LAWTON M. CHILES CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Interview with: Tom Reuschling

Interviewer: James M. Denham

Location: Residence of Thomas Reuschling

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JD=James M. Denham
TR=Thomas Reuschling

JD: I am continuing my conversations today with former President Thomas Reuschling. We are nearing the end of our time, but we still have a little bit more to go here. Can you reflect a little bit about your first inclination when you came to Florida Southern to look at the culture, the college culture that you got a sense of as it existed when you came and maybe what you hoped to be able to change?

TR: Yes, I quickly discovered that if I distanced myself from the autocratic style of the previous administration, I would be perceived positively. This was not difficult since my preferred style has always been one of inclusion. I quickly moved to change the culture. Dotty was a big part of this as we opened the house to a couple thousand folks a year. This included all kinds of student groups including freshmen during orientation, athletic teams and Greek organizations. All faculty and staff were invited to the residence, as were board

TR: No it was a letter, from somebody off campus who was used to a different kind of atmosphere. We could chuckle about the letter because we thought it was a minority opinion. The letter was a consequence of changing the culture.

JD: And that also included pickup basketball games on Saturday, faculty and other people?

TR: Yes, I played up pick-up basketball and intramurals. Dotty

JD: You mentioned Frank Furman and some of the other board members. Do you have any recollections of their contributions or your relation with them?

TR: Each board member I helped recruit had a unique story about joining the Board. I will mention a few. Sarah Layton may be a name you do not recognize. She is an alum and wanted to be a board member. She had a consulting business and flew all over the country. On one flight she met Marcene Christoverson. The two business women hit it off and next thing I know we had a million dollar commitment from Marcene thanks to Sarah. Soon Marcene came on the board and has been very, very generous.

JD: What was her background, was she in business?

TR: Marcene was an entrepreneur based in New York. I don't think she was a college graduate, she was a self-made lady.

JD: So she was not an alum

TR: No, not an alum, but she was brought in by an alum. It was a case of choosing a good board member and having her be a strong promoter of FSC.

We worked hard to get a better representation of women and minorities on the board. When I arrived, we had one African American on the board, a retired Methodist minister, and two women.

We recruited Evette Simmons, an African American Woman and FSC graduate. She has served as President of the black American Bar Association. She is a very impressive lady, a generous donor, and still on the board.

We recruited Josh High-- an African American, FSC alum and Vice President of Ryder Trucks. Dr. Wendell Blake, a respected Black physician in Lakeland, was a minority recruited to the board.

When I left the presidency, there were eleven women and three minorities on the Board. The board in 2016 still had 11 folks recruited during my time as president including board chair, Bob Friar.

Bob Friar became board chair a couple of years after he joined the board and has been chair for at least 15 years. It was another case of recruiting someone recommended by an alum.

We brought alum, Gen. Donald Kerrick onto the board. He was serving in the White House I visited him at the White House. We had lunch and he gave me a tour including a peek at the Oval Office.

Still another interesting board appointment of an alum was Bud Stone who was serving as President of Color by Deluxe in Hollywood. He and his wife, Judy showed Dotty and me around Hollywood and shared good stories of Hollywood personalities. I remember sitting in a room listening while technicians adjusted the sound mix on an upcoming movie.

Local trustees Barney Barnett, Clayton Hollis, Marjory Hollis Roberts, and Vane McClurg were wonderful. They were extraordinarily generous and influenced many people in the community to be generous to FSC. Without this local group the capital campaign would not have been successful.

visitation. The board was willing to begin-ed visitation to make us

I was always open to them and I met with them a lot. I'd go out of my way to make sure I got to their homes and their places of business to talk, ask questions, get to know their spouses, etc. The personal relationships were an advantage as we worked through tough issues.

I am not a knee jerk decision maker. You would probably know that as a faculty member. I can be too hesitant in making decisions. I told the board when they were asking me about my weaknesses. That I have a tendency to ponder things—sometimes too long. But part of pondering is learning as much as you can about the issue and hearing from folks about the issue.

I wasn't a snap judgment kind of guy. But sometimes you had to make snap judgments because circumstances demanded it. But If I could buy some time and get some counsel I would always do that.

Presidents get out in the community and I think I did that very well and Dr. Davis did it well. I was President of United Way. I chaired the Chamber of Commerce accreditation effort and I was on the founding board of the Givewell Foundation. I was out and around in the community trying to be visible without getting politically involved. I was not anxious to be identified by one faction or another. I had a lot of fun with community folks. When Doug Thomas became the City Manager, we got to know each other and I had him in my classes and got him involved in the Saturday basketball group. I tried to get people into the FSC environment.

I think my sensitivity to race, to the extent I was able to exercise it, was a positive. We initiated an annual Minority Achievement Banquet. This brought 300 minorities to the campus. Students and parents attended. For some it was their first time on the campus.

JD

much better shape in terms of people understanding what was happening and wanting to be a part of the progress. To me that was gratifying.

The physical plant was in much better shape by the time I left. The capital campaign was a critical part of that improvement. I think I did a good job with external constituencies, getting them onto campus and I and getting them to invest in FSC—financially and emotionally. Over all, I felt good about my 10 years .

JD: So, can you tell us two or three specific memories that pop into your mind about neat things that you remember. Events on campus or something that happened, a certain day or that you look back on in your memories, “Wow! That was really neat! That was one of the neatest experiences I can remember as President of Florida Southern College.”

TR: Well some of them were just discovering the culture. You might even say silly things. But I was impressed in my first year or two, some of the things that were traditions. The Christmas event, dinner. The snowman that they put on top of the planetarium, fireworks at homecoming and the pomp and ceremony of founders day were all very impressive. No place I had been did those things.

JD: And they do it every year, it was sort of a ritual.

TR: Another fond remembrance was completion and dedication of the Wellness Center. Being there with people who had sacrificed to make it happen was a joy—from John Rodda as contractor, to Marjorie Roberts

as principle donor and several other folks who really helped to make it happen.

Um, those were I guess incidents. Sometimes you were just glad to be able to survive a lunch with John Miller, of the Miller Residence Hall. John was a good and generous guy with a strong personality and prone to "critical advice." But I remember one lunch when he told me all of the things I should do differently. Then at the end when Dotty and I had endured all of this, he said, "I sure hope we could get together again very soon" But he gave a couple million dollars for the Miller Residence Hall and the Branscomb Pavilion. So I certainly didn't want to get crosswise with him. We simply had to appreciate him as he was.

JD: He wanted to able to say what he thought and for you to listen to him and act like you really took it under consideration.

TR: Yes, he was pretty generous in the end. Do you remember Bill Hatten?

JD: Of course!

TR: Bill Hatten was very instrumental in keeping John Supportive of FSC.

JD: He's one of the people on your staff that I would like you to kind of reflect on a little bit. Because he was an interesting fellow.

TR: Well he had been a successful business man at Kohler Company. I am indebted to Dr. Davis and Bill Finch for bringing him on staff. It was a second career for him. I think he felt fulfilled by being a part of an academic institution and Lakeland. He got his PHD while he was here. He took the extra time when there was no need for him to have a PHD. He was always, always, positive.

He and his wife, Marjorie, loved being at Florida Southern and being a part of it in so many ways. He didn't talk about his business experience. He never bragged about the fact that he had a big responsibility. He was not about Bill Hatten. He was truly about the college and anything he could do.

JD: Yea, he helped me a lot too.

JD: Well, we are nearing the end of our time. I guess this is your last chance, is there anything that we forgot that you would like to kind of put in there at the very end just to put a bow around things?

TR: No, I think after 17 years of reflection, there is not a lot that I would do different. Obviously, there are things I could have done better but I have few regrets. I came away thinking I still had friends on faculty and staff, in the community and on the board. It's nice to walk away and feel like you could be in touch with almost anybody from the FSC environment and have a pleasant interaction.

JD: One of those things in that regard is your creation, your coordination of a group that gets together of retired faculty that you kind of chair which is ongoing at this moment so do you want to reflect

permanent record at the Lawton Chiles Center for Florida History Oral History Program. We are going to share it with the college in also so thank you very much for doing this.

TR:Thank you, it’s been good, it’s been fun, a lot of memories, most of them very good memories. So thank you!

JD: Ok, great!