

# MICHAEL SCHILL

By STEVE ROSE

On March 30<sup>th</sup>, our own Steve Rose sat down with our fellow resident, Michael Schill, the President of the University of Oregon. Here is a synopsis of that interview:



**S.R.** I was thrilled when I moved into the Elizabeth, being a Duck alum, to learn that Michael Schill, a fellow Duck, was a part-time resident here. Also being a lawyer, I know of Michael, who I can say has a very luminescent background. Michael, first things first. How often do you come up to the Elizabeth?

**M.S.** Before Covid, I was coming up quite often - once a month. During Covid, the types of in-person events and meetings that we did pre-Covid came to a screeching halt, so I reduced my time here. Now, as of this date, we are getting back in the swing of things. I am teaching this quarter and we had our first class without masks. What a wonderful opportunity to do in person teaching again! I am now anticipating coming up to Portland quite a bit. Plus, as you may have read, we just bought the Concordia Campus.

**S.R.** I have read about that and I think it is exciting. What are you teaching?

**M.S.** I teach a seminar on higher education on our Eugene campus.

**S.R.** Have you met many Elizabeth residents on your stays?

**M.S.** Well, of course, in a residence this size I meet a lot of people through the elevator rides and in the lobby. I very much like the building. I chose the Elizabeth for a few reasons. I particularly like the concierge staff. They have been extremely helpful. I did tell the broker that one mandate was I needed to be within three blocks of Powell's Bookstore. Well now I am dead center. I looked at the apartment, saw Mount Hood, Mount St. Helens, and it was just amazing.

**S.R.** I think that is wonderful. Have you had many chances to experience the Pearl District?



**M.S.** Yes, I generally go out to eat with an alumnus or alumni. I'd say my current favorite restaurant is Andina. I just love the food there and I am never disappointed. Never having had much Peruvian food, I am now a big fan. Every time I am here, I go to Powell's. I am a huge book fan. I can spend hours there. I like reading hard copy books. I don't know if you had a chance to read Educated by Tara Westover. It's a fantastic book. I mostly read nonfiction.

**S.R.** Well, I should invite you to our book club. The Elizabeth has a fantastic club.

**M.S.** I should. When I lived in NYC, I was president of my co-op and I learned one thing. I don't want to be involved in the governance of a building. [Chuckles] Nonetheless, I am grateful for all the people who do step up and help this community be one that thrives.

**S.R.** I am on the Board and I should have taken your advice about governing. [Laughs]

**M.S.** My building in NY was in Greenwich Village and some of its former residents were folks like Bella Abzug and Ed Koch, a very politically active building. I remember on my elevator rides residents would tell me about the leaks in their apartments and ask me to come in and take a look. One time Larry Kramer, the playwright, asked me to come in and fix his toilet. I had no idea what to do, but I did go up to his apartment.

**S.R.** What years were you in the Greenwich Village co-op?

**M.S.** I practiced law at a Wall Street firm from 1985-87. Then after getting tenure at the University of Pennsylvania, I was recruited to NYU. It was during my NYU period, that lasted 10 years, that I lived there. 2 Fifth Avenue. It was a great building. It was an exciting time. I had lunch with Ed Koch and he would always pick a table where he could be seen. He enjoyed meeting folks even though he was no longer mayor. His tagline was 'how am I doing?' Quite a character. Teaching in Pennsylvania was my first teaching job. I lived close enough to walk to the university and I loved it. I was also much younger then. Penn has gotten increasingly better over the years, but it was a great law school then.

**S.R.** I know the school well. I have relatives who were on the faculty there. Let's go back to your youth. Let's go back to Schenectady. What was it like growing up there?

**M.S.** Schenectady was a city that was in the midst of deindustrialization. It's well known as the city where the General Electric Company was founded, its chief claim to fame. Most of my friends' parents worked for G.E. I was the oddball kid. My father worked in a factory and my mother was a nurse. It was my mother's parents who got us all to Schenectady. That is where they went when they got off the boat at Ellis Island. It was a good place for a kid to grow up. It was safe and the people were very nice.

**“... when I first moved to Eugene, it was like  
a green Schenectady...”**

**S.R.** How is it your mom's parents chose Schenectady?

**M.S.** It was like many chain migrations. My great-uncle went there, and when my grandparents came over from Russia, they went there. I don't think there are many relatives still there but, interestingly, when I first moved to Eugene, it was like a green Schenectady, with no fancy clothing stores but many of my favorite small businesses and restaurant chains.

**S.R.** What factory did your dad work for?

**M.S.** He worked for Mohawk Sportswear. A lot of manufacturing was done in the Mohawk Valley. A lot of those clothing jobs were exported to Asia including ultimately my dad's. My mother was a registered nurse who worked in a hospital. I have one sister, also a lawyer. She is older, but I don't think she technically admits to it.

**S.R.** Describe your childhood.

**M.S.** I was pretty nerdy as a kid. I am also a pretty nerdy adult! I really focused on schoolwork and reading. As far as extracurricular activities, I was not into the athletics which is a great irony as I am now president of one of the great and formidable athletic schools. The only sport I was ever really aware of was baseball. I grew up in my grandfather's house and he was a real committed Yankees fan. That meant I had to be a Mets fan. [Laughs] I was a fan of the Miracle Mets in 1969 and I watched baseball all the way up to free agency. I like to root for a team and a team is continuous. You root for them, you know who they are, and you build a relationship to that team. Intercollegiate sports, I worry, in say basketball with the transfer portal. It's become a high velocity of change.

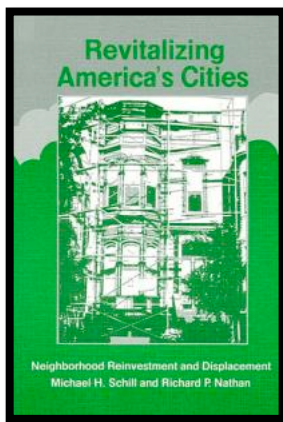
**S.R.** Before we leave this subject, who was your favorite player on the 69 Mets? Were you a Tom Seaver fan?

**M.S.** I was a Jerry Koosman fan. It was rumored he was Jewish and for me it was something to be proud of.

**S.R.** I know you have always done well in school, and I see by your biography you attended Princeton. Why Princeton?

**M.S.** My parents did not go to college and from the time I was a little kid, I remember sitting on my dad's knee and him telling me, "You are going to go to Harvard. You are going to go to Harvard!" I got wait-listed at Harvard and Princeton not only accepted me but provided me with an enormous amount of financial assistance and scholarships. My parents would not have been able to afford to send me to college.

Princeton was actually less expensive than state universities, so I chose to go there and it was a life changing experience.



**S.R.** Why was it life changing?

**M.S.** Well, in two ways. 50% of the students were from prep schools and 50% who had attended public schools acted like they went to prep schools. I didn't even know what a prep school was when I got there. It was just a completely different world. So, apart from the experience, what I loved was the education. I got an unbelievable liberal arts education. I majored in public policy. I had an amazing relationship with my thesis advisor, Dick Nathan, from the Brookings Institute. He came to Princeton my senior year; I was his first student. And we were able to write a book together. He passed away last year. That book helped me not only get into Yale Law School but also helped me get my first teaching job. The book was entitled Revitalizing America's Cities: Neighborhood Reinvestment and Displacement.

[Revitalizing America's Cities: Neighborhood Reinvestment and Displacement by Michael H. Schill, Richard P. Nathan - Books on Google Play](#)

It was published in 1983, Housing Policy is my area of academic specialty. Cities and neighborhoods come and go in cycles. As we all know, gentrification is a current issue. You are either experiencing investment or disinvestment. Disinvestment at that time, the 1980's, you don't, let's say, want to be the South Bronx. When investment comes in and people and businesses get pushed out, what happens to them? So, we looked at ten neighborhoods in five cities that were experiencing gentrification to see how the people fared.

## **“... develop a close relationship with professors. . .**

**S.R.** And your findings were?

**M.S.** Well, for the most part people landed on their feet, so to speak. Remember, if people experienced homelessness, we probably did not find them, so there is some bias. But for a long time I played detective, locating as many as I could find. This book would not have happened without a close relationship with a faculty member. When I meet with students today, what I tell them is develop a close relationship with professors. You never know how it will affect you, you will never know how it will help you later in your life. I want to add that the person that the hiring committee at the University of Pennsylvania called was Dick Nathan. One of the hiring committee members told me Dick said, “I hope he marries my daughter,” which I took as a pretty good recommendation. [Laughs] Finally, the book was based on my thesis. We took it to the Ford Foundation and they ended up funding it.

## **“... the greatest benefit of a residential university is that you get to meet so many people from diverse backgrounds. . . .**

**S.R.** What was Princeton like?

**M.S.** The social scene was unusual in those days-- you had eating clubs divided into jocks, southern good old boys, northern aristocrats, blonde blue-eyed woman, and Scarsdale Jews. Today, it is much better because all students there are in residential colleges, where students are assigned randomly, as opposed to eating clubs where they are selected. I told my class just yesterday that the greatest benefit of a residential university is that you get to meet so many people from diverse backgrounds. Be it race or political viewpoints, what a university does, it throws you all together. The future of this country will be based on how we are able to understand and relate to each other.

**S.R.** After Princeton, you took a year off to work on the book and lived in Brooklyn. Then you decided to go to Yale Law School. What was behind that decision?

**M.S.** My mother gave me three choices: be a doctor, a dentist, or a lawyer. Which are typical choices Jewish mothers give to their sons and daughters. I wasn't great in math or science and verbal activities came very easily to me. During my time off, I was also accepted to Harvard Law School, but not being a fan of The Paper Chase, I chose Yale. It brought together, I think, a more diverse group of people. It's a small school. It's the #1 law school again. It made the learning experience fun with all the diverse people. One bonus was New Haven. I liked it a lot. I am a theater fan and New Haven is like catnip for a theater fan. It's got the Yale Repertory Theatre and the Long Wharf Theatre, and we were seeing plays before they moved to Broadway. I very much enjoyed my time there.

**S.R.** Was there a specific focus in law school? Was there one area that you felt most interested in?

**M.S.** Real estate law. I became a real estate lawyer, coming out of college, with my focus on housing. The closest you got to housing was real estate property law. After that, I clerked for a judge in Philadelphia, worked at a Wall Street law firm, and then taught at the University of Pennsylvania in real estate law and urban planning. I worked at the firm for about a year and one-half, but knew, long term, being a teacher and professor was what I wanted to do for my career. In the field of law, teaching and research are about as close as one can get to being self-employed. There's no client paying for your time, wanting quick



solutions. In academia, when you write on your passion, you not only get published but you get prestige. I moved to NYU to start a real estate center and loved living in Greenwich Village for 10 magical years. The center I started was the Furman Center for Real Estate & Urban Policy. It

has since become the leading academic research center in the nation devoted to public policy aspects of land use, real estate development, and housing. Our mission was to be an honest broker between the real estate industry, tenants, and housing groups in the city of New York. In Los Angeles, people ask you what you drive. In New York, they ask how did you get your apartment. Housing is the most important thing, and we became a center where we could have honest conversations about housing, gentrification, rent control, and reducing exclusionary zoning. A lot of topics that are still on today's table.

**S.R.** Tell us about your development into administration and fundraising?

**M.S.** At the Furman Center, we fundraised several million dollars. Not nearly as much as I do now as the president of a university obviously. I learned early on that I wanted to have a say in what I did and where I worked. I chaired the search committee for a new dean of the NYU Law School and, during that time, I thought, this is kind of a cool job. Then later on, I got a call for the dean opening at the UCLA Law School. I got there in 2004 and I left in 2009. I ended up loving the city, the climate, and today some of my best friends are living in Los Angeles and I get to go back and visit. UCLA is one of the most diverse institutions imaginable.

**“I work with great teams who create great cultures.”**

**S.R.** Let's talk about your transition to administration and fundraising.

**M.S.** I very much enjoy administration. I work with great teams who create great cultures. For five years we did great things at UCLA, at least people said they were great. When you are doing it, you don't notice. Other people said it was successful - I am not objective.

**S.R.** Then after five years you go to the University of Chicago. So, Westwood to Hyde Park. What was that like?

**M.S.** Well, cold! The school was night and day different from UCLA, but I loved it. I am a very adaptable person. UCLA was leaning left and Chicago was leaning right. Chicago had a pretty austere culture but what I am most proud of during my time there - I would say we warmed it up. I care about people. I want to know them, I want to engage alongside them. I think Chicago is a great city, it has great culture, it has wonderful restaurants. It was a lot of fun to live there.

**S.R.** I am going to segue over to the University of Oregon. Here you were in the major cities of the US, the biggest urban centers, and you apply to run a university in Eugene, Oregon. How did that come about?

**M.S.** A headhunter called me when I was dean in Chicago. I was thinking about becoming a president of a university during that period. I knew a little about the University of Oregon but what I knew wasn't that positive. It had a period of, I think, five presidents in six years, two of whom left under not great situations. There was a basketball controversy with regards to sexual violence. The school had just unionized. You could have looked at the situation and said it was a bit of a



hot mess. I said no. Then friends of mine started telling me what a great school it was. Their kids were looking to go to Oregon and I started thinking about it again. The headhunter called again to say are you still not interested? I said maybe I am interested and I interviewed for the position. I had been to Portland but I had never set foot in Eugene. Since the airport is outside the city and close to a timber plant, industry, and open land, I sort of wondered if I would feel at home. But then, when I set foot in Eugene, I saw it truly is a lovely place. One of the great things about Eugene is it is a very livable city. Here is a good example: in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, or Philadelphia, if you ran an errand, let's say to a bank, it would take an hour. In Eugene, I told my assistant I would be back in an hour. I was going to the bank and I was back in 10 minutes. Everything is 10 minutes away.

**S.R.** It's been now seven years as the head of the University of Oregon. Has it been a good experience?

**M.S.** It's been a great experience. It hasn't been easy, as I mentioned. The school had gone through a lot right before I got here.

Our budget was a mess when I got here. As you may know, the state of Oregon severely underfunds higher education. If we compare all of our peers in the Association of American Universities, which is our group of the top 60-70 research universities in the nation, we are next to last in terms of state funding. In the State of Oregon, we get less per student than any of the other state public universities which is a bit ridiculous. Our budget is difficult. We were unionized – it's very rare that a faculty is unionized. I decided we needed to invest in research excellence. We have done that with the help of great alumni. The University of Oregon has raised, in our last campaign, \$3.2 billion and that doesn't include a recent gift from the Ballmer's of \$425 million. I am delighted. It allows us to build excellence at the University of Oregon and serve the state. The Knight Campus, which is funded by Phil and Penny, has gotten well over \$1 billion dollars to create a new bio engineering engine for the state. It's going to be wonderful. We have one more building to build and then hire new faculty. The Ballmer Institute gift allowed us to buy Concordia. We hope one day the people of Oregon can appreciate what a great honor and value it is to have a world-class research university.

## **“ . . . I love fundraising. It's matchmaking. . . . ”**

**S.R.** I am glad you went through all those accomplishments. As an alum, I am very aware of the Knight Campus, and I am aware of the Concordia purchase. It's been great to see the growth in the diversity of the University. How excited are you about these funds being not only raised, but being continually raised?

**M.S.** I love fundraising. It's matchmaking. It's someone who has funds they don't need for themselves and they can invest them to achieve communal objectives. Matching that with the needs of an institution like the University of Oregon, which is starved for revenue and tries to keep tuition at a reasonable rate. Going to alumni and talking about what we are doing and matching their interests with things that are going to be important to the University. It's an intellectual activity, it's an emotional activity. When it works, it's like cherries across a slot machine!

**S.R.** Well I hope you keep doing this for a very long time. You have brought great benefits to the University of Oregon. Before we leave each other, I want to move the conversation to a lighter area. I understand that you weren't a sports fan, but now you are the #1 sports fan at the University of Oregon. Is that true?



**M.S.** Well, there may be one other person who is the #1 sports fan, but I have become a huge fan. Pre COVID, I was going to all the home and away games of football. I go to lots of both women and men's basketball. And I really try to go, at least a few times, to all the other sports. Athletics is important to a school like ours. We are not in the mainstream of the East Coast where people are talking about different universities. So how students first hear about us, outside of California and Oregon, is through our sports teams. The Ducks - they watch them, they root for them, cool uniforms, great team, and then I really hope that gets them to ask the next question:

what are the academic programs like? One thing I hope I achieve by the time I leave is to blend the athletic and the academic together. They can be mutually reinforcing. One, the athletics is a recruitment tool as we are totally tuition dependent and secondly, we are thinking of academic programs that will focus on sport and wellness. I want the University of Oregon to be the place every boy and girl who thinks in terms of the blend of athletics and academics thinks about. Academic programs that focus on fitness, wellness, high performance, and the business of marketing of sports.

**S.R.** I do want to ask one more question. You are the chair of the Pac-12 Conference Executive Committee, correct?

**M.S.** Not only am I the Chair of the Pac-12, I am also on the Board of Governors of the NCAA and Division 1. Believe me, it's not based on knowledge, it's based on seniority. I've just been around long enough. [Laughs] All of my friends laugh that I find myself in the middle of this. As you know, in the Pac-12 we recently had a leadership change and I was the chair of the search committee. Now we are facing just unbelievable issues in intercollegiate activities that could be the end of the model of the amateur athlete. It's under tremendous pressure right now because of name, image and likeness, anti-trust law and labor organizing. We are at a very pivotal moment. I love sports. I love the mix of the athlete, the alumni, the students, the faculty, the community. It is such a communal experience. At games, I am so busy talking to people, visiting suites, going down to the locker room, I hardly watch them.

**S.R.** Mike, I cannot tell you how much I have enjoyed this conversation. I could ask you many more questions. On behalf of the Elizabeth Lofts residents, thank you for speaking to me this afternoon and I hope to see you in the building and see you embrace the community we have here.

Go Ducks!

