

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown State University

Personal Experience

O.H. 1895

VERN SNYDER

Interviewed

by

Jerry Bakanowsky

on

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B: This is an interview with Vern Snyder for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Youngstown State University, by Jerry Bakanowsky, on November 19, 1997.

How did you prepare for your position at Youngstown State University?

S: The interesting thing about fundraisers development work at the college level is, you will find that most like myself have backed into the position. By training, I am a music major. I got my Master's degree in music education. I spent some time as a high school band director, five years. I was in the corporate world. Then I found that I had been working with non-profits for most of my working career. So, there were two areas of preparation I thought I needed to really expand into the position I have now. One was to become involved in development at some entry level. My first position in development was as a Corporate Relations Specialist at the University of Pittsburgh. The way they defined that position was to give me a bag full of quarters and a phone book. The quarters were for the parking meters in downtown Pittsburgh. The phone book was my prospect list. So, I went through that for a year. That gave me the cold call experience that you need as a development officer when you are asking people for money.

At that point, I decided I needed a broader base of knowledge, so I became a campaign director with Ketchum Incorporated in Pittsburgh, which is the world's largest fundraising counseling firm. I would be sent to communities all over the country to become resident in that community for a period of time from six months to eighteen months, to implement, design, and plan capital campaigns. So, I did campaigns all across the country. In the space of five years, I got a careers' worth of experience working with non-profits from very small like a hospice to a hospital, to the area where I really preferred working, which was university capital campaigning. So, that is how you prepare for the position that I hold at YSU and, more generally, the entire profession of fundraising is populated by people who have come from other fields. As a matter of fact, other than national certification through the National Society of Fundraising Executives, there are only three programs in the country that offer any kind of degree work in philanthropy.

B: Can you describe a typical day at Youngstown State University?

S: In this office?

B: Yes, sir.

S: In the development office, your typical day is never typical, but here is how it goes. We are the conduit for all private giving for the university. So, on any given day, we will be receiving gifts through the mail that require them to be entered into our computer systems. The gifts are tracked, they are audited.

Most importantly, we send out thank you notes every day. This is a wonderful place to work because we are always thanking people. We have one priority in this office, that is to thank the donor within 24 hours of the time we get the gift. So, a lot of our work is intensive that way. We do not know what is coming in the 10 or 2 o'clock mail, but we have to react to it. We can have million dollar days, we can have three thousand dollar days. But a typical day includes the receipt of gifts for the university.

Recently, the typical day has also included solicitations for the Capital Campaign. We may be out asking a member of the community for a gift to the university. The president and I, or the other two associates in the office, our job is to ask people for money. Additionally, we operate special events out of this office. Today, for instance, on November 19, we are preparing for the dedication of our new stadium club. We are preparing for a Grand re-opening of the Southern Park Mall, which is featuring YSU's 30th Anniversary. We are preparing for the final football game of the season, which means confirming the president's guest list for his loge. Additionally, we are preparing for two ceremonies in December, three in January. This is typical. We plan ahead. On top of that, on a typical day I will work with the alumni association, intercollegiate athletics, the print shop, and media services in things that just come through. So, our office is a widely diverse one in the type of things that we do; it is not just fund raising but it certainly is centered on it.

B: What was it about YSU that brought you here, what attracted you?

S: Very simply, Les Cochran. To tell a story briefly, one of the campaigns that I directed in my consulting career was Southeast Missouri State University. When I was there, I met the provost. His name was Les Cochran. Dr. Cochran's job was to attend a conference in Japan and he was to solicit a Japanese firm that had a local affiliate near the University for a gift of \$50,000. Dr. Cochran came back with a gift of \$100,000 and I agreed that he was probably a pretty good fund raiser, and so we struck up a friendship, if you will, because of his success. I then left the campaign and my time was over. I went off to two other assignments.

One day in May, I was working in the Community College of Allegheny County in Pittsburgh, PA. I got a call from Les Cochran, saying he had just been appointed to the presidency at YSU, and would like me to come up and do a development audit. In other words, I would visit the university to give them my insight into what they needed for development. Following that report, he let me know that they were searching for a development officer to take over for the person who was retiring and so I applied and, by guess and by golly, I got the job. That is how I came to YSU.

B: You mentioned the Capital Fundraising Campaign briefly in your previous questions. Could you go into more detail about what that is and what its relationship to YSU is?

S: I will start with a quick definition of what a capital campaign is. A capital campaign is a short, intense project designed to accomplish a specific set of goals or a goal. In the case of the university, there were many needs in 1993 that needed to be met. Dr. Cochran specifically assigned me the task to design and implement this capital campaign. The key to the capital campaign is a plan. It took about three months to write the plan, including time tables outlining when we thought things were going to happen, how they would happen, and job descriptions. Most importantly, how much we were going to raise. Using a committee within the university -- a cross section of the university, faculty, staff, alumni -- we began to develop a needs list of things. That first list totaled 65 million dollars. In my opinion, as a professional fundraiser, that figure was out of the question for this area. The university, unlike other universities across the country, had never done a comprehensive campaign. They had done smaller ones for the stadium and for Jones Hall in the early 1920's. They have never done a comprehensive full campaign. That presented two challenges. First, was how much can you raise that is reasonable for the community. Secondly, you do not want to go to a capital campaign and lose, because it can hurt the institution for many years. Everybody does a lot of work, they give money and yet, we fall short of our goal, what is the use. I wanted to avoid those challenges.

This group going back to the campaign planning group, then took the needs list down to about 28 million dollars. We submitted that to the president. He asked my opinion again, and I felt that 28 was just enough too high that we would not make it. So he and the vice presidents at that time, revised the goal down to 22 million dollars for specific purposes. Eight million dollars for the Electronic Campus, 4 millions dollars for Campus 2000, which is the construction of facilities on campus and improving areas on campus. Five million dollars for endowments to strengthen the inside endowments, even though our foundation is separate, we wanted our own endowments to strengthen the colleges. Lastly, four million dollars for Stambaugh Stadium. We decided that was the goal, those were the priorities.

We then wrote a case statement explaining all of that. The case is a really boring work, about 52 pages long. People wonder why you do that, because in the final analyses, it turns out to be a page and a half. The only way you can do that, is you have to write the whole thing so you know exactly what you are talking about. From that point on, my role was the role of building the case. Then my role throughout the campaign was to act as a partnering solicitor with the president or lead solicitor on major asks, which by the way, are defined as 100,000 dollars and up. [!] Also wrote the various proposals that we submitted to potential donors. There were probably 300 proposals that were written.

B: What were significant obstacles associated with the campaign that you had to overcome?

S: The most significant obstacle actually turned out to be a positive. The university had never asked people for money. Why is that an obstacle? We were not in their thinking. When you are talking about major gift fundraising, 100,000 dollars, a million dollars, it takes some planning to give a gift like that. Very few people write checks for that amount. So, they had not been planning on us coming to them for major gifts. They were not adverse to our proposals. We went 18 months before anybody told us no, which is really terrific. They said, "We were never asked before, so we do not know how we are going to do this." So, as a result, the biggest challenge was, we would make the ask and the donor would give you the affirmative to the gift, but they would say it would take them a year to get the gift organized. So, the challenge became, we know we have this money, but cannot confirm it until we have it in writing, and that will take six months to a year. That was one of the biggest challenges.

The second was the validation of the worthiness of the university. People initially had a non-attitude regarding the university; it was not negative and it was not positive, it just was not there. We needed to build that awareness. Through a cultivation effort with the volunteer groups, we began to do that. Once we had that critical mass of people who said, "Yes, the university is really the strongest asset we have," then, the campaign began to open up very quickly. That is what I would say were the two major challenges. One worked as a positive to us and actually, the other one did, too. Because by increasing awareness, we drew other people into the campaign. That is what I would say were the major challenges we faced.

B: To what extent have the campaign goals have been reached or will be reached in the future?

S: You are going to get a scoop here. I would prefer this not be public now. We are there. We are five hundred thousand dollars over the goal. We are at number 22, 500,000. Within a month, we may, depending upon the donor or donors, go a million dollars over the goal. We are going to announce this in January of 1998. We will get through the football playoffs, which is important to the campus and to the city, so we are going to stay out of the way of that. I am just going to sit on the goal. I am sandbagging the goal for the next 60 days. We are there. I want to make a point for whatever history this is; few people understand that making a campaign goal is more than just making money, it is a validation by the community that they believe in the worthiness of the institution that is doing the campaigning. So, the university has received a validation that is rare and unusual. It is quite an accomplishment.

B: How do you anticipate this department and office will have to expand or become reduced in the future?

S: Expansion is out of the question. The university is very lean. Compared to other development offices in the state, we are the smallest. The next largest

development office is nine professionals and twelve support staff. By comparison, we have three professional and two support staff. We are very small. It literally will not grow any and it will not shrink any, I do not believe, unless the world comes to an end. If Youngstown sinks into the Mahoning River, then perhaps. Expansion will not be in the immediate future simply because of the downsizing of overall higher education. Some of those bigger shops that I was talking about will, by necessity, have to eliminate people. We run very efficiently. One of the key indicators as to how you run is what it costs to raise a dollar. The national average for a development office is 26 cents per dollar raised. Our average here in this office is nine cents per dollar raised. We do a pretty good job of what we do. The staff will remain about this size.

B: Can you describe the future goals of the department in relation to other fund raising programs or activities that they might be involved in?

S: As I mentioned earlier, we plan a lot here. We have just completed our first five year plan, which we developed in 1993. We are in the process of approval from the president for a second five year plan. Since one plan builds on another, I need to go over the goals of what we did the first time. The first plan, was to build our annual fund from its current level at in 1993 of \$40,000 to roughly between \$600, 000 and \$700,000. We are there. The second was to develop strong relationships among the Penguin Club, the Alumni Association, the university and the Youngstown State University Foundation. We have done that. Third, was to design, implement, and complete the Capital Campaign. That is over. Fourth was to build a network of Outreach events to get to our alumni, and fifth, get them involved in the university. We have 30,000 alumni within 50 miles of the university. Many of them have not been back since the day they graduated. There are still two parts that are still hanging out there. So, the next five year plan is as follows: using the campaign as a starting point, take the donors to the campaign and put them into the annual fund and get them giving to us not once, but every year. Two, using the donors that did not give or we were not able to get to during the capital campaign, put them into our major gifts pool, where we do what is called project specific fund raising. If we want to build an addition to a building, we would not have a campaign we would contact those donors and say it is going to cost "x" number of hundreds or thousand or millions of dollars to build this building, would you consider supporting. So they are varied projects.

The third step in that process, is to take people who have given to us for many, many years and see if we can talk with them about remembering the university in their will or in a deferred gift. That is a gift made during the donor's lifetime that does not come forward until the donor is deceased. It is based on the concept that you cannot take it with you when you go, you might as well leave it with the university. So, that program can be an extensive resource for usable dollars, not right now, but over the succeeding next five to ten years. The deferred gift usually comes forward in an average of five to seven years.

Wishing everyone a long and happy life, but that is what happens. So, our goal there, in terms of numbers, is to form a four million dollar deferred giving pool for the university and a three million dollar pool for the athletics.

Last but not least, is to take the Alumni Association and move them into a closer relationship with the university so we can get them involved not only in gifts, but also more long term. I want their minds for awhile and then I will get their money later. We want them involved in helping us recruit students, helping us do things at the university, that whole network of volunteerism that we do not have here and with the campaign we have not been able to build. Now I have the time to build that volunteer network that can work for the university.

B: Generally, we were on the theme of change. How do you feel that YSU has changed since your arrival, and will change in the future, in general terms?

S: It has changed dramatically since I arrived. Both in faculty and staff, we had a large retirement ERIP Program, the early retirement program which changed the face of the institution as far as the 160 faculty and staff members who chose to retire early. One of the things that people have not realized is that individuals in the positions of executive director and up, including Deans, Vice Presidents, et cetera, were not in those positions five years ago. So, it is a dramatic change in the senior management levels. The face of the campus has changed. Looking at how the campus looked in 1993 and how it looks now. Either under construction or completed. More important, there has been a change attitudinally. We have gone from a rather closed, inward looking institution, to an open institution that is partnering with the community. That is what has resulted in the success of the campaign. It certainly resulted in the helping the community move along. That would be the major change we had. People had the traditional ivory tower concept of the university as a small community within ourselves. In today's world, that does not work, it is global. So you have to open up and reach out and that is what we have done.

B: You mentioned the relationship with the community. What programs do you feel YSU should initiate or will be initiating in the future to strengthen that relationship to make the campus more visible to the community?

S: That is a good question. There are several things that we do now that just have to grow. We have the metro sites out in the community for students to get a start on education somewhere other than on campus. I think as that grows, people will have the opportunity to enhance careers through education and eventually migrate back into campus because that is where they can complete their degrees. Two is the internship co-op programs that we are starting to emphasize and need to grow. The program helps business because they get qualified people into their shop as interns and co-ops who they can look at over a longer term than just a job interview of three minutes. So, they have an

opportunity to judge the employee. It helps our students because many students in a co-op, intern program are hired where they intern. So, that is great. Third, it keeps the university tied in the business community telling us what it is they need our students to know when they graduate. So, that program is critical.

The one that is really the fuzziest, but I think it is as equally important, is the university's service as a catalyst for change. We get involved in developing the community around the campus, we are also talking to people. Because we have the expertise that can help the school system, the business people, we serve as a catalyst for change. Our faculty and staff serve on committees. They serve on non-profit boards. All of that together really enhances the awareness of the university. We bring that expertise out in to the community and get people to think differently and see outside in, not inside out. To look out and maybe partner with other parts of the community to make things happen, and the university serves as that catalyst saying, "Why do you two not come together and talk on our campus." That is going to be the thing that will increase the awareness of the university. I think the quality of the academic programs will now be more noticed than they were before. They have always had quality programs from jazz to criminal justice and so on. This only enhances that awareness. When we do our advertising or recruiting outside the region.

B: Outside of the office environment, what do you typically enjoy doing?

S: In the summertime, when I can, I play golf. What I do most of the time is tinker and fiddle, refinishing things. I do not have a specific set of hobbies, never have had. I just do what ever happens to be in front of me. I do read literary popcorn, I call it. I happen to be a Sherlock Holmes and a Stephan King fan. I let Doyle take me back to Victorian England and no sex or violence in those, just a pleasant story. The other side is Stephan King, and you never know who is going to get knocked off in those. So, I call them literary popcorn. I do not practice my art any longer. I quit playing 15 years ago. I enjoy listening, but I do not play.

B: Do you have family that is in the area with you?

S: I have two sons that are grown. One is in Iceland with the Air Force and the other is in New York City as a page for NBC. My wife and I live in Canfield. She is a librarian by training, but prefers to be a book seller at Little Professor Book store. Earlier we lived in the same town for 14 years. A town of five thousand in Pennsylvania, Waynesburg. So, we came here and it was a little culture shock. We just looked at what is available to us and it is easy to get to like this particular place. So, as empty nesters, we had a little different approach. We did not have to worry where the schools were located or any of that, we just moved in.



B: In your experience in the Youngstown area and Youngstown State University, what would you call your most significant event, if you had just a small number of events to pick from? Was there a climax event associated with your experiences?

S: I do not know how to answer that question. The pivotal events are the small ones you never really notice until maybe a year later and think "Hey, that was a critical event." I will give you an example. Early in the campaign, we brought in our major donors in small groups than we thought were going to be our major donors, to explain the campaign to them. It is called a cultivation event, and we ask them questions to get their responses so we could determine if we are on the right track. The evening that this happened was just a cultivation event. It turned out that it became a pivotal event because what this particular gentleman said became one of the basic quotes of the campaign. The gentleman stood up and we had not primed him at all, this was a complete surprise, he said, "Youngstown State University is the single most important asset in our community, and we have no choice, we must support it." That was a non-event at the time, it was "Okay, that is wonderful." But that stuck. If I were to put a second event in there from the campaign again, I think you go onto the bigger things.

One of the surprises was Veteran's Plaza. What we were doing was putting a new front on Beeghly Center. We decided to call it a Veteran's Plaza. We encouraged veterans to give to that and that is very nice. It turned out to be a super focal point for the community, they think that is the best thing. It touched something in the heritage of our community that you could not do on most college campuses. Certainly Kent State would not have Veteran's Memorial Plaza. But the community enjoys the plaza. I noticed the students walk through that plaza and stop for a moment and pause and it has really become a rather unusual thing that we thought was a nice thing, but not significant. Personally, the events just keep rolling on. Having a real job helps. [laughter] I am sorry, I have a sense of humor.

B: On behalf of the Oral History Department, I would like to say thank you for doing this interview.

S: My pleasure.

End of Interview