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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
OF JIM TRESSEL
May 16, 2024

Q. I'm Kevlin Haire and I'm here to do an oral history interview with former Ohio State football coach and former Youngstown State University President, Jim Tressel. Good morning.

A. Good morning, Kevlin. How are you?

Q. I'm good. How are you?

A. Wonderful, thank you.

Q. And thank you for being here.

A. Sure.

Q. Let's start with the basics. Tell me where and when you were born.

A. I was born in Painesville, Ohio. My father was the head coach at Mentor High School, and Mentor was a little place then and didn't have a hospital. Painesville was the biggest city near, so it was December 5, 1952.

Q. Okay. Did you grow up in Mentor? Tell me a little bit about your family background, your childhood.

A. I spent my first three years in Mentor, then my father accepted the head football coaching job at Massillon High School. I spent years four and five in Massillon, Ohio. Then he accepted the head football coaching job at Baldwin Wallace College. I was five when we moved to Berea, Ohio, and I spent the next 17 years there, all through K-12 and through college at Baldwin Wallace.

Q. Did you have siblings?

A. Two older brothers. My oldest brother ended up coaching for us here at Ohio State from about 2003 or 2004 through 2011. Prior to that, he was the head coach and athletic director at Hamlin University for 23 years. And then I had a middle brother who has passed. He was 37 years a middle school teacher and 50 years a swim instructor. In fact, they just named the city pool in Berea, Ohio, after him, the David L. Tressel City Pool.

Q. Oh, that's wonderful.

A. Yeah.

Q. I was going to ask, obviously football was a big thing in your family. Your father, did he play football and then decide to become a coach and that was kind of what you guys did?

A. That's an interesting story that links back to Ohio State. In 1942, my father was the player of the year in the State of Ohio at little Ada High School, up near Lima. He graduated early in December from high school. Paul Brown recruited him to Ohio State. He came to Ohio State and spent one, I don't know if it was semesters or quarters back then.

Q. It was quarters.

A. He probably spent two quarters. He participated in spring football, and I've seen articles, I can't put my finger on it right now where it would be now, because my mom had all that stuff, but he had a very good spring game at the 'Shoe and scored a couple touchdowns and threw a touchdown to Les Horvath. And then he decided in May of '43 that he would enlist, and he went off to the Navy, trained up in the V12 up in Cleveland, and then he ended up going to the South Pacific. His detail was kept a little longer after the war, so he was too late to come back to Ohio State to join the team. He had taken some courses at Baldwin Wallace while he was in V12 training. He just ended up going back there. Then he went into high school coaching. He was head high coach for 10 years, Ada High School, Mentor

High School, Massillon High School. Then he spent his next 23 years as the head coach and athletic director at Baldwin Wallace College where I attended and played for them. My oldest brother played for them. And it's still historically true that my dad and I are the only father and son who are both in the College Hall of Fame.

Q. Wow, I thought you were going to say actually the only father and son who had coached at Ohio State. But he hadn't coached at Ohio State. It was your older brother.

A. Yeah.

Q. Okay, very interesting. Good to know. That's a good tidbit. He obviously influenced your early experience with football. Did you play football from a young age or just in high school?

A. You know, youth sports were very different when I was growing up. It wasn't quite as organized and suffocating as it might be, if that's a fair word. Yeah, we played in the yard because we pretended we were the Cleveland Browns or the Ohio State Buckeyes. Organized football in our community didn't begin until you were in junior high. My first year of playing football was eighth grade, then I went on and played in high school then played for my dad [at Baldwin Wallace]. The small liberal arts colleges, were set up a little different than the [big] research schools. They were little footprints. Most of the faculty lived on campus in university-owned homes. That's what we did. They didn't have much of a salary but they were given housing. So, when you walked around campus, you always bumped into your faculty.

Our home happened to be right next door to the stadium. I could watch my dad at work every day, and I think just through osmosis or whatever, I decided, you know what? He looks like he's enjoying this. It looks like he's making a difference. We had students at

our home all the time. In fact, we had students living in our home at times. I think sometimes when they got into a little bit of, and needed more attention, we had a third floor and it was kind of an old home. And it was like a little apartment kind of thing. I think – I don't have any proof of this – but it seems to me, when he needed to keep a closer eye on someone, he moved them out of the dorm into the upstairs. It was a part of our lives every day.

Q. That's how you decided to become a football coach.

A. Yeah, it was interesting. When you're young you don't think too much about – the future to you is tomorrow, right? So, I didn't think much about what I was going to do until my guidance counselor in high school said, "You know, you have to think about, do you want to go to college? Do you want to join the military? Want to go to trade school? What do you want to do?" I said, "Well, gosh, I never thought about what I wanted to do." But I watched my dad as an educator. My two older brothers went into education. My oldest brother at the time was a graduate assistant coach at Florida State. And so, I thought that coaching looks like fun. Maybe I'll go to college and major in education. As I was going through college, I was convinced I wanted to be a high school math teacher and a high school coach. That's what I wanted to do. I kind of set all my goals that direction. And after I graduated from college, I got the recommendation from a lot of people, "Why don't you go get your master's?" Because once you get going in your career it's so hard to go back to school and have the time and the money and everything else.

I went to be a graduate assistant at the University of Akron. While I was there, I was applying for a lot of high school jobs and wasn't having much luck. And then our head coach there, Jim Dennison, had an opening. One of our coaches left Akron to go to the

University of Virginia. He called me in and he said, "Would you like to apply for this job?" I always thought I wanted to go and be a high school teacher and coach but I'm not having much luck, so yeah.

Q. And the rest is obviously history.

A. The rest is history.

Q. How long were you at Akron?

A. I was at Akron for four years.

Q. Okay.

A. And I was at Miami of Ohio for two. Coaches think in years as seasons. I was two seasons at Miami and then I was two seasons at Syracuse. Then I came to Ohio State with Earle Bruce for three seasons. Then I left to become a head coach at Youngstown State in 1986 and spent 15 seasons there, the last seven of which I was also the athletic director as well as the head coach.

Q. Oh, okay.

A. Then I came here.

Q. Then you came here, okay. How did that come about? Did they recruit you? Did you apply for the head football coach position like any other position? I don't know how it works.

A. It was funny. I think many assistants set as their goal they'd like to one day be a head coach. Well, you need the blessing of the coach you're working for, who would endorse you, recommend you. My first year here at Ohio State, John Carroll University approached me and Coach Bruce gave me the blessing that yeah, maybe he could do a good job. I interviewed and ended up deciding it wasn't the right thing. Then the next year, Otterbein College as it was called then, we got in a conversation and I decided no, I'm not sure. I'd

always, I'd kind of evolved into thinking, well, if I'm not going to be a high school coach, I'm going to be a division three coach because that's what I grew up around. I thought, well, this doesn't feel right. Then, the Youngstown State job opened and I went into see Coach Bruce and I said, "You know, this one might be one that might fit me. And would you mind calling?" He called their athletic director and their athletic director said that they didn't have any interest. Then about three weeks later, apparently, they'd offered to a whole bunch of people that turned it down. And I was in Los Angeles recruiting. I'll never forget. And I was in the airport and back then you didn't have a cell phone. I went to a pay phone and I called the office for messages. That's the way we used to do it, right? And Julie Bonfini was our administrative person at the office. And she said, "No, I don't have any messages other than Coach Bruce wants to talk to you." I thought, "I don't know if this is good or what." We had lost to Michigan that year. And he got on the phone and he said, "You need to call Youngstown State. They may want to interview you." So, I did and went and interviewed and got the job.

Q. Did you know that the other people had turned it down?

A. Yeah.

Q. Oh, you did, okay. And that didn't influence your decision.

A. No, no. A lot of them had had a lot more experience than I did.

Q. Oh, okay.

A. They were big names, and Youngstown State was trying to reach for whatever they could and had to settle.

Q. All right. At that point, you need your coach to recommend you. But when you're at Youngstown State you are the coach and athletic director. How did you get on Ohio State's radar screen and ultimately get that job?

A. You know, I don't know 100 percent for sure. I think there are a lot of factors. While I was at Youngstown State, one of the years that we'd had a very good year and so forth, University of Maryland asked me to interview. The athletic director at the University of Maryland at the time was Andy Geiger. I didn't end up getting the job, taking the job, whatever. But it was nine years later, when I think the first person who called me regarding the Ohio State job was Archie Griffin, who I had known. Archie was the assistant AD and he was kind of helping Mr. Geiger with the search. They were at the stage where they were going around and talking to about 10 or 12 people kind of confidentially in their own environment. They flew into the Youngstown airport and we met in a little meeting room at the top of a little bitty airport. A couple days later they called and said, "We'd like you to come to campus to meet with the committee, the Board of Trustees." They had student athletes and they had administrators come and spend the day. I learned that I was down to the final three and had my day. I don't know if the folklore is true or not but allegedly one of the persons turned it down, a little bit like my Youngstown thing. And in the end, Mr. Geiger offered me the job.

Q. You felt you were ready? That's a big jump.

A. Big jump. You know, I really felt like I was going to be at Youngstown State forever because we were so deeply entrenched in the community and doing so many different things. Outside of two or three places during my 15 years, I never really even considered leaving Youngstown for anywhere. I was very happy. And I think when the Ohio State job

opened up, ironically someone had given me a book the week before the job opened up. And it was called, “The Prayer of Jabez.” And “The Prayer of Jabez” is this little book that talked about some Old Testament something or other where this fellow named Jabez asked to have his territory enlarged. It talked a little bit about, be careful what you wish for, if you enlarge your territory you enlarge your headaches, you enlarge your responsibilities and difficulties. Ellen and I had just finished reading that book and we didn’t even know why the person gave it to us because we had been there forever. Well then, when the Ohio State job opened up, then when Archie called, we were like, “Well, maybe we’re ready.” But you never know, I get calls all the time now about, “Well, is so and so ready to be a head coach?” I say, “Well, I don’t know if anyone is ready until they are thrust into the situation and learn on the job and have some good luck and good fortune and good help and all that.” I was confident.

Q. For our listeners, I assume Ellen is your wife. She was involved in all of your decisions along your career. When did you marry her? How long was she along for your career?

A. We’ve only been married 25 years and at the time we were getting ready to come to Ohio State. We had only been married for a year and a half.

Q. Oh, I didn’t know that.

A. She had never lived anywhere other than Youngstown, Ohio, in her life.

Q. Oh my gosh.

A. And she was the vice president of a brokerage firm, deeply entrenched in her career. Absolutely the conversation was clearly two people seeing this is big, and again, going back to that enlarge your territory book we were reading, she said, “Wow, you know, I thought I was going to live here my whole life.” But you never know.

Q. Yeah, you never know. And the role of the head football coach's wife, spouse, here is almost as public and important as the head football coach is, as we've seen over time. That would be a big decision for her as well, yes.

A. And to leave your own career. It was interesting, as we were coming here, there were a lot of brokerage firms that reached out to her and said, "Well, now that you're here, there's a lot of good opportunities in Columbus." She said, "Well, let me get my feet on the ground with this thing and then maybe we'll talk." I think she recognized there were so many things she could impact in the Ohio State community and the central Ohio community. She could get engaged in a lot of things. And it felt very meaningful. She decided after that first year, "You know what? I think there's plenty I can do without joining another firm."

Q. My next question is to tell me about the first time you walked out, your first game as head coach, and you walked into the stadium. But I actually want to combine that with a question I had about your role as an assistant coach before that for Ohio State. Because to walk out that first time as head coach I can't imagine, and you're going to explain it to me, but I'm guessing that your role as assistant coach before, you were more prepared than others for the burden and the opportunity on you at that first game.

A. You know my first game as an assistant coach here was probably the most emotional one of them all, in that I walked out there in September of 1983. My dad had just passed in '81 and when I walked out and looked around and thought about the fact that he had been there but didn't get back cause he served his country. That was really impactful. That day was crazy emotions. I think when we came back in 2001, I think to your point, we had been in the stadium for three years, been away but still we'd been there. It had an emotional feeling, a special feeling, but not like that first time in 1983. That was surreal.

A. I could see that. This is going to sound like a non-sequitur but it did affect the football team a lot and it was right after you came here. The 9/11 attacks. Tell me about that experience, both how it affected the football team and then you were, because I was there I remember this. You were involved in the special ceremony that was held there as opposed to a football game that was scheduled.

A. Yeah, it was, that was amazing. We were in the Faculty Club in our all athletics meeting. Once a month coaches and the administrators had a meeting just to cover compliance things or announcements or whatever. Mr. Geiger was at the head of the room and all of a sudden he walked out, came back, and you could see he was shaken. And he said, "The twin towers have just been [hit by airplanes]." We were just in this room and cell phones weren't, you had them at that time but they weren't what they are today. I didn't know that Ellen had been calling my cell phone at the time. Obviously, the first thing we wanted to do was get back and get ahold of our students. That was a Tuesday, preparing for San Diego State. San Diego State was coming here. Mr. Geiger immediately cancelled the game, but as fate would have it, October 21st, they had an open date and so did we. They immediately rescheduled the game, and I remember spending time with our team, spending time with individuals, we had a faculty member come over who was an expert in things like that. And it was really an educational thing for all of us.

What I really remember after a day or two and we had rescheduled the San Diego State game, Craig Krenzel came into our office and Craig Krenzel was our quarterback and at the time he was our backup quarterback. The next year he'd become our starter. But he came, he said, "Coach, I've got a problem." And I was thinking maybe he had someone who was in the city [New York City] because a lot of the kids came in with different needs

and emotions. I said, “What’s that, Craig?” He said, “Well, my sister is getting married October 21st and I’m the best man and we scheduled it because it was an open date. I don’t know what to do.” I said, “Well, Craig, you’ve got to go to the wedding. That’s what you have to do.” He said, “I know, but I’m trying to work my way in the line-up, and this and that.” And I said, “Well, you know, keep working your way up, but pretend you sprained your ankle or something and can’t play on the 21st.” I remember him going through that and I remember kids coming in and talking about a relation that was from the city or this or that. It was really, obviously. it shook everyone to their core.

Q. Did they ask you to be part of the ceremony because the football team wasn’t playing?

A. Yeah, I think the whole team came. We wanted to be there. In fact, I remember a number of things on campus. I remember going to student things. I remember going, there was a church over in the Victorian Village.

Q. The King Avenue Methodist.

A. Yeah, they had a big event with students and we took a bunch of students there. We were looking for every which way to help kind of figure it out, you know, together, and anything that was going on on campus, we wanted to let our kids know that hey, this could be comforting. This could be educational. This could help you answer any questions that are rolling around in your minds, and I do remember the ceremony was in the north end of the stadium. It wasn’t in the closed end. And I remember it was, and I guess I never looked that closely at the flag and how big the flag was. I always looked from the sideline. I guess it looked big, and I just remember the chilling, it was something. And the other emotion I remember well is, the following week, we were going to be playing out at UCLA. And I remember all the chatter about well, the east coast was the target. They’re thinking about

the west coast and what's going to be a bigger venue to make an impression, and 100,000 people in the Rose Bowl. And some of our players were really scared.

Q. I can imagine.

A. There were guys that weren't sure they wanted to get on the plane. And we tried to distract them a little bit, so we got out there. We flew out Thursday night and we got out there on Friday morning and we took them to the Amer-I-Can prison program in the Los Angeles County Jail. Jimmy Brown, the old Cleveland Browns football player, started that years and years ago. And we attended an Amer-I-Can graduation of some inmates who had graduated from the program. They were getting ready to be paroled and all that. And I remember walking through that prison and one door would open and the next one. But we were just trying to distract our guys, give them another educational experience or whatever because you could just tell our guys were, their minds were racing all over. In fact, I remember the speaker for that graduation was Condoleezza Rice's sister.

Q. Okay.

A. And she looked very much like Condoleezza Rice. And I remember Jimmy Brown's wife was expecting. And I just saw her last summer before he passed and I said, "Your little one's got to be like 22 or something now." But it was, that was an interesting time on this campus and in this country and everywhere else.

Q. That is a segue to my question, people think that football players, the varsity team, just skates through college because they're on the varsity football team. But you had to balance their educational needs with their performance on the team. What kind of changes or new things did you implement to make that happen?

A. As we came to Ohio State was, we were in the midst of the transition [of OSU] no longer being an open enrollment school, right, and we were becoming a selective admissions school. And we knew that the competition in the classroom was going to be getting harder and harder and harder. And we were also, I think, in a little bit of a time where we hadn't achieved academically as a team as well as we could have and should have. One of the things we had had a lot of success with at Youngstown State was what we called academic encouragers. We hired a lot of retired educators and we sent them out around campus to do two things: One, create relationships with our kids specifically to academics. It's not like it was a coach out there who they think coach has something to do with their playing time or football success. But to create relationships solely from an academic standpoint. Also, though, to make sure they were in class. At first, we called them academic enforcers and people thought that was a little [harsh] or whatever. We changed it to academic encouragers. And you could really see that our cadre of former educators, most of whom had been former coaches who could relate with the kids. I think the relationships they built with our players, you could just see our academics. We went from being, like, ninth in the Big Ten in terms of how many academic All-Big Ten players do you have to first for, like, nine years in a row. And you could see because of their relationships, because of our emphasis of, we want to be the Big Ten Champs, but that doesn't mean you can't be 3.5 student too. You can do all this. And we spent a lot of time having them set goals in all the phases of their life, so that their goals weren't kind of hijacked simply by their football goals. And we set high football goals but we tried to make them conscious of their growth as a whole person. I think that really helped us.

Q. Speaking of their football goals, tell me about any changes you made in terms of physical conditioning, team bonding, mentoring, anything like that, that you can remember.

A. I think training and achieving is a constant learning process. You always come up with new technology and new innovation and new ways. Obviously, we wanted to stay up with whatever the training, the best training practices were and so forth. We had excellent staff for that. I think we did spend a lot of time talking about the building of a team because what can happen at a level like this, is people can get so caught on who is going to go to the NFL and who is All Big Ten and who is an All American, but really what's important is how does our team do? Just like in society, we get caught up in who is going to do this or that but wait a minute, let's think about it. How good is our society going to be? That truly was something that we talked about every day.

We had a thing we called our Winner's Manual and above all else in the Winner's Manual was the team is what's most important. Yes, your goals are important and we're going to do everything we can to help you realize your dreams and goals. But not at the expense of the team's successes. That was kind of our course on winning, our course on succeeding. And we also really worked hard to try to become a part of the entire Ohio State community and Central Ohio community as opposed to just expecting people to come and watch us play cause we're wonderful. We're part of the whole fabric and we wanted to be engaged in as many things as we could on the campus and in the community, with the goal of when they went on in their lives, they wouldn't just hold a job somewhere, but they would be a part of the fabric of that community.

Q. Do you remember any examples?

A. Oh gosh, we would go out to elementary schools. We would go out to hospitals. We would visit the patients at The James. Any civic event, whether it was a Boy Scout event. We hosted a lot of community things. We hosted a lot of military families coming back from deployment or getting ready to be deployed. We connected very closely with the National Guard base here. We tried to connect with our ROTC and anything on our campus that we could. On the Friday nights before the games, instead of staying out at the Easton Hilton, we said, "No, we want to stay at the Blackwell." And we said, you know, "We want to go to the [OSU Marching Band's pre-football game] Skull Session," because none of our kids had ever been to the Skull Session. We said, "Let's go be a part of the tradition." We asked the band to move from the north end of the stadium to the south end, so that when we go back in at the end of the game we could stop and sing "Carmen, Ohio" with them. Again, to make sure that they knew we weren't just a hired show. We were part of the whole. And it was interesting because as we asked them to do a lot of those different things that they had never done, you know how most kids are, "Well, what are we doing this for?" After a short while, if you didn't let them go sing "Carmen, Ohio," they would revolt. If you didn't let them go to the skull session, they would revolt. If you didn't have enough community service projects for them, they would be in saying, "Hey, I haven't been out anywhere." We just wanted them to know that Ohio State football was bigger than them. But it meant so much in different ways to the whole Ohio State community. We wanted to make sure that they knew that and appreciate that and took part in that.

Q. You spoke of winning a couple of moments ago, so I'm going to have to ask you obviously about the 2003 National Championship. I'm embarrassed to say, I don't normally remember football games. That's a football game I remember because of how exciting it

was. But it was your first National Championship. It was two years after you got here. Tell me about that experience and what kind of impact, if any, it had on the following seasons.

A. What was interesting to me was, we came here in 2001. We had the 9-11 disruption. The whole season was hard because you were new. You didn't know them, they didn't know you. There wasn't really a bond or a trust yet. But we did win that first Michigan game. Then we lost a Bowl game to South Carolina. We were down 28 nothing, brought it back to 28-28, and then lost on the last play. We were 7 and 5. In that off season, it was interesting to me how much the kids talked about how good they wanted to be and how good they thought they could be and they wanted to be National Champions. And I'm thinking, oh, 7 and 5, I'm just hoping to keep my job. But they kept saying it. And I kept trying to feel what they were saying. Then it dawned on me that our seniors, when they were freshmen, Ohio State was 6 and 6. When they were sophomores Ohio State was 8 and 4 and they lost their coach. They're juniors and they're 7 and 5 and that's not why they came here. And they were not going to leave.

We set out on a study and we got the book written by Dr. Dan Steinberg about the 1942 National Championship team called "Expanding Your Horizons." It was a book about all the players who were on that team, the majority of whom left to go to war after winning the National Championship. Some didn't even make it back. Chuck Csuri was a war hero. Bill Willis, I mean all of these. We studied because we said to them, "If you want to be, you have to see what kind of people achieve those kinds of things." Well, we were fortunate that Chuck Csuri was still living, Bill Willis was still living. We had probably 15 of the 40-some who were on the team, who were still reachable and we could bring them in. We kind of did an entire spring, summer, early fall curriculum if you will, on how you become a

National Champion. What kind of person. We studied more about what they did after they played: Doctors, lawyers, Super Bowl coaches, war heroes. And we tried to paint a picture of, we all have talent, but the thing that separates you is the kind of person you are.

I remember the first game that year. Back then they had what was called a kickoff classic which meant a pre-season Bowl game. And they only did that for two or three years. We were selected to play in the pre-season Bowl game, home against Texas Tech. And Chuck Surry came to speak to our team before the game. And I could just see how locked in our guys were. And I thought, "You know, we've got a chance. We can be better." We won that game, then we won the next one. And then we went to Cincinnati to play in Paul Brown Stadium and should have gotten beat. Didn't play very well and we still weren't great. But somehow we won. The rest of the year, somehow we won. But we were getting better. And by the end, we were probably better than anyone knew we were and we were getting ready to play Miami, who everyone knew was great. They were the defending national champs at 34 straight wins going [into the game]. All kinds of crazy stuff. But I felt pretty good going into that game simply because we knew how good they were. I wasn't sure they knew how good we were. So, the impact it had, interestingly enough the media loved to say the next year, "Is this going to be like '02?" And I would always try to tell them, "Nothing can be like '02 because our guys haven't suffered like the kids did going into '02." So, are we going to be good? Yeah, I think we can be good. Are we talented? Absolutely. Are we capable? For sure. But it's not going to be like '02 because '02 had something that you can't script and you'd really rather not script.

Q. You'd have a heart attack eventually.

A. So, yes, it had an impact on our recruiting and on our confidence and on our thinking of what's possible. And we did go two more times to the National Championship. Didn't win them. But had we not done that in '02, I'm not sure we would have even gotten to the championship game. And it impacted our Big Ten, and I think seven out of the ten years we won the Big Ten. Had that '02 not happened, we hadn't won an outright Big Ten championship since, I think, '83, when we won in 2002. Something like that. I forget.

Q. That sounds familiar.

A. It was a long stretch. Now you didn't have the playoff like they have now and all that. And you didn't get to play everybody. The impact of our '02 team: They did a great thing that we use to this day. In fact, there's been a book written about this one page from our winner's manual, that our '02 team created a list of things that don't take talent. And if you can do those better than anyone in the country, things that don't take talent, if you do happen to have capable talent and you do those things, you can maybe be the best.

Q. Give me an example of something that doesn't take talent.

A. Enthusiasm.

Q. Okay.

A. Punctuality, discipline, work ethic. being a teammate: things [that don't influence] how fast you run or how big or strong or how talented you are. So they made this long list, video study. Proper sleep, they came up with all these things. And there was a time when John Maxwell, who we talked about earlier, was going through our winner's manual and he said, "Would you mind if I wrote a book about this page?" And he wrote a book called, "Talent is Never Enough" and it became one of his best sellers, sold millions of copies. But that

was the impact that that ’02 team had. They really were willing to buy into, okay, I want to learn how to be really good. That carried on.

Q. I have to ask you about your resignation because there was a cloud over that time unfortunately. But I just want to ask you about your perspective and what kind of impact that had on you.

A. It was obviously a very difficult time. Ultimately, when you’re in charge, you’re in charge of everything that occurs. And you know that’s, it was difficult. It was a time when all of a sudden you’re really soul searching. You’re like, gosh, what could I have done or what should I have done? But I had a mentor who was a retired English professor from Georgia Southern University. And I used to talk to him two or three hours a week. And he was a guy, he was a football enthusiast and he played in college or whatever. But then had a long academic career, then loved helping football teams. But I’ll never forget, he said to me at that time when we resigned, he said, “You do know that your greatest impact is ahead of you.” And I wasn’t feeling that at the time, right. I was like, I don’t know. And he said, “No, wait a minute. You do know that your greatest impact is ahead of you if you believe it is. So, there’s your challenge.” It kind of helped me turn the page when many people wanted me to go or tell a different story. No, my greatest impact is going to be ahead of me, and I’m going to begin working on that. It helped me, it’s like anything hard that happens, it never goes away. But you think about it less often as time goes.

Q. Yes, that’s true.

A. It was hard because you felt so bad for the players, felt so bad for the coaches. You felt so bad for the University, whatever. But you know, you did need to turn the page. The worst

thing you could do would be bitter or be mad or be vindictive or any of that. Just like in a game, things happen, and you better worry about the next play.

Q. That's true.

A. In life things happen. Now you learn from them. You absolutely have to learn from them. One of the great lessons I learned was, you get so busy, and you try to do much in every way you can, that you have to be a little bit careful because if you get too busy, you don't do everything as well as you could. I've had that conversation with a lot of my former coaches and people that I mentor to this day. Certainly, try to be as helpful as you can and do as many good things as you can, but don't get so busy that you make mistakes or don't do things as well as you could have. And that was a good lesson for me because you get caught up in trying to be all things to all people and run from here to there. It was a good lesson.

Q. Now, the next year you went pro, as it were. And I'd love to know about that. How did that come about, when you were working for the Indianapolis Colts?

A. I decided after we were done at Ohio State that I was not going to do anything until I read 100 books. And I wanted to read 100 books that had nothing to do with sports because I knew the sporting world. And I thought, you know I've got to decide where I can be helpful, but I have to know something about things. I had people coming at me, why don't you come and do this, so I'd read about that industry or whatever. And so, I got to about 32 books, and I got a call from Jim Caldwell, who was the coach of the Indianapolis Colts, whom I had tremendous respect for, one of the finest human beings you'd ever know. He said, "We're not going to have Peyton Manning this year. He's got an injury. He's going to miss the whole season. We're not going to win any games. But I want to do the best we

can. Would you come and help?" I said, "Oh, Jim I decided I was going to read these books and I was going to try and figure out what I want to do next." And he said, "Well, can I just have you study our team? I will get you hooked up with a laptop and all the information. If you'll just study our team, send me a report, and then come spend the weekends with us. Then, if you'll put the headset on up in the press box and just help me manage the game."

Q. Is that all?

A. And I thought, well I only have to go on the weekends. I can write reports. I said, "Okay, I'll do it." And in the back of my mind I kind of thought, well, many people had asked me, "Would you ever be interested in coaching in the NFL?" So, I can find this out. I always thought no but maybe it's something. And it was a great experience. We only won two games, but it was miraculous that we won those two games. It was the best coaching job I've ever seen someone do. But I knew that that wasn't the education medium that I wanted to be in. I wanted to educate. I was an educator. That's what I was trained to do, and professional football was a small group. Some of the players came in and out every week. It was a business. And I was in the education world. And it kind of flipped me to thinking okay, maybe I should think about staying in education.

Well, at the same time we were still living in Columbus and it was the fall of '11. I heard a knock at the door and it was the president of a board of trustees of a small liberal arts college who I didn't know. He introduced himself. He said, "I'd like to talk to you about coming and being our president." I said, "Gosh, I've gotten calls and emails from people about doing various things, but I don't know." He said, "Well, let me sit down and talk to you." So, he convinced me to sit in front of their search committee. I said, "I really don't know. I've been in education, but I've in the myopic part and I've appreciated the

rest but I don't know the rest. I don't know what their needs are." He said, "Well, sit in front of the committee and they'll ask you questions, and they'll figure out if you know enough or you'll figure out if you do." It was in downtown Columbus in a hotel, about 20 people. You talk about walking in unprepared, but I got through it. Another small liberal arts school heard that I interviewed there and they said, "If you interview there you've got to interview here." They were both in Ohio. I said, "Well, okay." So, I did the same thing. After two interviews I thought, "I'm not ready for this." I didn't know enough about substantively being able to answer those questions. I just didn't know enough about the topic. I didn't know what I was going to do. I thought, well, I've got to think about this.

Well, I get a call back from both of them and they said, "You made the final three. We want an on-campus interview." Now I was scared. I was like, how am I going to get out of this because I really don't think I am ready or want to. Wouldn't you know it, the next day I got a call from The University of Akron president, Dr. Proinsa. He said, "I hear you're interviewing for higher-ed positions." I said, "Yeah, I don't know, Dr. Proinsa." And I talked to him one other time. I said, "I don't know if I'm prepared to do something like that." He said, "Why don't you come here and be a vice president? And learn the business and see if you like it." I said, "Well, vice president of what? What do you want me to do?" And he said, "Well, I really think we need fresh eyes on a lot of the things we're doing, and I'd really like you to come in and commit yourself to learning about a lot of our different areas. What can we do more efficiently? What needs do [students] have that we're not providing? Etc., etc." He said, "You have to promise me if you come, you'll be here two years because I don't want this to be someone coming in and we're going to make a bunch of quick decision. I want this to be a long improvement strategy." I said, "Well, you know,

I'll commit to coming for two years." Which gave me an out with the two other places. And I'll see if I like it.

I got there and just loved it, because I learned so much about everyone else's passion. I knew the passion I was always around, but I learned that every other department had the same kind of passion for what they did and impact on the students and impact on the community. It was really after being there about a year and a half that I thought, "You know, I could maybe be a president. Maybe they were right." And then wouldn't you know it. Youngstown State was going through some, they had three presidents in four years and they were kind of shaken a little. They just needed someone that they knew loved them, because the last president quit after six months to take another job. It kind of shook them, shook their confidence. With what I learned those two years at Akron, and the intimacy I had with the community in Youngstown having been there so long, it was kind of a circuitous path to where I got. It kept ringing in the back of my head, my mentor Dr. Spurgeon, saying, "Your biggest impact's ahead of you if you believe it is." So go about it. And so, like anything else, every lesson you learned along the way and everything you did contributes toward the things you did well, the things you didn't do as well, the improvements you can make. Hopefully, you keep improving.

Q. It sounds very similar to actually when you took the head coach job here. You had never been in that role. I mean president of a university is something, I can't imagine what that's like. But you had had roles before that contributed to you being confident that you could take on that role. Am I describing that correctly?

A. I think the good fortune I had to be around and observe and pay attention. And continue to be a reader. You don't have time to go experience everything. So, go learn from others'

experiences. So every job I ever went into, I read about every person I could find that did that job. And then of course, I tried to listen closely to the people I worked for. Not everything that you observe that you want to do and there's some things, oh, if I'm ever a head coach or if I'm ever a president, I'm going to do that. I think if you're fortunate, I tell our students all the time, pay attention and absorb everything you can from everyone, every faculty member, every extracurricular thing you do, observe, learn, be curious because you never know when you're going to be able to put that knowledge to use.

I remember my dad used to always, every two to three years, he would go take an Evelyn Woods speed-reading thing. I said, "Dad, why are you doing that? You're a football coach." He loved to read novels. But anyway he said, "You know, the faster you can read, you can store that knowledge. You don't know when you're going to need it. But if you don't read …" I thought, "Well, maybe he's right." And I'm a slow reader. I'm one of those reflective readers. Like how am I going to apply this? What does this have to do with what we're doing now? Or how will this help our team? Or how will this help the University? But that's why I tell people all the time that kids spend so much time not learning things, that they're really wasting time where they could be advancing their basis of knowledge and experiences, and that's why we've got to make sure we've can convince them to use this to learn rather than waste their time.

Q. When you became president in 2014, did you have specific goals or I assume one of the goals was to get the campus to settle and move forward as opposed to reacting to people leaving. That must have been one of your goals. But did you have other, a mission or a vision?

A. I had been studying very closely at Akron, which was a similar institution, the challenges and the demographics and all of the higher-ed challenges that we have, whether it be the public conversation about do you really need a four-year degree and too much debt and all the things. I felt like I understood their challenges and that I really wanted to go in and study what Youngstown State was doing before I went in with a whole bunch of ideas or whatever. What was interesting was my first year at Youngstown State, every meeting I was in, if I closed my eyes, it was like I was in a meeting at Akron because we had the same challenges and we were looking for the same solutions and we were having some of the same conversations. That gave me a little confidence that I sat in these think tanks and so forth, to figure out how we can best serve our students. And you know there were changes at that time where Governor Kasich had just switched the [university] funding model from enrollment only to half enrollment, half completion, which I thought was a great idea because I looked at our data and so forth at Youngstown State and Akron. There were way too many kids that probably we were doing a disservice having them in school. Yet we were keeping them in school because it helped the funding model. And it wasn't really fair to them. So, we had to think through some of those decisions. But it was every bit as exciting being a president as being a coach. Because it was so challenging and you were never without a day that you're trying to figure something out and rally people together and get people to understand one another and appreciate one another. You're building a team. It was just a bigger team and it was harder. I never really realized, I always quipped that had I known how hard it was to be a president, I would have been nice to my presidents when I was a coach. Because the time is just, you're expected to be everywhere all the time.

Q. Answerable all the time.

A. Yes, I just, as I looked back, just the amount of time I knew my presidents were around our athletic programs. Well, guess what. There's 50 other programs on campus asking for the president to endorse and to be there to encourage the students, the faculty, and the staff. Ellen and I said that we never dreamed we'd find something busier than being a coach.

Q. Oh, my gosh.

A. And we lived right on campus, which made it too easy to be busy.

Q. Yeah, I could see that.

A. You're across the street. I asked them when they hired me, I said, "How long do you want me to commit? I'll do what I say I'm going to do, but if you ask me for too long, I don't know if I'm going to say I'm going to do it." They said, "How about four years? Will you commit to coming for four years, just so we can get some stability and so forth?" And I said, "Okay, that makes sense. I can do that." We had just finished a two-year commit, which didn't seem forever.

Q. Right.

A. Yeah, I can do that. I got to campus and they gave me a contract, and it was a three-year contact. And I said, "Hey, I thought you guys said you wanted me here for four years." And to this day we laugh about that. A four-year promise with a three-year contract. We ended up being there 8.7 years, not that I counted. Might not have stayed quite that long had Covid not come along, but the thought of not being there ...

Q. You didn't want to abandon them at that point.

A. Not during that. It was too, we just didn't know what the world was. And you needed to be there to say, "Hey, we're going to figure it out. We're going to be fine." It worked out. And out of the 47 years in higher ed that was plenty.

Q. Why did you retire when you did? What was the .7?

A. Ellen is a very interested golfer.

Q. Does she still work or no?

A. No.

Q. So, she wants, and I like being in January, February, March, in the warm weather. And she has golfing friends. We decided with my board that, why don't we end it at the end of the school year? They said, "Why don't you give us one more semester, and then we'll do an interim for a little bit while we're searching." We were in the middle of some fundraising things that we wanted to finish. A couple of projects we really wanted to finish. We decided to do a February 1st retirement, and Ellen went down a little bit in January, then I went and met her. Florida has been good for her because she's enjoying her friends and we like the weather and what not. But I've also been able to continue fundraising things for YSU and Ohio State's James [Cancer Hospital] and Baldwin Wallace because that's where you do your fundraising.

Q. Yeah, I'm assuming they have a lot of retirees there.

A. Yeah.

Q. That makes sense.

A. Or snow birds.

Q. Snow birds, yeah.

A. We love Ohio too much to live down there forever, but we go down there for about three months. We'll be back three or four days a month for events, but the other eight months or whatever we're Buckeyes.

Q. When we first met, you were taking a tour of Thompson because you were trying to get started on trying to develop a new learning resource center at Youngstown State. That leads me into my question about Youngstown State. What do you think your biggest accomplishment or accomplishments were there? It may be something that happened after you left but you had gotten it started.

A. I think the biggest accomplishment we had was that our graduation rate went up about 17 percent during that time, from the time we got there and left, and our retention rate went up about 15-16 percent, which again, thinking back to the funding model, all of a sudden it became, hey, it's not just telling these students to sign up, but what are the outcomes and are you keeping them? We were always going to lose some students. Maybe they couldn't get into Ohio State and they'd spend a year [at Youngstown State], but they'd always dreamed of being a Buckeye and we understood that. Come here, do well. We lost a great honor student to Princeton, had a 4.0 with us and this and that, and Princeton offers him whatever. We were going to lose some kids but not for all bad reasons. But we wanted to not lose the kids that could be successful. We wanted the kids to graduate at a better rate. That was, just like when we were coaching, what our kids became was way more important than how many games we won. Now I know people get excited about the games, but the game only lasts that day, then it become a trivia question. But those lifetimes – so that was probably our biggest victory if you will. And I think the pride that our community regained in our institution, and our alumni regained, I think that really, you could feel it. It was

palpable. Then of course we did a lot of building things and all that. Our fundraising was good. I think the important things were the ones that impacted people, and that's been the fun of reflecting on that.

Q. I'm going to ask you the same question about your time here as head football coach. What do you think your biggest accomplishment was? And actually for either of them, what may have been your biggest disappointments?

A. The biggest accomplishments I think have been as I have gotten feedback from the kids that played while we were here, is to how they are applying the lessons they learned today in their families and their businesses. That's the real victories. I think the joy that was kind of bubbled back up about Ohio State football was fun to watch. It had been a long time since we'd won the national championship and all that stuff. You could just feel the joy. I still run into people who say, "I can die happy now." Like whoa, whoa. But your joy is what your joy is, right? I think instinctively what we're connected to, who we're connected to is very important to us. And this University is very important.

Q. Yeah, it's a large connector.

A. It really is. I think bringing that joy and that pride of being a Buckeye was fun. It was rewarding. And obviously we turned around that rivalry game a little bit, and that certainly is what a lot of people like to bring up. But as far as the biggest disappointment, I wouldn't have scripted the ending the way it happened. But like most adverse things that happen, they turn into something that you might have never dreamed could happen that's good. But still I wouldn't have scripted it that way.

Disappointments. We talked every day with our team about always having an attitude of gratitude regarding knowing things aren't all perfect and you have hardships

and so forth but come on, compared to our list of blessings, this air we're breathing didn't have to be provided. We're pretty lucky, right? It was hard to be, I mean, how many people get to be the head coach at Ohio State for ten years? I have a hard time being disappointed about much.

Q. You said at the beginning of this interview your goal was to become a high school math teacher and coach and yet you became a national championship winning football coach and a University president. No one could have scripted that, but a lot of people would say, "Well, I'm blessed" or fate [had something to do with it], but it seems like you were ready for each role as you went along and you were the right person. Is that a fair assessment?

A. I tried hard to get ready. I probably wasn't ready, but you get thrust into it, like, are you ready to swim? I don't know. If they throw you in there, you figure out how to swim. I don't know if I could go as far as to say, "You were the right guy," but I do feel as if I did the best I could do when given the opportunity and that's about all you can do. We read a book one time with our team back at Youngstown State. You could tell they were getting really nervous about the expectations because all of a sudden it became, if you don't win the national championship, you're terrible, right? And we read a book by a guy named A. L. Williams that was, all you can do is all you can do. And all you can do is enough.

Q. That's a good attitude.

A. Right. And he's the guy that invented term-life insurance, and he invented it when his father got sick and he couldn't afford insurance. He was a high school teacher and coach when he invented term-life insurance. But anyway, I think all you can do is be thankful for the opportunities, do the best you can to serve and take advantage of the opportunities and learn every day what went the way you had hoped and what didn't. And correct what you

can do better. At the end of the day, you have to be thankful for the opportunities that you had.

Q. Correct. Is there anything else that we didn't talk about that you would like to say?

A. No.

Q. Otherwise, that was a good way to end. Go ahead, you were going to say something.

A. I've never done an oral history interview, so I don't know. This is my first go around. Does that mean I'm old?

Q. You're seasoned, let's use a sports metaphor. No, this was a good way to end and I am going to end the recording now. Thank you so much for your time.

A. A pleasure, a pleasure.