

I'm Jenni Lockett, and this is Pacific University's Boxer Voices.

Today, we are talking with alumnus and former professor Wid Bleything.

Wid earned three degrees from Pacific on his way to becoming an optometrist. He served in the Air Force and Air Reserves, retiring as a colonel, and he also worked in private practice for many years before eventually returning to Pacific, where he became the dean of the College of Optometry.

And while he has many — many — stories to tell, today he's talking to us about his early years as a student at Pacific just after World War II and as young lieutenant in the Air Force, stationed in Montgomery, Alabama, during the earliest days of the Civil Rights Movement.

In the early 1940s, Pacific's Forest Grove Campus was nearly empty, as almost every young man of college age was called to service in World War II. After the war, though, students flooded back, many pursuing their educations on the GI Bill.

Wid had just graduated from a technical high school in Portland and started his freshman year at Pacific in 1947, surrounded by classmates several years older:

Bleything: “There were different dynamics as a result of that kind of thing. They went home at night to university apartments on the edge of campus, it was in what was near the football field. These were rickety little places that had been put together as leftover buildings from Camp Adair down there at Corvallis. The government gave them to universities who would make use of them ... and we made good use of those. But they lived there with families. Many of them had a spouse and children to go home to. The rest of us went to McCormick Hall. And so, the divide was obvious in terms of age, and in terms of where you were in life at the time.

“So that meant, when you had Homecoming activities, with noise parade, it was a rah-rah, kids from 19-year-olds really in there. Freshman hazing didn't seem to apply to the GI. They thought that was too childish for them. They just plain didn't cooperate. That left the football team with fewer targets: us freshmen with green beanies.

“Social life on campus was primarily driven by Greek organizations. I was a member of Gamma. It was the oldest. In fact it was older than many national fraternities.

“During that time, they actually acquired a house in Forest Grove that became the Gamma house. That originally was built for the Alpha Zeta Fraternity, they went broke. It turned into the hospital for a time, then back again. And everybody was so sure it would be the place for beer parties. In fact, they were so over-corrective of that they allowed no alcohol in the building at all, so that was not an issue.

“You had to dress up for dinner each evening. Each six tables had an upperclassman, and you were fined for poor manners, or saying the wrong thing. Really about turning people into gentleman scholars.

“One of our biggest champions against the dean of students — who was really suspicious of us — was a professor of religion named Gertrude Crane. She was a tough old lady who said, ‘Nonsense. These are good kids. Leave them alone.’ And many did.

“It was a good time for Pacific, because we had more students than we knew what to do with in terms of housing and classrooms. It was a bit of a bonanza, in terms of enrollment, but not without its other challenges as well, because of the two cultures being melded together.”

“The veterans were good students, and they were serious about it. The vast majority were studying optometry, not other majors. I think they got a good value for their GI Bill for doing that.”

“They were often officers who had been pilots, navigators. That was common it seemed. That meant they had strong backgrounds in engineering. Everyone had a slide rule hanging from their belt. And so, when you sat in physics class, that was a little de-arming to have this person sitting on each side of you, and you didn’t have your slide rule.”

“They were whizzes at that thing. They could solve these physics and math problems as great speed.”

“I remember, though, I was majoring in optometry, and you did that as a freshman on.

“One of the requirements was a course called math analysis. It was taught by a crusty little lady, Andrea. On the first day the class met, there weren’t enough seats. The second day, there were empty seats. She scared the pants off of that many students with the first lecture. And most of these were GIs, who weren’t ready for beginning calculus. That’s for sure.”

While many of his classmates had already completed military service, Wid’s service requirement was still calling.

Bleything: “That was an interesting period, but as it melded in, the U.S. was in the period of time called the Korean Conflict. They were careful not to use “war,” because never declared war, technically. So it was called the Korean Conflict.”

“I was eligible for Selective Service. Every male had to register, had to take a physical exam and the like. If you were in college, pursuing successfully a college curriculum, you could get deferred. You had to stay in the top 10 percent of your class to be eligible.

That's good incentive, I would say. And so, I managed to do that. And I found out that my technical class engineering background in high school — four years of math, four years of science — played very well as background to study optometry."

"I had taken a year of physics, year of chemistry, four years of math. It provided a very solid background. I stayed in that calculus course, I didn't walk out the first day, and that's why."

"So, now I'm being deferred from selective service. I get a bachelor's degree and finish my OD degree. I don't feel like I'm done yet. Besides, all my classmates are older ... I want to be smart like them and a little older like them, so I decided to stay two more years and do a graduate degree, a master of science degree. At that time, brand new program, that allowed us to take clinical majors. I chose children's vision, which has been sort of my specialty and passion. It was wonderful!"

"I was teaching in the daytime, going to school at night. One night a week off, sang in Forest Grove Gleemen."

"Now I've finished my master's degree. I'm really eligible now for selective service, and so I go down a visit with them. There was a second act passed: the draft doctors law. I was eligible for both. I knew I needed to get my service time out of the way. How I did it was important to me. If selective service, end up in infantry. Didn't matter what I studied in college. I really didn't want to do that if I could do the other.

"I had an opportunity to talk to Navy, Army and Air Force. They all had strong lineups, waiting lists a mile long trying to get commissions, so they were not very encouraging. But I stayed connected, and finally, I got a letter from the Air Force man who said, I have an idea. I have a teaching position available. Since you've had teaching experience at university level, I'd like to put you at the top of the list. Boy, talk about a breath of fresh air. I said, 'You bet.'

"Well, during that time, Sen. McCarthy was making everybody out to be a communist. I was going to be teaching top-secret stuff, and I had to have top-secret clearance before they would give me position. The Air Force was not going to be embarrassed. It takes a long time. So I'm working pick-up jobs in offices around, trying to fill in. For several weeks, I was a substitute music teacher in Portland Public Schools, OK? Teaching band."

"So I'm a music teacher now, trying to make a couple of bucks working in other optometry offices, waiting, waiting, waiting for the FBI to clear me. My neighbor says, 'Are you in trouble?' No, no, no, I'm OK."

Finally, approval came through. He was stationed at the School of Aviation Medicine, part of the Air University headquartered in Montgomery, Alabama. He taught flight nurses about the affects of flight on their patients, taught corpsmen how to respond to

eye injuries in field assessments. Taught aero-meds how to perform eye-related aspects of annual flight physicals. The work, he said, was rewarding. Alabama in the 1950s, though, was a troubling environment.

Bleything: “The biggest adjustment for me was, here was a guy who had grown up in Portland and the Northwest, and in a family that was taught that people are created equal and should be treated that way. During my years at Pacific had a black roommate for several years.

“... ended up in a state where segregation was prevalent. It was very hard for me to get used to that. I wasn’t used to seeing restrooms: men, women, colored. Drinking fountains: colored. Reception rooms at medical offices: white, colored. The Ku Klux Klan was still very much in evidence, especially in those states, and so they would have a rally. And you would walk down the street and pass a Klansman in all his garb. I had a hard time with that.”

“I learned at the time, it wasn’t just Black people, it was Jewish people, catholic people, they had as targets. I did some weekend practice with a local optometrist who happened to be Jewish, and we would go to lunch together and pass one of these people on the street, and you could just feel him tighten up until we passed that situation.”

“I was kind of fascinated by the culture there, and on the weekends, I would take and drive out in the country and visit little country churches that were mainly black churches.”

“I would tell my colleagues in the choir on weekend what I’d done. They’d say, ‘You can’t go to that area, you can’t go to that market. That’s a black market.’ I said, ‘That’s your problem, not mine.’ They felt it was too dangerous to be hanging around. I would, being interested in music, I would sometimes go park my car in front of a black church and listen to them sing. It was just something else. When they sing, the whole world just rocks. It was terrific.”

“I ended up being the choir director at a Methodist Church. Across the street and down the block was another church, a Baptist Church. The minister’s name was Martin Luther King.

“So, I was there during the bus boycott, the Rosa Parks thing. I was utterly amazed at the degree of peaceful organizational talents displayed by Martin Luther King.”

“If the bus isn’t going to run, we’ll run our own system. So you’d see station wagons stop at a church, pick up a bunch of people, take them to work. They didn’t need the bus. The bus is run by the city. When they didn’t have paying passengers, they started to

go broke, because there was nobody riding the bus. I can't think of a better tactic than to get to the city through their pocketbook. It really worked. It really worked."

"That was kind of a growing up thing for me, sociologically, to see how that existed and to be there during the heavy pulse of its changing, and witness things on the street that were happening, and stuff like that."