

**LAWTON CHILES CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY**  
**ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

**INTERVIEW WITH: THOMAS REUSCHLING**

**INTERVIEWER: DR. JAMES M. DENHAM**

**PLACE: LAKELAND, FLORIDA**

**DATE: August 3, 2020**

**JD= DR. JAMES M. DENHAM**

**TR= DR. THOMAS REUSCHLING**

**JD:** What year were you born?

**TR:** I was born in Conneaut, Ohio in 1942. My first 21 years were spent in Ashtabula County, the most northeast county in Ohio bordering on Lake Erie and Pennsylvania.

**JD:** Where did you live when you were a child?

**TR:** I lived in Austinburg, Ohio with parents and grandparents through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade then moved to Jefferson, 6 miles away.

**JD:** What are your first memories as a child?

**TR:** I remember living on a small farm. There were draft horses, a couple of cows, pigs, and a good size garden with corn,

vegetables and watermelon. I could fall out the back door and disappear into the woods or take a dip in the creek. Also, I fell in love with baseball and spent hours hitting and retrieving the ball, bouncing the ball off the barn wall or throwing the ball on the barn roof and catching it on the way down.

I had two close calls my early years, falling out of a car at 2 and being hit by a car at 7 as I rode my bike into the street without looking.

**JD:** When you were little, who were the oldest people you knew?

**TR:** My grandparents and their peers in mid to late 50's. We had an extended family that all lived within 15 miles. It was common to have gatherings of 15 to 20 on my dad's side and 25 on my mom's side.

**JD:** What did your parents do for a living?

**TR:** My dad was a welder, tree trimmer, fertilizer salesman and finally a successful real estate broker and developer. In the 40's, my dad served 2 years in the Army Air Corp and as Union President in a Timken plant in the early 50's. My mom was a teacher and home-maker. She initially taught with two years of college and then finished her undergraduate degree at Kent State at the same time I was getting my masters.

**JD:** How did your mother and father meet?

**TR:** They attended the same high school.

**JD:** Who did you look up to most as a child?

**TR:** My parents and grandparents. Roy Rogers and Captain Video were my TV heroes.

**JD:** Can you tell me about your mother's family?

**TR:** The family was 5 daughters and 1 son. Four had long marriages and two had multiple marriages. I had 17 cousins on Mom's side. We still have cousin's gatherings 2-3 times a year.

**JD:** Can you tell about your father's family?

**TR:** My Dad had 3 brothers - a plumber, a railroad engineer and a telephone company employee. Three brothers had one spouse and one had 3. The latter was in the thick of WW II, being wounded twice. Alcohol flowed freely at Reuschling gatherings. One brother was a functioning alcoholic and one was a recovering alcoholic the last 50 years of his life. I have 11 cousins on my Father's side but am not as close to them as to cousins on Mother's side.

**JD:** Where did you go to school? Elementary, High School?

**TR:** I went to the first three grades in Austinburg. We then moved 5 miles to Jefferson where I attended school from 4<sup>th</sup> grade through my Senior year. Moving and changing schools was a trauma for an 8 year old but I quickly adapted and thrived.

**JD:** Who were some of your closest friends from high school?

**TR:** I am still in close contact with Jim White who was in K-12 education and Ron Naso who became an administrator and was Superintendent of the year in Oregon several years ago. My longest friendship is with Dave Close from Austinburg. I spent a lot of time with him and his family through our teen years. We still make a point to see each other every year.

**JD:** What are some of your best childhood memories during that time?

**TR:** My warmest childhood memories were of family gatherings (often on Lake Erie beaches) and athletics. Little League was initiated in Jefferson when I was 10. We won 59 straight games until I dropped an infield fly. I was on every all-star team in little league and Pony league. Our little League coach, Elmer Lehotski, went to work for Little League International and retired as an Executive VP. We stayed in close touch until his death 4 years ago.

I was active in sports in High School with letters in Track, Football and Basketball. There was no high school baseball.

Perhaps my best learning experience beyond school and sports was a paper route. I had the route for 2 ½ years. It was easy in summer with a bike but tough in the Ohio Winter when I had to walk and get home after dark. I dealt with all ages, income levels and personalities. I even had my first contact with a black family on my route.

**JD:** What are your worst ones?

**TR:** Spinning a car around at 80 miles per hour without killing anyone including me and my passenger. I also started a house fire in a house I was painting by burning an active wasp nest under the eaves.

**JD:** How many brothers and sisters did you have? I have a younger brother and sister who still live in Jefferson, Ohio. My sister is a nurse and my brother was a builder and real estate broker.

**TR:** What role did the church play in your life? I went to Sunday School in Austinburg and Jefferson. I had some good role models and got a good Baptist foundation, I have continually reshaped my theology over the years as I left the Baptists and was active as a Presbyterian and Methodist.

**JD:** What kind of student were you?

**TR:** I was an OK student.

**JD:** Were your parents strict?

**TR:** Not unduly but there were spankings on occasion.

**JD:** Can you reflect on your High School Years?

**TR:** High school years were sports, socializing and dating. I was elected Senior class president over my best friend and rival. I have presided at most class reunions.

**JD:** What subjects were you most interested in.

**TR:** I enjoyed History and English.

**JD:** Did you know from the very beginning that you would go to college?

**TR:** Thanks to my parents, I always planned to go to college. I think I was the first cousin on either side of the family to finish college but many younger than me got college degrees including my sister and brother.

**JD:** Where did you go to college?

**TR:** Hiram College, a small liberal arts college in Northeast Ohio.

**JD:** What did you major in?

**TR:** I started in Psychology but finished in Economics.

**JD:** What were some of highlights of your undergraduate college career?

**TR:** I maintained a solid academic record—missing graduating with honors by .02 point. I had a 4.00 senior year. Much of my time was spent playing two sports—baseball and football. We did not win many football games but I stayed at it for all four years. As evidence of the talent level, I played every minute as a freshman, going both ways as an offensive and defensive end. I was seventeen. We got a new coach my junior year. Football became fun and we won 5 of eight games. It taught me “leadership matters” and perseverance sometimes pays off.

Baseball was a different experience. We had four winning seasons, won the conference. We played in Division III

regional tournaments two years. I received a “most valuable designation” from Hiram and was named first team all conference. I was inducted into the Hiram College Sports Hall of Fame in 1980. I am still in touch with my college coach.

**JD:** When did you consider going to graduate school?

**TR:** When I was a Psychology major, I presumed I would go to grad school. As an Economics major thought I would get a job and support my family. In the second semester of my senior year, I decided to seek an MBA. Most of my peers in Economics took entry level jobs. I do not recall what prompted my change of heart but at least two of my professor/mentors were supportive as I considered graduate school.

**JD:** What was your graduate program like?

**TR:** I did well in the program but was not a star. I developed an interest in Marketing and Social responsibility of Business. My first Harvard Case Course was about social issues in business taught by a man who became a lifelong friend and mentor. I worked for him (graduate Assistant) my second year in the office of Management development. He and the Professor who taught the capstone course were instrumental in encouraging me to consider a doctoral program.

I was guided to the University of Colorado program by a Kent professor who had been on the faculty there. It was a solid program with good access to faculty. I taught my first college course there—Social Responsibility of Business

disguised as Business Law. My dissertation was “The Use of Black Salesmen in All White Neighborhoods”. While at Colorado, I began to have an interest in social issues and race. At least one professor tried to dissuade me from this topic. I got the Jewel T Company to let me use their route sales people and customers to gather my data. In a nutshell, I concluded that most white customers would accept a Black sale rep as long as he was professional. Brand loyalty and product quality trump race in economic transactions.

**JD:** When did you decide to get married?

**TR:** Dotty and I were high school sweethearts in Jefferson, Ohio and got married after my sophomore year.

**JD:** What was your first job after college?

**TR:** I went straight through 8 years of school from 1960 to 1969. My first position was as an Asst. Professor at Kent State.

**JD:** What was Kent State like when you were there?

**TR:** Kent had 25,000 students—20,000 in classes on the main campus and 5000 in centers around Northeast Ohio. Many were first generation students.

There was a growing and active Black Student population. They helped me begin to understand the Black experience. I assigned *The Autobiography of Malcom X* in my Social Issues class. It raised a few eyebrows in the business college.

**JD:** How many years did you spend there?



**TR:** I was there from Fall 1969 to spring 1973. I received one of three university wide Outstanding Teacher Awards in 1972—probably the youngest and shortest tenured person to ever receive one. I received \$1000 as part of the award—a big sum for a young and struggling family.

**JD:** Can you reflect on the Kent State Killings?

**TR:** Kent was a small town and the university was steeped in conservative Mid-West values. It was the last place that that violent protests and killings were expected.

The National Guard Troops were not trained to deal with protests. The Governor was running for office and took a tough enforcement position. We finished the academic quarter by mail.

I went from Kent to the University of Northern Iowa in 1973. It had been a teachers college and was transitioning to a regional university. I was Head of the Business Department at 30 years old. Luckily, there were two former department heads still in the department. They were both very supportive and helped me grow into the position. Bob Waller was the brightest and most respected member of the department--later and better known as Robert James Waller, author of the raging best seller, *The Bridges of Madison County*.

**JD:** How many years were you at the University of Richmond?

**TR:** I was a dean at U of R for 10 years—a longer tenure than any place except FSC. It was an emerging school with great leadership. I found two mentors there. E. Bruce Heilman was the President and loved seeing his colleagues move on to presidencies. Between fifteen and twenty folks from U of R moved on to presidencies.

Dick Dunsing was The Director of Management Development and reported to me. He taught me about facilitation and group processes. He got me involved in the training and facilitation of corporate groups. I began working with top managers to help with human resource problems and long range planning. At one time I was on retainer to the Richmond City Manager, the president of a software firm, and the president of a local savings and loan.

Thanks to Dr. Heilman, I was also on the founding board of Fidelity Federal Savings and Loan that was later purchased by a bank. Dr. Heilman said he would help me get on a board of directors. He called me one day and said a start-up S&L was looking for board members requiring a \$25,000 personal investment. I did not have that kind of money to invest. I invested \$6500 and he invested \$18,500 to get to the \$25,000 required amount. The institution prospered and we both saw our investments increase 10 fold.

**JD:** Why did you leave?

**TR:** I wanted to be a College President.

**JD:** Can you reflect on your time at St. Andrews Presbyterian College in Launenburg NC?

**TR:** This was the toughest 6 professional years of my life. The school was small, underfunded and challenged to attract students. I was not a great fit because I was more conservative than the faculty, many of whom had been there since the schools inception in the 60's. I was not a true humanities/social science type. It's mission included serving 50 to 60 physically disabled students in wheel chairs, twenty quadriplegics were housed in a clinical setting. This was a wonderful mission but very expensive.

The school was a great, if painful learning experience. It had some wonderful colleagues and a supportive board. We improved the finances and had a successful \$12,000,000 campaign. I left St. Andrews because I felt I had done all I could. My health and the well- being of the school were at stake.

**JD:** Reflect on the process by which you came to Florida Southern College.

**TR:** I was in the market and had visited several schools for both president and dean positions. FSC was not on my short list so I was surprised when I got a call from Dr. Wade asking me to come to FSC. Since there had been no prior communication with FSC, I presumed it would be a preliminary interview but Dr. Wade said I was invited to campus as a finalist. As best I could tell, all the finalists were on campus at the same time. I saw one of my presidential colleagues from Ohio Wesleyan from a distance as we all moved to our next appointments. This was very efficient for the board, faculty and staff but not very professional.

I got a call from Terrell Sessums in a few days giving me an offer. The process was interrupted by a long FAX from a St. Andrews faculty member vividly outlining all of my shortcomings. I gave

Bob Trinkle my response and additional references and we moved ahead.

**JD:** What were your first impressions of FSC when you visited?

**TR:** It was a pretty campus in a good location—a nice step up from St. Andrews.

**JD:** Who were the primary officials you dealt with at the time?

**TR:** Ben Wade was my staff contact and Shari Szabo was my transportation to and from the airport. Terrell and Bob Trinkle were my first meaningful board contacts. We negotiated a salary and a start date. I did not want to start until August. This created some down time and renewal between jobs.

I did visit the campus a couple of times to expand my contacts and get an impression of the institution. I learned from my visits. My visits confirmed that it was good decision to come to FSC. I felt comfortable with the faculty, staff and board. My only early staff change was the director of the physical plant.

**JD:** What was your first impression of the faculty?

**TR:** I had a positive impression of the faculty. It was obvious they had been excluded from the governance and decision processes. I resolved to make them a part of those processes.

**JD:** What was your first impression of the community?

**TR:** I was impressed. It was larger than Launenburg but not overwhelming. It took a while to realize the wonderful character of the city.

**JD:** Who were the leading members of the Board of Trustees?

**TR:** Terrell Sessums, Robert Trinkle, Charles Courtoy, Barney Barnett, Frank Furman and Bob Sharp. They bought into needed changes and helped me rebuild and strengthen the board.

**JD:** What were your major challenges when you took over?

**TR:** Be inclusive-the faculty, staff, student and board constituencies needed to be better informed and have a greater opportunity to provide input to the decision making processes. There were other expectations:

Raise enrollment from 1400

Address deferred maintenance

Increase minority representation in all constituencies

Have a significant capital campaign

**JD:** What were your major surprises? Do not remember any negatives?

**TR:** I was concerned about the magnitude of deferred maintenance and the high cost of maintaining the Frank Lloyd Wright structures.

**JD:** What do you consider your major achievements over those years?

**TR:** We informed all constituencies and got them to accept new directions and priorities. We had a record setting incoming class. We made some progress in minority recruiting and hiring. We strengthened the board. We addressed deferred maintenance—replaced nearly all roofs and improved living conditions for students and working conditions for faculty and staff. We hired an admission director, provost and finance officer in the first two years. Nancy Aumann was the first woman VP and the first of three women VP's during my tenure.

In subsequent years we added two housing complexes and a Wellness Center. We put additions on Branscomb, staff financial offices and the sports complex. Most other buildings were renovated/ improved significantly. We completed a \$60,000,000 capital campaign with wonderful buy-in from all constituencies. We continued to improve our diversity with women in senior administration and on the board. Our student body and board gained African American representation. We liberalized student housing rules as a response to student desires and to be more in line with our competition.

We worked diligently to improve our minority contacts in the area as a way of convincing local minority students that FSC would be a welcoming environment. We hired a minority recruiter, persuaded folks like Wendell Blake and Clint Wright that we wanted a more integrated campus and initiated an annual Black Student Recognition Banquet for local students and parents. This banquet brought over 300 students and parents to the campus, many for the first time.

Perhaps the most emotionally charged event during my tenure was the dismissal of our basketball coach when we were ranked #1-- pre-season. It was a lesson in the emotional coefficient of

sports. I had telephone calls from a board member in Europe, local fans came to my office, players gave me a late night visit at my home, my wife was verbally assaulted at a game and the star player left school.

Another difficult issue was the election of a board chair to replace Terrell Sessums. The nominee supported by the executive committee was voted down, and an interim was elected for my last year. This was a surprise to me even though I knew the candidate had some detractors. Sarah McKay served as president in my last year. We worked well together.