ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
NORMAN BURNS
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Q. Dr. Norman Burns, thank you for being here today. Please state your full name and date of birth.

A. Well, Bob, before I get into the pertinent details of my arrival on the planet earth, I want to thank you for the time and effort you put into just getting me here. Bob, I was born in Fostoria, Ohio on October 26, 1928. Born at home and one of five children.

Q. Where did you grow up?

A. I grew up along with the rest of the family of course in Fostoria. And in 1944, I'm midway through high school. I'm in my second year at St. Winlin High School, and that's when my family decided, my father who was a shop worker, decided the pay was better than the factory in Fostoria, so we packed up and relocated in Toledo in 1944, right during the war. So I'm now at Toledo Central Catholic, high school of 2,000 from a high school of 200. I certainly would never, ever agree to someone taking a youngster out of high school midway through. It's a whole new challenge, new friends to make. If you're going to take a youngster out of school or a child out of school, do it early in life. But as they progress into junior high and high school, it's a real challenge. So I really can't say that my last two years at Toledo Central were that enjoyable.

Q. What kind of jobs did you work in before you came a dentist?

A. The typical paper route in Fostoria. I had about 100 customers. And Bob, if everyone would eventually pay for that delivery, I was making almost $8.00 a week. Some weeks less if I couldn't collect for the paper, because the paper was, now we're going back into the '30s, early '40s, the paper was twenty-five cents a week. The paper route was the

number one job. Number two, when we relocated in Toledo, I ended up on the golf course as a caddy. And then from caddy, two years of caddying, now I graduated from high school and I'm starting at the University of Toledo as a freshman. So now I'm working in the pro shop at the golf course. I'm cleaning clubs. I'm repairing clubs. Selling merchandise occasionally. So that was quite an enjoyable.

Well, let me see, from 1946 until I entered Dental School really in '53, that was about seven, maybe eight, years of service at Heatherdowns Country Club in Toledo. So, Bob, to answer your question, those were probably my two main jobs although I did work occasionally as a dental student. If we want to talk about now or later on, but as far as my working career before Dental School, those two jobs.

Q. Okay. Where did you complete your pre-dentistry school work?

A. Predominantly at the University of Toledo. At the time it was not a state university. It was a municipal university like Akron was a municipal university at one time. And gradually and eventually, the powers to be said, "Hey, we can't compete at the state or national level in high education with funding as a city, municipal college." So that's how Toledo gradually became a member of the Mid-America Conference. And I'm going to guess that would have been around 1950, Bob, maybe. But my years at the University of Toledo were predominantly spent when Toledo was a municipal university. And then, after talking to my pre-med advisor still in high school, I was still thinking about medical school and wanted to go to a Jesuit medical school. "Well, Norm, maybe if you spent some time at a Jesuit school before applying to Marquette Jesuit, St. Louis Jesuit, Loyola (those are just examples of Jesuit), maybe Xavier is a Jesuit school. Think about maybe spending some time at Xavier." So I go back home and push my family further in debt to

send me to Cincinnati, to Xavier, which was fine. But to get a degree from Xavier at that time, I had to fulfill the so-called religious criteria. So now I feel like I'm in seminary school because about all the courses I'm taking are religious courses. That plus the fact that Xavier was still an all-male school. And once in a while it's nice to see a female. And then my mother is in a tragic car accident and is critical for a period of time. So immediately I closed shop at Xavier and came back and I'm at University of Toledo again. So that in essence kind of answers your question of where I completed my pre-dentistry work.

Q. Do you have any favorite memories from college or pre-dentistry years?

A. Oh Bob, that's a difficult question to be perfectly honest. I enjoyed my time at Larry's. That was a watering hole on campus. I certainly enjoyed my time at the Phi Delta Beta fraternity house. I enjoyed that. And some time at the library and some dedicated effort at higher education. Of course you can always say athletic events. Football is obvious with memories of college. But as far as a specific answer to that question, I think my memories of activities at Ohio State University are more so after graduation.

Q. What pre-dentistry degrees did you receive?

A. A B.S. Bob, I'd like to think that I have about 90 percent of a Master's. I did a lot of my work in Histology and that's documented. And I just scratched the surface on my thesis. Of course, that's when I decided to make the switch from pre-med to dentistry and Dental School. Then I just dropped everything when I was accepted in Dental School. Then I dropped completely my Master's preparation. And in retrospect I feel kind of short-changed. I short-changed myself while I was in Dental School. Really, I could have gone

back with a little added effort and gotten my MS. But I didn't. So it was just a Bachelor's degree.

Q. When and where did you get married?

A. Married in Springfield, Ohio, my wife's home, in 1955, which was the summer between my second and third year in Dental School. My wife-to-be, although she is about four years younger, Donna had her degree in Fine Arts Education and was working. I was also fortunate enough to have a part-time job. So we sat down and much to the, my parents were disappointed that I didn't wait until I got out of Dental School, but we decided that we could handle things financially with her job. And then, Bob, I was fortunate enough to have a job as a tissue technologist at the legendary Emory Bonham's practice office. In my graduate work I had, of course, become rather proficient in tissue technology. I could take a specimen from the formaldehyde and run it through the alcohols, and end up staining it maybe a [inaudible] stain or a Masson's trichrome stain or a Sudan orange stain. So I had a little bit of expertise in slide preparation. So here I am, I'm working for Dr. Bonham. He has an extensive practice throughout the state and maybe the Midwest. They were sending specimens in for diagnoses. So I'd open up the mail when I'd leave the school at 5:00, open up the mail, and there the specimen was in a little vial. And within four hours' time I would maybe run through half a dozen specimens and end up with a slide for Dr. Bonham to investigate and pass a judgment on the next day. So that was my main employment while a dental student.

Q. How many children and grandchildren do you and Donna have altogether?

A. Well, Bob, we have three children and nine grandchildren. My three children, I have two daughters and a son, all three graduates of Ohio State. I'm not doing as well with my

older grandchildren at the present time. I have one who graduated from TCU [Texas Christian University]. I have another who graduated from University of Dayton. I have one that graduated from the College of Charleston. So I really haven't put back into the Ohio State format my grandchildren. But I do have a son-in-law who graduated from Ohio State. So when you add everything, we have six, three and three, we have six degrees from Ohio State.

Q. What year did you graduate Dental School and where was your first position after graduating?

A. The class of '57, and as we mentioned just a few moments ago, Bob, that was 60 years ago: 1953, my freshman year in Dental School, Postle Hall was brand-spanking new. It was three years old about.

Q. One or two, yeah.

A. Yeah, they were just phasing them in from Hamilton Hall and Starling-Loving over to Postle Hall. And I'm not sure, was it named Postle Hall that early?

Q. '77 is when they named it.

A. So what was it then? Just the College of Dentistry?

Q. Uh-huh.

A. Okay. That's the answer, 1957.

Q. Well, after you graduated where did you begin to work?

A. Well, Bob, that was quite a challenge. Where do you go? Bob, this is after 11 years of preparation. I was a slow learner in essence. Seven years before Dental School. But I picked up momentum a little bit in Dental School. I got through dentistry in four years. And my dear wife takes part credit for it. My GPA, believe it or not, jumped after starting

my third year in Dental School and my first year of marriage. I made the honor roll and before that I was on the cusp. I was 2.8, 2.9 [grade point average] but never a 3.0. Now I'm married and holy Toledo, 3.2, 3.3. So of course, my wife is taking a lot of credit for it. So it's time for graduation and, Bob, one of the big challenges, now I don't know if you faced it, but one of the big challenges with a professional degree, where do I go to utilize what I hold in my hand, which is my DDS or my MD or I've got my license from the state. So where do I go? I may have to stay in the State of Ohio. But if I take the necessary tests then maybe I can go elsewhere to do what I've been trained to do, which in this case of course is dentistry. So we decided we'd go back to Toledo, my home. That was certainly on the back burner. Donna from Springfield, Ohio, we weren't going to go to Springfield. So would you believe I'm walking down the hallway and I'm looking at the bulletin board and up there is this paper, "We want you." It was almost like Uncle Sam. "We want you, we need you, we need a dentist." And it was Edgerton Dental Ohio. And where in the world is Edgerton? Well, Edgerton is way up in the northwest corner of the state, a community of about 3,000. To make a long story short, that's where I started. Edgerton, Ohio, for three years. And that was my commitment because they supplied me with the necessary funds to begin practice. And Bob, $15,000 to start a practice. Unheard of today – $15,000 wouldn't get you into the bathroom. So I'm at Edgerton for three years and then I wanted to go to the big city. And the big city in northwest Ohio, in Williams county, is Bryan, Ohio. After three years at Egerdent I spent the rest of my dental career in Bryan, Ohio, a community of maybe 9,500, 10,000 at the most.

Q. There was a dentist from Bryan that went to Dental School at Ohio State, Carl Baucher. Does he ring a bell?

A. Yeah, his brother practiced dentistry in Bryan. And his cousin practiced dentistry in the small county, Wauseon also. But the Bauchers have a footprint in northwest, Ohio.

Q. What was your first position as a dentist with the Ohio State College of Dentistry?

A. Are you asking for …

Q. You were working with recruiting dental students.

A. Yeah, before that, Bob, I was kind of illegal on the council. Back then, the council on Dental Public Health and Information – if you recall, at one time we had a ton of councils. What did we have, a dozen councils or something? And in the interim they condensed the councils now and I don't know, you would know better than I, how many councils we have that make up the ODA [Ohio Dental Association]. We don't have 12, 14 or 16 as we had back then. But I was on the Council for Dental Public Health and Information, and I found out after about six or seven years on the council, that you're only supposed to serve one term, and that's four years. But that was my initial effort as far as organized dentistry was concerned. And then I got involved with the science fair. And I end up 25 years of serving, representing the ODA at the State Science Day, and judging the science exhibits year after year for about 25 years. That for me was a delight certainly. And it afforded me bragging rights for the ODA because we were the second professional organization to sponsor an award in our category. Vet Medicine was number one. Dentistry was number two. And gradually, eventually, you have others from the health profession. Medicine got on the band wagon and Nursing. And they came up with special awards at the State Science Day for projects that pertained to their profession. But Dentistry for 25 years was a leader. And I take great pride in the fact that I was able to

assist in elevating Dentistry to that plateau. Unfortunately, the demise was another topic that we won't get into.

Q. How were you involved with the original formation of the OSU Dental Alumni Society established in 1977?

A. Well, that certainly is a point of pride for me. You know, the concept of a dental alumni association had been on the table for a number of years. And I think the basic feeling was, if we have a professional organization coming in, maybe they will usurp our position as administrators at school. In other words, maybe this dental alumni association would tell us how to run the school and we don't like that. So there was a little bit of antagonistic thought from some of the deans and some of the department heads at the school, when it was originally proposed, which would have been, I'm thinking Bob, it probably started talking about it maybe back in the '60s. And of course then Dean [Charles A.] Howell said, "Hey, I like that idea. Come on board." And as you all know, today we're a pretty solid organization.

Q. And the Alumni Society is not the tail trying to wag the Dental School dog?

A. Yeah, but the way, also Bob, I think looking at the initial formation of the Dental Alumni Society, what they tried to do is spread it out throughout the state as far as responsibilities. And holy Toledo, I'm the president. I like to think almost the first president, although I'm told that there was another. Who was it, John Cramer, who preceded me, who was in office for a very short period of time but then was …? I'm still a little bit confused. If I am not the initial president of the Dental Alumni Society, I'm the second president of the alumni association. So that was 1977.

Q. During Dental School did you have a particular mentor or one particular faculty that you would go to with questions?

A. Well, Bob, let me see. It's a difficult question. I think the legendary faculty person at the College of Dentistry and maybe even in today's criteria of faculty people, I think Bill Dew would rank near the top. And would you believe Dr. [William] Lefkowitz, who was certainly a controversial individual, he was head of the Operative Department. I mentioned the fact that I had had this training in teaching technology, micro techniques, and I would occasionally take a slide over to show Dr. Lefkowitz what I had done, or Dr. Bonham, [and he would say] "Holy Toledo, that's wonderful, that's wonderful. Look, I can see the capillary loops in the circulatory tissue with all these intricacies." So I'm really one of his buddies. He likes me. I thought, "Well, what the heck. Since he's [Lefkowitz] in the operative department, why don't I like him too?" So we had established a little bit of a rapport. And he had a base in academia. But Bill Dew, when you think back, here's somebody, the clinic closes at 5:00 and Bill is with you at 5:30, 5:45 trying to finalize aesthetics. Here you are, you're trying to get your requirements done in [inaudible] -dontics, and without getting into the details, there were some impediments that kind of slowed you down. But Bill Dew would stay.

I remember one specific instance, I'm making a denture for my dear mother-in-law. She had been here for two weeks and wanted to get back home to Springfield. And the last step was aesthetics and you want to finish the case, right? Well, it's 5:00 and Bill Dew, we're still looking at maybe tucking the lateral in a little bit more or doing a little something with the cusp, and Bill Dew stays and finally says, "Okay, we got it." And of course one other individual that I must mention here was in Orthodontics and he was a

[former member of the fraternity, Phi Delta Beta], and a former basketball player, Jimmy Hall. One of the first things we Phi Del's, and I mentioned the fact that Phi Dels go to Dental School at one time, we want Jimmy Hall to know that we were brothers. Well, Jimmy Hall said, 'Fine. Nice to see you," and everything. But he said, "You're going to have to perform. Just the fact that we're all from the same fraternity doesn't mean I'm going to give you a spectacular grade." So I think those three names. And there were others. Ham Robinson. There were others I held in high esteem. And of course there were a couple of others that were kind of a major impediment.

Q. You mentioned Bill Dew. He was the first editor of the Dental Alumni [Society magazine] and did everything himself for five years.

A. Extraordinary, Bob. You don't find faculty people like that today unless you're one of them.

Q. When did your daughter first try out for cheerleading at Ohio State?

A. I tell you, that was kind of a milestone for me, because I'm on the sidelines. I started photographing as you well know in 1974 for the Bryan Times. So I'm running back and forth on the field with my camera shooting for our local newspaper. And Marty tried out initially in 1980 and made the final cut but the final cut does not mean you made it period. So all right. In 1981, again, final cut. And my dear wife Donna said, "You have to go to the tryouts. I went through it one year with Marty and it's kind of an emotional occurrence," as maybe you well know, Bob. So it's the second time around. And again, the final cut. That's it. So I thought, "Well, Marty," and I'm there and I'm finding it kind of emotional. So I thought, "Well, that's it." Well, they say the third time is a charm but I didn't think so. So we pass it over and it's May and we have a wedding reception in the

family. And it's in Dayton. And I rounded up my kids, and Marty said, "I can't come, I can't come because I've got this job and I can't leave." I said, "It's May, it's almost the end of the quarter. Quit your job." "No, I'm not going to do that. I like my job and we need the money." So I let it go at that. Well, I find out later on, the Saturday of the wedding reception, that it's tryouts. And Bob, the third time she made it. So it was the year 1982. In '83 they get to go to the Fiesta Bowl 13. And the year with Marty on the sidelines was spectacular for me. Of course, previously when Mary Burnett had been chosen, Mary Burnett was from Bryan also. That was a thrill too, to be on the field with a fellow Bryanite. But to answer the question, Marty tried out a third time. But back then, there were 12 cheerleaders or something. You didn't have the number they have now.

Q. Six girls and six boys.

A. Yeah. And look today, how many Brutus Buckeyes do you have?

Q. Four.

A. Four, yeah. And how many cheerleaders?

Q. Can't count that high.

A. If you say so, Bob. I don't know what the odds are. Maybe 10,000 to 1. It would be like being in the US Open.

Q. How has the practice of Dentistry or dental care changed in the 60 years since you graduated?

A. Bob, it's night and day. It's night and day. When I retired in '89, I was fortunate, 32 years of practice. I retired in '89. I'm 60 years old and I want to work for the University. And the Alumni Association [Director] Dan Heinlin, I promised Dan that I was going to be around looking for a job. And Dan said, "Good luck." Bill Waters hired me and I became

part of the University on a part-time basis, working with the legendary Don Bowers in the recruiting and admissions department at the Dental School. I did that, Bob, for about 15 years. So that probably as far as my activities directly with the College of Dentistry, would certainly be paramount.

Q. Did you say 1989 you retired from practice and came to Columbus?

A. Yes.

Q. What activities were you involved with in German Village where you lived until just recently?

A. Bob, here again, I mentioned, when you graduate and you've got your degree in Dentistry and you pass your Boards, [you ask yourself] now where am I going to hang my shingle? If I can leave the state, otherwise I have to hang it up someplace in the State of Ohio. Well, the same thing, you had the same sort of challenge when you retire. Now see, one of these days, not for a while but one of these days, you'll be faced with that also. Maybe you've already decided whether to stay in Columbus. Well, it was time for retirement and where do we go? I would say, back in my pre-med days I was fantasizing on making a lot of money out west, buying some land, raising some cows, buying a horse, and that sort of a life. So now I'm retiring, it's 1989, I decided, "Well, we're going to stay in Ohio." And Donna was still teaching Art and decided to continue teaching, hoping to get to 30 years. But as it turned out, she only got 28 years in. Then I decide I'm going to talk to Bill Wallace and I want to work for the College of Dentistry, not knowing really the extent of admissions and student recruiting, but I wanted to learn. So to make a long story short, I come into Ohio State as an Associate Professor, although I'm not in the clinic. I'm not teaching. I'm with Don Bowers in recruiting and admissions. So that to me was a

milestone, 15 years which I dearly loved. You meet the students for the first time and have a little bit of an input in getting them started and to graduate. And I'm happy and they're happy.

Q. 1970 was the 100th anniversary of Ohio State University and they had the centennial. How were you involved with that?

A. Again, an octogenarian and having all these memories and everything, and you're looking back on life as you remember it, what really stands out, you know, other than maybe your wedding day or when you graduated from college, there were times in your life that were a little bit extraordinary so to speak. So 1970, Ohio State is 100 years old. And I get a letter from the University to the effect that you have been chosen as a recipient for the Alumni Centennial Award, which I find that I in essence represent northwest Ohio as far as an award is concerned. Because here again, they wanted spread them out to the State of Ohio and elsewhere, because it's the 100-year anniversary of our dear Ohio State University. So it's a wonderful weekend. In essence, for me personally, to meet Chic Harley, Jesse Owens, the cartoonist, Milton Caniff, just to name a few, Bob. And the celebrities at the time, they were a dime a dozen. They were just all over the place. And there was a dance, and who was [leading the] dance orchestra but Sammy Kaye. Swing and Sway with Sammy Kaye. And I find out later on that Sammy Kaye was chosen among a number of other big bands that had survived. Sammy Kaye got his start at Ohio University. Did you know that?

Q. No.

A. He's a graduate of Ohio University. He had a combo while he was in college. But we don't go to the dance. Why don't we go? Because it's another $25 or $35 to go to the

dance. And we looked at our resources and much to my wife's dismay I said, "I think we'll just pass on that," besides I'm the world's worst dancer. So the Centennial award weekend was really phenomenal. And as I've said, Chic Harley was [also honored in] 1970. Chic Harley, the legendary football player, was elderly. Chic Harley only lived five more years. Chic Harley died in 1975. And of course, another legend, Jesse Owens, mercy, Jesse Owens, four gold medals at a time when an African American wasn't held in very high esteem, especially in Germany. So I think I was chosen, Bob, I started working for the Development Fund as the Development Fund officer for the Williams County Alumni Club. And I just did it. I did it each year. And I'd go door to door and on a good year, mercy, I'd come back and have $1,000, $1,500 and I gathered it in small increments. And I think that really was the reason that I was chosen for the award, because you stop and consider northwest Ohio is not overly populated. And a misnomer, Bob, is Toledo is not part of northwest Ohio. Toledo is north central Ohio. So you've got Williams County, Defiance County, and then you've got Archibald and Wauseon [counties]. You've got a lot of small communities that comprise northwest Ohio. And fortunately, with my activities with the Development Fund of the local Williams County club, I was afforded the Centennial Award.

Q. Around the time, 1963, '64, you were President of the local dental society. Was that the Bryan Dental Society?

A. No, that's Maumee Valley. Here again, you must realize that as you get into the hinterlands, out away from the three C's, and Dayton and some of the other larger communities, you get into these smaller communities and now with the Maumee Valley Dental Society, Defiance was probably the largest community and then Bryan. And then

you had Montpelier, Wauseon, Napoleon, a lot of the smaller communities around that area. Back then, the component societies, they were better tended than today. Today, Bob, it's a struggle. We know that. But back then, we would meet maybe this month in Defiance, next month in Bryan, this month in Montpelier. So we'd gravitate around northwest Ohio.

Q. Each year the University awards the Mershon Alumni Award to the most outstanding alumni. In 1966, you were selected.

A. 1996.

Q. 1996. What do you recall from your acceptance speech?

A. Of course, you thank your nominating committee, and here again I must thank Don Bowers, from my association at school, working with Don. And then of course going back to Bryan, Ohio, George Brown. George very active in not only the Bryan community but organized dentistry, as an orthodontist in Bryan, Ohio. And so you thank the individuals that nominate you. And then of course the reasons for why have you devoted so much time and energy to your alma mater and your profession. Well, obviously the rewards that are there. And in my case, neither one of my parents went to high school. My dad was one of seven from the farm. My mother was one of eight from the farm. I'm one of five children and the only one to go on to college. So in retrospect, looking back at what college afforded me and I met my wife. It's a bonus, more or less, 62 years married life. So I don't know, does that answer your question?

Q. Yes. One last question. Do you have any suggestions for young dental graduates now entering the profession?

A. Oh Bob, how do you answer a question like that? As I look back to dentistry as it was taught in the ’50s, as I practiced dentistry from 1959 to 1989, and comparing it with dentistry today, with computers and advances, the advances in dentistry. Bob, we were still using the pulley system. The air rotor hadn’t made its appearance in 1953. In 1955, ’56 they’re saying, “Hey, we’ve got this prosthetic device that will cut into tooth structure and it’s going to go faster than 15,000 RPM.” So the way dentistry is taught today, and I look at you, Bob, as a practicing faculty person, you see more of it from an educational point of view than I, as somebody on the periphery. But I think the student today, with the physical makeup of what school is all about, compared to past years, dentistry today has made leaps and bounds, with implants, you could just go on and on with what they can do, as a prostadonist, as an orthodontist, as a periodontist, the advances, Bob, are monumental. I think our students now their first year are exposed to clinic life. Isn’t that right? They’re brought up to the clinic, maybe just to stand around, but they are in the clinic and they’re not down in the pits for two years, and then all of a sudden there’s daylight.

Q. We just have a minute or two left. Are there any comments you wanted to make that we haven’t touched on?

A. Well, I think, my feeling for the University and what it accomplished as far as you as a student is concerned, I think at the time of graduation you’re not as aware of what this institution is all about, and as you mature in life, become elderly, become an octogenarian, then you realize more and more what the institution has done for you. Although there are certainly some shortcomings, there are some things that could be improved but as I look back, as the one and only member of my immediate family to go

to the next level, I feel that what the Ohio State University did for me is something that if it hadn't happened, I just feel that I would not be enjoying these golden years so to speak, that I do enjoy, thank goodness to my past history with Ohio State University.

Q. Well, thank you very much, Dr. Burns. We appreciate your time and insights.