

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN A. PRATHER

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KSU Oral History Series, No. 132
Interview with Stephen A. Prather
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Part I - Tuesday, May 26, 2009
Location: KSU Alumni House

TS: We're in the Alumni House interviewing Steve Prather who was president of the alumni association between 2004 and 2006. Steve let's begin, as we do in all these interviews, with asking you about your background: where you grew up and where you went to school before you got to Kennesaw and things like that.

SP: Well, it's not exciting and adventurous actually. I graduated from North Cobb High School, so I'm local. On my father's maternal side, I am six generations from the Acworth/Kennesaw area. On my father's father's side I'm five generations, fifth generation.

TS: The Prathers go back a long way.

SP: Yes, the Prathers and Bakers of Baker Road. Baker Road was named after the family. The Hickory Grove Baptist Church there where Baker becomes Hickory Grove Road [2862 Hickory Grove Road]—that land was donated by my great-great-grandfather.

TS: On the Baker side?

SP: Yes. Baker Elementary School [established 1988] is George Stephen Baker Elementary School. George Stephen Baker is my namesake, Stephen, and he's my great-great-grandfather. The Prathers lived on Hickory Grove, and the Bakers lived on Baker about two or three miles or an hour and a half apart by wagon.

TS: Right, right. So where's our Prather Road instead of Hickory Grove?

SP: Well, in Acworth there's Prather Drive. It's right off Main Street on the north before you go into Bartow County. So there's actually Prather Drive. More history, the very first sheriff of Acworth was a Prather. Acworth was chartered in 1840. Fred Bentley's mother was a Prather, so that was the Bentley's side.

TS: Oh, Fred D. Bentley, Sr.'s mother was a Prather.

SP: Yes, on that side. So it's a pretty common name and pretty common family out here.

TS: Were they farmers in that area?

SP: They were. The Baker Elementary School sits on the old Baker farm. Another tie is the railroad. My dad was a railroad engineer, retired, and my grandfather and my uncles and all were railroad workers. The tracks run right behind the school.

TS: So your father was a railroad engineer?

SP: Engineer. Yes, he drove trains.

TS: What's his name?

SP: V.G.—Virgil George. He goes by the initials of V.G. The railroad progressed all the way through the Nashville, Chattanooga, and St. Louis Railroad (NC&StL Railway) to the Louisville and Nashville (L&N) to the Chessie System, which is now CSX. As a matter of fact, CSX is actually an acronym of Chessie System and Seaboard System [after their merger in 1986]. My dad actually brought *The General* home.

TS: In 1962?

SP: No, the second time, because remember it came under its own power in '62, right? They actually drove it on its own power.

TS: Oh, for the museum.

SP: Yes, and then when Tennessee sued, they came and got it and took it back to Chattanooga and then Tennessee and the state of Georgia had the suit. Actually, what happened was it was the L&N's property, and they gave it to the state of Georgia outside the courts. So it was brought back on a flatbed, not under its own power in 1972. My dad brought it home because he worked the main line at that time. I went to nursery school at Dobbins Air Force Base; my mom was a civil servant at Dobbins.

TS: What's her name?

SP: Lillie Mae, or Lil Prather. Her maiden name was Price. She was from Rome, Georgia. She passed away in 2003.

TS: But she worked at Dobbins.

SP: She worked at Dobbins, yes, as a civil servant, so non-military at Dobbins. I went to nursery school there and then went to kindergarten right in downtown at the old Kennesaw Methodist Church, the old church that's now a chapel, and then went to Kennesaw Elementary and Awtrey Middle School and North Cobb High School and then Kennesaw College.

TS: You were a traditional student here?

SP: Yes.

TS: Right straight out of high school?

SP: Right straight out of high school. I graduated from high school in '79, started here in the fall of '79 and majored in business, of course, and wound up with a bachelor's of business administration in the area of management in 1984.

DY: Before we turned the machine on and were chatting a little bit you said that you hadn't intended to come to college.

SP: That's true.

DY: So why go to Kennesaw?

SP: Coming from a railroad family, I felt destined probably to go into the railroad or something that wouldn't require a college degree. I had a very good friend whose grades weren't as good, and his dad really wanted him to go to college. His dad had a conversation with me and said, "Why don't you go too and you guys go together and then get acclimated. Then if you don't like it you can go your own way, but at least get him started into school." I did and we started and he lasted a quarter and dropped out and I loved it. I really enjoyed going to school. I did my homework, and I did the work I had to do, but I didn't find it that overbearing or difficult in high school or in college, so I continued on.

DY: Were you first-generation college out of your family?

SP: I was first generation, yes. Now that you mention that, I probably wouldn't have thought of it, but I was the first out of my family to graduate from college.

DY: Well, so many of our students at Kennesaw are.

SP: That is a trend, you're absolutely correct.

TS: I think you probably already told us why, but why Kennesaw? Because it was here, local?

SP: It was, it was a local community college. My parents didn't really have the money to send me to school, and there wasn't such thing as the HOPE scholarship or anything at the time, and it was local. I was already working. I actually worked for the same company from the time I was fourteen through when I graduated college. I worked ten years at the local grocery store in Kennesaw, Bobby Grant's, Grant's Thrift Town. The Food Giant came in later, but that was before the big, major ones.

DY: Oh, yes. I used to shop there when I lived in Kennesaw.

SP: Grant's Thrift Town, Bobby Grant.

DY: Loved it.

SP: I started there sacking groceries when I was fourteen and worked my way up. I did everything in the store through the ten years that I was there. I think when I finally finished I was a butcher, cutting meat as a butcher, but also I managed the produce, managed the frozen foods and those things. It allowed me to work full-time until I decided what I really wanted to do. Because it was non-conventional, they offered classes [at unconventional times], like I had a class at 6:45 in the morning. I could have a 6:45 class, leave, go to work, and then take two more classes in the evening, and it didn't interrupt an eight-hour day at work.

TS: So you worked full-time all the way through college?

SP: Yes.

TS: Do you think that was typical or rare at that time?

SP: I think at this college it was very typical. I mean, there were students my age who probably didn't work. So I guess I'll back up and say for the students who were my age it probably wasn't typical, but of the typical student at Kennesaw . . .

TS: The non-traditional student?

SP: I think it was. I think in certain ways, except for my age, I was a non-traditional student.

TS: Well, President [Daniel S.] Papp asks at every graduation for the graduates to stand up who held down a job while they went to school. Just about everybody stands up. Then he says, "Those who held down two jobs stand up." A good many stand up who held down two jobs all the way through so it's still true.

SP: Yes. To answer your question, it was local, it didn't disrupt my lifestyle or life path as much as I thought it was going to be, and I was helping out a friend. They were coming here, so it just seemed to work out.

TS: What do you think Kennesaw's reputation was when you started here?

SP: I didn't have a clue what the reputation was. I wasn't planning on going to college, so it was just here, it was an opportunity. I felt like I was doing the right thing. I don't know if the friend's father tricked me into going to school. We were very close, and I'm still very good friends with the person that graduated with me from high school, so I don't know. He might have just been tricking me, thinking I'd probably like it, or the both of us would have liked it.

TS: Maybe another way of asking this, were there a lot of students or almost nobody from North Cobb that came to Kennesaw straight out of high school?

SP: There were, actually I would say there were probably a handful. Of course, I remain friends with them. But one of the great things was it allowed me to meet people outside [my narrow circle]. I got to meet people from Marietta High school, Sprayberry High School. You've seen them at the football games and whatnot, but you get a chance to meet them, and I still have very good friends from those years from other schools.

TS: Okay, so you didn't know anything about Kennesaw before you got here. What was your impression once you arrived?

SP: Well, I really enjoyed it. It suited my style of learning and that was it was small classes; basically it was lecture-based. One of my faults, if you will, is that I do not enjoy reading. I just have never enjoyed reading. It's not that I can't. It's just that it's not something I enjoy. It puts me to sleep. It actually relaxes me because it seems I'm getting more now, but in my younger days it was on, wide-open, or off. I had two speeds. This school was more of a lecture-based school. So as long as I took very copious notes and highlighted in the books what was important to read—outside of literature, of course, and some of the others—then it suited me very well. It still amazes me, but I would take, in an hour's class. I might take ten pages of notes, almost word for word. I have good, high recall, so by writing it down it burned it in my memory, and I didn't have to study long hours or do a lot of reading.

I would get up at four o'clock in the morning typically before a test and study the day of the test mainly from a review standpoint. Although every class wasn't that way, that's what I remember about the school that for my style of learning it was very accommodating. To me, it worked out very well, and I learned quite a bit. I was very impressed with the school. I liked the people. I have fond memories of several of the professors themselves. Dr. [Thomas H.] Keene was always a favorite. S. Alan Schlact was by far a very favorite of mine because I had a certain interest in business law at that time. I think I mentioned Dr. [Micah Y.] Chan because just his teaching style was very unique.

TS: Before we turned on the tape, you were talking about taking him for statistics. He started out teaching math in the old Math and Science Division, but somewhere along the line he ended up teaching management science classes in the business college. Do you remember if he was teaching math or business courses when you took him?

SP: I had him for a couple of classes in the business building.

TS: Where was the business building when you were here?

SP: Well, I'll describe it the way I can. From the parking lot that sits in front, the first building you would walk into, and then if you walked out of that building there was a covered walkway . . .

TS: The building on the west side of the walkway is now called Willingham Hall.

SP: Right. And then there was a building behind that. That was the business building. I actually took Chan's classes in the business building. My economics, who was my economics teacher?

TS: Was it Charlie [Charles F.] Martin?

SP: It might have been Martin. Grey-headed and had a mustache.

TS: Yes.

SP: That was him. I got such a kick out of him because what he would continually remind us in the class is that you're never going to own your own home, you're never going to be able to save enough money to live your life . . . it was almost like reverse psychology. I remember him always talking about Volcker.

DY: Paul Volcker [chair of the Federal Reserve Board, 1979-1987]?

SP: Yes. He was always talking about how Volcker actually controlled the world. I mean, he had that reverse psychology mentality of toughening you up and challenging you that you're never going to own a home and you're doomed.

DY: Well, he was right until the sub-prime loans came around.

SP: Yes, I think he was winding us up to send us out to change the world.

DY: Good for him.

SP: That was certainly fine. That was one of the classes I had at like 6:45 in the morning.

DY: Everybody better be alive at that time of the morning.

SP: Yes.

DY: What was your degree?

SP: I got a bachelor of business administration in the area of management with a minor in business law.

TS: I think we talked about this before we started the interview, but Kennesaw had just become a four-year school before you got here. We didn't even have departments when you started here. By the time you graduated we had a Department of Management, but didn't when you started. I think when you started business administration hadn't been a separate division for very long.

SP: Which I would have been oblivious to.

TS: Right.

DY: But if you went in and read Alan Schlact's interview, then you had a history of that.

SP: I didn't read the entire thing, but I did read some of that because he also had a little bit of that reverse psychology teaching. His famous line, where Martin's was "you'll never own your own home." Alan's was "sue all the bastards." If you sue, what do you do? You sue everybody and then make them fight it out amongst themselves, and you can sit back and watch. That was just the little tidbits of things you remember from those days.

TS: Okay. You're working full time, and you're going to school in your spare time in effect. Did you have time to get involved in any campus activities while you were going through?

SP: Not really, but then again, there weren't that many activities. You came to school at five o'clock and except for classes you left the campus. I mean, the only social time that you might have had in spending time on campus was if you ate lunch at the student center. There was some social time if you had down time. You'll remember in the student center upstairs they had pool tables that were lined up on the walls—pool tables and a couple of ping pong tables. So we spent some social time up there. Then, of course, from a social perspective, in getting to know other students, across the street, where now the Kennesaw Hall is, we went off campus to party.

TS: Oh, across Frey Road?

SP: Yes, because across Frey Road there was that old road that wound up the hill and went to the fence that runs along I- 75.

TS: So you got back in the woods where nobody could see you.

SP: That's right! So kind of coming back to your point, there weren't fraternities. There were some starting or going to start. Student government was so small and kind of just getting started that there really wasn't that much going on.

DY: Were there any business clubs, Steve, do you remember, for business students, any organizations?

SP: No. If there were, they were so small you didn't see them. Where now you go in the student center and there's banners of all kinds, but there were very few.

TS: So you were about as typical as a student could be back then at Kennesaw.

SP: Absolutely.

TS: Okay, you graduated in '84. What did you do then?

SP: I graduated in '84 and, interestingly enough, the same friend's father who had gotten me or tricked me, however you want to say it, going to college, owned a business. So he gave me an opportunity to get into doing some sales. I went to work buying and selling used computers, the large computers that the large corporations would use. That was in '84 . . .

TS: What was the name of the company?

SP: It was Computer Resource Technology. Their acronym was CRT which at that point was what the big ones were. So what we basically did was we sold the old CRT terminals, the large IBM equipment like tape drives and disk drives and card punches and those things. We would literally be on the phone brokering used equipment during the day, and then in the evening we would go in the back, scrub them up, be sure they were working right—not from a technical standpoint because usually they just powered on—and then have them delivered or delivered them. I did that for a couple of years.

Then I wanted to possibly look at making more money. What I was told was that if I wanted to make money—and actually I learned that here from Alan Schlact and Charlie Martin—you need to deal in money. There's a finance component on this side of business in the leasing of the high tech equipment. So I was fortunate enough to find an opportunity. Somebody was looking to add on the type of equipment that I had expertise in. They were looking to do some brokerage as well as leasing of the new equipment. It required me to move to Long Beach, California just south of LA in 1986 to get into the lease financing side of that business. It served two purposes for me: number one, was to advance my career, and number two, to get out of here for a little while. I mean, I love being here. I'm sixth generations and love being in the area. But I didn't know what the rest of the world was like. So at least to get some semblance of where else would you want to go in America, you might as well go to southern California, right?

DY: Right, the great American tradition, "Go west, young man."

SP: It's very typical. It broke my mom's heart. Interestingly, I'd done all the interviews, and I didn't take them as seriously as probably I should have. I flew to California for the final interview with the chairman of the company and flew back and didn't even tell my folks. I didn't mention it to them.

TS: That you had been out there?

SP: Yes, I didn't even mention it to them. I literally flew in that day and flew out the same day. So I got a call on Christmas Eve. I'll never forget because it was 7:30 in the morning my time, which means it was 4:30 from the recruiter's time. He called and said, "When can you start?" I said, "I'm pretty flexible." I had already told my current employer that I'd been looking at the opportunity.

TS: You're not married yet?

SP: No, no, I'm still single. He said, "Okay, they want you to start on the sixth of January, which is a Monday." This is Christmas Eve. He said, "You've got to make up your mind right now; we've got to go." The recruiter was a sales person himself. So I said, "Okay, I'll do it." I had to tell my mom Christmas Eve.

DY: Your poor mama!

SP: Yes, I had to tell my mom Christmas Eve, "I've got a new job." They were excited, that's great. "It's in the finance business which is what I want." That's good. "The only thing is I'm leaving for California in four days."

DY: But you came back home.

TS: You said southern California, which city?

SP: It was Long Beach which is south about thirty minutes of LA proper. It's right on the Orange County line there. There's a community inside Long Beach called Belmont Shores. I literally lived two blocks from the beach on one side, and two blocks the other way was where Long Beach State University [California State University, Long Beach] was. So it was a college town of Long Beach State in Belmont Shores. There was a second avenue that ran into Pacific Coast highway where all the restaurants and stores and bars were. In 1986 I put like 3,000 miles on my car, and it was all because I basically rode a bike to work and walked up the street.

TS: Well, you know, the part of Cobb County you were in was still fairly rural when you left here. I mean, it was suburbanizing but . . .

SP: Oh, yes.

TS: How did it compare when you went out there? Did you feel like you were in a different world or was it just like another suburb?

SP: No. It was a different world, no doubt about that! An interesting part of that is that when I moved out there I didn't know anyone out there. I didn't have any relatives, and I didn't know any one, so I literally had to start completely over. I met friends at work, and I met friends through friends. Even to this day I've got a gentleman that works in the same company I do now. I helped get him hired on, and we worked together in two other jobs, and we're still very good friends. So I have several very dear friends that I stay in touch with from California from the time I was out there. But it was just what you would think it would be. It was worlds apart from that. I will say that I was surprised that it wasn't just all sun and palm trees and flashy cars and big houses. I was surprised to find that it was a very industrial state with the oil wells, and in parts it's got its poverty as well as the riches. But I lived in a fairly good part of the city and of the state.

DY: Was the community diversified that you were in?

SP: Absolutely.

DY: Yes, I'm sure that was a big change.

SP: Yes, it was very much so. You had to be really very open minded and very open to new ideas and new thoughts. One of the comments I make about it is that the people were driven. They worked very hard, and they played very hard. I remember even in '86-'87, where we weren't really having much of a rush hour in Georgia of any consequence, there they had rush hour on the weekends because you work very hard Monday through Friday and then on Saturday . . .

TS: To go to the beach?

SP: Well, we all lived on the beach, right, so on Saturday you had to load up and go somewhere. It was either go to the desert or in the winter it was going snow skiing or it was going out to Lake Havasu in the summer on the border of California and Arizona, or going to San Diego or going to Mexico. It was like you had to get up and you had to go somewhere.

TS: So everybody's going.

SP: Yes, so you didn't relax on the weekends. You got up, and you loaded up your bikes or whatever you did, and you took off. So that was a big change. I was there for two years.

TS: What was the company?

SP: It was Capital Associates. I worked for Capital Associates Portfolio Company. What I did was I bought and sold and leased the small IBM top mainframe equipment. I worked for them for two years in California in '86 and '87. After a couple of years of working from 5:30 in the morning until 6:30 at night, and then as any young, single guy would do, partying in the evening, getting to bed at 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning, getting up at 5:00, I did that for about two years, and finally I said, "It's been great. I've loved it. . . ."

DY: But I'm worn out! [laughter]

SP: But I'm tired, I am tired. I've made some good money. I've learned the business. I'm tired, and I'm really ready to go home. I found an opportunity to stay in the finance business, but moved to where I was doing phone sales and brokerage. Now I'm moving outside and doing field sales, doing outside sales, where you're actually visiting the companies, dealing directly with them face to face, much larger transactions, multi-million dollar transactions of financing new equipment that they buy as well as supplying used equipment and doing leasing. So it was a new opportunity. The company at that time was PacifiCorp Capital. So I had the opportunity to move back to Georgia. Capital Associates didn't feel like I was ready to take an outside role. It was outside sales like some of their sales guys. I'm not sure why. I think the truth is they didn't want to lose

me in the position I was in because they didn't have somebody to fill it. So they were trying to delay me. But the kind of person I am, my mind was made up. I was going home.

As a matter of fact, little bit of back up from Kennesaw College as an extracurricular activity, at one time one thing I did do is I water skied competitively. We actually had a Kennesaw College water ski team, and we competed in what then was the SAC, the South Atlantic Conference against University of Georgia, Georgia Tech, Georgia State, Life College, Clemson, Alabama, just the major southeastern schools. When I moved back I wanted to live on the lake and start skiing again. It kind of all came together. I found a house on the water on Lake Allatoona and a job to bring me back here. So everything, the stars, the moons aligned up perfectly for me. I moved back to this area in January of '88. So I was gone almost exactly two years to the day to California.

TS: Was PacifiCorp Capital headquartered in California?

SP: No, that division was headquartered in McLean, Virginia. That was the high tech division. But PacifiCorp was actually a giant utility, and at that time in the 1980s the utility businesses were allowed to expand a little bit.

TS: Deregulation?

SP: A little bit yes. PacifiCorp was actually a large utility in Portland, Oregon. I bought a place on the lake and got back and worked for PacifiCorp for about three and a half years. To finish out from a professional perspective, I worked for them for three and a half years and then I went to work for GE Capital Computer Leasing, again, a large company. GE Capital was large in the finance area, and worked for GE Capital for five and a half years. They closed that division, so I then moved on to the largest leasing company in the industry by the name of Comdisco; they were out of Chicago, Illinois. Computer Discount was the name. They were a publicly traded company. I worked for them for two years, and then that would have probably put us right about '99. If you recall that's when we were in the telecom and high speed internet bubble at the time.

I had an opportunity to move from financing of general computer equipment into doing telecom infrastructure. It gave me an opportunity to do more senior secured type financing. Senior secured was where we would take pieces of startup companies and finance them. While doing that I worked for GE Capital Telecom Financial Services and was doing that as a vendor captive for leasing. Actually, I had a Nortel Networks Corporation business card, but I was a GE Capital employee. I went in with a Nortel sales rep. As he was selling his product I was financing as if I were the vendor leasing company. It's called vendor captive leasor. So I did that and then, of course, as we know, that bubble burst in about late 2000, so that was a struggling industry. I had a friend who wanted me to come back into the general computer financing. Then we had September 11, 2001, and that sped everything up to where, if you're going to come, you need to come now.

So I moved out of GE in that role and went back to computer leasing for a company called GATX, again a transportation company [formerly named General American Transportation]. They were out of Chicago, and they had big railcar financing business. They had bought a company that wanted to do computer financing to expand themselves. So I was at GATX for three years. They were bought by a large conglomerate finance company called CIT [formerly known as Commercial Investment Trust], and I decided not to make the move to that larger company. I had an opportunity to go back into true vendor financing where I actually worked for the vendor. That was in June of 2004. I went to work for Hitachi Data Systems. Hitachi Data Systems sells the large mainframe storage to large companies that you would recognize.

TS: Which is the name on your shirt.

SP: Yes, Hitachi Data Systems. I was in their vendor captive leasing group, so I worked for Hitachi Data Systems Credit Corporation. I did the lease financing. I stood behind the sales reps, but I was actually a Hitachi employee. I did that for three years, and then in 2007, still at Hitachi, I moved from the finance side over to the actual sales side. I took a position from a finance customer of mine for a long time by the name of Total System Services, or TSYS, out of Columbus, Georgia. They do credit card processing. They're the largest credit card processor in the world. So I now am on the sales side but more of the business management. I am a global account manager for Hitachi at TSYS. I handle them worldwide. I have a sales team who sells to them worldwide. I manage the sales team. Typically, I spend most of my time in Columbus, Georgia up at the headquarters, but I do spend quite a bit of time in the UK, in London and in Manchester, in the northern part of the country. I do usually make one trip a year to Tokyo in Japan and also to Shanghai or Beijing, China. As they expand globally, there will be other trips. I don't travel too often, but enough to be Platinum [SkyMiles] with Delta, more than I probably would like to. I'm still there today. They call it GAM, Global Account Management. I've been in that role for the last two years.

TS: So you're the poster boy for the idea that you're probably going to have six or eight different jobs in your lifetime that you're being prepared for.

SP: Yes. My longest stint was ten years in the grocery business. I had five and a half years with GE at one time, and then left and went back to them, so I've got collectively almost eleven years with GE. But, yes, this is one of my longest jobs now at five years here.

TS: So your degree was in management, but really it sounds like what you've been doing has been more marketing, sales, that sort of career.

SP: That's right. That's an accurate statement. And finance, financial structuring. I obviously used my degree from here, but financial structuring has really been the forte around the areas of sales; so sales and marketing. I did manage in the early 1980s when I was in California where I had a three-person sales force that was actually out making the phone calls. So I had some sales management experience there. And now to a certain degree I have a dotted line virtual team if you will for TSYS, sales in the UK, sales in

China, sales in the U.S. so some management responsibilities. But, yes, your statement is accurate. Primarily it's been marketing and sales in the area of finance.

TS: Do you think Kennesaw prepared you well for all of this?

SP: Absolutely.

TS: Did Kennesaw help you at all in finding jobs or did you take advantage of Placement Services?

SP: No, I did not take advantage of it. Really, where you would get involved with that would be meeting other people, and they would connect you with possible employers. I'll never forget that everything was in the student center because we didn't have a whole lot of building space, but you would go up the stairs, and they used to have the metal roll up window there. That's where they had Career Advisement and Placement Services [Deborah T. Waller, director].

DY: I think that was before CAPS, before Nancy S. King came and created CAPS.

SP: Yes, because I didn't know Nancy until after I came back.

TS: Well, let's make the transition to alumni. How did you get involved with the Alumni Association?

SP: Through another alumnus who was on the board, J. Chris Pike. Chris graduated the year before me in 1978 from North Cobb, and we were good friends. Chris also went to Kennesaw College, and we graduated together in 1984. He got involved first, and it just amazes me how long I was on the board. It flies by so quickly. But Chris contacted me in 1993 and at the time he was . . .

TS: President.

SP: Was he president at that time?

TS: He was president '92 through '94.

SP: Yes, so as president he contacted me and said, "You really need to get involved here. They could use your energy. They could use your experience and your contacts around the state and the people you know. It's great to give back." I thought, "Absolutely!" I really had a strong pull back to the university here. In 1993 he got me involved, and I joined the board in 1993.

TS: Are you still in touch with him?

SP: Yes. I played golf with him at the Dot Martin [golf] Classic last Monday. He got me on the board in '93, and I served actually consistently from '93 until my presidency [2004-

2006] and then my immediate past presidency. So I think I became the longest termed board member. What happened is I filled an unexpired term, and then I fulfilled two full terms, and then I went officer track, so it was, what, fifteen or sixteen years on the board?

TS: From '93 through 2008 would be fifteen years.

SP: Yes, isn't that amazing? I was on the board for fifteen years. It just flew by.

TS: I know the more recent presidents have gone through kind of a six-year track to get to be president where they start out as treasurer or something and then become a second vice president. Did you go through those stages? Did they have those back then?

SP: Yes, I did. You may have records better than me. The first officer position I took was, was it treasurer?

DY: That's generally where it starts, is it not?

SP: Well, it depends. You can do secretary or you can do treasurer, and then second vice president.

DY: Oh could you?

SP: Yes. So second VP, first VP and then president. I think I was treasurer, and, I skipped one of them, maybe first vice president. Maybe I went treasurer, second VP, then president.

TS: Because somebody that was in line dropped out?

SP: That was the time we got an Alumni House. I was an officer, but I wasn't the president yet.

TS: The residence halls across the street [University Place] opened in 2002 and that created a great tension with all these homeowners, so the Foundation bought them out in the fall of 2002.

SP: I was the first sitting president when we moved into the Alumni House, so that would have been between 2004 and 2006. I had a two-year term.

TS: Tell me something about the Alumni Association in '93 when you came on the board. How active was it, and what were some of the things you were doing back then?

SP: At that point we were making the transition from a social, connectivity aspect to raising money and making a financial impact for the university. We were just starting that. They actually had had the phone-a-thons, and they had some folks out raising money, but even at that point raising of money wasn't about how much you could give. It was about just getting people to sign up. It wasn't as much about raising money as it was about the

connectivity back to the community and pulling the alumni back in and getting them involved in what's going on. [Concetta E.] Connie Bostick was the president at that time.

TS: She was president '94 through '96.

SP: Right. So Chris rolled off, and then Connie came in.

TS: She replaced Chris.

SP: Right. So again, it was more of a get the people back on campus. What would surprise you was that because it was a non-traditional school, someone would graduate from here and then never come back. They hadn't been back. They hadn't seen all the changes that have been made and all the advancements. That was really the push in the early 1990s on up into the late 1990s. Then, as the Foundation began to have a financial impact and ramped up even more so, we've begun to align with them and start thinking more about raising money. But again we never lost the focus of trying to have people reconnect to the university. One thing that really transformed us from that perspective is that we actually started more activities like the July 4 Braves game and getting the alumni to come back for the concerts on campus or to walk in the commencement or to get involved in more of a social aspect. Give them some reconnectedness. And then of course, with technology being able to reach out with e-mail and those kinds of things, there was that kind of transformation there.

TS: Where did you hold your board meetings?

SP: In 1993 we held them in the old Nurses' Building. There was a room . . .

TS: The old Nursing Building?

DY: Across from Willingham, the connecting one? Is that the one you're talking about?

SP: It depends on how you're looking at it. You had the library [Pilcher Building], and then the old Nurses' Building was next door.

TS: In other words, the old Science Building?

SP: Yes, the old Science Building, which became the Nursing Building. In there, there was a boardroom of sorts or a large meeting room. That's where the portrait of Dr. [Horace W.] Sturgis hung in that room. It was a nice, well-decorated room. Where was Dr. [Betty L.] Siegel at that time? Where were her offices?

TS: Well, in the Administration Building, the one-story building you were talking about that you remember. It's still there. It's the Public Safety Building nowadays.

SP: Yes. Anyway, I think it was in the old Science Building downstairs. So we met there. Of course, the alumni office got moved all over the place. I mean, Myra Morgan [alumni

secretary] and Phil Barco [alumni director] got moved all over. They were in a little bitty closet in the library on the third or fourth floor for a while. [Editor's note: According to the annual catalogs, the alumni office at the beginning of the 1990s was in the Office Annex, a modular building to the south of the original Science Building adjacent to Parking Lot B. By 1992-1993 it was in Pilcher 155. Several former alumni board members recall that the association had a small office in the Sturgis Library for a short time before the Carmichael Student Center addition opened in 1999. Then the alumni office moved to Student Center 156 for several years before occupying the newly renovated Alumni House on Campus Loop Road by 2004.]

TS: Okay. I didn't mean to interrupt. You were talking about going to Braves games and activities of that sort.

SP: Yes, more of a social aspect. Then as we moved into the early 2000s, what we realized and what we started talking about was that we noticed that the alumni enjoyed spending time with the people they had things in common with. The nurses liked spending time with nurses and seeing what was going on with them. I had a business degree, but now this time you've got Coles College of Business. So we started talking about having individual clubs. That way they could kind of control their own destiny, do their own thing, but still be connected to the alumni as an umbrella over them. So I guess the biggest feather in my cap from an alumni perspective was the founding of the business club. I made that my mission to charter the business club so the business graduates would have something in common. Then, about the same time or right after, it might have even been right before, was the nursing club.

DY: Who was doing this chartering work in the alumni association?

SP: The board, the alumni association.

DY: The board? Okay.

SP: Yes, we were working that, and Nancy—I can picture her face and she was on the board for such a long time—she helped develop the nursing club. I can't think of her last name now. So nursing and business kicked off, and that was two large contingencies inside the college, two very large areas. Then soon thereafter was education, I believe. So what we did was to encourage groups of people that felt they had something in common to group together as a club and just fall under the umbrella of the Alumni Association. They did that. We saw membership spike heavily at that time, so it was the right move. There was some concern that you'd also get that disconnect of, okay, they're all doing their own thing. But we didn't seem to have that. I will say that of all the clubs, the Coles College of Business alumni club probably made the most out of that charter that was given to them. They really grew out on their own, and of the membership of the Alumni Association, they probably made up the bulk of that membership.

DY: It probably had the greatest number of grads too coming out of there.

SP: Probably did.

TS: Did each club have its own president?

SP: They did, they did, yes. They had their own president and their own board. One thing we had done was we made certain we nominated somebody from each club to represent the club on the board.

TS: I see. So were you president of the business club?

SP: No. I never was. I had my hands full with the Alumni Association. So I was involved in putting it together and getting it chartered, but then wanted to immediately turn it over.

DY: Do these clubs keep records?

SP: I'm sure the business alumni club has them, and I would say that the nursing club has them as well, unless they're all kept on Myra's computer.

DY: Well, that's going to be a good resource for statistics at least.

TS: Were you on the alumni board when they hired Phil Barco?

SP: No, no, he was already here.

TS: When you got here in '93?

SP: Yes. He was already here.

TS: Okay. So the Alumni Association is transitioning. Any other changes that you can see before you became president in 2004?

SP: We obviously finally got our home, the Alumni House. A large portion of that actually was the effort of Phil Barco, and Nancy King was just absolutely fantastic, but again, as in many other instances with the advancement of this institution, it was Dr. Siegel. President Siegel was determined to have an alumni house. She wasn't sure where it was going to be or how it was going to be, if we were going to build one or if we were going to buy one, but we were going to have an alumni house. We always had her full support 120 percent behind us on that. Obviously, a big monumental part during my board stay here was getting the Alumni House and being able to make use of that.

TS: So you're just becoming president when they get the house?

SP: That's true, yes. I think we secured the house just as my presidency was coming up.

TS: I understand that one of the big responsibilities was to get furniture for the house at that point, and to decide how the different rooms were going to be used. Could you talk a little bit about that?

SP: Yes. It was interesting because we had to decide, was it to be a meeting place, strictly business? Was it to have a social aspect to it? What were we going to use it for? I think as evidenced by what it's used for today it's obviously used to welcome the alumni back in. We had been saving money in a contingency fund to be able to afford some of the things that we needed. We knew we would get basic set up from a college perspective. Like for this boardroom [where the interview is being conducted], this board table and the chairs you see here, we funded that through the Alumni Association. The house, when it was redesigned and rebuilt and refurbished, if you look at the design, it opened up so it would be good for meeting areas. This room was opened up and then the offices were set up and then of course, the dining room and the kitchen. We left the kitchen to be able to serve and cook if we needed to. We left the patio. There was a pool here, which is gone now. It's covered up. There was a pool, and we left the pool open for quite some time so that families could come, and, if we had an event, the kids could swim. The pool is now filled in, but it was right out there.

TS: Just behind the board room where there's a patio area now was the pool?

SP: Exactly.

DY: And you had a bedroom too where Dr. Siegel and various guests stayed on occasion.

SP: Yes, is the bedroom gone?

TS: It's gone. That's Lisa A. Duke's office [current Alumni Association director] now, I think.

SP: Oh is it? Having the bedroom was fantastic. It was for late night events. If President Siegel or other ranking members of the university were on campus late, they could stay. She thoroughly enjoyed staying here and then spending time with students over at the student housing. Before this time if we had guests that would be in from out of town, we couldn't accommodate them. I think at the time it served its purpose. I think now, with the growth of the Alumni Association support staff, we need the space, but, secondly, I imagine that with the Foundation there's probably some special room on campus that's always available for people to stay inside the dorms and those kinds of things.

TS: I don't know where you put special guests, but there are several nice hotels near campus now. The Foundation also owns the Best Western next to the Cracker Barrel.

SP: I didn't realize that.

DY: I didn't realize that either, Tom.

- SP: I didn't realize that either. So anyway, the house has kind of transformed now. I still think there are social events that are done here and obviously the board meetings and those kinds of things, so I think it well serves its purpose.
- TS: We've had Department of History & Philosophy parties down here.
- DY: Yes, we've had English parties too. I mean, it's very welcoming for faculty to gather and include students in that gathering.
- SP: Yes. And, interestingly, all the other houses along this road are very similar in design. I remember when these houses were initially built [in 1986], and they looked very much alike on the outside. They were painted different and some in brick, some in stucco, but they were very similar. I don't know if the other houses are laid out in different plans.
- TS: Well, the CETL House is two-doors down, and it's a very similar layout.
- SP: Okay. But that was a big part of my entering the presidency. Then the alumni really started to advance even more by aligning with the Foundation in a role—and you hesitate to say, although there's a certain amount of truth to it—around the money function of things. I mean, you shouldn't be bashful about saying that it takes money to run a top-notch show. But being from this area and being pretty politically [aware] and very plugged into local politics . . . I still live on Lake Allatoona. I've been in downtown Acworth, and so connected with them, so through that I started getting more . . .
- TS: When you say you live on Lake Allatoona in downtown Acworth, are you talking about Lake Acworth?
- SP: No, Lake Allatoona proper.
- TS: So that's zoned into the city of Acworth?
- SP: Yes it is. Out North Main Street, there's a beach called Dallas Landing that's actually in the city limits of Acworth. So I'm actually on Allatoona Lake.
- DY: That's the way I go home every day.
- SP: Is it? Yes, so I'm there on the lake. Moving off the alumni topic, I actually chair the Acworth Lake Authority, so I'm pretty active in the city. To tie back to that, I got to know Wesley K. Wicker [vice president for university advancement and executive director of the KSU Foundation] pretty well. I had the opportunity to spend a lot of time with Tommy Holder, who was the chair of the Foundation at the time. I was on the president selection committee to select the replacement for President Siegel. So we went through the interview process interviewing everybody.
- TS: Tommy Holder was on that committee too?

SP: He was, so we spent a lot of time together. So after that discussion Tommy thought that it would be a good idea, if not officially, at least unofficially for the president or some officer of the alumni association to have a spot on the board of Foundations or at least have some recognition there. So we started implementing that.

TS: So you went to the Foundation trustee meetings?

SP: Yes. Then in reciprocation we wanted to invite somebody from the Foundation to serve on the alumni board. I don't know the status of that because that was after I left and J. D. [Joseph D.] Frazier became president. But we worked from that perspective, and I started working with Wes Wicker quite a bit. So pulling together the Foundation was probably my last focus toward the end. Even a little bit into my immediate past president role, I was helping pull the Foundation and the Alumni Association together.

TS: And part of that was changing whom the director of the alumni association reported to, I think. It was the vice president of student success and enrollment services, and then it became Wes Wicker.

SP: Right, right. And I think all of that was pulled together at the same time by design. Then I guess you had mentioned before we turned the tape on that you might want to talk about the transition from Phil Barco.

TS: Right. Myra Morgan retired while you were president, and then Phil was replaced or moved on, and Lisa Duke came in probably right about the time that your term as president was ending.

SP: Right, about by the time of the end of my presidency.

TS: Were you on the search committee for her?

SP: No, I was not. I appointed J. D. Frazier because he was first vice president and . . .

TS: He was going to have to work with her.

SP: He was, and since I had just come off the president search, I felt like it was best to have him serve on that.

TS: Well, just tell us whatever you feel free to tell us about the transition in leadership and the staff positions.

SP: Certainly. I thought so much of him, and he was great for the Alumni Association when it was in its social aspect, pulling people in for the social aspect. I believe that his particular skill set didn't serve the Alumni Association as well when we were linking into the Foundation, the financial aspect of it, and trying to bring not just volumes of people in, but a different functionality of people we wanted on the board. If you look at some of your current board members and the professions that they're in, you start to see more of

that tie back to the business owners and tie back to the Foundation. Phil was so loved here, but the job just outgrew him. The focus of it changed. I don't think we were all prepared for the fact that the alumni transition wouldn't include Phil Barco. So, unfortunately, if I had a low point in my tenure on the board and in the presidency, it was having to work through and help the board work through the exchange from Phil to a new person.

TS: Who made the decision? Was the board involved in making the decision to have a change of leadership?

SP: No.

TS: Not at all? So it came from the president's office?

SP: Yes, it came from the Foundation and then the president—the leadership at the time of the university. As in any good institution, they didn't do it in a vacuum. They consulted with us. They wanted to keep control of rumors, so I think the president's office confided in me given my long tenure on the board and my relationship with Phil, and I think they relied on me to try to work through that. Not that it became my responsibility, nor did I participate in the actual discussions with Phil, but I interfaced back to the board because a lot of board members and other alumni were upset. They understood the reasons. They understood the changes that were going on and the changes on the board, but, still, he was a very dear friend to the Alumni Association.

TS: So you're saying that if it had been up to the board there wouldn't have been a change.

SP: No, if it had been up to the board there would not have been a change. Let me back up. I'm not saying there would not have been a change, but I would say that it would have been a very difficult sale because everybody on the board wasn't ready for where we were moving. There were certain members who were very vocal about us being tied so close to the Foundation.

DY: What were their objections to that?

SP: Just being controlled by the Foundation. In other words we lost control. They asked, "Aren't we in a position to control our own destiny?" If I had a low point it was because I had to deal with that. Coming from my business experience and having to see the big picture, one thing I was trying to convince them of is that it's not about control, and it's not that you can't control your own destiny, it's just where are we all headed? What's the common good? Fortunately I had some younger members, recent graduates, and confided in John Fuchko and Nels Peterson, for example. Those are a couple of guys who really did understand the value of where we were headed. But back to your point, yes, had I been driving the exchange from Phil to who became Lisa Duke, as well as how we interfaced with the Foundation, it would have been a very difficult sale to the board at the time.

DY: Did you all ever talk about vision or mission or anything as a group?

SP: Yes, we did.

DY: I bet those weren't fun conversations.

SP: Yes. It was just a difficult time. J. D. Frazier understood it very clearly. So he and I worked very closely together on that. Then there were other senior board members who also were very clear on it. Quite honestly, I think some of the most vocal critics [of a closer relationship with the Foundation] were the club representatives. I think they felt like that it might impact them negatively.

DY: That's interesting.

SP: I could see that but again . . .

DY: What do you think they feared? That they'd be subsumed into it?

SP: Yes, that's a good way to describe it. Quite candidly, it is good that you're getting this discussion because I haven't had this conversation with anybody. This is the first time I've really thought about it short of having private conversations with J. D. and Wes Wicker and some other folks. But this is the first time I've actually put this out in open discussion. So it's probably good that you know that because change is tough; transition is tough.

TS: Yes. It's a very important shift I think in the alumni board when you go from being the social bunch to consciously recruiting people who are middle or upper management in their companies and moving up the ladder. The John Fuchkos type. Did you all discuss this change? It must have been difficult to have a board that's the old type say we need to move beyond where we are to a different stage. I guess what I'm asking is whether the change was initiated by the Alumni Association itself or was it imposed on the Alumni Association?

SP: Using your words, I would say imposed. I think a different way to look at it was that it was inevitable. It was the right move. It mirrored other Alumni/Foundation connections. We were now the third largest institution in the State of Georgia, so we needed to look at what was working for others. I think it was a natural transition. I don't think we wanted to have the small school mentality. I think it was just the fact of change. I believe it was just change. It wasn't that anyone was opposed. It was just they couldn't get as comfortable with it. Using your word, change was imposed; it was coming. It was the right thing to do, and it was coming. I think they took offense to the fact that it was coming. But, again, I looked at it from a business perspective, because that's my background and that's what I understand. From my limited experience in politics, that's the way it works. You had a lot of board members here who didn't have that experience or vision. It was harder for them to see the big picture. They thought change wasn't necessarily going to be good for them. So, again, it wasn't like there was this large

uprising of opposition. It was just that having to sell it was very uncomfortable. And, the question you'd asked earlier, was there much discussion about it, I controlled those discussions very carefully—controlled how long they went on, when they came up in the meetings, how they came up, what was on record and off record—because those discussions could be hours long. We weren't made to have multiple hours long board meetings.

DY: Would you say that you, as a negotiator of change here, were in the minority or the majority on that point?

SP: I think you probably would split it right down the middle.

DY: That's usually the way it happens. Which makes it really hard. If there's a majority, you don't have that kind of conflict.

TS: Well, maybe another way to ask this is did you appoint the nominating committee for new board members?

SP: No, the nomination for board members came from the alumni at large. Well, let me back up. In my day, they came looking for us, because they were just trying to find somebody to serve. They came looking for me. They came looking for the right people. Then it was a slate of nominees, and you didn't have opposition. But nowadays my understanding is that you may have two or three people running. So you have people who have interest in giving back. I think now they actually go out and look in the open for those nominees. Then they screen them to a certain extent, but if somebody is nominated he or she is on that slate, unless they ask to come off.

TS: But there's a nominating committee?

SP: There is a nominating committee.

TS: And that's elected by the board?

SP: Yes. Every fiscal year the new board is put in place. At one of the very first meetings, or sometimes at an annual retreat, they assign members to committees. They ask for volunteers. "What do you have an interest in? Do you want to be on the nominating committee? Do you want to be on the treasury committee? Do you want to be on the homecoming committee?" The bylaws give the president the authority to appoint committees. There are certain committees that by the bylaws must be in place. Then there can be extra committees as deemed necessary by the president or the executive committee. From there then you have people volunteer for those committees. Just a point of reference, you have the general board meeting, and in that general board meeting any alumni can come, whether you're a board member or not. Then for day-to-day business they have an executive committee meeting. That typically is your officers. Now under sunshine laws, anybody can attend those meetings unless there's something of a sensitive nature that they're not allowed to hear . . .

TS: Personnel matters?

SP: Possibly so. We have very few personnel matters, but a lot of the day-to-day business is driven through the executive committee. So when I say the president appoints, it's typically the executive committee.

TS: Okay. What are you proudest of from your association with the Alumni Association?

SP: Well, obviously the Alumni House.

TS: It gives you a visibility you didn't have before, doesn't it?

SP: It does, it does. The driving force obviously came from the institution and from President Siegel, but being the alumni president during that time was very important to me. We worked very hard to get that. A lot of credit goes to Dick [Richard G.] Stovall. He was president from 1998 to 2000. Dick Stovall was responsible for saying, "Hey, maybe we should start setting up a contingency fund, because we're going to get an alumni house some day, and when we do, we're going to want to be able to furnish and refurbish it how we want to. So credit goes to Dick Stovall for starting that out. But again, back to your point, for me, the proudest accomplishment is getting the alumni house completed and getting moved into the alumni house, number one. Number two is the merger with the Foundation, working directly under the Foundation. Then number three is the business alumni club. Those are probably the three things I point to the most.

TS: Okay. Let's see, you weren't on the search committee for Lisa Duke, but you continued as past president to be on the board for two more years.

SP: Right.

TS: So you were on the board when she came in.

SP: I was.

TS: What kinds of changes did that bring about to bring in a new director with a new vision?

SP: Without spending a lot of time on it, it goes back to how the Alumni Association is structured to fit into the goals of the institution. We found the right person in Lisa to lead the Alumni Association. By the way, in her previous job [as development officer for the Coles College of Business], she worked with the business alumni club. So she already had the experience from the business perspective. So the transition that the Alumni Association was going through was illustrated by the fact that we were moving from a Phil Barco to a Lisa Duke. The changes that took place were natural transformations in how we were reporting into the institution. Interestingly enough, I didn't work closely day-to-day through the transition with Lisa, because as immediate past president, you really step back, so you're not in the way of the incoming president. So I didn't attend

but maybe one or two board meetings. The role of the immediate past president, historically speaking from my experience of fifteen years on the board, was, "I'm there if you need counsel and some experience or historical perspective. If not, you're really not going to see me."

TS: Good policy

SP: Well, I questioned whether the immediate past president should be on the executive committee, which makes day-to-day decision. But the board decided to leave it as it was. I even questioned whether the immediate past president should be on the board.

TS: Make it non-voting, ex officio.

SP: Yes, exactly, because really I'm going to be there for counsel regardless of whether I'm a board member. They can call me today for counsel. But they felt like at this point they wanted to keep it intact. The immediate past president is welcome to come back anytime they want to, but the experience is that you really are hands off.

TS: I know that the percentage of alumni who contribute annually to the university has grown over the last several years. How much were you involved in actual annual campaign fundraising and that sort of thing during your presidency?

SP: Well, during my presidency I would say activity had fallen off on aggressively pursuing donations because we were in that transition stage. We had gotten to a point where we started stepping on the toes of each other. The Foundation was pursuing alumni who had been very successful and could contribute back to the university, and we were pursuing the same people.

TS: Going to the same potential donors?

SP: Yes, yes. So we started to back off, so we could get better coordinated with the Foundation. But from a money-raising gift perspective, we came up with a few things like block-time membership. Rather than pay the \$25.00 or whatever alumni membership was per year, you could pay \$500.00 and have a lifetime membership in the Alumni Association. So we started doing things like that to create more ways of bringing them in, so we're not nickeling and diming folks to get them in. So we stopped the aggressive campaigning of the phone-a-thons and those kinds of things, but at the same time began to use e-mail aggressively.

TS: Stop the aggressive campaigning because the Foundation was doing it?

SP: They were also doing it. So we never let go of the social functionality and the bringing people in part of it. I think that aggressively continued, and it shows by the membership gains over the last ten years.

- TS: Right. Several people have talked about the transition toward the Foundation and of the alumni board being a kind of feeder organization for Foundation trustees.
- SP: Yes. That's why you want to have the two tied together. I would agree with that. It would be interesting for you to do your own survey of how many of the members of the Foundation are alumni?
- TS: Yes, I think it used to be only two or three and now it's up to five or six.
- SP: Yes. I think you'll see that as a continuing trend.
- TS: I think some alumni would like for alumni to be the majority eventually on the Foundation board.
- SP: Yes, but think about that for a second. Do you really want that? Alumni already have their place as members of the Alumni Association. How does somebody who didn't have the good fortune of going to Kennesaw, yet loves what it's doing for the community, become a part of it? Like for example, Tommy Holder, who went to Georgia Tech. You've got to have room for them. I don't know what great benefit you get from the majority of the Foundation being alumni.
- TS: Right. Well, I think I've just about run out of questions. Anything that you can think of that we should have talked about that we haven't?
- SP: Maybe just a couple of things from a personal perspective. We didn't talk about my family. I'm married; my wife Lori went to Marietta High School and attended KSU for a short period of time. She also went to the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and then Berry College, but she did spend some time at KSU. We got married in 1991 after I moved back from California, and we have three kids. Our oldest, Drew, is fifteen, and he attends Allatoona High School. Our middle child is thirteen and her name is Marina and she attends a special-needs school. She has some disabilities, and so she's at Brookwood Christian School in Acworth. Then our youngest, Cera, is eight and is in the third grade at North Cobb Christian School in Acworth. Drew is obviously a common spelling, Marina is like a marina for boats and likes living on the water, and Cera's name is a special spelling. We let Drew name her. As a four or five year old he was fond of *The Land before Time*, which is the dinosaur cartoon. There's a *Triceratops* character named Cera, so her name is Cera Rose. I have a lovely family and I'm very proud of them. We live in a house across the street from the one I bought when I came back from California. We still live on the lake, and my dad now lives in the neighborhood with us as well. I'm very active in the community.
- TS: You mentioned the Lake Acworth Authority. That's pretty prestigious.
- SP: Well, I don't know if it's prestigious, but it's a good chance to give back. I have been on several committees in the City of Acworth. It surprised me that I was on the alumni board as long as I was here, but I've probably been longer on the Acworth Lake

Authority. I co-chair it with the mayor. I've lost track of how long I've served. Acworth is a great little town. Most recently, from a personal perspective, I haven't been as active in the college community here because my latest project is a special-needs field. We put together a committee, and we raised over \$1.2 million and built a rubberized, special-needs field, along with a concession stand that's adaptable to special needs and special-needs bathrooms and all the amenities.

TS: At the lake?

SP: No, it's located close to the lake inside the Acworth Sports Complex [4000 South Main Street]. The Acworth Sports Complex has a football field on one side of the creek, and on the other side is baseball. There are two clover leafs, so there are eight fields there, and one of the fields is the special-needs field [Horizon Field], so they're included. We have an inclusive facility. We're extremely proud of that. That was a great community pull together of state government, county government, and local government. We welcome kids with special needs of all ages from anywhere in the surrounding area. So I've been working on that one for the last couple of years. That one is complete now. I'll remain on the special-needs committee [Special Needs Development Group, Inc.] and work with the city. We're now playing ball on it and having fun every week.

TS: That's great.

SP: I think that covers it unless you can think of anything.

TS: No, I think this has been very interesting.

SP: Thank you.

TS: I appreciate it very much.

SP: It's good to share.

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Part II - Tuesday, May 31, 2016
Location: Telephone interview

TS: Steve, we did an interview in 2009 with regard to your service to Kennesaw State as alumni president. The interview today is about your service to the city of Acworth as the chair of the Acworth Lake Authority. To begin, let me ask you how long you've been the chair of the Lake Acworth Authority. I know even back in 2009 you were already the chair, and you're the chair now. You've been the chair continuously for a long time, haven't you?

SP: I have, and I'm embarrassed to say that I don't know how long! (laughter) It's been so long, Dr. Scott, I don't know how long. I was appointed to the Acworth Lake Authority when Marcia S. Andruzzi was the mayor [from January 1998 to December 2001]. Mr. Tommy Allegood is in his fourth term of four years [from January 2002 to the present]. So I'm going to say that I've been on the Acworth Lake Authority Board at least fourteen to sixteen years. As a point of clarification, I am what we describe as co-chair [with the mayor] of the Lake Authority. As you know, it is a state chartered agency that was put together [in 1951]. The board had been inactive until Ms. Andruzzi had got it started again. There had been members, but they weren't active. There were no meetings or participation there. Under the state charter the mayor of Acworth is actually the chairman of the Acworth Lake Authority, but the Board of Aldermen and Mayor Allegood thought it made sense with everything going on to have somebody that had experience with the city and experience with the Lake Authority to serve as co-chair—someone who could run the meetings, call for the votes, and help keep up with the minutes and the day-to-day business. So they created a co-chair position, and I became the co-chair of the Acworth Lake Authority about eight years ago or a little less and have served in that capacity ever since.

TS: So does the mayor appoint you to become the co-chair?

SP: He does [with the approval of the Board of Aldermen]. Yes, he did.

TS: If the mayor is there, does he or she preside but otherwise you preside? Is that the way it works?

SP: Actually, if the mayor is there, he still asks me to preside since I've got the experience and the background from presiding over that particular authority. Obviously, there is a lot of communication with him during the meeting, but the co-chairman runs the meetings each month. The mayor tries to make as many meetings as possible. Mr. Allegood has a full-time job, so he doesn't get to make all of them, but when he's there he still asks that I run them just for continuity.

- TS: I wasn't aware that the Lake Authority had been inactive before Marcia became mayor. That's interesting that it would have been inactive. So what happened with Marcia Andruzzi that caused her to want to make it active again?
- SP: My opinion is that Ms. Andruzzi felt like it needed to be active. It was an ongoing chartered board from the state. There is no funding from the state, so there wasn't any kind of economic consequence for it being inactive, but I believe that Marcia felt that it was the city's duty to keep it active, keep it going. There were originally members of the Lake Authority doing things. There were meetings on a regular basis, and then it became inactive. That's the first part of it. The second part I would say is because at the time that I was appointed to the board the lake was closed due to pollution, fecal matter, testing, and different things. They were keeping people out of the water. You could drive through the park, but the park itself was closed except for some of the upper pavilions. The beach house was closed. I think the beach house could still be rented, but it was not in great shape. I think there was a move by Marcia and a desire to reactivate the board because it was the right thing to do to find out what was wrong with the lake and what needed to be done to get it reopened. It was just a lost treasure and a great asset and resource to the community. She wanted to get the beach house and the facilities up and running and cleaned up and going again to make it a useful asset for the City of Acworth. I believe that was the drive. We were one part of her plan to revitalize Acworth beach, Cauble Park, and the area down there.
- TS: Don't be modest on this, but why do you think that Marcia asked you to serve on the authority?
- SP: I think because my longstanding relationship with the city had already bloomed at the time. I live in the city limits of Acworth. If you look back over the history, of course, I'm six generations on my dad's maternal side and five generations on my dad's paternal side, so there's a lot of family history within the city, number one. Number two, I was also very active. I live on Lake Allatoona, which is the same body of water, if you will, although they do separate them through the spillway or the little dam at the Highway 92 bridge. But they're the same. The Corps of Engineers deems them to be the same body of water. She knew that I lived on Lake Allatoona and was a competitive water skier and so very active in water sports and those kinds of things. So it made sense. It was a good fit she felt like. She and I had developed a relationship through politics and activities around town. That's why she felt like I had the passion to get involved and see how we could get the lake and the beach opened back up and usable by the community.
- TS: You've already started to answer this question but what are the main things that the Lake Authority does?
- SP: The Lake Authority by charter oversees the Corps of Engineers property that lies within the city limits of Acworth. It is designed specifically to oversee Lake Acworth, the body of water and the surrounding property that is Corps of Engineers land, which is technically in the 100-year or maybe 500-year floodplain that the Corps controls. So our role is to look specifically over that. Interestingly enough, our purview has grown

because the city has strengthened its relationship with the Corps of Engineers and, quite honestly, the Lake Authority has developed [a strong relationship] with the Corps of Engineers. I had a personal relationship with the Corps of Engineers with my connection to water skiing and the Atlanta Water Ski Club, which has its site on Lake Allatoona. We began to strengthen that relationship, and now the city actually has more leases and more rights to more Corps of Engineers property within the city limits of Acworth and to a certain degree outside the city limits of Acworth than just Lake Acworth. So really and truly our charter is looking after the Corps of Engineers property within the city limits of Acworth.

TS: Do you report in any way to the Corps of Engineers?

SP: No we do not. It's strictly relationship-based and legal contract-based on where we lease the different properties. For example, Cauble Park and Acworth Beach: the Corps of Engineers doesn't really have the facility budget and funding for the manpower to be able to maintain all of its current public parks and beaches. You may be aware that the result of that was closing those beaches and those public parks that normally would be open to the public. Some of the less popular ones, if you will. The City of Acworth said, "We have an interest in serving the community by taking over and maintaining and patrolling those venues that lie within the city limits or are very close to the city limits even to the point of annexing them into the city limits." For the record, that includes Dallas Landing, which is on Allatoona Drive near the end of Lakewood Drive here in the city of Acworth. It includes also what they call Proctor Landing [on Proctor Landing Drive], which is going west on Highway 92, crossing over the lake, just before Cobb Parkway. The entrance of Proctor is on your right if you go down there. Then also it includes what we call South Shore Beach, which is directly across the lake [on Ragsdale Road] from Acworth Beach, but actually that piece of property is not inside the city limits of Acworth. The City of Acworth Parks and Recreation Department collects the parking fees, takes care of the trash, and monitors the area for traffic control and crowd control. The police are now able to go in and police those particular areas. Those areas would have been closed to the public, but they have now been re-opened and maintained by the city for the community's use.

TS: You mentioned parking fees. What kind of budget does the Lake Authority have?

SP: The Lake Authority sets its own budget based on its annual revenues that it brings in. Its annual revenues are pretty constant, and they are primarily 98 percent generated by a lease with the Acworth Parks, Recreation, and Community Resource Department. Basically what we've done is we have a lease with the Corps of Engineers. It was a state charter. Then we in turn sublease to the City of Acworth Parks and Recreation Department those same parks that I just mentioned in the previous comment. They pay it annually instead of monthly. It's an annual lease of \$10,000.00 a year.

TS: So you have a \$10,000.00 and pocket change type budget. Do you collect parking fees and rent facilities?

SP: We don't. Because we get the lump sum, in turn, as part of our sublease, we give the right to the Acworth Parks and Recreation to collect parking fees and to collect rentals of the facilities—not necessarily for the beach but for renting of the pavilions, the beach house, and those items. We relinquished that because otherwise we would have an expense budget of management and employees, and we don't have the wherewithal for that.

TS: Right. So what do you do with the \$10,000.00 that you get from the city?

SP: That's a good question. So we have several projects that we help with. One is what is known as the Great Lake Allatoona Clean Up. We coordinate and cooperate with what used to be the Lake Allatoona Preservation Authority and now is called the [Lake Allatoona Association]. In the past the focus was on what we call Lake Allatoona proper, and Lake Acworth wasn't really getting cleaned up and didn't have the attention. So about seven or eight years ago we decided, "Why don't we extend the Greater Allatoona Clean Up over the spillway, if you will, into Lake Acworth and go out and generate more resources, more volunteers, to focus on Lake Acworth and the Acworth Beach area."

What we did is we started coordinating. Some of our budget goes toward helping the Great Lake Allatoona Clean Up, plus we do our own [at Lake Acworth] because Lake Allatoona is so large that you have a celebration, cook out, live music, entertainment, and those kinds of things that are typically around some point at Lake Allatoona. What we've done is that there are two [clean ups]. At Lake Acworth, [under the sponsorship of] the Parks and Recreation, we cook hot dogs and provide drinks and chips for the volunteers and have music and those things to celebrate and feed them after they clean up the unimaginable amount of trash that gets in that small lake. So that's one area where our budget goes.

The other area is we support the Acworth Football and Cheerleading Association [AFCA], Inc. A good part of the AFCA's fields are actually in the floodplain and under our purview. So we've worked with them to help them advance themselves. We funded some studies for field improvement and field expansion both for the Acworth baseball complex and the football complex as well as the special-needs field [Horizon Field] that's there inside the Acworth Sports Complex. We also helped them with some special design so that they can get approval from the Corps for permanent stands for the football fields and the baseball fields. So we invested in the recreation side of that with some planning and design.

Another thing we do is that we spend a small part of our budget on the things that might get overlooked—not ignored, but just accidentally overlooked by the general fund from the city for parks and recreation. A bench is broken, a picnic table has been broken, just something small that wasn't budgeted, little things that come up a lot of times. We get them because it's important to us that the facilities stay very usable, very safe. So we'll take on a small project such as fixing a table here or a grill there that maybe after the last cookout has rusted through the bottom.

The last thing we do that I think is beneficial is if the city is exploring a larger project. A good example of that is the current expansion of Logan Farm Park where they're redoing the area down there, putting in a parking lot and making it a more open space with a walking trail. That's also the Corps of Engineers property along Tanyard Creek. We put forth some of our budget to help with the feasibility study and the design for those projects before they actually got funded. Then the city used [\$3.2 million from the Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) approved by Cobb County voters in November 2014] to fund the expansion. So we've become the catalyst that can help from time to time on different larger projects. With that small budget we really can't do a project, but we can certainly get it started with maybe a feasibility study or some sample architectural drawings and those kinds of things.

TS: About how many visitors per year take advantage of the lake?

SP: Of the parts that are under our purview, the city will tell you they count probably 150,000 to 200,000 cars.

TS: Wow.

SP: Yes, as a matter of fact, this Memorial Day weekend I know at some point on Sunday for sure and maybe the other days they reached full parking capacity for Cauble Park, which is Acworth Beach, and Dallas Landing, and Proctor Landing were all full. South Shore Beach is not regulated; there's no attendant, and they don't collect parking fees. There's no attendant or anybody except for to come through to pick up the garbage. The police ride through to be sure things are okay. So we don't really have any measures over there. But in the three main ones at one point they were closed because of maximum capacity.

TS: We've made several references to Cauble Park. I assume that it's named for Dr. Cauble, but it could be his family. I don't know. Has it always been called Cauble Park?

SP: Yes, it has been called Cauble Park as long as I've been around. I didn't know Dr. Cauble or his wife, but, yes, as long as I can remember that has been named after Dr. Cauble who lived in that area and was obviously a prominent physician in the city of Acworth. Just an add on to that, there are two foot bridges, one on the northern end of the lake and then one on the southern end of Cauble Park, which is about the midpoint of the lake, close to the gravel parking lot and boat launching ramp. The second bridge I mentioned on the south side actually was dedicated and named after Dr. Cauble's wife, and there is a plaque there commemorating her. That was dedicated about five or six years ago, so they actually have something dedicated to her there as well.

TS: What are you proudest of from your service on the Authority?

SP: That is a good question. It would have to be the reopening of the lake, once we got the right people involved in the community and reopened Acworth Beach for public use. The ability from a health perspective to get the clearing for people to want to go again back into the water and swim safely in the water would be number one. The second one

would be the Acworth Sports Complex. The reason I say that is so important is because while I was the co-chair of the Acworth Lake Authority, the Acworth Football Association came to us looking to expand their practice field and facilities, which were in the floodplain along Proctor Creek. They had asked if they could expand. I went over and walked the property—I had never really done that—and realized how much land was on the other side of the creek. We were talking about maybe expanding on the other side of that. I was actually coaching baseball in the Acworth Baseball Association at the time. My son was playing. I had the idea that, “You’ve got all this property here. It’s already flat and level. Only a small portion is in the floodplain. Why don’t we expand football on one side? We’ve got a whole area for baseball and for more recreation on this other side.” I guess one of the things I’m very proud of is being part of the genesis of the Acworth Sports Complex and realizing that we had a resource there to make that a reality.

Then if I can rank them, the third would probably be the refurbishment of the beach house and the concession stand and bathrooms. They call them the bath houses at Cauble Park. I don’t know if you’re aware, but back when it was built in the 1950s they had the concession stand and the picnic tables and the bathrooms and the showers and all that. Well, that all had been closed down, and they were using it for storage and a few things for the summer camps for probably twenty years. About three or four years ago, we made a conscious decision, now that the beach was so successful for the community, to put a new deck on the beach house. That’s where you and I met the last time, if you recall. So in the beach house we redid the floors, redid the windows, and made that a more desirable place and built a deck on the back of it. Then phase two of that was that we then went in, redid the showers, redid the bathrooms, and cleaned all that up. So now the bath house as it’s called, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, is now operable and used on a daily basis for the summer camps and for the visitors to the beach. So those would easily be my top three.

- TS: That’s quite a list of accomplishments. Let me just ask you, when I met with the lake authority a few weeks ago, either you or someone else was telling me about future plans that had to do with Highway 92 where it crosses over the little dam. Can you tell me anything about what the plans are for that area?
- SP: Absolutely. That would also be in the top five of accomplishments, maybe ranking right up there at second behind getting the lake opened up again. It was something that has been a passion of mine that we’ve been working on for quite some time. One big desire that we’ve always had for the community is for Acworth to be a walkable community, even to a certain degree for bikes and walking and running and that. So one thing we really wanted to do was to make use of this great resource and build a multi-use path completely around Lake Acworth. In some instances just because of residential properties and other obstacles—a golf course for example—you can’t really be on the edge of the lake all the time. But it would be nice if you knew that you could circumnavigate the lake, so maybe part of it might be the sidewalks at Main Street or through the neighborhoods up around Main Street and then down Nance Road and back there. But the idea was to have a multi-use path or access path all the way around the

circumference of the lake. We've been working on that from all angles, master planning and different things, and we've been working on that ever since I've been on the board and we got the lake opened up. We now are in a position to say that we have a path around the lake all the way up to where Nance Road intersects Acworth Due West Road.

We don't have a good clear path, only the road, all the way to where Highway 92 meets Main Street. So we're about 75 percent there. The reason this last 25 percent hasn't been feasible, and we haven't really focused our energies on sidewalks on Ragsdale Road and sidewalks on Acworth Due West Road, is because we knew there was a pending upgrade/expansion, and widening of Highway 92. Highway 92 would be the last piece of making that total circumference connection. In 2011 they started seriously looking at what they're going to do with Highway 92. Because of the congestion right now it is a traffic nightmare all during the week from 5:00 o'clock until probably 7:00 o'clock because all the traffic that comes off I-75 that needs to get to southern Bartow and East Paulding and West Cobb has to come that way. That's the only exit that gets them that way. You can get off two exits from I-75, but they're going to funnel you into that Highway 92. So it was very important to get that done. Now they have master-planned it, and they are proceeding with the four-laning of Highway 92, which will require expansion or construction of a new bridge, because now there is only a two-lane bridge that goes over what they call the spillway or the little dam.

The dam keeps Acworth Lake from draining into Lake Allatoona proper. They're looking to have the funding completed by 2018, which doesn't necessarily mean construction will start, but that at least gives a good idea of some timing. They're doing right-of-way acquisition currently. That's a state highway, so you can go into the website for Georgia DOT to see the master plans of how it's going to look. No one wants to touch the current bridge at Highway 92 because everybody's concerned with breaching that dam. No construction company and no one else wants to be responsible for breaching that dam and having to repair it, which would cost millions and millions of dollars. Nobody wants to see Lake Acworth become a mud flat that would have to be repaired. Since they are going to have to build part of a new bridge anyway, the state has decided to abandon the old bridge and construct a completely brand new bridge just to the northwest, if you will, just parallel to that bridge. As part of the plan, they're going to turn over the current bridge to the city of Acworth and the Parks and Recreation because there's already a park there, Overlook Park. So they're going to turn it over for our use as we see fit, which would probably be for pedestrian purposes.

So we're going to use that, and Dr. Scott, that ties it all together. Once we have a way to cross the lake at that point, then it makes sense for the sidewalks, because Highway 92 will be side-walked all the way up to Main Street and even at Acworth United Methodist Church [4340 Collins Circle off Highway 92] before that. It connects into a trail that goes over to Cauble Park. Then from there Highway 92 will go up to Ragsdale Road. Of course, Ragsdale Road is in the county, not the city, but we can work with our great relationship with the county commissioners to be sure we get sidewalks on Ragsdale Road and then Acworth Due West up to Nance, and at that point will have a full circumference around the lake.

TS: Cobb County is already doing a fabulous job of building a network of running trails, and it sounds like this would just be another great piece of that whole system that we've got in Cobb County nowadays.

SP: Absolutely.

TS: Also, maybe it will give people a chance to be more aware of the dam because that dam is sixty-six years old and historic now. I'm out of questions. Is there anything else that you want to add about the Lake Acworth Authority and your service on it?

SP: Not that I can think of. If I do I will certainly follow back up with you. I would like to say thank you for taking on these projects because I do feel that it's critically important to get the different viewpoints of the history of the lake and the beach house and of course the Lake Authority and the City of Acworth. This is just one great way to capture that information. So I certainly want to say thank you to you for all your time and effort with this.

TS: Well, thank you for all that you are doing.

SP: Thanks, Dr. Scott.

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