

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH TRENTON D. TURK

CONDUCTED, EDITED AND INDEXED BY THOMAS A. SCOTT

for the

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TS: Why don't we start talking about your childhood in Georgia? I assume you were born about the 1960s. I know you've talked before about your father being in the forestry service, so maybe talk about your family and growing up in central and south Georgia.

TT: Sure. I was born in Hawkinsville, Georgia, a little small town down in Pulaski County. My father was in the [Georgia] Forestry Commission. He was a University of Georgia graduate in forestry and went to work for them straight out of college. We moved around the state from there. His home was near Hawkinsville when I was born, but upon graduation, we moved around the state as he progressed through the Forestry Commission ranks, ultimately landing in Sandersville, Georgia, where he was a district forester. I believe that was his title. I attended school there—a school called Brentwood—and had thirty-eight people in my graduating class, a very small school. I guess the most important thing I got out of my dad was my work ethic and getting up early every day and hitting it and finding projects and doing something every single day.

My childhood was wonderful in that regard. I grew up in the country. I grew up where we didn't even have streetlights. We didn't even have a paved driveway. We had a dirt driveway. I couldn't play basketball because I didn't have any way to dribble a ball. I couldn't skate because I didn't have anything hard to skate on. I didn't swim unless it was in a creek. So, that's the childhood that I wouldn't take anything for though. I gained my freedom as a child when I earned enough money cutting grass to buy a motorcycle. The only rule they gave me was to be home by sundown, and I could not drive on paved roads. I could cross them, but I couldn't drive on them. My neighbor and I both had the same rules, and we explored the entire county on our motorcycles at age 12 and 13 years old.

TS: You must have picked up a lot of dirt.

TT: Really adventurous. But early on, as I progressed through school, my dad would always put some type of project in front of me and empower me to do it with a flare of making some money with it. On a Saturday we'd go to the junkyard and grab an old lawnmower. He'd teach me how to rebuild the engine, and we would put it outside the road for sale. I began to understand that I could do things like that and pick up my spending money, and it grew. As I got bigger and older, and I was physically able to do things, he bought a riding lawnmower and pointed me around the neighborhood and said, "Start cutting grass." So, before I was 10 years old, I had three or four yards I was cutting.

We lived on a farm, even though it was not a working farm. We farmed as my daddy's side-hustle. I began to do more. I had to start washing cars, so, I had four or five people. I washed their cars on Saturday—different people I knew that would bring their cars, and I would wash them for them. So, things like that I did all through my childhood. I planted soybeans in a twenty-acre field and kept them up and harvested them. I had 4-H steers, so I raised steers and sold them after one year. I put them in the steer show for 4- H and then had an auction and sold them. So, by the time my sixteenth birthday rolled around, I was ready to pay cash for a car.

TS: There's a story about that, I know.

TT: Oh, yes. But Daddy didn't let me spend that money on the car. He let me keep it in the bank and made me get a loan for the car, so I'd have payments to teach me how to borrow and pay back money. He co-signed with me at the local bank to buy a car \$5,000, and I had a balloon payment due September of each year for three years to get it paid for. So, I had to earn that money through the summer to make that payment. But that taught me the value of borrowing money and keeping your money and what you could do with your money if you didn't have to spend it all. Lessons like that were taught to me all through my childhood. I was very, very involved in church there every time the doors were open, and that taught me a lot as well. I have a sister. We were very close to each other and had a fun relationship and some funny stories I could tell, but probably don't want them recorded.

TS: Okay.

TT: She wouldn't want me to record them. Then my mother, God bless her—she loved me all the way through my childhood. She's still alive this day. Both Mom and Dad are still alive. They have their challenges in their mid 80s, certainly. But as I look back on my childhood, it was a very, very good childhood. I was very fortunate to have grown up where I did without the temptations of an urban area. And I learned a lot of things that I was able to leverage and bring to an urban area and stand out among those that didn't necessarily learn what I did. As far as moving on into college, there was never a question as to whether I would go or not. It was never even considered that I might not go to college.

TS: What year did you graduate from high school?

TT: In 1979.

TS: So, you were born about 1961?

TT: That's right.

- TS: I think you were planning on going to ABAC to begin with, weren't you? Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College [Tifton, Georgia]?
- TT: Yes. Like I said, my dad taught me things to do around the farm, and I really thought maybe farming is actually what I want to do. So, I enrolled in ABAC out of high school. I enrolled at ABAC, was accepted, signed up, and already had my housing lined up and everything. I was wrapping up my senior year when I got a job with a company across the road from the grocery store where I was working, called Barker and Associates [Land Surveyors Inc.] I saw these guys leaving every day in their Chevrolet Blazers, going out on some adventure. They'd come back at the end of the day. The car would be all muddy, and they'd have mud up to their knees. And I thought, "It really sounds like fun! What do they do?" Here I am working in the grocery store, taking old ladies' groceries out and putting them in their trunk and coming back all day long, and it's pretty boring. So, one day at lunch, I just walked over there. I knew Mr. Barker, the man that owned the company, and I just asked him what it was about. He said, "I need help. Would you come to work for me?" I said, "Well, I only have the summer, and then I'm going to ABAC." And he's like, "Well, why are you going to ABAC?" And that was the beginning of me finding a different passion than farming. He gave me a job, gave me a raise. I started out making five bucks an hour instead of \$3.35 an hour.
- TS: That's what you made at the grocery store?
- TT: Yes. So, I got a raise to go across the street.
- TS: Isn't there a story about the first day on the job?
- TT: That's right. The very first day, and I think you've heard this in my chat that I did for the development team [at Kennesaw State University].
- TS: Yes.
- TT: The very first day they put me up in the back of one of those Blazers, and the guy running the crew—I still know him to this day, great guy. That's been a long time ago now. What is that? That's 40 something years ago [44 years ago]. So, he said, "I heard you're going to college." And I said, "Yes, sir, I am." "What are you going to do? You're going to go off and get a fancy degree and start up some big company one day. That's what you think, right?" Just like that. So, it kind of ticked me off that he said that, but it also put a burn in me that I was going to prove to him that I could. To this day, I'll still see him once a year at a conference that we have, and he'll come up and shake his hand and say, "I'm glad I challenged you that day." And I just say, "I'll never forget that. I'll just never forget it." And that very same day, we went straight to the swamp, and I stepped off in the swamp, waded in water up to my belt all day long.
- TS: You were surveying the swamp?

TT: Oh, yes. And he said, “You won’t last a week.” That also served as a challenge to test me and see if I would. I made it through the summer, and it really challenged me. I just kept telling myself there’s more to surveying than just swamps. And there was. There’s a lot more to it than that. And I’m glad I stuck with it, but he was responsible for challenging me.

TS: Now, what were you doing in the swamp? You didn’t know anything about surveying at that time.

TT: Well, we were working for kaolin companies.

TS: Oh, yes, sure, the big industry down in Washington County.

TT: That’s right. They have made leases all over the place down there where they have the rights to go in and explore for kaolin by drilling. They drill down in the ground to look for kaolin, and they try to do it on a 400-foot grid. Well, in the middle of a swamp, how do you know where you are to drill? And so, we were responsible for putting the stakes on the 400-foot grid for them to go in there with machinery and drill their holes. We were the tip of the spear or the leading edge of getting in there and putting the stake in for them to do that.

TS: So, they had you out in front killing snakes for them?

TT: Well, it was a three-person team, one in the back, one in the middle, and one at the front. Typically, they don’t put the new guy at the front. And I’m glad they didn’t because that’s the guy that killed the snakes before we would get up there.

TS: Oh. So, you were in the back?

TT: I was in the back at first, but it didn’t take long to make my way up to the front. The guy in the front is the one scouting the way, and I didn’t have a clue. We didn’t have an iPhone to help me then. So, I was just bringing up the rear. We had a brand new electronic distance meter that would magically shoot a distance. Now, that was right at the beginning of my career when they came out with them, and they had just bought one and paid something like thirty grand for it, and they made it my job to keep it dry. My instructions were, “You are to keep this dry. If you drown, we can replace you tomorrow morning.” I took that very seriously, so, I had to keep it dry.

TS: Wow. So, you must have liked it and stayed more than a week.

TT: I liked it. And we did other things besides the swamp work. I began to understand it involves history. It involves connections with people. And it involves a search. It involves finding property corners that may not have been found in one hundred years. In particular, yet another swamp experience, but in this case, we were doing a boundary survey that had a corner way back in the

swamp. I watched as this guy running the crew using a Hewlett Packard calculator and some measurements we took out at the front. He calculated the position a mile away, and he said, “All right, let’s go looking for it.” So, we worked with our equipment back there, and in underwater we staked out where this monument was supposed to be, and we found it through the calculations. There’s no way we could have found it without doing that. And that put a bug in me that I enjoy this. I enjoy it. And even though I’m retired, I still do it. I still go out and do a lot of surveys for people.

TS: So, you’re not going to ABAC. How do you get to Middle Georgia College?

TT: So, I began to explore, “All right, where do I get an education in this instead of farming?” Middle Georgia College had a program of Civil Engineering Technology that also had surveying embedded in it as an associate degree. Several of my friends had already enrolled at Middle Georgia College with different majors than I graduated with. And so I phone-called to them, “Hey, you’re going to Middle Georgia?” “Yes, come on.” So, I canceled ABAC, got in at Middle Georgia, and actually roomed with my friends at Middle Georgia while I enrolled in the Civil Engineering Technology program. And very quickly off the bat, as soon as I could get in it, I took drafting because drafting was my ticket to get out of the swamp. Because once I went back to where I worked at home and told them, “Hey, I can draw,” they immediately parked me behind the drafting table because they needed somebody to draw. So, that grew into me actually drafting in my dorm room for them at night and shipping a tube back and forth to them. That was the beginning of me working and surveying helping me go through college.

TS: I was not aware that Middle Georgia College had an engineering program.

TT: Yes, they sure did—engineering technology associate [degree]. Two or three of my friends actually ended up coming up here. That was their gateway to [Georgia] Tech was to take the core curriculum there at Middle Georgia and transferring into Tech or Southern Poly.

TS: It was just the one campus in Cochran at that time?

TT: It was.

TS: And then about the same time that Kennesaw and Southern Polytechnic started their consolidation [2013], Middle Georgia merges with Macon State [2012] and becomes Middle Georgia State College [and then in 2015 Middle Georgia State University].

TT: That’s right. So, both of my alma maters now have been absconded with.

TS: Okay. We’ll get into that “absconded with” as we go along with the interview, I guess.

TT: These hostile takeovers.

TS: Hostile takeovers?

TT: Yes. I coined that, by the way. When you hear people around here say it, that was me. I was on record.

TS: But you said it with a smile.

TT: Oh, you'll find out.

TS: Okay. Well, I know they've got campuses all over creation in middle Georgia today, I think, [Cochran, Macon, Dublin, Warner Robins, and Eastman].

TT: That's right.

TS: Louis [Cleveland] Alderman [Jr.] was a long time president at Middle Georgia College [1964-1987].

TT: Yes, that's right. His son Jonathan was in many of my classes and a good friend.

TS: When you were there, it was a two-year school, wasn't it?

TT: Two years, and I actually did it in two years.

TS: So, this would be 1979 to 1981 we're talking about.

TT: That's correct.

TS: And then how did you get to Southern Tech?

TT: Well, the only progression available to me if I wanted a degree closely related and in land surveying would be Southern Poly. No other college in the state offered it. What I was looking for would be to have a degree as close as I could get to in land surveying. So, I enrolled Southern Poly and transferred all my credits except for my D in calculus I had down there. They wouldn't take it.

TS: How much calculus do you use in your job?

TT: None. It's just a gateway. But anyway, that's how I ended up at Southern Poly. And actually two of my friends from Middle Georgia that were going to Tech, we all came up together and got a four-bedroom apartment in Smyrna. Three of them were going to Georgia Tech, and I was going to Southern Poly.

TS: I see. So, you didn't want to live on campus.

TT: I was just looking for a cheap, inexpensive place.

TS: Sounds like you probably had a better place than the dorms.

TT: I definitely did, right.

TS: I'm maybe missing something, but I've got you graduating in 1986. That's five years from the time you got there with an associate degree.

TT: That's right. I immediately moved up here and began working. I had sent my resume to multiple land-surveying firms up here prior to coming.

TS: So, you were going part-time then?

TT: I tried carrying a full load and working the first couple of quarters, and it was just too much. I didn't necessarily have to do it. My parents were paying for my college except for my spending money and keeping up with my car, but I did. I don't know why, but I did. I worked. I loved surveying, so I looked forward to the work component of it and just was doing the school because I knew I had to.

TS: Well, again, with your upbringing, I would have been surprised if you hadn't been working.

TT: It was very challenging, though, to pass the coursework and work at the same time. I was averaging twenty-five to thirty hours a week plus taking usually anywhere from ten to fifteen quarter hours.

TS: So, you were like all those non-traditional students.

TT: I'm very non-traditional.

TS: I know we had a lot of them at Kennesaw. Was it more a traditional-aged campus at Southern Poly or did you have a lot of the non-traditional?

TT: Most of them were all my age or very close, maybe a little bit older, but they worked.

TS: Everybody worked?

TT: They worked, yes. Everybody seemed to have a job. Very few people actually were just living the college life on campus, including me. I didn't really get to live the college life on campus my entire time at Southern Poly. It was just my choice. I went to a bathtub races, and I'd go to some things on campus, but I didn't live in the middle of it like a lot of folks I know do.

TS: Did you make any of the bathtubs to race?

TT: I did not. Daryle Higginbotham [Mechanical Engineering Technology student at Southern Polytechnic and longtime Chief Operating Officer of Marietta Nondestructive Testing] was very involved. But I watched them. I went and watched. My second choice for a major would've been mechanical if I had not fulfilled my civil degree.

TS: Well, tell me about Hap Holladay and some of the faculty members that you had and how they helped you out.

TT: The names coming to mind are Hap Holladay, Al Troemel, and Jacque Williams. I don't know if you remember Jacque. We always called him Jacque. All three of them, and I could think of two or three more, but they were the primary influencers as professors for the land surveying side of my education. And I just loved them. They had a passion for making sure we succeed. They just wanted us to succeed, and they made a close personal connection with every student and burned certain things in our brains that are still there today. You know, neatness and lettering. I always would lose five points from Hap Holladay. You could put minus five N and L on my [work]. They'd be perfect, except it just was not quite perfect enough for the lettering. But him doing that made me strive to try to not get that deduction, and it ended up giving me a nice handwriting, I believe, at the end of the day. A lot of things they burned in my brain aren't necessary today. They're not needed given technology and all the advancements. But I'm glad they were put in my head for sure. Al Troemel—I was probably the closest to Al of all of them for the very same reasons I just described. It is not so much the content they taught me, but the demeanor with which it was delivered and me learning to be a better person through these guys. That's what I really remember. I still use to this day some things I did learn for sure, too.

TS: So, how did you get through calculus?

TT: I brought my D out of Middle Georgia up here somewhat. Day one, I signed up for calculus again here. Made another D right off the bat. And I said, "I've got to do something different." Some of my buddies had taken the course and also gotten a D. We were having surveying together. I mean, we had several people got Ds in it, and we all decided to sign right back up for the same teacher. We all created a study group together. And that's what pulled me through was a collective study group. And you might could say that we taught ourselves the test. We knew what was going to be on the test, and we learned exactly, and it was very close. It might have been a little bit different test. And that's how I finally got through Calculus I. But then I got my legs under me in Calculus II. I signed right up for it and made a C in that. I consider that an A. In golf you have a par, you have a handicap, and if I get a double bogey, I feel like that's a par for me in golf. Well, I got a double bogey in Calculus II, but it was a par for me.

TS: So, you made it?

TT: I made it through it. That's right.

- TS: That's great. [Stephen R.] Steve Cheshier was president by that time [1980-1997]. Southern Tech became independent from Georgia Tech [in 1980] long before you got there.
- TT: Actually, having read the Green Book, I was one of the first students to come in under...
- TS: Oh, that's right in 1981 you would have been.
- TT: I did not even know that until I read the Green Book. Professor Bennett, I believe wrote that book.
- TS: Yes, Richard Bennett [Richard A. Bennett, *Southern Polytechnic State University: The History* (1998)].
- TT: And I began to understand, wow, I came into Southern Poly right as it gained its independence from Georgia Tech. I did not realize that during the time. When you're a student, most of the time as students you don't know who the president is. You don't know anything other than you're trying to get a degree.
- TS: Yes, right, sure.
- TT: You're very self-focused. I've learned a lot getting older and looking back that I didn't even know.
- TS: No encounters with [Vice President of Academic Affairs] Harris [T.] Travis?
- TT: That's right. I didn't end up in the principal's office in any way.
- TS: Okay. So, you work and you get through in 1986, and you were working hard, so you're not doing a whole lot of extracurricular activities.
- TT: Right.
- TS: But I wanted to ask you; I know that Southern Tech always had a fabulous record of placing its graduates. So, after you graduated, how many job offers did you get?
- TT: Only once have I really shopped for a job. I've always been where I needed to be and have a job. So, where I was working, I just went from part-time to full-time and kept doing it. But as I got to know more about the profession, I began to understand that where I'm working now is not going to afford opportunities I'm looking for. I had been exposed to every facet of land surveying and touched up almost every part of it. I did not have my license yet as a licensed land surveyor. That came around 1989, I think.

- TS: Okay, so about three years later?
- TT: Yes. Four years after I graduated, I guess. But anyway, I did through a contact of a large national firm that needed help. I made a phone call or two and ended up parlaying myself into being an office manager at age 27 of a land-surveying group at Hensley-Schmidt [Inc.]
- TS: Oh, really, in Marietta?
- TT: In Marietta, right; a fellow named Tommy Coleman was actually the manager of the entire department, and I was put in over the office group, and had a couple of drafts people and processing data that crews were generating under the leadership of another fellow Jesse Price. Well, it was like throwing myself out the end of the dock and not really knowing how to swim, but I learned. I had faith that I could learn and I did. And that was really the beginning of me actually leading some others doing the land surveying.
- TS: One of the first interviews I did was with Sam [P.] Hensley's father-in-law, Shuler Antley.
- TT: Wow. Hensley-Schmidt goes way back in the community. I guess now they're part of, they became Piedmont Olsen Hensley [Inc.], and now they're part of Arcadis, so big, big worldwide firm.
- TS: How long did you work for them?
- TT: I worked with them for three years, I would say. While I was working there one of my coworkers from my previous employer that I had left called me and said, "Hey, Trent, one of our clients has asked me to start a business for them in land surveying." That was intriguing to me. I lived in Woodstock, and they were going to put their office right in Woodstock. I knew this client who was a developer, and I thought, "Well, okay." The guy he'd approached was kind of a drafter, but not even really a surveyor. He'd never even been in the field, and he was more of a business kind of guy. I guess this client saw in him a business head, and he said, "I want you to come over and start up a surveying group." At this time, I had gotten my license, so I was a registered surveyor, and I would've been 28 years old. It was right about that time. I slept on it, thought about it, talked to my wife, and, "Okay, I'm going to make the leap." So, I left and did it. And they literally just gave me a blank check and said, "Buy the equipment you need for two crews, and you've got to hire the people." So, it is almost like I was starting a business for someone else within.

I was finding out how to do this, and at that time, nobody was using data collectors on their instruments. They were running an instrument, and they'd have a field book, and they would write the information down from the instrument, and what was written down was carried back to the office and entered into a computer to calculate the data, the coordinates. So, it was a very

cumbersome, hard process, and I actually became a very fast number typist through doing that over the years and years and years and years.

I was interested in this new data collector. So, I called a local shop here in Marietta, Optical Engineering [Company Inc.]. P. V. Rice was his name, and I said, “P.V., I understand that Sokkia (Leitz) at that time, has something called a data collector that will actually collect these angles.” “Yes, just come by the office. I’ll show it to you.” And they had one. And so P. V. said, “Trent, if you’ll just take it and learn to use it, we’ll figure out how to pay for it. I just need somebody that knows how to run it. Nobody here knows how to use it. We’ve got it in the shop. Leads hasn’t provided us any training. If you’ll just take it, here, we’ll load it in your truck.” “Okay.” So, they put it in my brand new company truck I got, and I went home with that thing, set it up in the backyard there in Woodstock, and just started messing around with it.

I connected it. The instrument was electronic, which was weird. It displayed the angle instead of us reading. This is so weird. And I pushed a button, and that data appeared on this controller, and I hit another button, and it calculated coordinates, and that’s when the lights went off: “This is going to be something else.” And so we bought it and learned to use it. I actually ran the crew for a year and a half, running it as part of my getting things going, and so, I can take credit for being one of the first ones in the state to actually take a data collector and actually use it. And now our equipment is robotic and the controller, we call it, is actually at the pole connected to the instrument with a radio, so doing all this math right there at the pole. So, it’s been fun to watch it all transpire.

TS: Yes, for sure. Where in Woodstock were you?

TT: Just right near downtown. Just north of downtown. I bought my first house there.

TS: It’s about ten years after you graduated before you start your own company, about 1996.

TT: That’s exactly right.

TS: Why don’t you talk about how that came about?

TT: Okay. I knew through working for the company I worked for in college and then subsequently working for Hensley-Schmidt that I really wanted to have my own company. I disagreed with the way some things were done, not just in the surveying realm but in the business realm. I just disagreed with things, and I always had this thing, “If I ever run a company, I won’t do it that way.” I mean, I just said that to myself every day just about. So, a good friend of mine, Robert Armstrong—Robert and I are wonderful friends to this day. He now works for the National Park Service [assisting with protecting park property lines]. Robert had a surveying company in Douglasville, and we would talk every morning. We both got up very early, and we would shoot the bull every morning about 6:30 on

the phone about whatever surveying, the state surveyors society [Surveying and Mapping Society of Georgia]. He got me involved in that. We were just good friends, and he kept mumbling about that he really needed someone to come into his shop and help him. I need to back up a minute. The company that I helped found or that I helped get the survey started lasted five years, and the kid that they had hired to run it didn't work out. They ended up closing the company and leaving me without a job.

TS: What was the name of the company?

TT: North Georgia Engineering. So, that set me up in a tough spot, but I found a job over the weekend for an engineering firm called Hartrampf Engineering in Sandy Springs. While working there, I kept talking to Robert, and my stint there lasted three years. I may have all my dates messed up, but I was there two or three years. Wonderful engagement, wonderful experience! I basically ran their survey department. But I had an opportunity. They had actually contracts all over the place with [the U.S. Army] Corps of Engineers. I got to experience the country of Panama, spent multiple months in Panama working on the Panama Canal and on Howard Air Force Base [in Panama] building a road around the base and just a wonderful experience. Now, I had such a great engagement while I was with Hartrampf, but I was not fulfilling my desire. I had Robert in my ear, telling me he needed this. So, verbally, Robert and I agreed, "If you'll come over here, we'll make you part owner in this company."

Well, while at Hensley-Schmidt and my prior engagement at North Georgia Engineering, I had developed a small client following. I had three or four developer clients that liked my work and said, "We'll go with you. Wherever you go, we want you to do our work." So, I told Robert, "I've got some clients coming with me, and I'm going to need some staff. But straight up, these are my clients, not yours, unless you make me an owner." I was protecting what I had built, right?

TS: Sure.

TT: And he said, "Oh yes, we'll do that. We'll do that." So, we rocked along for about three years. At this point, I'm about 34 or 35 years old. I'd been through a rocky divorce when I was 31 years old, and I'd been through a very low point in my life during that time, and Robert helped me through it. But what never came to fruition was my ownership.

TS: So, he owned the company?

TT: He and his wife owned the company. I didn't know that she was actually the one that was making the decisions, not Robert. And I didn't know what I was going to do. Here I'm 34. I'm not realizing my dream to own my own company. I've built this little operation that's now bigger than Robert's operation within Robert's company. And then my biggest client came to me and said, "We've just

landed the contract to build about fifteen Walmarts across the Southeast. We need you to get licensed in all the adjoining states, and we want you to do all the work.”

TS: Like surveying before the store is built?

TT: Right. So, each one of those represents a significant amount of revenue for a surveyor. And I’m like, “Well, I can’t do that. I don’t have a staff. I’ve got to get licensed. That would take me a while alone. I just don’t see how that could happen.” And they said, “Figure it out. You need to figure it out. We want you to do it.” So, I went home thinking about it and spewing about it. This time I was single and eating pork and beans. I mean, literally, my paycheck I was left with after paying child support for my son, was about \$50 every two weeks to get by on, literally. So, I was painfully low money and getting defeated, and these guys are coming at me like this. I went to Robert, and I said, “Robert, man, y’all have got to do it. You’ve got to make me part owner, and you’ve got to get on board with me to grow this. We’ve got a chance here to make a lot of money.”

At that point he said, “Well, I’ll talk to Dorothy.” And Robert doesn’t mind me sharing this if he ever watched it or I would not be doing it. He knows this is the story; it’s factual. After three or four days of no communication from him, I said, “What’s the answer, Robert?” He said, “Well, Trent, I guess it’s a no. Dorothy says she cannot go below half ownership, and I certainly can’t go below half ownership. It would have to come out of her stock or we just can’t do it.” And I was so defeated. I drove all the way home—thirty minute ride—with tears in my eyes, and I’m just never going to be able to do this. This is never going to happen.

The next morning I called my client and told him, “Look, I can’t do it. Here’s the plan. I’ll do the ones in Georgia. I’ll get staffed up for that, but I’ll coordinate getting other surveyors to do them in other states.” And he just went right back at me, “Well, that’s just complete bull. You need to meet me and my compatriots.” I won’t say their names. “Meet us at the Marietta Country Club Sunday afternoon at four o’clock.” I thought, “Okay, where’s that?” I mean, I lived very close to it and didn’t even know it, right? So, Sunday afternoon, four o’clock I told my wife, I said, “Well, I guess I’ll go to the country club.” In my tennis shoes and blue jeans I came walking.

TS: You told your wife?

TT: Yes. So, oh, well, I did get married. Oh, wait a minute. At that time she was my fiancée. Actually, she was not quite my fiancée. She was my really serious girlfriend.

TS: Yes, really good friend.

TT: You're keeping me straight, and I appreciate it. That's right. She was my very serious girlfriend. So, I told my very serious girlfriend, "Well, I'm off to the country club." So, off we go, and I come walking up in my t-shirt, blue jeans and tennis shoes. And we're sitting at a wrought iron table overlooking the tenth fairway, which I could take you to the very table to this day because I'm a member of the club now, right? But we sat there, and they said, "Trent, what would it take for you to be in business? You need your own company." And coincidentally, I had taken a course at Kennesaw State University continuing education in how to start a small business, just the other side of the interstate [I-75] at KSU Center. And my still my accountant to this day taught that course. That's where I met him, Kendyl Strickland.

So, I asked Kendyl, "Would you like to have a cup of coffee? I want to talk with you about something." He said, "Sure." So, we sat and talked, and I showed him my revenue. I had invoices for all that. I said, "These are all my clients. This is all my revenue that I've generated for this company, and they won't make me an owner." And he very quickly said, "Why would you want to be an owner in that company? You've got enough to have your own company." And the light bulb went off. But I had in mind there's no way I could do it. And then all this other, it all came together in a head like that. So, we're sitting at the table. I had just been through all this course. I had developed a pro forma and figured out I needed 100 grand. With 100 grand, I could start a company and not have to borrow any more money before I hit bottom, and I could come out the other end of it.

So, these guys asked me that question, "How much do you need?" And I went, "\$100,000." And they said, "You don't need to give any more thought than that. Like that?" And I said, "Trust me, I've given it tons of thought, and I can show you my business pro forma. Are you saying that you'd be willing to loan me that money?" And they said, "Well, we'll loan you that money, but we're also going to be half owner of your company." And I thought, "Well, I've got to think about this because having a client be half owner of my company was pretty weird." But what would you do? I didn't have any other choices. I told them, "Yes." I took the 100 grand. We went to the attorneys, drew partnership papers. They claimed half ownership of the company and had half ownership, 25 [percent] each. And they were my number one client and started feeding me more work. I had work coming in like a fire hose. I was standing out on [US] 41, grabbing people out of cars, trying to hire them. I needed work so bad, I mean, I needed help. And it was tough times, November of '96. So, the first week I opened was the first week of November in 1996. And the very same week, I also proposed to my very serious girlfriend.

TS: So, this is LaSona?

TT: LaSona is her name. That's right. We subsequently got married the following year, June 14. No, June 21. Her birthday is 14th. June 21, 1997. That was a very busy time of life. But the pro forma proved to be correct. I had also taken

out every credit card that came in the mail. I signed up for them. So, I have a lot of high interest credit available to me. We started spending that 100 grand setting up an office, and I hit the ground. I had five people on payroll the very first day. People left from Robert's and came with me. I didn't court them. They just did because Robert didn't have the work for them. I did. So, they all came with me. Boom, I was in business, but now I've got to make a go of it. Within six weeks, I have to make payroll and don't have enough. So, I called my two co-owners who owed me \$50,000 at this point and hadn't paid me. I said, "All right, guys, we have two choices here. I need for y'all to round up your portion of the payroll for Friday, or do you need to pay me what you owe me?" They said, "Get in your truck, come to Buckhead, go to the front desk, and the checks will be laying on the counter."

TS: Wow.

TT: When I drove there, I got that money and made that deposit. That was twenty-seven years ago. The company has never gotten anywhere close to not making payroll ever again. So, it succeeded, and it turned out to be a really good thing.

TS: So, you've surveyed a lot of Walmarts then?

TT: My goodness, tons of them all over the place! We don't hardly do them anymore, but at the time, they were building like crazy. That led into doing Home Depots and Lowe's through engineers. The developer connected our company with engineering firms, and then the engineering firms had other clients besides that client. They also had Lowe's, Home Depots, Kohl's, and all these other companies, and they liked the work we did. So, they began to stipulate to the other companies, "You need to use this company to do the survey work." And so we ended up being commercial surveyors all over the place. I did get my license in other states. I've got my license in every state adjoining Georgia except Alabama, but my business partner ended up getting his there.

TS: Where did the name come from: GeoSurvey?

TT: Well, that's a good story. Imagine that. A good friend of mine named [M.] Greg Johnson, a Georgia Tech guy, also a civil engineer and a land surveyor, both, which is kind of rare—there are not many that do both, but he's registered as both. He worked way back at Barker and Associates. That's where I met Greg, and we became very close friends through the years. He ultimately went to Georgia Power and was head of their land department at Georgia Power. We still remain friends. During the time I'm getting really serious about starting up a company he and I were sitting at a Waffle House on Austell Road. I was trying to come up with some kind of name, and I said, "I want it to be something that does not include my name. I want it to be a generic name that describes what we do, but that every employee can take pride in that name. They don't feel like they're working for a person, but they're working for an entity. Way down the road, it'll be more marketable to others if my name is not hanging on the shingle." That

turned out to be tremendous forethought on my part that I didn't even realize I was having. He coincidentally had a small solo company that he did civil engineering on the side called GeoCivil. He had made that name up. So, I said, "We can apply that very same thing to the word survey, GeoSurvey." He said, "Yes, we could. One day, if we have our companies together, that would make sense." And that's where the name was conceived and how it came about. At that time, that would've been 1995, that's when everybody was registering domains for Internet. I immediately went to my office and went in to register.com and registered geosurvey.com. Greg had done the very same thing for geocivil.com, and I can't tell you how many companies and people have made a run at that name wanting it. Yes. Yes. Because the term geo became like there's geomatics, right? It became a very good term through the years, and here we are. We've got GeoSurvey. So, I don't know if I did it justice or not, but I'm glad I've got it.

TS: What about the Ltd. part instead of corporation?

TT: Well, it's an LLC. It is a Limited Liability Corporation. It's a partnership, and the papers just got drafted up with the Ltd after it versus LLC after it. I didn't know any better. At first, it probably should have been LLC, but everybody just became to accept Ltd. at the end, and we just left it so.

TS: By the way, I've never known anybody named Turk before. Where does that name come from?

TT: Well, I don't think it's Turkey.

TS: So, you don't know the...?

TT: I actually have a very thick book that one of my relatives wrote. Her husband was the editor of the Macon *Telegraph*. Watson was her name. I've read that book, and I've learned about my lineage, but it's been fifteen years ago, and I can't remember it all. But we have a lot of roots in Georgia, especially South Georgia. We have a lot of Turks down there.

TS: And Trenton—is that a family name?

TT: No, I think my mom found it on a milk carton.

TS: Okay. You're being facetious, right?

TT: I think so. I don't know.

TS: So, you've got a company underway, and who is Jamey [R.] Coleman? How does he fit into the company?

TT: Jamey—I rank him right there with one of my best friends even to this day. Jamey worked for me back at Armstrong Land Surveying. I hired him away from Gaskins [Surveying Co.]. You’ve heard of Johnny [C.] Gaskins probably here in town.¹ He [Coleman] came to work for me because I offered him a promotion to run a crew. He couldn’t find the opportunity to run a crew where he was, so he came to work for me at Robert’s. I was hiring a lot of people at Robert Armstrong’s office. And what a go-getter and hard worker! I’m not bragging, but he was so much like me. He was raised in a rural environment way up in Rabun County and had a very similar approach to work that I did. We got along so well, and as I progressed towards starting this business and fulfilled that story I just told, here’s Jamey over here working hard at Roberts. Out of professional courtesy and respect, I did not approach any of the employees I’d hired about what was about to happen. I just left them. I was hoping the phone would ring, and it did. The first call was Jamey, “Where’d you go? What the heck’s going on here? Robert’s back here handing us work to do. Something’s not right.” And I said, “Well, Jamey, I left, and I’ve started a new company called GeoSurvey.” He said, “Okay, where are you?” I said, “Marietta.” He said, “Well, I live in Marietta. Can I come to work for you?” And so he was employee number two.

TS: Okay.

TT: What’s your next question? Who was employee number one, right?

TS: You’re right.

TT: So, employee number one—my accountant gave me some of the best advice I ever got. He said, “Before you hire any employees, hire an office manager first. Trust me; that will be the very best thing you can do. You’re going to have fifteen employees before you know it. If you wait and hire that office manager after you’ve gotten in trouble, you’re going to regret it.” So, I took his advice, and coincidentally, Greg Johnson, who I just told you about, knew someone that had run offices. She had just gone through a divorce and was looking for something to do, and he put us together, and she was employee number one. I parked her behind the computer then. I said, “All right, this company’s going to be entirely digital. I do not want to work on paper. We’ve got to figure that out, but here’s my accountant’s name. Get on the phone, set up this corporation, set up payroll, and get ready. We’re about to start hiring people.” I turned her loose,

¹ According to a tribute posted by the Surveying and Mapping Society of Georgia (SAMSOG), Mr. Gaskins graduated from Southern Tech in 1975 with a degree in civil engineering technology. The following year he formed a partnership with Roy Hogan called Gaskins and Hogan, Inc. After Mr. Hogan moved to Nashville, Mr. Gaskins in 1981 became sole proprietor of Gaskins Surveying Company. Over the years he served as a trustee of the Southern Polytechnic State University Foundation, a district commissioner for the Soil Conservation Service, and a member and president of the Etowah chapter of SAMSOG. He died in 2011 at the age of 61.

- and she set it up. I mean, all I had to do was plug things in. and she was ready to take it.
- TS: And what's her name?
- TT: Her name was Janice. Janice Anderson was her name, and she stuck with us for six or seven years. Long time.
- TS: Well, you started in Marietta, I guess, but you moved to Barnes Mill Road in 2011, I think.
- TT: Yes, that was an interesting journey to get there.
- TS: How did that come?
- TT: Our first office was at 1710 Cumberland Point Drive. If you were to draw a straight line down the runway at Dobbins where it crosses [U.S.] 41, right there was where our office was.
- TS: Oh my goodness. You're in the crash zone.
- TT: Interestingly, at the same time we started Geo, we invaded Iraq. Guess what they were doing at that runway? Touch and goes. Practice. It was so bad! We would talk to our clients on the phone, and we were just trying to learn email at that time. It was all phone, phone all day long. Some days you would have that little thing that rests on your shoulder, and you'd sit there like that all day [Mr. Turk illustrates sitting with the phone resting on his shoulder]. I had neck cricks from holding the phone all day. They began to understand when they called us, there were going to be interruptions in our conversation. I'd say, "Hold on a minute. Okay, now what were you saying?" I had a joke that if we walked out in the parking lot, we could reach up and spin the wheels on the jets that were so close. It was so bad they were running articles in the *MDJ* apologizing to the community.
- TS: So, Barnes Mill Road, you didn't have that problem?
- TT: No. We left there out of growth. We grew out of that spot within three years. I mean, really growing. I came up to Sandy Plains Industrial Parkway just off of Sandy Plains Road at the Highway 5 connector. We landed there, got a bigger space, finished it out, moved in there, and we were in that space for about a year and a half or two years, and still grew out of that. We moved into the same office complex across the parking lot to a bigger space that had come vacant, and in that space we grew into probably forty people at that point. Then, really, we're doing well and decided, "Hey, we want to build a building." This is the path to get to Barnes Mill. That's why I'm telling you. So, we started looking around for dirt to build on—Jamey and I did. I need to tell you how he became my partner too. Separate story. But at this time, Jamey had become my partner. And so we

started saying, “We want to build a building.” We look for dirt. We end up buying the Furniture Craftsman building on White Circle. Do you know where that is?

TS: Yes, off the Four Lane [U.S. 41].

TT: Yes. So, we bought that thinking we’re going to build us an office right here— “Beautiful environment; this would work great.” Well, if you remember, that building was really ugly and nasty. We kept it a couple years and decided we’re not going to build here, but we couldn’t sell it. So, we tore down the building except for the metal warehouse part and got somebody to lease the metal warehouse part. Then we sold it back to them and made a little money on the sale. We were still looking, and Jim [J.] Hills comes along from ATS [Applied Technical Services]. Do you know Jim?

TS: No.

TT: Okay, there’s your next candidate for an interview. He’s a tremendous supporter of Kennesaw State and recently made a \$1 million donation.² So, you need to get to know Jim. Anyway, Jim’s company had grown out of their office space off Atlanta Industrial Parkway and Atlanta Industrial Drive [Marietta, GA 30066]. So, they moved out, and we bought that and moved there. This was around 2006. We spent a ton of money and finished out this place, just tremendous! We moved in there with forty-five employees, rocking and rolling. Fall of 2007, what happened?

TS: Recession.

TT: It hit, and it hit us like a tidal wave. The phone stopped ringing. I’m sitting around with forty employees, and the phone stopped ringing. We got down to we had three days worth of work backed up. That was all. We had ten field crews running, trucks everywhere. A lot of lost sleep! I just had to start laying people off en masse. I had one layoff where I just gathered them all in the conference room. I didn’t even do it individually. We had one-on-one layoffs with senior

² Hills graduated in 1977 from Southern Tech with a degree in mechanical engineering technology. During his student years he competed in Southern Tech’s legendary bathtub races in motorized tubs that he built. Along with his wife Wanda, he provided in 2021 a \$1 million gift to KSU’s Southern Polytechnic College of Engineering and Engineering Technology, the largest gift in that college’s history. Along with a 150 percent matching program established by Rosemary and John Brown and the KSU Foundation, the grant supports scholarships for engineering students, the needs of KSU competition teams, and the purchase of equipment by the various engineering labs. Hills is the president of Marietta-based Applied Technical Services, an engineering/testing firm started by his father, Jim F. Hills, and two partners, Ralph Johnson and Bill Lewis. ATS employs more than one hundred KSU alumni, coops, and working students.

level people, and over the course of 2008, we got down to eleven people, a core. We had just moved in this office building we just bought. We just all moved up in the front corner of it. The rest of it was just dark. And I'm sitting there bleeding a payment of \$18,000 a month on this. That's the net payment. The total payment was \$30 something a month, but it had a tenant in one of the buildings helping pay the payment. But still just bleeding money!

[T. Daniel] Dan Buyers is a local commercial real estate agent with McWhirter Realty. He and I were at Kiwanis. I go to Kiwanis every Thursday. He asked me, "How you doing?" And I said, "Man, it's rough. It's real rough." Like that. He said, "You still own that building over there, right?" And I said, "Yes, that's part of why it's so rough." He said, "Well, you want to sell it?" And I said, "I do, but I'm not going to take a haircut. I can't sell it in this environment." "Well, don't jump to conclusions because I represent the Cobb County-Marietta Water Authority, and they have been looking for two years and can't find anything." I said, "Okay."

He said, "I'm going to bring their executive director, Glenn Page, over after lunch. Are you going to be there?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Let's just walk through it." So, they came and walked through it, and Glenn came up to my office. Glenn said, "Trent, we want your place. We want to buy it." I said, "Well, I'm not selling it if I'm taking a loss." "What you got in it?" And I don't mind throwing the numbers out here. I said, "After improvements we're in at \$2.7 million." He said, "Well, if it appraises for that, we'll pay you that. But we can't pay more than appraisal because it's a semi-government entity." I've never quite understood it, because they have a board. Anyway, I said, "Well, have at it." So, they hired Hank Manning [owner/president of Manning Appraisal Service, LLC], and he did an appraisal, and he came back at like \$2.4 million.

I had an SBA [Small Business Association] loan on it and, first of all, there are penalties to get out of SBA loans early. "How am I going to recover that money I lost if I sell to them for what they're saying?" I think it was \$2.5 million. It seemed like there was a \$230,000 or \$240,000 gap there. So, I called Glenn and said, "Glenn, I'm bleeding about \$10,000 a month. I believe I could sit here, and I could bleed \$10,000 a month for two years or I could sell to you and lose it right off the bat. I won't have anywhere for my company to go. So, I'm just going to sit here and bleed. Thanks for looking." Clunk. Hung up. He called me right back, "Now, wait a minute. Wait a minute. Let me think about this. We'll talk tomorrow." And I thought, "Okay, but Glenn, I can't go out and buy something. You're putting me a quarter million in the hole. How am I going to go buy something? I can't even go rent something at this point. I've got to stay here." So, he called me the next morning. He said, "Why don't you and Jamey ride up here to our office on Barnes Mill Road? We just want you to walk around and look at it."

TS: Oh, he had the spot where your office is today.

TT: Right. That's where they were. There were their water tanks. And I said, "Well, Glenn, I've already told you I cannot buy." "No, we can't sell it. We've got our water tanks up here. We just want to talk to you." "Okay." So, I said, "Come on, Jamey." We rode up there. We didn't have anything to do. It wasn't busy, and we're just riding around.

TS: Oh, that's right; the water tanks are right next to your business.

TT: Right. So, we went there, rode around, and Glenn said, "Just walk around in here and tell us if your company could fit in it. There are two buildings, this one and the one next door. Just think about it. I'll tell you what I've got in mind." And I said, "Well, if it involves a bank and borrowing money, we're out, Glenn." And he said, "No, we're going to talk." So, we came back, and he said, "All right, you think your company could fit here?" And I said, "Yes, we could fit here, but I don't know how that works." And he said, "Well, go to closing and take your losses, but then you can live rent free here until you recover your losses."

TS: How about that?

TT: So, I'm doing the math in my head right quick. I said, "How long can I live here?" He said, "Well, does a year get you home?" I said, "No, that's more like three years gets me home, figuring the rent payment times 36, three years gets me close to home." "Okay. We'll do that." So, we drafted up agreements, signed a lease with them for a dollar a month just to have a lease, and moved.

TS: So, you still don't own the property? You're operating on a lease to this day?

TT: Right. We never bought it, just lease it, but now we lease it at market rate. They wanted to move in where we were, but they wanted to renovate it to their taste and needs. So, we had to move out of there, and we moved over off of old 41 temporarily into a pre-finished space from Bryan Torres and rented that for a year while they lived on top of the mountain and finished out that space. When they finally moved out, then we had to change that space some. So, it took a lot of flipping around, but we made it, and Dan Buyers says it's one of the greatest real estate stories ever told.

TS: Wow. It is an interesting story. Well, now 2007 was bad in a lot of ways, but the Cobb Chamber of Commerce selected your company as a Top 25 Business in Cobb County in 2007.

TT: That's right.

TS: Talk about that. What did that mean to you?

TT: Well, I did the preparation for that myself. I pulled all the data together and applied and got that acknowledgement, a Top 25 Business. It was tremendous acknowledgement of what we had done, and we felt very good about that. I had

become very involved in the Chamber and learned a lot through their CEO Roundtable and other people I had gotten to know there. By the way, that is what led into me actually plugging back into Southern Poly on the Foundation because [Southern Polytechnic president] Dr. [Lisa] Rossbacher read the article in the *MDJ* and saw my name and company. She researched that because she thought I might've been an alum, and said, "He's an alum of Southern Poly." So, she sent the then vice president for advancement and university development [2005-2015], Ron [Dwyatt] Dempsey, to my office to invite me to be a trustee.³ I first turned him down. I just didn't feel that I was capable or qualified to be that. But he made two or three runs at me and wanted me, and I ended up agreeing. That began my involvement with foundations in 2011. I had served on the WellStar Foundation as a trustee prior to that, so I did have some experience with foundations.

TS: Let me ask you one more question about GeoSurvey, and then let's start talking about your connections with the Southern Poly Foundation and the consolidation and all of that.

TT: Okay.

TS: But just to wind up on your company, you took in a bunch of partners in 2016, four of them who had been working for you for a long time, and then you gradually worked your way out of the company, I guess.

TT: Yes.

TS: But in the meantime, you were doing all kinds of modern technology things: GPS and robotics and laser scanners and all that. Why don't you talk about what happens to your company after you got through the recession?

TT: Okay. Leading into the recession, I need to back up to 2002 to bring Jamey Coleman into the mix as a partner. In 2002, my then partners, fifty-fifty, remember, the two developer guys, came to me and said, "We want out."

TS: Oh, great. You probably thought, "Great."

TT: Well, [they said]: We want out, but here is our price we want you to pay us."

TS: Oh, oh.

TT: So, it wasn't so great. I said: "Well, I'm not doing that until we get an appraisal." So, I went and got an appraisal done of the company, and it came back more than

³ After his time at Southern Polytechnic State University, Dempsey moved into a similar position as vice president for university advancement at Winona State University. In 2019 Dempsey became president of Oakland City University in Indiana.

what they had offered to sell out for. So, I took their offer, and I said, “But you guys know, you see the books, I don’t have that kind of cash laying around.” They said, “Oh, no, you can pay us out over time; we’ll finance it five years.” Now I have another payment. How am I going to offset that payment? All of a sudden, I’m going to be a 100 percent owner, but I’m going to be saddled with this payment? I knew I still needed a partner; I’m a firm believer that correct partners are the best business. If you can partner and have the right partners together, that is the best business arrangement for a small business, but they’ve got to be the right ones. I knew that Jamey needed to be my partner, and I wanted him to be my partner.

Then Jamey comes in my office and says, “Trent, I just want to let you know I’ve decided to quit and move home to Rabun County. I’m going to buy a land surveying company up there.” My heart sank! There were only a few times I cried running the company; that day made me cry. I had to come up with a plan here. So, I went to Jamey the next morning. I didn’t just hit him right outside the head with the possibility of ownership; I led him into it. He knows this because I did it to him. So, I’m not saying anything he didn’t know. I led him into it. I said, “Jamey, this company you are going to buy—have they presented you with an agreement in writing on how this goes down or is it just chat and talk?” “Oh, just chatter at this point.” I said, “Look, I’m going to encourage you to get this in writing, and here’s all the things that need to be in it. As a matter of fact, I’m going to send you to my attorney out of my pocket. I want you to have some stuff drafted to present to this owner before you buy it. I’ll pay for it.” “Really? Why would you do that?” “I don’t want to see you land in a bad way. I got caught in a bad situation in which I wish I had done this myself. I’m advising you to do this, and I’m willing to pay for it.”

He did it. He went to this attorney, had paperwork drafted up, and I knew that if he showed up at this surveyor’s doorstep with paperwork, that surveyor was going to realize, “Maybe I don’t want to do this.” Jamey really called his bluff. “Are you really going to do this for me?” They built in a five-year arrangement to where first year, no ownership, second year ownership, third year, right? So, the guy completely balked on Jamey. He came back pretty distraught the next week and said, “Man, I guess I’m glad you had me do that paperwork. It fell apart. Do I still have a job here?” And I said, “More than that. How much were you going to pay him?” He told me how much it was, and I said, “Well, what if I were to offer you 25 percent of Geo for the very same number, and I’ll finance it, and I’ll give you a raise to make the payment? Don’t say, ‘Yes.’ Go home and talk to your wife. Tell me in the morning.” And he called me at home that night and said, “Yes.” That’s how Jamey became a partner in Geo, and he ended up digging in here and living here and making his life in Marietta.

TS: You were about to tell us about your company and all the technology that has been added and the history up to your retirement. Could you tell what you want to tell about the last decade of your company?

TT: From a technology perspective, one of the things that helped me be successful, I think, is my flare and love of technology. I always considered me to be the leading edge for the company of what we're going to adopt and use. That goes all the way back to when P. V. Rice put that first data collector in my truck and told me to learn how to use it. I've always been that way even to this day. We were basically just embracing current technology through the early 2000s, current technology meaning electronic instrument and a data collector at the tripod and the instrument turned manually by an instrument operator and then a button pushed to store that data. That was the conventional method. To this day, a lot of surveyors—that's still how they do it. But leading into the recession in 2007, we had been exploring robotic use instruments, which enable you to move this controller data collector to the pole, and the robot would follow the prism.

But it was very problematic. We had even bought one or two of them, and the crews would just be so frustrated with them getting everything connected and working. It became cumbersome and hard to get to work. They'd go back to the old way of doing it and finish the job. But we kept pushing it, and I believed sooner or later, this is really going to work. Then along comes a recession. We muddled through the recession, just conventional technology, but then in 2009 things really started coming back, and we needed to start growing again. I did not want to grow back with just people doing it the same old way. So, we had every robotic manufacturer bring their equipment into our office and demonstrate it. In 2008 we bought one of them that we thought was the best one, put it in the field with our best crew leader, and told him, "Test drive this and tell us if you can use it daily, potentially by yourself here and there without an assistant." He was very frustrated with it and came and said, "I don't think I would be able to do it."

I knew other people that had embraced a different technology, Trimble, and I just didn't like the way it looked, but everybody said, "They're really good." So, I called Trimble and said, "We'll buy one." So, we bought a Trimble and sold the other one, put it [the Trimble] with that same guy, and we said, "Take this one out and tell us what you can do." He came back after one day, and he said, "I'm sold. This is my instrument from now on." So, at that point, we went to the bank, and we floated a loan and bought six of them all at one time.

We took every other piece of equipment, the entire shop, back and set them aside and trained everybody on the use of robotic equipment and became a completely robotic company. To this day, we're still a 100 percent robotic, which now most companies are robotic. But that's an example of trying to stay out on the leading edge of use of technology. And then GPS is very similar in nature. We had some of the first GPS equipment. It worked, but it was very cumbersome, very hard to use. It took a long time to get a position on a point. And along comes cellphones, which allowed the development of a network with fixed stations, and we could pull fixed data in through cellphone connections to our pole and determine our position in a flash through a subscription. That all came down during the last decade now. So, we no longer need benchmarks. You know, benchmarks are fixed, known points that have a latitude, longitude, and elevation. We no longer

need those. We've got them in our truck now. We just stand that pole up, connect it to the internet, and it tells us our position. We can store it.

It's just unbelievably fast—the GPS technology. But tree canopy was the biggest problem. You get under trees, and it—well, now there's technology that goes under tree canopies. Just in the last year or two, we bought—we being Geo; I'm not a we anymore there—bought three or four of these setups now where it works under tree canopy with GPS equipment, which is revolutionary for us. So, we're actually using GPS more than the conventional robotic instruments. It's always been fun. That's from the field perspective. And then there's the office side of it, the software side of it, and utilizing AutoCAD. We use an overlay called Carlson Software, which is a surveyor's software. It interfaces with AutoCAD, and we do everything completely digitally.

Another thing I got into just out of pure interest for it was laser scanning, which was very fun. We went and bought one, and I was the Guinea pig on it and learned to use it. We bought [a Faro X330 laser scanner] in 2015, and we've scanned a lot of different things, but we also figured out that laser scanning, while it's fun, mapping, it's not necessarily surveying. It's just high-tech measurements point clouds, and so we have it as a tool now, and we can use it, but it's not really a service that we market externally anymore. We just use it as a tool internally when it makes sense for measurements that we need.

TS: Are civil engineering students learning all these things in the classroom?

TT: Yes, they're getting exposed to it—the land surveying students are. They are getting exposed to all of it. As far as utilizing it, that maybe is a different story.

TS: Well, you took in some more partners, David Hester, Brad Cash, Gene Etris, and Craig Jennings in 2016. Talk about that; why did you go that way?

TT: There was a lot of strategy involved there. If we back up five years prior to them coming in as partners, I befriended a guy named Don Thomas who helped me strategize how I could exit the company at age 60 or 61, right in there. That was a decade ago, right? I attended a seminar that he taught, and that's where I became his friend. He lives in East Cobb, and through a few breakfasts with him here and there, he began to help me understand that exiting a company is actually harder than starting a company. That is absolutely the truth. So, the strategy was that I was either going to sell it outside or internally, one of the two, in order to get out. Otherwise I'm going to be saddled with making a payroll through my 60s and into my 70s if I don't come up with a plan. I didn't really want to do that. I wanted a chance to have my 60s for me.

TS: So, you're about 62 now?

TT: I'm 62. I've done through his coaching—"All right, let's bring in some partners that we think are ownership material and get them in ownership, so, you lock

them down. They're not going to go anywhere once you've got them in ownership. And then you begin to mentor them into actual business owners." Now, Jamey had the very same exit strategy I did. He's about three years younger than me, but he was wanting out too. He's got a farm up in North Georgia, and he wanted to go feed cows.

So, he and I went off on this journey. We spoke with ten different employees probably, and out of those ten we landed on five of them that had the appetite and wanted to do it. So, then the challenge comes, "Okay. How do you value it, and how do you fund it?" For the valuation, you don't involve the partners. You just value it. We put a value on it based on two appraisals we had done. We looked at those appraisals. They landed close enough to each other, so, we averaged them and said, "All right, there's our value. That means 25 percent of it is worth this. But since it's internal, we'll discount it a little bit, and we'll sell it to you for this. There are four of you." They wanted it. So, we sold each of them 6.25 percent, and then self-financed it through a note, and through their ownership, their disbursements actually made the payments. I made them put some blood money in. They had to put 5 percent down. So, they had to go get some money somewhere. But the biggest thing is that I had a connection to them now. They were owners.

TS: So, they're going to have a quarter of the company then?

TT: They collectively own a quarter of the company. Jamey and I divulged we proportionately sold 25 percent of our ownership into them. Jamey [had been] a 25 percent owner, and I was a 75 percent owner. We went down pro rata percentages to sell to them, and it was very successful. They were able to easily make their payments with their disbursements. In fact, they made money. And the company grew. It appreciated, so, their investment appreciated. I told them upon the sale to them and in our partnership agreement, I retained the right to market it outside if they didn't step up and act like owners and become leaders. So, I put the burden on them to do that. And I tried coaching and pushing and trying to get them there. They made some progress, but nobody really rose to the top.

Meanwhile, I had two or three companies coming at us wanting to buy us. I would listen; I'd explore it. I couldn't get there. They didn't even know, but I would end up stopping the conversation because I felt like the culture would be wrong or the name would be wrong. They'd want to change the name of the company. I just couldn't bring myself to do it to the people that had helped me build it. And then along came one where they were out of state, up north. I'm trying to not give away too much information. State up north, and they have a local division here that needed growth. They needed to grow it, and we represented that potential growth. They made a hard run at us. I went up, met with them, and got comfortable with it. They were going to allow us to keep our name, being a division of them.

So, I had that offer in my back pocket, and they had just made their last five-year payments. I went to them—Jamey and I are doing this collectively, together. We went to them and said, “All right, guys, here’s the deal. We have an offer to sell this company. You guys are going to make out very well. You’re going to be able to pay your houses off. You’re going to make out well. You do have an opportunity to try to buy it if you want. This is the number, and you’ve got a month to decide. Let me know if you’re interested.” And just immediately, “We are interested. We want to buy it.” I was like, “Well, now it’s not that easy. It’s actually very hard, and you’re going to leverage everything you’ve got all the way down to your child’s tricycle to do this.”

Through a lot of good connections and bank relationships and determination from them, we got real creative. They came up with it. They floated the SBA loan. It enabled them to buy it from me and Jamey and allowed us an exit. So, I consider that a complete and total win. The company is preserved in its current state. It’s being run by people that learned it and grew up in it. It hasn’t been perfect. It has been some bumps. I made them give me an employment agreement that kept me there for three years with benefits and perks and things. They did that. I’m doing my last year now with them. I hope they’ll keep me around. I need health coverage!

TS: So, you’re staying around for the health coverage?

TT: That, plus I still love and enjoy working with them.

TS: Until you’re 65, I guess, and have Medicare.

TT: Yes. But anyway, I consider that a success story.

TS: Absolutely.

TT: It worked out real well.

TS: Okay, let’s shift gears and go to all your community service activities and particularly SPSU. How did you become a member of the foundation at Southern Poly?

TT: Okay. I kind of covered that earlier with the article in the paper for the Top 25 Businesses of the Year. Ron Dempsey, then vice president for advancement and university development, came to me, we had lunch, and he just kind of talked me into it over a couple times. I joined that foundation not really knowing much of anything about the foundation, but I joined it, started going to all the meetings, and began to understand how a foundation operates and what it does. That took a while just to get my brain around all of that. So, I was just a trustee at large. I chaired one committee, I think, and did that for several years when they approached me and wanted me to be vice-chair for a two-year term.

- TS: I had you down as vice-chair at the time of the consolidation announcement in November 2013.
- TT: Yes. I was ending my term as vice-chair when the merger got announced. I asked them, “Why do y’all think I’m vice-chair material?” And they said, “Because you come to every meeting.” “Well, I can’t argue with that. I do.”
- TS: I hope there was more than that.
- TT: I hope it’s a little more than that. That’s what they said. But anyway, during the vice-chair, I kept learning and listening. Don [E.] Davidson was the chair. My predecessor. And about halfway through my vice-chair term, the merger was announced.
- TS: Yes, talk about that. How did you find out?
- TT: Dr. Rossbacher called me, and she said, “I don’t know if you want to sit down for this or not, but we’re about to be merged with Kennesaw State University.”
- TS: And what was your reaction?
- TT: Disbelief, I guess, you could say. It can’t be right. There’s just no way.
- TS: I don’t think anybody expected it.
- TT: Yes. I don’t know. There’s just such a deep love for the little university and the niche university. Just the thought of it was just knocking me off my feet. I couldn’t believe it. We had an emergency trustee meeting right after the announcement, and, of course, everybody is clamoring, “We’re going to stay separate. We’re going to stay focused on this campus.” I fortunately was just vice-chair. I wasn’t chair. Don was. But I was closely involved in everything that was going on. And so, we started setting up meetings. I’ll never forget this. A joint meeting between the two foundations was set up for Marietta Country Club. I’m walking through the parking lot at my office to get in my truck to go to this meeting. My phone rings, and it’s like, “Trent, this is Don. I’m sick. I can’t make it.” I said, “Don, you’ve got to be kidding me.” “Nope, I’m serious. I’m not going to make it.” So, I had about eighteen minutes—that’s how long it took me to get to the Marietta Country Club—to get prepared to lead this meeting, basically, along with the then chair Jo Ann Chitty [October 2014 to October 2017].

The tables were set up in a giant circle, and the tables were like this: [KSU president Daniel S.] Dan Papp, Jo Ann, me, Dr. Rossbacher, all in a row. I literally have not even given any thought to, “What am I going to say?” I wasn’t prepared. So, I walk in the meeting, we sit down, and I’m nervous and don’t know what I’m going to do. Dr. Papp started up the conversation. He said, “Well, why don’t we just have everyone [say something]. We’ll start right here to

my left, and we'll go around the room and let everybody just give a two or three-minute thought on what they think we need to do." They'd already heard we were rumbling to just stay separate.

TS: So, you're going around, and you're going to be about the last one.

TT: I'm the last one. So, guess who the first one was? It was one and only [J.] Larry Stevens. I didn't know Larry at that time. So, he looked at Larry, and Larry goes—Larry, now he's very blunt. "I think it's pretty simple; just rip the Band-Aid off and merge them.

TS: Easy to say from Kennesaw's point of view.

TT: I raised my hand, and I said, "All right, I am not going to be able to sit on my hands all the way around this table. I've got to say something to that." And I said, "Larry, I dare say, if we were up at the Kennesaw campus tearing your signs down and putting up green signs [the Southern Poly color], you would not feel that way. So, we expect to be respected about what we believe in too. 'Just rip the Band Aid off' would be very damaging at this point. This is a process that we all have to go through. For Southern Poly people, it's a grieving process, not necessarily for you. So, let's continue." And it went to the next one. That set the tone.

TS: Did he respond at all?

TT: "Well, I guess you've got a point there, Trent," is what he said. Then we went on around the room, and I don't even remember anything else hardly out of that meeting. A lot of people were extremely passionate, more so even than me. I just ended up somehow getting it put on my forehead because I was [acting] chairman at the time; I'm the one leading this; and I ended up becoming the flag bearer for it in a lot of different ways. But that's okay. I still take pride in being that flag bearer to some extent.

If I were to just say some thoughts about the merger, as it progressed, there were a lot of things done wrong, and I don't mind saying that. Anybody you bring it up to, especially any Southern Poly people, would say, "A lot of things were done wrong." I personally blame the Board of Regents for the way they directed things to be done. "People, these are academics. This is academia. And these people—they're not bad people, but they were told to be a certain way and to do a certain thing and to do something they're not used to doing and don't know how to do." So, I believe a proper consulting firm should have been brought in and put in charge of it and guided us through it. But we were left to our own devices on how to do this. They just went on a mission to erase green from everywhere. Literally wouldn't let people even wear their old green t-shirt or green memorabilia. It was only KSU; it had to be a yellow and black only. That was very damaging. People still harbor resentment to this day about the way that went down.

- I don't harbor resentment because I know that those that were saying that were being told to do that, and it started at the top. It started at the top, and failure to do it in a way that I believe would've been much more successful. So, that's my only negative comment about it. I've got a lot more positive comments. Standing here and now looking back over it, both schools are way better off. I don't even know if the Board of Regents had the vision to understand what we would become. Does that make sense?
- TS: Yes, absolutely.
- TT: I think they've actually created something here that they may not have even been aware was going to be created. We are a moving force now.
- TS: I think our consolidation probably went better than any other consolidation.
- TT: I have heard that. I didn't just up and adopt black and gold. I just didn't up and do that. As a matter of fact, the first few football games I went to, I couldn't even put the shirt on. It didn't feel right. And I said, "It just doesn't feel right." But then, Dr. Papp and Sue [his wife] were the glue that brought it together—the connections I made through them, without fail, every single person I met in the KSU community. That's what ultimately put the black and gold on me was their professionalism and their courteousness and their desire to see it succeed, and ultimately the respect for where we all came from. It's gone full circle, and now I see proper respect being sent back and trying to resurrect and preserve what was there. So, I believe we're so much stronger now together, but it was painful.
- TS: I was interested that you used the word merger. We were instructed, "Do not use the word merger. This is a consolidation."
- TT: Right. That's right. There were instructions given like that as well, but we all felt more like the old "hostile takeover." I remember saying it more than once: "If it was not a takeover, why are our signs still not up down here on the streets?" There was a time there for two or three years afterwards where you couldn't even show up in green. You know, "No, you can't do that." They wanted to erase it.
- TS: Really?
- TT: That was really a feeling that was sent out, and that was just so improper in my opinion.
- TS: I think we need green as part of our school color.
- TT: It is part of it. If you look at the official color palette for KSU, through me banging on pots and pans during the time it was being done, I was at that time vice-chair when this color palette came forth. I along with all the other trustees on the board from Southern Poly were vetoing the heck out of it. "You've got to keep green in here." And not just because of the passion everyone feels around

- that, but think of when you turn it into a money thing, you need that green. It helps you raise money.
- TS: And yet we hardly ever used the green.
- TT: I know that's right. I get it to not have it everywhere, but there's a time and place when you should be able to support a little bit of green behind the KSU logo to let people know what your heritage is. There's nothing wrong with that. What are you afraid of? What's the fear?
- TS: Yes.
- TT: I just don't get it, but anyway....
- TS: I was about to ask you a leading question, but let me make it another question. Lisa Rossbacher: how do you think she handled things during this period? I mean, she went down to the Board of Regents and [chancellor Henry M.] Hank Huckaby tells her there's going to be a consolidation, the name's going to be Kennesaw State University, and the president's going to be Dan Papp. And that's according to her account.
- TT: That's what she told me.
- TS: How do you think she handled it?
- TT: As good as anybody could have, she gracefully worked through her [job] search period, which obviously she was told, "You need to get on a search to find yourself a home." She never let up. She came into work every day. She sat in forums, and she had town halls. She worked with Dan lockstep. Never let up until she made an announcement. So, I've got tremendous respect for her in that regard. I sat right next to her at many trustee meetings. Somehow we'd end up sitting next to each other, and she would always say, "What do you see we're doing right or wrong?" I mean, she would always ask that and open the floor for you to criticize and talk and complain or praise. She wanted to hear it. She had a servant heart. I knew her through Kiwanis as well. We were both members of Kiwanis. I would often sit with her at lunch.
- TS: Well, that was my impression.
- TT: Yes, I have nothing but respect for Dr. Rossbacher.
- TS: I don't think it could have gone as well as it did without her total cooperation.
- TT: I think that's right. She stayed in it right up until the day she announced [she had become president of Humboldt State University] and even after. Stayed after getting it to happen.

TS: How did you get the merger of the foundation boards to happen? You would have been chairman of the [SPSU] board at the time of the consolidation of the foundations.

TT: That's right.

TS: Can you talk about how that came about?

TT: Sure. I'm chairman, and I've got all these trustees clamoring to draw up new bylaws to where we're a unit of two foundations. Concurrently with that, the KSU Foundation announced a trip to Italy to open the Fortezza in Montepulciano. I got that email. I'll never forget, my wife and I had just been on a bike ride. I looked at my phone, and I said, "Wow. The KSU Foundation's going to Italy, and they're inviting us"—us being the Southern Poly Foundation. I just said, "You want to go?" She said, "Yes." So, we signed up to go being the only [ones from SPSU]. No, Julie and Jim Kimball also signed up.

TS: That's all?

TT: That's the only Southern Poly people that signed up. So, off we went to Italy, and that's where I really developed a bond with Dan. I'll never forget on that trip I pointblank said to Dan, "Dan, you know there's an effort to keep things separate. Tell me what you think about that." And he said, "Trent, it won't ever feel right unless we're all one. You, in my opinion, as chair, need to figure out how to navigate getting them together, because getting them together is way stronger than having two to fight against each other." And you know, I took that to heart. He is the CEO at that point. I had to. I couldn't not do what he was saying ought to be done. I guess I could have, but I came back from Italy with a different outlook on it and began having conversations trustee by trustee by trustee that "we've got to roll this up and make lemonade out of lemons here and do this."

I don't remember the exact timing, but the KSU Foundation had a round of golf at the club that I played in. They said, "What would you think about us inviting every [SPSU] trustee to be a trustee of the KSU Foundation now?" I said, "Give me another week or two to make phone calls." So, I worked my way through the list of eighteen to twenty-two of us. I can't remember [the exact number]. I got push back, and I said, "I'm going on record as being in support of this as the path we need to take. Y'all do what you feel like you need to do, but I'm going to have to go on record this is the path." So, eventually everybody lined up and...

TS: Everybody?

TT: Well, the effort just kind of fizzled; put it that way. The effort lost its steam when I got out from behind it. I never really was behind it. I just needed somebody to kick me over the finish line. So, then it was just a matter of inviting each trustee one by one to consider being a trustee of the [KSU] Foundation. We had half, I guess, exit. I can't remember the numbers that came over. Then we began

attending the KSU trustee board meetings while we still had our meetings because we had not rolled up.

TS: You were still raising money?

TT: No.

TS: You were in a capital campaign when all this started, weren't you?

TT: You could say that, but it had not really gotten any steam yet. We were faced with, here we are, a board of trustees that's now defunct, basically a foundation with no real purpose. Money in the bank; we had, I don't know, 300 or 400 grand sitting in the bank, maybe a little more than that. We had to figure out what to do with it and how do we shut this thing down? So, that became meetings with attorneys, papers being drafted, stuff to sign, but more importantly was the money and what are we going to do with it?

In our final board meeting—I still have the minutes for that meeting, by the way. I saved them and I'm proud of them because in that meeting we carved that money up and did not let it go to the KSU Foundation. We earmarked every bit of the money in some way to benefit the Southern Poly campus. We put 100 grand towards the dance theater, for instance, and helped renovate that; they were under renovations. We took another 100 grand and set up a matching scholarship for scholarships on the Southern Poly campus. And so, we were able to leave out with our heads held high that we did use what was left out of that foundation to do good positive things for that campus. Yes. But at that point, we were considered merged.

TS: Did it help at all that Dan Papp was the former interim president of Southern Poly [from July 1997 to August 1998]?

TT: Oh, it did. He was the right man at the right time in the right place to handle this merger. We went through a lot of contentious things I can't document here on video that were very, very trying and challenged me. I mean, some of the most challenging leadership tasks I've ever had were during that time.

TS: I bet.

TT: And Dan was the steady voice of reason, the big teddy bear that nothing's as bad as... and just coached me through so many things that would've been hard to do without Dan during that time.

TS: I know that [vice president for advancement and CEO of the foundation] Lance [E.] Burchett has said that you played a central role in making the merger go smoothly.

TT: Just from the foundation perspective. I just ended up being in the middle of it all.

- TS: I think he said you've done as much as anyone to smooth over and heal the bad feelings.
- TT: Well, that's been a challenge for sure fighting for keeping the [green] color there for one thing. I didn't do this, even though I was part of the conversation, to come up with the Southern Polytechnic alumni group within the KSU alumni. That was very important, I felt.
- TS: Oh, sure.
- TT: There needs to be a home for people within the [alumni association].
- TS: Yes, for sure. Right after [the two universities] become officially consolidated, Dan Papp's presidency comes to a rapid end in 2016. Do you have any thoughts on that?
- TT: Heartbreaking, just absolutely heartbreaking! It's a time in my life I'll never forget. I remember the very place I was standing when I heard it from Dan.
- TS: Were you in the graduation [in the Convocation Center] when he announced it to [the platform party]?
- TT: No, I knew before that.
- TS: Did you?
- TT: Unfortunately. The morning of [graduation] I knew the night before because the trustees were aware of it. We had an emergency meeting. But then that morning we had a trustee board meeting previously scheduled, not for this, but just previously scheduled. I'll never forget the look on Dan's face when he walked in that room and knowing what was coming down. This isn't the place to air all that, but I've just got to say that it was terrible how Dan was treated.
- TS: How did it affect the foundation? I mean, the foundation was at the heart of the deferred compensation issue [one of the alleged reasons why the chancellor pushed President Papp into an early retirement].
- TT: Well, the things that went on were prior to my engagement with the foundation, so, some bylaws got changed. I do know that because I bumped up against that bylaw a time or two when I wanted to do some things that you couldn't do where our hands got tied to some extent, actually kneejerk tied, that I believe need to be relaxed a little bit as far as what the foundation can do in the form of compensation for leadership.

I'm close friends with Dan, and in my estimation Dan just got bad advice. He was a little bit gullible in believing everything was fine. To Dan's detriment, he

- didn't have a personal accountant that could have forewarned him. I think possibly if he had had a personal accountant, maybe it would've been flagged earlier. But at the end of the day, I know for an absolute fact there was no ill intent to do anything wrong from that man, and he did not deserve what came his way. I'll go on record all day in saying, at the very least, he should have been allowed a proper exit with serving out of a notice of retirement.
- TS: He was going to retire in another year.
- TT: All that had to have been done was just accelerate it. It could have been handled so much better than it was handled. I don't know what all was behind the pressure to get him out as quick as they could, but they did.
- TS: Do you think there was pressure to [force him out early]?
- TT: Oh, yes. There was an agenda bigger than Dan, in my mind. I know it's a bigger agenda than Dan. He was just one piece of a puzzle.
- TS: Yes.
- TT: Yes.
- TS: Well, I know there are a lot of theories that have floated around about what was going on in the governor's office, and so you think there's some credibility to those?
- TT: I don't have any proof. But the writing is all over the place, isn't it, [the writing] on the wall?
- TS: Well, I think none of this controversy had anything to do with academics, but from the administrative and foundation side, it must have been difficult going through Houston Davis, Sam Olens, Ken Harmon, and Pam Whitten, all those changes in a very short period of time. And for that matter [vice president for advancement Michael J.] Mike Harders leaves somewhere along that time too [in early 2017 for a parallel position at the University of Toledo in Ohio].
- TT: Yes.
- TS: What was your relationship with Mike Harders, by the way?
- TT: Mike, of course, was VP for development of the KSU Foundation while we were in merger, and I got to know Mike very well—a good friend, and he worked very, very closely with me to affect and pull off the merger. Attorney meetings, all kinds of conversations, and he's just a really hard worker that did his very best to do it and get it pulled off. The consolidation had had a lot of casualties. It wore people down to the point they left. He's an example of that.

- TS: Well, I was wondering to what degree he was forced out. I mean, he went to a similar position at the University of Toledo.
- TT: That's right. Dan recruited Mike in here from what I understand. He was not here long enough for me to talk with him about anything but merger. I never really got to know him from a development perspective and his capabilities as a development officer. So, I really could not speak to that part.
- TS: But it must have had an impact on raising funds for the university during those years.
- TT: Well, if you're going to be bouncing presidents every year, you're going to have a hard time raising money. Donors need to know that leadership is in place that's stable in order to guide an organization and they're investing their money in a [good] company. You don't buy a stock [in a company] that you don't believe has good leadership. And donating to a university is a very same thought process. You're not going to invest in something that has leaders flip flopping all over the place and controversy, and you never know who is running it this year. We lost tremendous credibility during all of the various controversies that went on during that time. It was just exhausting. Every time we turn around, a new search committee. "We lost another president. Now we've got to do this; now we've got to do that." It was tremendously exhausting.
- TS: I think you were on the search committee that recommended Lance to replace Mike. That must have been 2017, I guess, since he left in 2017. It's hard to believe it's been six years.
- TT: No, it was actually late 2018 when Lance came on. We were in such flux and so much turnover, we didn't feel like we could field a search for a CEO for our foundation and a VP for development at the time. We didn't even have a president. I can't remember.
- TS: That's right. Sam [Olens] would have left in February of 2018.
- TT: Right. We just didn't feel like we could even market ourselves to get a potential candidate. So, [James P.] Jim Dunn, the chair then, stepped up and said, "I'll be interim CEO of the foundation while things settle down, while we figure out whom we are and what we're going to do." Thankfully, he did that, and what a tremendous bridge he provided for us to calm the waters, settle things down, and figure out a president that'll stay. I can't remember exactly. I'm pretty sure [Pamela S.] Pam Whitten came along.
- TS: Yes, in 2018.
- TT: Right. I was on that search committee. So, Pam came in, and as soon as Pam came in, we knew, we've got somebody. So, now we can go after a VP for development.

TS: Oh, right, you had to get her in first.

TT: We needed her first. We were waiting on the president before the VP for development. So, we got Pam in, and with her good graces, we said, “All right, we’re going after a VP for development.” So, we started a nationwide search and vetted many very viable candidates, but Lance rose to the top. I don’t mind going flat out on record—him coming here has been just a windfall for KSU. He knows what he’s doing.

TS: I was going to ask you what made him the best candidate?

TT: No one certain thing. Just the overall person he is and what he brought to the table and what he had done [as executive director for the Foundation Fund] at [the University of] Arkansas [for Medical Sciences, Little Rock] really, really sold us he’s the guy. Of course, we didn’t make the final choice. Pam Whitten did. We put three in front of her and Lance being one of them. So, she and Kat [[Kathy S. Schwaig] made the final choice for Lance.

TS: Did you have a preference?

TT: He was my preference. He was my vote all along.

TS: So, you let him know that he was your...?

TT: Oh, he knew it, yes, I mean, after he got here.

TS: But, I mean, you let Pam and Kat know?

TT: Oh, yes, I did. Yes.

TS: There was a story that he was wandering around before he was supposed to appear before the committee and...

TT: Yes, we crossed paths.

TS: Was in a running outfit or whatever and ran into you.

TT: Yes, it was the first day. He was one of the first candidates we interviewed, and I was standing there looking at the floor map of the building, trying to figure out what room to go to. He came walking by, and he saw me. He was looking at it to try to figure the same thing out. We conversed for a minute, but we didn’t know who each other was at that time. Yes.

TS: Until you got into the meeting?

TT: We got in the room. I said, “That’s the guy that was in the running outfit.”

- TS: Do you have any opinion on Sam Olens as president and the way it affected the foundation?
- TT: Sam is a good friend.
- TS: You would have known him as a [Cobb County] commission chair, I guess.
- TT: I was flabbergasted when that announcement was made [that the Board of Regents had selected Olens as KSU's fourth president]. I felt shortchanged that we didn't get any input in it.
- TS: None at all?
- TT: It came from the governor [Nathan Deal] and said, "He's your new president," through the Board of Regents." That was yet another, in my opinion, terrible decision that came down from downtown. No offense to Sam, but he was a fish out of water. He was put in an environment he had never been in, and I just felt sorry for him.
- TS: Yes.
- TT: I did. He tried his very best, and did everything he could do, but I think it took him a year to figure this out—that, "You know what? I really can't do this." He, for his own sake, for his own personal wellbeing, decided, "I need to get out of the way here." And so, he did.
- TS: I think he had great potential in terms of foundation-type things, raising funds and so on, if he had been able to.
- TT: If he could have somehow figured it out, right.
- TS: I know you chaired an economic development committee for the foundation, and then you were vice-chair of the KSU Foundation, and then from 2020 to 2022, you were chair. Why don't you talk about what the foundation was doing outside of all this controversy—foundation type things, raising funds, and what have you?
- TT: Well, being vice-chair under Jim—Jim Dunn being chair—some things started coming into focus that needed to be worked on. In particular, our source of revenue was very real estate focused, but unfortunately that real estate rolls back to the Board of Regents at some point, and we lose that income, and unaffectionately it's called a cliff that we see coming in the 2030s. So, during my term, we began conversations around that problem, ultimately culminating in the creation of a committee that Steve Cadranel has now really formulated. They are off and running. So, I would say that's probably the biggest long-term challenge the foundation faces is how do we transition from a real estate reliant foundation to a philanthropic foundation? Key to that happening was Lance coming on

board. So, during the search for our development officer, priority was placed on those that had a track record for philanthropic type foundations, that knew how to raise money, that had successfully done capital campaigns, that had these things under their belt, so we didn't have to learn it. We could hire it. Lance checked those buttons. So, that really launched off the changing culture from having trustee meetings about real estate to having trustee meetings about philanthropic efforts. Oh, by the way, our real estate is doing well, but we're talking about philanthropy now. That transition has been, to me, the biggest change that has occurred during my involvement. And I'm not taking credit for it. It had to happen. But certainly lining up the right players, putting them in the right place, and getting them facing the right direction is going on now.

TS: There was a stage where owning the KSU Center and the BrandsMart [building on Busbee Drive] and all that acreage where the football field is, and so on, was pretty important to the university. But you're saying we've moved beyond that?

TT: Oh, I don't. No, no, not at all. Let's just say that real estate is still going to be very important to the foundation. We just can't have a reliance on the funds it produces. But our importance when it comes to real estate is not diminished. In fact, it's very important because we represent the opportunity to pull off real estate developments, whereas the university could never do it.

TS: I've been wondering what was going to go in where the motel [Kennesaw Inn] used to be that the foundation owned.

TT: We tore that down. That was done under my leadership. It is one of my claims to fame. That was such an eyesore and liability for the foundation. We derived very, very little income off of it, and it was just a constant on the meeting agenda every time in a negative way. So, we appointed a study committee to determine what to do with this thing. It came back, "Tear it down;" and we're like, "Hire them now."

TS: I stayed in there one night while we were having a big conference on campus, when I had to be here early the next morning. I spent one night in that motel.

TT: It's just so much better with it gone.

TS: I was surprised how little the space is. I used to think it was a fairly big motel.

TT: It's not that big.

TS: Okay. I know that you've engaged in a lot of philanthropy yourself, along with your wife, a GeoSurvey endowed scholarship in 2017 for students in the Southern Polytechnic College of Engineering and Engineering Technology. Do you want to talk about that?

TT: Well, that particular scholarship was created by my company, funded by the company out of a selfish need for employees, to be honest. We were so desperate for employees, and I suggested to the partners at the time, “Look, let’s get over there and set up an endowed scholarship and start connecting with students through that scholarship.” And that’s what we did.

TS: It’s for students majoring in surveying and mapping?

TT: That’s right.

TS: So, it’s for your company.

TT: It’s for the company 100 percent. We leveraged the foundation. We have now leveraged it into three or four quality, long-term employees that we hired out of the program, who rode our scholarship. It’s working like a charm. It’s been so good. Of course, it takes not just the scholarship. It takes involvement and work to be present, get in their face, meet with them, talk with them, and make connections. If you’re not, your competitor will be sitting at the table, and they’ll make that connection, and you’ll lose them. I hope Darrell [K.] Rochester watches this with Rochester Engineering [CEO of Rochester & Associates]. They also have a scholarship. He didn’t come to the last scholarship luncheon; so, I sat at the table with his recipient, gave them my card, and they’re coming to work for us. That’s how competitive it is for students. It’s very competitive.

TS: Well, it’s nice to know that our students have job offers when they get out.

TT: Right. Oh, they have their choice.

TS: Why don’t you talk about your wife, LaSona? I know she works in telecommunications and information technology and does a lot of philanthropy and community service.

TT: She raised our kids, first and foremost, and did such a wonderful job with that. They’re all very successful, and I think her crowning achievement is what she did with our children. Aside from that, she did have a career in technology with Cobb County Public Schools back in the MS-DOS [Microsoft Disk Operating System] days [1980s and 1990s], and the big and the hardwired networks and all of that protocol. She did very, very well with that. But there’s a side to her—an artsy side. She loves decorating, and she loves art. She understands the value of art in our community. Through our getting to know Dan and Sue Papp, Sue involved LaSona in decorating the dance theater, the choices made on colors and all of that. It was done out of trying to get us involved, but LaSona fell in love with Sue, and then she fell in love with Ivan [Pulinkala] through that effort.⁴

⁴ Dr. Pulinkala is KSU’s provost and executive vice president for academic affairs. He founded the program in Dance at KSU in 2005 and served as its director until 2012, then chaired the Department of Dance from 2012 to 2018. In 2018 he was appointed interim

One thing led to another, and she went down the same path I've done with the KSU community. She just fell in love with the people and the arts, and they asked her to be an ambassador for the College of the Arts. She has been with it now for four years, and I'm so proud of what all she's done with it. Last year she led the gala. She handled all of the auction side of the gala and pulled together all of the auction items. They raised a lot of money at that gala last year, and a lot of it was on her.

TS: And you've got a scholarship for the student in the College of the Arts?

TT: Yes. We endowed a scholarship [the LaSona and Trent Turk Endowed Scholarship] in the College of the Arts around her passion. So, now we have that connection to a student in the arts and try to get to know that student every year.

TS: Okay, good. And I understand she also volunteers with MUST Ministries.

TT: She has. Through the years, she keeps up one way or another a connection to the community. Her volunteer time now is with her elderly mother, and taking care of her. So, she wakes up every day literally serving others in some way. That basically is what she does. She wakes up and finds out who needs her and goes after it.

TS: Fabulous.

TT: And right now it's her mom.

TS: I know you've done at least one commencement address in 2017. Do you remember what you told them?

TT: Oh boy, it's all written down. I tried to stay on script. Sam Olens asked me to be a commencement speaker, and I was deeply honored to do that. He asked me because it was the last graduation where we would have people start out at Southern Poly, but graduate as KSU graduates. So, I coined the phrase "the hybrid graduate" that can take pride in both institutions. I was focused on that, and then I focused on very practical life application kind of thoughts that would help serve them in a career. I said what everybody says, "Find a passion and stick with it, and you don't have to go to work. If you find on Sunday you're looking forward to work on Monday, then you're in the right place."

TS: That's basically your story, I think, following your passion.

TT: Yes, and I told some stories from my history to give it some flavor.

dean, then in 2019 dean of the College of the Arts. In 2021 he became interim provost before being elevated to his current position in December 2022.

- TS: You've been a member of the Surveying and Mapping Society of Georgia [SAMSOG] for a long time now, since 1990. In 2008 you also became a board member of the Georgia Museum of Surveying and Mapping.
- TT: Yes, that one's now defunct. The guy that started it passed away. But he brought me on that board along with a few other surveyors to figure out what to do with all the stuff he had collected for his entire life. We found a place in Albany, Georgia, for it to move to.
- TS: Okay. So, that's the Thronateeska Heritage Center there. You've already mentioned the Marietta Kiwanis Club, but you've been a director.
- TT: I was on the board. I've been asked multiple times to be the president, and I just keep saying, "No." I just can't make the commitment for being on point every Thursday at 12:00 noon to run a meeting. It's a season of life thing. I've got things that prevent me from doing it.
- TS: Well, you got a Distinguished Alumni award from KSU in 2019.
- TT: Yes.
- TS: Why don't we wind up the interview by you talking about where the New KSU stands today? You said earlier that both campuses have benefited from the merger, and certainly the Marietta campus has grown mightily in number of students, and the campus is really pretty down there, I think.
- TT: I agree. We were in some ways floundering, and I guess the Board of Regents knew that. We had infrastructure problems. We had deferred maintenance on buildings. We had rats in dorms. I'm talking about the little rats, not the other ones. Those students—they can cause problems too. We had problems, and we were working on them, trying to fix them. We were a real estate income-reliant foundation as well. Unfortunately, we as a foundation had just been faced with having the rug ripped out from under us by the Board of Regents. I was on the foundation, and didn't quite understand what was happening, but we were forced to turn our assets over to the Board of Regents early and lost our revenue. All of a sudden we became a philanthropic foundation just like that. I'm telling you all of that to set the stage for [the merger], even though we couldn't see it. The merger was actually almost a relief because all of a sudden we were this behemoth now that can get the attention we need to fix that place. You can see what all has happened and gone on there over the last years since the merger and things planned. There's a big new building coming over the next two years just approved by the legislature. In fact, it's one of the only buildings approved this year in the legislature.

TS: There are a lot of students now. I guess everybody at Southern Poly now who is a student has come in since the consolidation took place. We're talking eight years ago now. They have no memory of the old SPSU, I guess.

TT: That's right.

TS: Do you think the legacy of SPSU is going to be preserved?

TT: Efforts are being made. Efforts are being made. I see them. We just recently had Poly Day, a matter of fact. I mean, that looks like a picture from it right up there [referring to a exhibit in the KSU Archives] with that logo on the front of that hornet. They had that logo down there. Anyway, efforts are being made, and I believe some semblance of the legacy is going to be maintained as long as you've got alumni out there that are willing to be passionate around it. And there are a lot of them out there. If it's crafted and done right, it could be they can find home for their passion, and we can leverage the benefit of having them here through their participation and donations. So, I think it needs to be acknowledged what percent of your alumni database is in fact green, right? It should be acknowledged and embraced.

TS: Yes, sure. You were on the presidential search committee in 2021-22. Of course, Kat Schwaig was interim president at that time.

TT: Yes.

TS: Talk about that search. I guess you sent three names down to the Board of Regents.

TT: That was one of the easiest search committees I've served on. [Norman J.] Norm Radow [former KSU Foundation chair and founder and CEO of The RADCO Companies] was on it with me. We were both trustee representatives on the committee. We had twelve maybe that we interviewed, many of them from academia trying to step up into leadership. We had a few deans, a few provosts, maybe, only one or two presidents, maybe, and Kat. It was just hands down that she was the natural choice. You won't hear a single negative if she is put in. So, that worked out well, and we're so glad that she ended up [president]. In my opinion, I think everybody is. She's the right person at the right time for here.

I'll say that about Pam [Whitten, president 2018-2021], too. Pam was the right person for that time. Pam did very well for us for her time. But she needed something else to fix. Pam—she's kind of like a fireman. She comes in, she finds problems, she gets right after them, and fixes them. There were some problems, and she made some great hires during her tenure. So, somehow things just work out. We were very, very, very surprised [when she left to become president of Indiana University]. It took us all by surprise.

- TS: Anything else you'd like to add about what could make the consolidation work better?
- TT: Not really. I think it's in the past now, and the things being done to pull the green along, I believe, are positive. I have some very simple things I think of often that I think would be really tremendous. One would be to have [alumni] events at athletic events for Southern Poly. I think they've done it a time or two where you have a suite or you have off to the side of the arena at a basketball game. We did that. Those are tremendous, and I think they are a wonderful tool to get passion going around sports. I think I've begun to understand the importance of having sports because it's that one part of the university everybody can cheer for no matter what part of the university you're in. It's your outward face to the world. So, if anything, I would encourage involvement in sports and promoting it, investing in it, and moving it forward.
- TS: Going to football games last year, I saw very few students up in the student section. Of course, they had a mediocre team last year, I guess, compared to what they had been in the past. But it didn't look like a whole lot of student interest in those free tickets.
- TT: I'm certainly no expert on this, but I believe getting the passion in the stands is just a time thing. When freshmen come in here, and they're brought into sports right off the bat—the more you become an experiential university where they come and live on campus versus coming back and forth from home, you're going to find students that are going to that [game] on Saturday. That's what they live for. But it's new. It's still so new.
- TS: Yes.
- TT: You know, as opposed to a UGA or a Tech where that's their culture, and they just have hordes of alumni coming. Students are only a little small section there. It's all the people that are graduated.
- TS: Yes. The basketball team certainly aroused a lot of interest [this year].
- TT: Oh my goodness. I'm excited about that.
- TS: Well, is there anything that you would like to talk about in this interview that I haven't asked you about?
- TT: You hit all the hotspots.
- TS: Or anything you want to add?
- TT: I'm just honored I was asked to be here, and I'm glad it's preserved.
- TS: Well, we're honored that you have come to talk to us.

TT: And I know where to go when I lose my memory to read about myself.

TS: Listen to your interview.

TT: It's kind of scary. My mother has dementia, and she's lost her memory. I joke with my wife that I'm going to write a letter to myself to remind me of who I was if it were to happen to me. I don't have to do that now. I got it done.

TS: All right, thank you very much.

TT: Oh, yes, my honor, Tom.

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