

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YMCA Project

Youngstown YMCA

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LAMONT JACOBS

Interviewed

by

Jeff Collier

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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INTERVIEWEE: LAMONT JACOBS

INTERVIEWER: Jeff Collier

SUBJECT: Youngstown YMCA, First Campaign in 1979, Family Improvement, Changes over the years

DATE: September 15, 1975

C: This is Jeff Collier, I'm with the Youngstown State University Oral History Program. Today is September 15, 1975. I'm speaking with Mr. Lamont Jacobs at the Youngstown YMCA at 17 North Champion Street, Youngstown. Mr. Jacobs has been affiliated with the YMCA for a number of years and is presently co-chairman of the 1975 YMCA campaign.

Mr. Jacobs could you give me some background about yourself to include things as where you were born and raised, your high school education, and also your college education and presently what you do as far as business?

J: I was born and raised in the Youngstown area. I've lived here all my life. I attended Youngstown High School and have no formal college degree. However, I took some night courses at the Youngstown College as it was called at that time. I went into the sales field and have been with the George L. Williams Company for some 42 years. I am vice president, district manager, for that concern in the Youngstown division. My affiliation with the YMCA has been some 50 years.

I was encouraged here by my father who was a businessman's club man and a volleyball player and active in Camp Fitch and in general YMCA functions. This encouraged me and kept me into the Y program. At that time, when we came to membership campaigns, my first experience in this is when I was in the boy's division and in my teens. Someone got me on a team that year in the campaign and being just a kid I was interested and active with my dad. I remember he took

me over to a prominent businessman and I'm sure by no influence on what I had to say or do, but this man bought ten memberships from me and that was the happiest day of my life. I think this probably kept my interest in the YMCA and started it in this direction. I've always been a member. My father had until his death a couple years ago and was active in Camp Fitch and other programs.

I am married and have six children. As a result of my experience in the YMCA, the various membership campaigns over the years, I have my boys, who are twin boys, active also in the Y.

At that time, we started a lad and dad, father and son night, as we called it at that time. Pre-Y age, I was one of the first father and sons in that particular group. There were about three: Swede Hunneke and his son, Gill Guteneck and his son. There were just a few of us that started in this. This program is still in operation. That was pre-Y age program. This kept coming along and my boys became interested and continued in the Y. They became active in Camp Fitch, were junior leaders, were leaders at Camp Fitch.

Our two girls who followed were on various jobs and active in the Camp Fitch program. We continued and this influence from my father to me in the YMCA has been very effective by example and by participation encouraged by my father, with me and with my sons at present. My one son is on the board and is past president for the Fairfield YMCA down near Cincinnati. My son, Lamar, is a local man here with an association and has been here all his life and is active here and is in the membership campaign and is co-chairman this year. The exposure has been handed down so to speak. My interest in the family programs has continued. My wife and I have been in to the family swim program. My two younger children, Tad, who is my youngest boy, was in camp and has functioned here in the family program with us and spent part of his time while a student at Youngstown State at a part-time job in the boy's division here.

Our youngest girl is in the program now, in the women's exercise program so that the entire example and motivation to participate in the Y program has been a very big influence in my life. I've been on the board here for several years and was active in various membership campaigns over the past. Also with the YMCA Ohio-West Virginia area council, I have helped them there doing some special work in house-keeping seminars throughout the state which relates to my business which is in cleaning chemicals and soaps, et cetera, and maintenance type operations. I had some rapport there with a lot of available information that was good for the housekeeping seminars so I functioned there.

After that I had served in some membership conferences in the Ohio-West Virginia area of the YMCA. I've been involved in some form or another in the Y all my life.

I believe one of the biggest advancements in our present association here, with the facilities we have, which now can be matched by no one I believe and not only that, but our staff and program tie with this. The end result of this is that we are serving people in different areas of community action than I have ever seen. We now have women's programs, girl's programs pushing very hard on family programs. Our problems of parking and transportation from outskirts of town down to the central branch are being minimized. We're solving some of these problems.

Most of all I think that in the Youngstown association, I have seen the departure from the Christian motivation in the Y program that was minimized here for a few years back is changing now. I see the association here in other areas becoming more aware of their national responsibility and their international responsibility in the work that they're doing throughout the world, which is an influence on underprivileged countries, underprivileged people, and in most instances, the public is not aware of this.

A very great pet of mine over the years has been that we are very lax in our public relations programs of the association with the general public as well as advertising. At one time it was just frowned upon that we would do such a thing, as we didn't have to and so forth. I felt that this needed some motivation. Today, within this past year, we have had some very fine Youngstown professional people volunteer their services to the YMCA for helping them in the direction of public relations work and advertising in both newspaper, radio, and TV merely to get the story of the YMCA and its image out to the public. I believe that people have the image of the YMCA as it was years ago. As we grew through the years the YMCA seemed to assume that everyone had that same image.

C: What was that image?

J: That image was that it is strictly a boy's and men's program that was done mostly for a public community effort towards underprivileged boys and it was limited to this. They always felt that this was one of those restricted programs. It was very difficult changing that image because some people still feel that way. The purpose of it is not to do this, as we see it, because the Christian relationship in the family unit today is far more important than it ever has been. Don't misunderstand, we can't do everything

about this, but we can do something and we are doing something. The other agencies in the past years, part of the reason for, I think, the change in this is the federal programs and the federal monies that have been used to fund underprivileged children, community action programs, as well as church programs, some parochial programs, some community programs, some service clubs and their functions have all had a great part in this and they're all doing their share. It's far short of the needs though of the community in general. There isn't another organization that covers the scope of an entire family to the aspect of their body, mind, and spirit as the YMCA program does. There again, that image comes back in because people were not aware of this as well as the international program. Our world service program is a fantastic program.

We participate in these programs in a small way because we've been more concerned, and rightfully so, with our local community and doing the job here that we see needs to be done. The various agencies that have made this possible have been great. The Community Chest is one. We receive about 11 percent of our income from Community Chest. This is fed back through to underprivileged boys and girls in their programs and funding the various community projects that we have that cannot be financed through our regular budget of money. This has played a very important part.

C: Are you saying then that the image of the Y has gone from a boys, mens, to a family unit?

J: Yes.

C: Is that correct?

J: Yes. It's moving in that direction because of the needs.

C: Okay. A question about what you had spoken about earlier, and this is concerning the father-son relationship that you had as a boy and that you've instilled in your children. Do you feel that this has been something that has been instrumental in making the Youngstown YMCA the foundation it is? Like you said, it is a very good YMCA. Has this played an important part? You mentioned dad-dad night and several other people like yourself that were involved in that program and it's still going today. Were there always that many people in the father-son relationship as you were growing up? Do you think that it is being instilled in other people now and being carried forward?

J: Yes, Jeff, it definitely is because as a matter of fact, back then there were not too many. The program was small because there again, the information was not out to the general public and we weren't moving many people in that

direction. However, it's growing by leaps and bounds because the program of the Y has now branched into Indian guide program, Indian princesses, a function very similar to Cub Scouts, Bluebirds, et cetera. This is just fathers and sons or fathers and daughters. There again, the family relationship is there. Also the lad and dad program as I said is still functioning. The High Y, Tri-High Y school programs, here again, is youth connected with parents involved also. Our swimming team programs have advanced. Our family programs, especially at Camp Fitch for family weekends and for family camp week has been a very, very popular program with us. All of this is part of the motivation of example and participation that I see those children are going to continue their interests in the YMCA. They're seeing it in the new image, not the old one. Our big job is functioning with the public, a people business.

I would like to mention this also, that we at one time had two branches in Youngstown and we finally closed the West Federal Branch because of the necessary monies to operate it and with the facilities we have here. In order to facilitate better programs, these were all brought together under one roof at Central Branch with some opposition. However, within the past year they've had more function with the black community and with other communities, more active participation than we've ever had before. I know of years back that had this been mentioned at that time someone would have said it would have never worked. Possibly at that time it may not have worked, but it's working beautifully. We're just very pleased that we're able to step in this direction.

Our youth program is serving the youth in many, many ways. We're having high school after-prom programs here. We're having various school functions. Even the guides and the princesses programs come in here and function. It is the tie with the association so that they will be exposed to it in ways that they will remember this. This will be the future YMCA in it's progress of doing a better job in the community.

- C: Talking about the family unit and of course, bringing in the involvement of women which is something that has been active through the years, but certainly not as active as it is presently, do you foresee eventually the YWCA being either phased out or closing or merging with the YMCA?
- J: No, not necessarily. I believe that there are other agencies that feel their need in the community. I believe that merging them together would not necessarily improve either program. I believe that both can function, however,

there are some YWCA and YMCA combinations throughout the country and some very successful. There again, they have come together by those two names, but in fact, they are community, family programs. They are not YWCA or YMCA, they are actually family programs. We're trying to do the same thing, the YWCA is trying to do the same thing and I believe both can function because there is far more need than what both can serve. I believe there is a need for both associations.

C: Some of the programs and things that can be offered are influenced by the monies. Of course, right now being in a campaign here the YMCA money is very important because of course it pays employees, keeps the physical plant running and things like that. Do you foresee money problems in the future for organizations such as the YMCA and if you could expand on that at all?

J: Yes, very definitely. The membership monies that we receive through campaigns are either participating memberships or donor memberships. This is only a great part of it, but it is not all of it because without the corporations giving to our various programs, even our investment programs through wills and donations from foundations, et cetera, we are able to keep generating some money to help our operating expenses. In this past year another advancement that we have made is in this particular area of different types of memberships that would be classified as donor memberships to an extent, but from corporations as such. These monies are invested for income purposes to benefit our budgeted operating money. Also, we were encouraging people to include the YMCA in their wills. This is a very important part of our financial program; however, this is getting more difficult every year. The rates, like everything else, have had to increase. The senior men and the Y athletic club and these particular participating memberships are priced so that they might generate income for the loss that we have on the boys and the girls, the youth memberships, and also to the donor memberships for underprivileged children. It becomes a bigger expense to finance this whole program because to expand on the program is very, very expensive today.

The reason for our advertising and our public relations program, in my estimation, is in looking ahead to this that the public itself, the individual person in the community are going to have to be participating more in the financial interest of this and like organizations for the YMCA association to advance in the community and to advance to increase its programs.

C: If we could step back now a little bit in time and talk

about, if we could, the YMCA that you had made mention of coming here of course with your father. When you started coming, you say you were nine years old?

J: That's right.

C: What was the YMCA like at that time, if you could, in terms of both physical facilities that were offered and also any of the programs that you might remember? Of course, you had made mention of the lad-dad program? They didn't have anything like that at the time you were coming down here?

J: Primarily, Jeff, in those days the facilities, of course, were small. The boys would primarily have Saturday, that would be the day where when the walls would be busting with boys all over the place. It was primarily a physical program, gym, running, swimming, et cetera. That was basically what it was, the game room and this type of thing. Twice a week your particular age group would have an opportunity to come down for a swim or other program. The swim training program was very effective. I got mine, my kids learned to swim through this program. There again, the learn to swim program in the summer for the community has been a tremendous asset to the community here.

Back in those days it was very limited compared to what we have today because we have all types of programs, the crafts, the karate, the scuba. The various aspects of interests for kids today is just so far beyond that, that it's just a real delight for me to see this. It could not function today with these few programs because we're too advanced for this. As a matter of fact, one of the reasons for the advancement for our programs has been the Youngstown State building, their physical plant for their facility. Prior to that we had students in the programs from the university that function here at the Y in the mornings and also many use our dormitory. As this phased out this actually gave us a better opportunity because this is where our girls' and women's program developed because here we have the physical facilities. In the mornings from 9:00 to 11:00 we have a lot of unused space. This was a great help to us because prior to that we could not figure any other program when people were available to have the facilities to do it. Today, we have the morning programs. This is the reason for an advancement in the pre-Y tots, underage with their mothers. The women's programs, and the girl's programs, and so forth have been advanced because they're using time that the building was laying idle.

C: Yes, which before would have been used by the Youngstown State students.

You made mention, if I'm not mistaken, about the fact that you were in the leaders' club as you grew up?

J: Yes.

C: When were you in the leaders' club, and what did this encompass?

J: In the high school age. At high school age you could join the leaders' club, if you had the interest and the desire to help in the physical department and in the gym programs. They needed a lot of help particularly on Saturdays. It is the same as the junior leader program today, although it has more to do than just that. This helped me in learning the leadership in the program and working with younger kids. You would always work with a younger group under the direction of a qualified physical director. This program continued on to Camp Fitch for leadership development. All of this is just part of one's education. At the time, you don't realize it, but later you do.

In the case of my children, four of my children, when they got to the college level, were advisors and guidance people and floor overseers, et cetera. All of this utilized some of the experience, the education, that they received in the Y association.

C: Out of curiosity, who was the person that was in charge of the leaders' club when you were in the leaders' club, was it Paul Davies at that time?

J: Paul Davies was the general executive at that time.

C: Who would have been in the gym program, Leonard Skeggs or Al Fairfield?

J: Al Fairfield, Randy Leyshon, Joe Check, and Dick Bennett. Joe Check was involved when my boys were coming through the leader programs. Camp directors from Paul B. Davies, to Jack McPhee, to Joe Check, all of these men, contributed a very important part of the development of this entire leadership program.

I think that the quality of our staff here has been very noticeable because we receive calls from all over the country to get help and suggestions for them because of our successful programming.

C: Interesting to note of course is that the leaders' club is still very strong and active. Secondly, in talking with Dick Bennett--Dick Bennett was in charge when I was in the leaders' club--is the fact that so many of the people have

gone into YMCA work as a professional field. I'm sure it was started by the fact that they were associated with the YMCA through the leaders' club here at this organization.

J: Our track record has been exceptional here. It was recognized statewide and nationally for this particular program. The quality of the entire program of this association has made it desirable for young men who think they might be interested. They have been pulled into this association and because of this and the type of men that we have had here, this is what I feel is responsible for the results of all of this leadership training. These people see this and feel this, and this is what has made so many Youngstown Y-affiliated people to be called to other associations throughout the country. We have never deviated from this program and this is part of the reason for our advancement at this point.

C: I would like to ask you a little bit about campaigns. You made mention that you worked your very first campaign when you were sixteen years old. How, if in any way, have the campaigns changed over the years?

J: There has been a great change because of the involvement of people in the community that work in these campaigns. There are so many of them today and each business professional, industrial, what have you, man who is involved in a campaign one way or the other, if they are good and exceptional and they like this kind of effort, they're in all of them practically. This has made it difficult because the good ones seem to become fewer or at least they are spread a little more. The numbers of leaders has been a little more difficult to get. The quality is the same. I would say that our membership campaigns at this association have been most outstanding and is a result of the past work through industry. Industry has had a great part in this because we have had the cooperation of the industrial leaders. The men in their particular plants or in the operations themselves have given permission to function for the YMCA. There again, the business and professional people have always been here. I believe that it has become one of the outstanding functioning financial campaigns in the community.

C: Would you say that businesses have changed as far as the way they work with the YMCA? Let me further clarify that by saying, of course, businesses in Youngstown thirty years ago were many times locally owned and businesses have become involved with outside interests. A good example might be, for instance--and I won't say that Strouss ever worked in a campaign because I don't know that--at one time the Strouss family or the McKelvy family,

we could name numerous companies that were owned by local families, have been purchased and bought out by larger concerns. Has this in any way, shape, or form hurt the campaigns?

- J: Yes, it has because the more outside interests that become involved, in the local businesses the interest lessens a little. It doesn't diminish completely, but in part of these it has been left down now to the employee who might have some interest. Most of them donate money, but smaller amounts. Before, we had more influence from the local ownership people who had a bigger part to play in the association's work in the community. Big industries, as they have changed managements, have been down a little bit, but very receptive to our program. However, the bigger the corporations get or if the new managements have more interest outside of the Youngstown community, instead of being the whole, we are a part of their total giving. I believe this has had a little effect. However, I believe some of the areas of participation have changed. The awareness of management to the physical condition of their key personnel has motivated them to our physical fitness program, which is a fine program of which we are very, very proud.
- C: Have you involved those people via some means? In other words, have their executives come down to the Y?
- J: Yes, we're in this program right now. We have probably over 225 at least in our physical fitness program. These are all types of persons that can come morning, noon, night, and all during the week in classified and regulated physical fitness programs according to examination of the individual as to the level at which they should exercise. As a result of this, we have some industries who are being encouraged in getting together some executives in groups who will come down as a company group. This is a new aspect and a very, very fine one. It's saying something, they realize the importance of the physical fitness program. Of course, in conjunction with this, our rapport with the Youngstown Heart Association has been tremendous because our pro-care cardiovascular program, which you probably are aware of, is for cardiac people who come in three different times a week. From their doctor's recommendation, they are moved into a heart program. We have the facilities and we have the equipment to do the testing, et cetera. This is just an outstanding advancement in community service. All of this relates back to the importance of showing your image and your true function to the community and making the people, family, sons, wives, daughters, men, and fathers be aware of the importance of their health and their bodies, and that with a little bit of function in the YMCA

program they can feel better and have a better life and will function better every day. It's making the people realize that they should do it now, that they shouldn't wait. I think this is part of what we're doing here.

I don't know whether this has been mentioned or not, Jeff, but if you tell some people that before 9:00 in the morning you'll get from 30 to 40 businessmen in and out of the YMCA, it is kind of hard for some people to believe. I personally have been in this program for some three years and I feel better than I have for fifteen years. I come in at 7:00 in the morning and there are some men who have played handball and are getting dressed ready to go out. When I first saw this I couldn't believe it either. To me, the association becomes a way of life that many people do not recognize, a way of life which pertains to their physical body. It's a God-given blessing and I think it is a marvelous thing that we have facilities such as this. There are many people who are taking advantage of it, but there are thousands who are not and should. If you could just make people realize how many physically handicapped people there are in the Mahoning Valley, and what they would give to be able to come down to any physical program. Many people who are physically sound are prone to think that it's going to go on forever.

In regards to the physically handicapped people, we have in the future plans to develop facilities and programs as soon as possible.

- C: A couple of final questions, one being you mentioned numerous changes that you've seen happen over the course of time with the YMCA from the physical plant itself to some of the programs and things such as that, what would you say is the most drastic change that you've seen in the YMCA over the course of fifty years that you've mentioned you have been affiliated with the Y? Is there any one thing that stands out in your mind as the most dramatic change?
- J: I believe it is the family oriented program. There are many, many of course, but in my mind this stands out because I believe this is covering more of the area of needs in the community. Individually it's here, but any time that you can benefit and help to develop a Christian home and a better family life this makes a program far, far more effective. This, I think, is the most outstanding.
- C: You mentioned something that other people disagree a little bit with you on in terms of the aspect of the spirit, mind, and body. That being, the YMCA has sort

of fallen away from some of the things that perhaps it had initially set down as criteria. I'm referring now to the spiritual, Christianity, and things like this. You made mention of the fact that you feel that it is coming around again, why do you feel that?

- J: For a few years back there just seemed to be a feeling that we had minimized the Christian programs and the Christian activity in the programs. I think this was partially due to a breakdown in leadership, in staff if you will, because they were trying to advance programs and they just felt maybe this wasn't their field. It isn't our field to do the job of the church, that's not our function. The Christian attitude in everything that is done in the association work is what is most important. Because of the demand through the war years and so forth it became very difficult to get the type of staff and the type of personnel to even make your general program function, this I think had something to do with the breakdown of this. Now I feel that it is coming back. I see it. As a matter of fact, we have here at the Y, we still have and have always had a short chapel service every Thursday morning at 8:30. This includes staff and employees and members of the Y, anyone who would care to attend. This is increasing in numbers and I believe this is going to expand, the attitude is good. Certainly we are not trying to preach a religion, this is not our function. Our function is in helping to develop a Christian life.
- C: Okay. One final question and that is where do you see the YMCA going, turning into, developing into ten years down the pike? Do you have any premonitions as to how the YMCA will go or what will change about it?
- J: I believe that we will be more involved. We will have more sophisticated programs such as our physical fitness programs. Certainly our physical fitness programs today are more advanced than they were forty years ago in that it gets down to the individual person. I think it is the personal touch that makes the difference. In programs where you touch someone personally this becomes a far more effective program. I believe that in all these areas of our program today and many that I have mentioned here and any of those that are becoming more successful are those that touch the individual a little bit more than the others. I believe that as people see the program of the YMCA and what it can do for them, they will become Y oriented and the entire program will grow.
- C: This is something that you feel the increased and better advertising and things like that will help along the way too?

J: Advertising to the extent of communication to the community to let the people know what is here. The YMCA is something that is down here for the little kids or what have you. That is what most people think. It is, that is a very great function because that's the YMCA of the future. These programs that I have mentioned that excite me are those that involve the family and the children in their exposure to the YMCA. As they grow older, just as I told you has happened in my family, I feel that the more this is done that the YMCA of the future is going to have men and women who as children found out what the YMCA was and what it will do and it will remain with them and this will advance the entire association.

C: Okay. I would like to thank you for taking the time to sit and talk about some of your instances, happenings, and things with the YMCA. Again, thank you very much.

J: I hope I've been helpful.

C: You have.

J: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW