is also a team sport. And you live or die by your own thing. And in some ways the arts can be that. You can live or die by your own performance and never be part of something else. And somehow in Minnesota we have created this opportunity for—I say this because I was a distance runner, actually I have done all three of those things—but in those sports we have given people a chance to run in races with really top runners. Or to rub elbows with stars in those fields, which you can't really do in basketball or football—you can't really play with the Vikings. But you can run in a race with a great marathoner in this town. And it is sort of the same thing here with the arts. You may never be a Karen Wirth, or you may never be some other great artist, but you can be in the room with them, you can learn from them, you can rub elbows with them, you can have that experience, and you can gain that appreciation about what it is that they have achieved and what that means to you as somebody who is trying to achieve part of that. So something in the Minnesota soup or the Minneapolis-St. Paul culture enables that to happen in a way that, if you are in a more competitive, more cutthroat environment, it may not be as conducive.

BB: It does seem that we have a constellation of hands-on studio-based non-profits here, and it has come to characterize one side of the arts in Minnesota. What might be characteristically Minnesotan is, perhaps, openness to that kind of cooperative venture. I love what you have just said about the levels disappearing to some degree.

CQ: You still recognize the elite, and that is why you want to be there, because, oh my gosh, there is a lot of other metaphors I could use, but it is observing and seeing the person up close [to understand] what it really means to make one of these things. That just enhances your appreciation of it. And it is really possible in the artistic fields for that activity that the elite person does, to become an elite activity, and not to open that door of experience to other people. A studio helps that, but a studio by itself isn't going to make it happen.

BB: Just a few more questions. One that I can imagine people might be curious about in listening to this conversation from your perspective, is the fact that MCBA was a start-up, was a non-profit, going through this transitional period in the late-1990s that was preceded by a challenging period and a change in leadership, MCBA has survived a

couple bumps in the road and is now flourishing, in particular since about 2000, so for about fifteen years. When you are thinking about longevity with MCBA, and we are imagining how each non-profit has its own challenges, thinking back over your history with the organization, are there any keys or characteristics that you think might have helped MCBA along that road to survive and flourish today?

CQ: This isn't in any particular order, but one of them going back to the early days [is] a board that is really engaged in the organization, not running the organization but engaged in the mission of the organization. Because the reality is that none of these organizations will earn their own income; they have to raise money in other ways. And it is not all going to come from foundations. So you need both the financial assistance or clout that a good board can [provide], but also the distance that they can bring; they are engaged with the mission but they can sit back a bit. Because, I can't think of a harder job honestly than to run a small non-profit, in terms of attention and time and doing a million things and not having enough resources, aside from being the President of the United States, that is a very hard job. And so having a good board that can be the sounding board that can help ground the organization and insulate it from some of that stress is important. And I think MCBA has been fortunate from the time it is founded, through most of its history that I'm aware of, to have that kind of support from a board.

The other one that I think is important is that the organization has to be ready to change, it has to be malleable and can't stay stuck in what it was when it was founded. The organizations that have survived...first you have to survive the founder. You have to get past what the founder envisioned and created, and whether that founder is one person or it is a collective, you have to get beyond that. And then you have to get beyond as things change. Here we are talking about books and ancient printing techniques and so on, at a time when the book itself is undergoing a huge transformation [and] communication is undergoing transformation. So you can't be rooted in this old: ok, we are going to crank the press again today and set the lead type and that is what we are about. You have to be able to make yourself relevant to the artists who are trying to express themselves and to the people who are going to receive those messages, and to the institutions that are going to support what is going on. So I think that is the other thing MCBA has done very well, [with] the leap that we made to Open Book. And then getting the artist back: we sort of started with an artist leadership in the beginning to get the mission rolling, and then to be mature enough to get someone like Jeff, who is an artist and has those two sides to lead it, and is really good at finding new wrinkles and new collaborations and new ways of revivifying what book art means. Over and over, and year after year, with the exhibits and everything else that goes on; I think that is important, and I think MCBA has done a really good job with that.

BB: What I end with each time is a question that comes to mind with any anniversary, especially with one as advanced as a thirtieth, and that is about legacy. MCBA, for some of us who were involved [early on], the delight has been to watch it grow and mature, and hopefully it will have a long life to come. But if you think about perspective now at its

thirtieth, what might its legacy be, however you want to frame it, for Minnesota or nationally? What has MCBA given back at this point in its lifespan?

CQ: One of the things we used to agonize over in the early days, and that they may still agonize over, is, what is book art. And I think for sure, one thing that has changed from fifteen years ago, say, in the mid point [of MCBA's lifespan] when I came in, until now: I think there is less agonizing over that, [because] we have moved the notion of the book arts [to match] with what the artist is trying to convey, and to realize how broad that is, to realize that the definition is not so important as all the things that we looked at. There are a lot of ways that the book arts can manifest themselves. And I think that there are still probably many, many Minnesotans, or many people in the world, who don't recognize what book arts are. But I am sure they have come to be familiar with these other forms of artistic expression, whether their vocabulary is the vocabulary we happen to have.

So that is one. I think the other one, maybe I didn't express in terms of legacy, is that combination of being an artist services organization and a community services organization, a membership. If I am a member of Minnesota Public Radio, I get a coffee mug or something, I don't accept the premiums, but if I give money there I am a member, but really, I am a contributor. I am not a member in the sense that I can go into MPR and hang out in the studio and rub elbows with the personalities and be part of the programming. That is a different kind of relationship.

I think the other thing that MCBA has demonstrated and has made valid for other organizations in this community as well as around the country, when organizations are looking for models of how we survive, how do we stay relevant. They can look at a place like this and say, oh, that is how it is done. You can't be this citadel of art that is like this, and you have to have standards, you can't be all things to all people or anything goes. But bringing those two things together, I think that was always part of it, but we just got better and better and better, and will continue to get better at that. I think that, as a model for other arts organizations anywhere they are trying to figure out how do we survive and still be an arts organization, or how do we survive and still have an education mission. Or a community mission. I think MCBA is a shining example of that.

BB: That is a perfect place to wrap this up. I want to sincerely thank you for your time and your service. We are talking about thousands of people and kids, and all the Minnesotans who have gained from MCBA. So, for all that you have done for MCBA, thanks so much.

CQ: Oh, it was fun, the whole time.