

LAWTON CHILES CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: THOMAS REUSCHLING

INTERVIEWER: DR. JAMES M. DENHAM

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JD= DR. JAMES M. DENHAM

TR= DR. THOMAS REUSCHLING

JD: We are at the home of Thomas Reuschling and we are going to be talking today about his career at Florida Southern College.

JD: Tell me a little bit about your very first impressions of the college when you first arrived at the college, and began to get a sense of the college and the community of Lakeland?

TR: I never had any terrible disappointments. I came in with a positive image of the school as an opportunity for me. Even the folks that found me to be pretty far out on their scale of acceptance regarding anything from politics to race to authoritarianism were good to me. Ben Wade being a good example.

JD: Can you talk about your relationship with Ben Wade. Was it different from what you first expected?

TR: I probably did not realize when we first met how different we were in terms of management styles. I think Ben was basically fair under the umbrella of what he believed.

He was Methodist and he felt he had to keep people on the “straight and narrow”, he and I had a different sense of “straight and narrow “. He was willing to speak his peace, and that is when I began to see the differences in our philosophy. He was very seldom contentious about our differences. He would say, “Here is what I think,” or, “this is the way we have done it,” or, “I think that’s risky.”

He did strongly express his displeasure one time, when he thought I was too accessible to faculty coming into my office to express displeasure a decision he had made. I remember him coming in and saying, something like, “You get on my liver.”

JD: Under my liver. He used that phrase all the time.

TR: We talked through it.

JD: Was it a faculty member that used that phrase?

TR: No it was Ben. What happened was Ben made a decision and someone had come to me to complain. I got back to Ben suggesting a slight revision of his decision. We talked through our differences and worked well together. I don’t know if he would have retired as soon as he did if I had not come to FSC. I think he was getting to a point where retirement was on his radar so maybe our differing management styles hurried him a bit. I did not ask him to retire.

JD: During your first couple of weeks together with him, did he lay out some things and priority that he thought you might want to take a look at or did you discuss with him, certain things that you perceived after being there a month or two that really needed to be looked at?

TR: I think it was more the latter. Early on, I talked with broad sections of the college's constituent groups including the board. I had my list of goals. He would comment on those goals, giving me his opinions and adding historical perspective. He would give advice and council but he never tried to preempt the president. But, as different as we were, we actually got along very well. I got the sense that Ben knew change was coming, embraced much of the change but sometimes differed on the rate of change and the process.

JD: Can you comment on openness and sharing with the faculty information regarding enrollment, budgets, and all of that. For example, I guess it may not be incorrect to say there was not a whole a lot of transparency before. Did you discuss that kind of thing with him?

TR: Certainly he would have known what I was going to do in faculty meetings, because we had cabinet meetings every week.

JD: That was with him and who else?

TR: The senior management team including Ben, the CFO, Director of admissions, VP of development, athletic director, Dean of students, and the Chaplin. In the group, Ben was the first among equals.

I am sure I got advice, but there were certain things that made me think that he really agreed that some of this needed to happen because he would say, "This isn't something the old generation, would have done,"

but he didn't say it in a sense that it was a bad thing. He would say it as a contrast. I trusted what he said if I disagree with him, but he would give me some information on faculty but he wasn't damning of any faculty; he might tell me about somebody's eccentricities but he was not unduly critical of any faculty members .

He did come in and see me occasionally to discuss a faculty member or faculty issue. If he wanted to talk about somebody's strengths and weaknesses, we would have that conversation and think of how we could help that faculty be a more productive member of the college community.

JD: Walk me through his retirement and the process by which you selected another VP or successor for him. What were you looking for in that position?

TR: Well, standard criteria. We wanted somebody who would be comfortable working collegiality, with good credibility in their discipline and a strong history of managing in a participative way. Nancy Aumann and Susan Conner had those strengths.

JD: What was your relationship, how did you and Nancy Aumann work together? Were there ups and downs, conflicts?

TR: Nancy and I worked well together. I do not remember any significant conflict. Nancy was brought in because she had worked in participative settings. She had worked in environments that were truly collegial.

She could be tough. She would say no. She was a happy, friendly and a bit eccentric woman but there was real substance. She could make the hard decisions.

JD: She was tasked with overseeing the creation of faculty governance. Prior to that, there had not been much at all. Would you say that was one of her agenda items?

TR: Yes. She would have known the process of change we had experienced my first two years, and the goals for the next 3-5 years. We had a very representative search committee that was open and candid with her.

JD: That was another eye-opening, amazing thing, was to have faculty involved in that process.

TR: You may remember that Nancy was not on our radar. We went through the process. We selected a young man and made an offer, but he took another position. I said, “gee , that school chose well. I wonder who else was a finalist there.”

I called the President of the institution that hired our first choice. I asked him, “Is there someone in your candidate pool that you would recommend we interview”. He gave me Nancy's name. We checked her credentials and brought her to campus.

She impressed us with her candor and energy. Hiring Nancy was a good decision and we avoided going through a second search.

JD: So she never really applied on her own?

TR: No

JD: So, the two of you worked really well together?

TR: We worked well together. She was always willing to say her piece, and she was pro faculty, she knew when to draw the line but she wanted faculty to be a real part of important decisions.

I think that is the period when we got away from the three division heads (Dick Burnette, Walter Weaver and Margaret Gilbert), who had been in place for many years. They were great people in a bad governance structure. They were appointed, reappointed, over and over again. To my knowledge, none objected to the new way of doing things.

JD: Now you have been on campus about 3 years. What about political connections? Did you get to know the state representatives, Congressman, the governor? Can you reflect a little bit on that?

TR: The governor at that point was Lawton Chiles. I don't remember meeting with Lawton but I did meet the Lt. Governor, Senator Graham and local reps like Adam Putnam and Paula Dockery.

JD: We always heard things about the Florida Resident Tuition Grant (FRAG) how critical it was. Was that always on your mind?

TR: You always had the issue of the dollars that were given to the private schools from the state. Every year, the FRAG grant was

challenged. I quickly joined in lobbying efforts with the other private college presidents. We could usually get in to see the reps within the districts where our schools were located. The man who ran the Independent Colleges and Universities Association was in the legislature. I questioned the ethics of the arrangement but it seemed to work.

I did have one personal confrontation the ICUF manager. I came to a meeting to find that he had removed me from chair of the Finance committee without telling me and with no input from anyone else that I could tell. I did not care if I was chair of the committee but I did not like the surprise or lack of consultation.

JD: Did you get to know other college Presidents, through your whole career?

TR: I was very much involved in North Carolina college presidents' organizations. I don't remember much detail, but they had a non-academic chair who was CEO of one of the big banks. Like ICUF in Florida, we tried to make sure that private schools were getting get a fair share of funding.

In Florida, there was a group that included both private and public institutions (FACU). I went to all their meetings and served in several leadership positions. Its meetings served as a good place to have discussions about issues that were important in both the private and public sectors.

I also tried to be collegial with local presidents and even suggested some cooperative projects. I did not see these schools as serious competitors because we served a different student profile.

Southeastern, was struggling when I got here. I contacted the President and had lunch with him. I also talked to his successor and suggested some joint undertakings. He was not responsive.

I also got to know the presidents at Warner and Webber and let them know I would be happy to work with them. So I tried to build bridges and connections.

JD: One of the building additions to campus we are still enjoying today was the Wellness Center. Obviously we know your enthusiastic about athletics so was that a big priority in your mind to get a really first rate wellness center?

TR: I didn't start out with that in mind. We were in the campaign at that point. To raise money, you have to sense what the donors are interested in. Margie Roberts and the Hollis family were interested in wellness, physical and psychological health.

So we went from there. She became a leader in supporting the wellness center concept. In this process, I also got acquainted with her children. Jim was a graduate of FSC.

JD: It just kind of blended into the overall campaign.

TR: Yes. She told me what her priorities were for giving. I do not recall whether she was as specific as to suggest a Wellness Center. She was wonderfully generous and very student oriented.

When I saw her years a couple of years ago, I gave her hug and said something about the Wellness Center and how much we were enjoying it. She indicated her interests now focused on dyslexia. With her support, now we have nationally recognized programs in that area.

So, the Hollis Wellness Center was a cornerstone of the campaign, and, arguably the most important building project for the campus during my administration. It has all kinds of uses, from student fitness to basketball camps to banquets.

JD: It's been instrumental in our recruiting and maintaining students.

TR: We were probably and little ahead of the curve in building a fitness center for students. Now an impressive wellness center is a campus essential.

JD: One of the initiatives you found when you were on campus was the Harlaxton program, in England, which is a fabulous program but, under your leadership you also facilitated a lot more emphasis on foreign travel, if I am not mistaken. Can you reflect on that a little bit? Who were the people you identified to do that? Was there any conscious decision in your mind to enhance that part of the academic program?

TR: When I learned about the program, I was very impressed. Dotty and I visited early in our time at FSC. We thought it was a great program. We talked to faculty who confirmed the value of the Harlaxton experience. I am a strong believer in international experiences for students.

JD: A lot of it perhaps was also just giving faculty the running room to create more programs. I think with Dr. Jose Garcia for example. A lot of this was just allowing faculty the running room.

TR: Faculty are very good idea people and you try to support them in bringing the ideas to fruition.

So often the best initiatives come from outside the administration. We didn't have a lot of money to but we tried to support them.

The board was also supportive of new initiatives. They knew we had a very good faculty and they were happy to support them.

JD: Let's go through the Athletic Program, obviously Florida Southern College has a very rich tradition of athletics. One of the great coaches and also college Administrators in the history of division II you had right here, Hal Smeltzy. So what was it like to work with him your first couple of years, what were some of your reflections of him?

TR: Well let's start with the fact that I knew he had been very successful, particularly in baseball, basketball, softball and golf. I tried to get him a little more resource.

The first year, baseball won the national championship. I went up to the championship game. It was so much fun. The team was on the field celebrating and Hal came up into the stands and led me down to the field so I could get my picture taken with the team and give them my congratulations.

Hal was a strong personality and he got things done. He found the outside funding for the small addition to the gym and had it underway before I knew about it. I called him in and said, "this is not the way things work." I was not chastising him for his energy or initiative, but I couldn't let him start projects as if the president and the board didn't exist. In the end, Hal and I worked well together. He was a good friend and counselor.

TR:

Hal was a real personality with great stories. For example, he met Castro. He was coaching an American national team in Cuba. Castro was at the game and gave him a Cuban cigar. He was concerned that he did not have anything to give Castro but he came up with some memento that was “baseball appropriate”.

JD: So he decides to retire. Was there anything that you think that tipped him over to that point or do you think he was just ready to go?

TR: I think he just was ready. He and Sylvia enjoyed life, I think they felt there were other things they wanted to do. I did not push him to retire.

JD: What was the process by which his successor was hired?

TR: We did a national search process with a committee with a broad range of representatives from Athletics and the college. I don't remember who we interviewed other than Mike Roberts. I do know that he stood out as the best candidate by virtue of his success on the field and also the quality of the schools where he worked. We were led to believe that he was forced out at The University of North Carolina by a new AD that wanted to have a clean slate. He wasn't the only one that left and he had a great record there.

He came for an interview, answered our questions well, seemed pretty polished. The committee, Hal and I thought he was the right one, and we hired him. He was quickly perceived by coaches and staff as authoritarian with too little understanding of the dynamics of division II programs. Early on, he is going through the basketball coach's

folders and decided that we had reason to get rid of Coach Gordon Gibbons.

Gordon was a very successful coach and well-liked by his players and fans. We were nationally ranked at #1 in preseason polls. His son played for him.

In any case, Mike Roberts felt it was time to part company with Coach Gibbons. Basketball fans and players loved him and were furious.

We lost an all American in the process. He refused to return to school. Some avid fans never came to another game. I heard plenty about the firing from players and fans. Even Dotty was pulled into the emotion. Player reps came to the house one evening to see me and would not believe her when she said I was not home. She was verbally accosted by an ardent fan at half time of a game.

JD: So, Hal has retired. But Hal was Gordon's friend. Hal hired Gordon, so that would have been an awkward situation. What was Hal's response to all of this?

TR: He knew Gordon's strengths and weaknesses. He never was publicly critical of the decisio

JD: Did Roberts ever come before the board to make his charges or allegations?

TR: He did share his intent at a meeting with several board members.

JD: Do you remember the time-frame? Was it before the season started in the fall?

TR: Yes, during the fall, we had a great team and they would be expected to be very good.

JD: Did you feel like you had to support the new AD?

TR: Yes, I tried to support all of my senior colleagues. But as the year proceeded, I realized that he was not a good fit for us. My sense was that he was very hierarchical in his management style. He would say, "I'll handle this," and then proceed to give directives without significant input or collaboration.

JD: And I'm sure you, started to really hear it.

TR: Yeah! Students came by and indicated how they felt verbally assaulted at a basketball game. He was not good at listening and negotiating. The CEO of our conference told me one day that he had heard that the whole team was going to come over and confront me before a game. He said he discouraged them and it never happened.

As an aside, Gordon's son was on the team, which made it more difficult for Gordon but also made it very difficult for Mike Roberts and the new coach, Tony Longa. Gordon landed on his feet. He went to Clayton State for several years and had a good record. I saw him later at a funeral. His son was with him at the funeral and both were cordial to me.

JD: So, if we follow through from that, what happened to Mike Roberts? Did he voluntarily resign or did you let him go?

TR: I let him go after one year. It just seemed to be best for him and FSC given his management style and strained relationship with coaches and students. I was also told by reliable sources that he was job hunting.

JD: Cause, he got a lot of flak, didn't he, from the boosters and all that, right.

TR: Yes, but also I don't think he was ever a good fit at FSC. I never talked with Mike after he left. I do know he coached a team of college players in a New England summer league. At one point, I saw a press release reporting he was going to coach at a division III school but I do not know what happened.

JE: One of the most dramatic things that happened during your tenure and of course everybody's tenure if they were alive was Sept. 11. Can you remember the day that happened, and what you were thinking about regarding the college, what you were doing at that moment?

TR: I was speaking to the CPS financial group as they were having a seminar on campus in the Athletic conference room. I was doing the standard "Welcome to Campus" Dottie called me. She was home watching the TV coverage. I vaguely recall having a convocation the next day with the Chaplin and Dr. Willis saying a few words and leading some prayers. The only purpose of the convocation was to bring students together as community in that time of tragedy, acknowledge our collective grief, fear and outrage and let them know we were there for them. I went to the cafeteria often during that period and listened to students who knew people working and living in the area of the

towers or had been in mid-flight not knowing whether their plane might be next.

JD: How did it change things, did it change things for the college, did it change things from your perspective, when it came to operations of the college or fundraising?

TR: I don't think so; it was an emotional piece for the whole country. It was not something that I thought was going to impact us in terms of either donors or student numbers and I don't believe it did. Our concern was for our students who were away from home and parents. We were just trying to be empathetic to both students and parents who were frightened and concerned about the country's ability to manage the crisis and its aftermath.

JD: Uh, one of the other key people you worked with and you were instrumental in her hiring was Susan Connor, can you reflect a little bit of what it was like to work with her, her personality, what kind of things did she add the college academic world? First of all, I thought she was very good. The search committee selected her as a finalist and invited her to campus. I met her plane. A lady with a 60's look comes toward me. I was surprised. It was not the way that I pictured a Dean candidate to look.

The next day she was very professionally dressed and made a great impression and had good empathy with the faculty' She had excellent scholarly credentials. She accepted the responsibility of strengthening the faculty through good hiring, setting ambitious standards and finding support for faculty to meet the standards.

Her predecessor, Nancy Aumann was an academic administrator and did a great job of establishing the deanship as a faculty friendly office.

Susan was an academic administrator and scholar. The faculty appreciated her scholarship. It gave her credibility as she raised the expectation of scholarship by faculty. I appreciated her counsel on delicate faculty issues. I'm glad we hired her. She was a good colleague and became a good friend. I was so sorry to hear of her death in 2020.

JD: There was an interim who came in for a while.

TR: That was Joan Buccino. She was a very good interim dean. She could have been a good dean but she wasn't really interested in the position. Nobody saw her as having favorites.

It is interesting to note that the three deans (including Joan) after Dr. Wade were all women. I think they were the first women who served as senior administrators. We also hired Dr. Carole Obermeyer as the Student Life Dean and hired a woman as chaplain.

JD: What I would like to do now is to get you to reflect on just a couple of things, I think we have talked about most of the issues that we want to go through. One is working with Terrell Sessums. What was it like to work with him and can you reflect a little bit on your relationship with him?

TR: Absolutely! Terrell was there from the beginning. He was really good at describing the college as it was and then listening to my thoughts about how we get to the next stage. He was so calm and matter of fact, never emotional about things. He would tell you if he thought something was a bad idea, but he never demeaned your ideas. I was not afraid to go to him with any issue because I knew it would be a reasoned, calm discussion. Bob Trinkle, the Vice Chair of the Board

was the same way. I quickly learned to trust both of them and value their counsel.

Terrell was very cautious about liberalizing student life policies. His caution came from his personal beliefs as well his concern that the Methodist Church might not accept the changes. He let the issue of coed Visitation come before the board. The board approved the changes. He accepted the decision. Terrell's faith was important to him and he was a bit conservative, theologically.

Terrell was a remarkable guy in so many ways. He often did my evaluations and salary reviews. They were positive evaluations but always included a couple of things I could do better. So he was wonderful in so many ways.

He is not a guy that would stand at the podium and get everyone excited. But in spite of that, his influence was just amazing. Board members respected him so much. When he spoke, they listened-- not because of his rhetorical skills or enthusiasm but because they trusted that he had done his homework and his only motivation was to help FSC become a better school.

JD: Yeah, Relations with the board, ah, reflect a little bit about your relations with the board. Obviously, Terrell Sessums was the leader, but what were some of your other experiences with the board. Were there instances where you got push back on certain things you wanted to do or you got put input out in left field from some of the board members who said "now you ought to be doing this or that." Do you remember any of those things?

TR: Each board member had their personal perspective but all were good listeners. Once issues had been decided, we moved ahead without rancor or second-guessing. We kept the board informed and never surprised them.

The board benefited from some lighter moments. Frank Furman succeeded Bob Trinkle as Vice Chairman of the Board. He was a great guy. But he occasionally chose the wrong word. He was speaking to the board and meant say “tentacles” but he said, “testicles”. He did not catch the error and said it a second time. I'm guessing many remember the incident. People will still remember. But his heart was in the right place. He worked hard for us.

JD: Who were some of the board members that you acquired. Was there a time when you thought, well I want that guy on the board or I want this guy on the board or how can I reach this person to come on the board?

TR: Since others knew the community far better than me, I would listen to suggestions. Terrell suggested Bob Sharp and took me to meet him. Bob has been a good board member for many years' Bob has stature in the Tampa community he served as CEO of AAA.