

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

Interview with: Tom Reuschling

Interviewer: James M. Denham

Location: Residence of Thomas Reuschling

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JD=James M. Denham

TR=Thomas Reuschling

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

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

members and donors. Dotty was a great hostess, and became known for her deserts. Making the house available was a message that we were accessible; that we cared about people and saw their worth to the college. One of my earliest impressions was the faculty and staff felt under-appreciated,

I remember one day when we were going around the table with self-introductions and Dotty said, "I'm Dotty Reuschling, I sleep with the President". People got a good laugh.

In another act of appreciation, we gave staff Friday afternoons off over the summer. Staff loved it and I do not think we lost any productivity. We also started a senior staff workday in the summer. Senior staff and Dotty would appear at the beginning of the workday, we would be assigned to a staff member and work with them until staff were off at noon. I remember painting, moving furniture, and cleaning rooms and bathrooms. It was a good reminder of how hard these people worked. Not all senior staff were as enthusiastic about the workday as I was.

Another clear message about the change in leadership style took place in a faculty meeting. We came to the meeting with financial information, shared it with faculty and answered questions. This was a strong message to faculty that this administration would share information and ask for input.

Not everyone appreciated the new informality. Early on, Dotty received an anonymous note written to Dotty with a very unsteady hand, presumably from an elderly person. The note said, "I'm so surprised that you're out around the lake on your roller blades and your husband is running around in his baseball cap. Why don't you show a little dignity?"

JD: Was it in campus mail or was it a real letter?

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

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

TR: Yes, I played up pick-up basketball and intramurals. Dotty rollerbladed and ran the lake. We both played in golf outings that raised fund for athletics.

JD: And this is point of privilege on my part it was soon understood among the faculty that you were a team player, and you were a good player, a tough player but when the game was on the line, you wanted the ball. That was kind of the general appraisal among some of us.

TR: It was a lot of fun to meet, mix and mingle with all kinds of folks on the courts and the links. People begin to see you as a multi-faceted person rather than “the President who is seen only at formal events”.

One of the surprises to staff was that I created a board meeting time in which representative staff met with the executive committee of the board when I was not present. Frank Furman ran the meeting and always invited me to stay but I did not want to dampen the candor from the staff. I don't know if staff realized how special it was for them to communicate directly with the board

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

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

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

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

JD: So she was not an alum

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

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

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

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

When I left the presidency, there were eleven women and three minorities on the Board. The board in 2015-16 still had 11 folks recruited during my time as president including board chair, Bob Friar.

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

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

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

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

Ann Hansen is an alum who quickly became a very influential board member. She is a bright lady who has good ideas and is willing to work. People listened when she spoke.

So I feel good about the changes in the board and its role in governance. The board went from being too passive to being active; from being predominantly older white males to being diverse in race, gender and age. Terrell Sessums was very supportive of these changes.

JD: Well that brings us to another point. How quickly after you became President did a lot of those people leave and then more people came on or was it just gradual, the normal course of events.

TR: It occurred over 3-5 years. Some people left because their terms ran out or because they had served their time. There was no rancor—people were not forced out.

The prior board chair, Fred Millsaps, had served for many years and left the Board when Dr. Davis retired. I only met him a couple of times but sensed my values and leadership style was much more compatible with Terrell Sessums' style.

We had some great folks that had been here for a while. They welcomed me and were excited about new directions.

JD: What were some things that came up during your time-frame that were flashpoints or contentious issues that you remember?

TR: I don't remember contention; people were pretty good at working through issues without being contentious. Probably the point at which I knew we were headed in the right direction was the issue of co-ed

visitation. The board was willing to begin co-ed visitation to make us more competitive with other private schools and address the student body's dissatisfaction with the no-visitation rules. The vote was unanimous or nearly so. To my knowledge, no one ever second guessed the decision. The board supported the changes not as a refutation of Dr. Davis leadership but a recognition that the times were changing.

JD: Um. Ok let's see. Are there any other board members that you would like to talk about, along with their attributes that we've missed that you haven't mentioned?

TR: Well, lots of good board members. But I don't think of critical issues, where they either swung with us, or they were vocal in their disagreement.

I do remember being a little surprised in the last meeting when they had an executive session, basically to elect Anne Kerr as the next President. I normally was included in executive sessions except those dealing with my evaluation and salary. I asked Sarah McKay if she wanted me to leave and she said, "Yes". [laughter] I'm sure it was just protocol so I went and waited with all of the other senior officers in the gym. I think they were already settled on Anne, so it was not like I was going to have any input. It was just an indication that that a new administration was beginning.

JD: Your time had come.

TR: My time was over.

JD: Okay, looking back on your time as President and not only at Florida Southern, but obviously you grew as a person, all throughout the time of your Presidency. What do you consider to be your best attributes?

TR: A couple of things occur to me. I try to get along with people. I have my opinions but I listen to theirs. I have seen some Presidents get very quickly offended. I was at a board meeting at St. Andrews after my election but prior to my taking office. I was there as a visitor. I was surprised to see the President get his hackles up and get mildly confrontational with a couple of board members. He was probably right about what he was doing but abrupt with the members who questioned his proposed action.

JD: That's kind of weird you are at a board meeting with the board and the old President. . .

TR: It was their last board meeting and I wasn't officially in office. He wanted to fire one of his senior officers. They looked at me and said, "What do you think"? I said, "I don't know," but if this is the decision the president and board make, I will support it. I was careful not to generate any discord even before my term began.

As a new president if I was in disagreement with any constituency, I would try to talk through the issue. I wanted to listen and learn and I was hoping they would hear me out.

I tried to be open and accessible to all constituencies. They were good people. I appreciated them. I didn't feel like they had to agree with me for me to appreciate them, and so that was fun, Specific to the board, a

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

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

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

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

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

JD: Did you ever get mad, do you remember any instances in your ten years where you really just got mad and you almost perhaps violated that tenant; that is by a knee jerk quick reaction. Remember any instances where you just got angry about something someone said or something that happened or a situation that occurred?

TR: Well, as I said, I had one instance in a staff meeting. But it was one of those times where you said, "that's enough discussion." One person would not accept that the discussion was over. It was pretty obvious that I disagreed and I was no longer going to take counsel.

There were times when I was very concerned. Sometimes you get allegations about a faulty member or a staff member. A couple of times it was about sexual improprieties. I wasn't so much angry as I was disappointed. And you know those are tough to work through. In one case, I simply got a board member to come into the office and listen to the person's answers to my questions. I just don't remember being in a rage, frustrated sometimes, disappointed some times, but not to the point of losing my composure.

JD: Okay, alright

JD: What do you consider the 3 or 4 maybe 2 or 3 best things about your tenure at Florida Southern that you remember? Um I guess I should frame that better. First we can do accomplishments, second we can do your memories, why don't we start with accomplishments?

TR: I feel pretty good about empowering and communicating, so that all constituencies could understanding the issues. Everybody still has

their own opinions but they had good information to enlighten those opinions.

The capital campaign was a success people would point too. We had a sixty million dollar goal. In the beginning those numbers look so large, but if you take it a day at a time, keep everybody involved, and listen to the consultants, you will get there.

JD: Now when you say capital campaign does that mean just cash or does it mean commitment to build buildings or what does it mean?

TR: It was all of that, there was money for scholarships, and there was money for buildings and there was money for operating.

JD: So it was just really across the board, across asset accumulation.

TR: Yea, and a lot of the money got spent quickly because it was designated for buildings or renovations. The naming gift for a building typically doesn't pay for the whole building. So you still have to find another large percentage to complete the building. Typically this is done by getting naming gifts for interior sections and rooms of the structure.

I think we got through 10 years without a personal crisis that I was aware of. I never seriously thought my job was in jeopardy. We did have difficult issues such as sexual assaults that seemed to come in bunches. With timely and candid information and solid support from all of the constituencies, we endured. I think I left the organization in

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JD: Of course!

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

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

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

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

JD: Yea, he helped me a lot too.

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

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

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

on that a little bit ? Because that really continues what you were talking about.

TR: Yes, there are retired faculty and staff who attend. People who are retired or have 30 years at FSC are invited. It's social and we almost never talk about Florida Southern except maybe a particular current event. We do not second guess current campus happenings or directions. People are proud of their contribution to FSC and delighted with the progress the school has made since they retired.

We talk about what we are you doing now, where are you traveling, how we are feeling and our families. We get 15 to 25 at meetings and more than 25 when Dotty prepares a Christmas lunch.

JD: And do you meet every month?

TR: We meet every month. It is hard to predict who will become regular attenders. Some people I thought would not come have become regulars and others I thought would love it have drifted away. Some have drifted away; some have died.

But I think we still like each other, we don't argue, we talk. We just share. Some of your close colleagues, Frank Hodges and John Santosousso, are regulars.

Now with thirty years in, you can now start coming.

JD: Well, I think that's probably going to do it for our session. I really appreciate your thoughts, your insights. This is going to be a

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

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

JD: Ok, great!