

PRESERVING OUR HISTORY: ROTARY CLUB OF GREENSBORO
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: DONALD W. CAMERON

INTERVIEWER: KATHELENE MCCARTY SMITH

DATE: May 23, 2008

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

KS: My name is Kathelene Smith. This is May 23, and I am in the office of Dr. Don Cameron at Guilford Community College, and we are here for an oral history interview. Thank you so much for meeting with me this morning, Dr. Cameron.

DC: Thank you.

KS: Let's start off with telling me when and where you were born.

DC: I was born in Greensboro, North Carolina, September 18, 1943.

KS: Can you tell me a little about growing up?

DC: Well, I grew up in the small town of Robbins, North Carolina. I went to school there, and I graduated from high school in 1961.

KS: Tell me a little about your family and your home life growing up.

DC: Well, my father was a truck driver and my mother stayed at home. And so, you know, that was a very positive experience.

KS: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

DC: I have one brother, and that's it.

KS: So, growing up, what were your favorite subjects in school?

DC: Well, since I was a physical education major in school and had come out of an athletic background; playing baseball, basketball, and all that in high school, I had planned to become a coach, and so I loved anything that had to do with Physical Education.

KS: So when did you graduate?

DC: In 1961.

KS: In 1961. Is there anything else you'd like to share about growing up in North Carolina?

DC: I enjoyed growing up in North Carolina. It was just a lot of fun. I had a great experience.

KS: Now when you graduated from high school, what did you do next?

DC: Well, I went to Wingate Junior College. Went there for two years and then, of course, transferred to Atlantic Christian College in Wilson, North Carolina, and finished there and went into teaching and coaching.

KS: Great. So you majored again in physical education in college?

DC: I did. I did. Majored in physical education in college.

KS: Now, how else were your college experiences? Were they fun?

DC: Well, yep, I had a great time in college. If I had to relive any years, it would probably be my college years. I just had a great time.

KS: Any other events you recall from your college days?

DC: Well, I think one of them was that I met my wife. That was a great experience. We met when we were in college.

KS: And tell me about your wife.

DC: Well, she was a freshman when I was a senior and we met that year. And of course, when I graduated, we married that summer. Then after we were married, she went on back to school to finish and all. So, again, we've been married forty-two years.

KS: That's great! Good for you.

DC: It's been a good experience.

KS: So were you involved with any campus organizations specifically?

DC: In college? Well, I was – not really. The athletic club that they had there. Also, I was Vice-President of the senior class. I was involved with that.

KS: So tell me what you did after college.

DC: Well, after college, I went to work teaching and coaching in Moore County. And so, you know, right after school, it was going to work – really fulfilling my dreams of what I wanted to do and that was to teach and coach, and I did that. And, of course, I got into community college work in about 1971, I guess, and have been in that ever since.

KS: So, would you like to share anything about that?

DC: Just that I started out teaching in a two year college and became a Director of Continuing Education and following that, I moved to Spartanburg, South Carolina, in 1977 and became Vice President for Academic Affairs at the college there for four years. And then came to Guilford Tech Community College in 1981, as VP for Instruction, Executive Vice President. Stayed in that position nine years, then became President.

KS: Well, let's talk about Greensboro, your experiences here through the years. Remembering back through different events – were you here, for example, when the sit-ins occurred or anything like that?

DC: No. I was only born in Greensboro. I was here for seven days. [Both laugh] Then my mother went back to Moore County. My mother and father spent most of their adult life in Greensboro and so my father moved to Robbins to become a truck driver, and when my mother was ready to have me, she wanted to come back to Greensboro. There are not a lot of hospitals in Robbins so she came back to Greensboro where family was and everything. So I was born in Greensboro and then went right back to Moore County. So I really did not grow up in Greensboro.

KS: So when did you move back to Greensboro permanently?

DC: In 1981.

KS: In 1981.

DC: Right.

KS: I see. So what are your impressions of Greensboro since you've been here? How have you seen it change?

DC: Well, it's been a tremendous transition. The change has been, you know, having the leading manufacturers in textiles, like Burlington Industries and Cone Mills and Guilford Mills – and they're pretty much gone now. And then seeing that transition occur in the whole biotech, transportation, logistics, aviation – there's been a tremendous economic change in the city of Greensboro.

KS: Do you see any kind of social changes?

DC: Well, you mean social changes such as?

KS: Just any kind of difference, for example, in race relations, political differences since you've moved here?

DC: I can't say that I've noticed any differences in that, I mean, we've started with the sit-in movements and, you know, back in the sixties, and I guess Greensboro has always been known for being progressive in race relations. But I haven't really seen, what I would say, are political changes in that area. I think we still have our issues and I think we are still dealing with those issues; we have for years. I don't think we've solved our race relations issues. They're still out there.

KS: Now, have you been involved in local politics?

DC: No. I don't get involved with politics.

KS: You stay out of that? [Laughs]

DC: Yep.

KS: Well what about philanthropy? Have you been involved in particular philanthropic causes or volunteerism in Greensboro?

DC: Well, you know, I chaired the United Way campaign, that's one of the things, in 2004. So, I did do that. I'm involved in the Greensboro Partnership, involved in the Greensboro Economic Development Alliance. I chaired the Y campaign back in 2001 or 2002, something like that, to raise money for the Y [YMCA] and the United Way. So those are things I've been involved with from a philanthropic standpoint.

KS: Well I know that you've been very supportive of the local economy and you spoke the other day at the Rotary Club about what you see in Greensboro's future, especially connected with the college. Can you talk a little bit about that?

DC: Well, I think from the future what we stand to really put a lot of our energy and efforts in is the nanotechnology school at A & T [North Carolina A & T] and UNCG [The University of North Carolina at Greensboro]. I think that's going to drive our economy. I think Guilford Tech Community College will have a key role to play in that as we train the technicians that the nanotechnology professionals are going to need in those areas. So, I look at aviation as another area with FedEx coming in the summer of '09. With Honda Aircraft building their world headquarters here, I think aviation is going to play a major role in the future. I think logistics will be a major area in our future as Greensboro as we look at New Breed Corporation. Again, FedEx falls into that whole area of logistics. You take Old Dominion, that's a global leader in logistics today. I think

those areas – be it aviation, be it logistics, be it biotechnology, be it nanotechnology – I see those major industrial clusters driving our economic future in Greensboro.

KS: So, do you want to see Greensboro grow? Because I know a lot of people kind of lament the fact that it is growing.

DC: I've heard that for years, about it not growing. Well, Kathelene, I've got to tell you. That's not the way life is. You're either growing, or you're going backwards. Take the town I grew up in, Robbins. It didn't grow. It's been a thousand people for a hundred years. It hasn't grown, therefore, nothing new is happening in Robbins. In our life, we don't like change. We resist change, but we know it's going to change, but we don't want it to change, but it's going to change. Greensboro is going to grow. Now I do hope it's controlled growth. I do hope it's growth that we manage. I don't like growth just for growth purposes but I think if you're not moving forward, then you start moving backwards. You tell me anywhere you've ever seen a city, a social society, or anything else, stay the same forever. It doesn't happen. You are either going backwards or you're going forwards. Now let's move forward, and let's grow, but let's control it, manage it, and let's be sure we can provide the services – that's police, fire, water, sewer, etc. – that the people need in a reasonable way. I think you can do that and I think that the growth that we're having in Greensboro right now – I think that there was a piece in the paper this morning that said we had grown like 2.1 or 2.3 percent or something like that and I think that is manageable growth that we can have. But I know that there are people who do not want to see us grow. I regret that, and we are all entitled to our opinions.

KS: Do you think it's sentimentality?

DC: I think it's complacency. I think we get complacent. We like things the way they are, you know. If you're just complacent, and you just sit there, you don't have to face barriers every day or obstacles in your life. That is what we would all like life to be, but that's not the way life is. There are always going to be obstacles and barriers. I think we just get complacent and we just don't want to face any more barriers or challenges in life. Yet, that's what we have to do, and that's the way life is.

KS: Well, I know some people are concerned about the water shortage. I've heard a lot about that – whether our water will hold up for a growing city or if our roads will hold up.

DC: Well look, our water has been taken care of for the next fifty years, once we build the pump station at Randleman Dam. Now it took us forty or fifty years to get Randleman Dam [Both laugh] and we had water shortages up that point. And you certainly would not have gotten the Miller Brewery or a company like that that uses enormous amounts of water to come here. But now that we have Randleman

Dam, or Randleman Lake, it's full and that's supposedly is to take care of us for the next forty to fifty years. So, I don't think – but we've got to build a pump, and that's all sorts of political ramifications with that. But that will be worked out. And once that's worked out and it's built, then our water situation shall be improved.

KS: So, on the two hundredth anniversary of Greensboro, what are your reflections on its past, present, and future?

DC: I think as we move into our two hundredth anniversary, I think Greensboro is still exciting. I think if you go back in history and you look at Greensboro, we have a rich history. If you go back to the Quakers, if you really go back in there, you go back to the Guilford Battleground, there's a rich history there. I think our city has a rich history in the past. I think what you see today a lot reflects the Quakerism that established our city. We still try to build consensus, we try to please everybody, we try to bring everybody into the fold, and I think that goes back to our history. And I think that has a lot to do with where we are today because that philosophy is still out there in our community, and I think – I don't think it is good or bad, it is just the way our city grew up. And I think we have to accept that and as we move forward, I think you're going to see a great deal of excitement and enthusiasm happening because – you know, you tell me other areas today that are bringing in – I know Dell is in Forsyth County, but it's probably closer to downtown High Point as it is to Greensboro; probably 40 percent of the workforce is from Guilford County. So you look at Dell coming in, you look at Honda Aircraft putting their world headquarters here, you look at FedEx coming in here with 1500 people, you look at the expansions of many of our companies today, like TIMCO [Aviation Services] is expanding and you take the RF Micro Devices. Yes, they let some people off, but they're still employing 1,800 people. And so, you take those companies that are driving our local economy, and I think that Greensboro has a bright future.

Now are we at sort of at a stumbling block right now? Sure. Has our poverty rate gone up from a year or two ago? Yes, it's gone up. Has our median income gone down? Yes. But, those are challenges. Those aren't just bad things happening to our community. It's adjustments that are going to have to be made, to correct those pieces; and the way you correct them is to have better educated people, better trained people, so we will have companies coming in here with higher paying jobs, and that's what has to drive our future.

KS: At your school, you certainly have your finger on the pulse of the community. It seems you have a lot of forethought concerning what kind of training the community is going to need in the next ten, twenty, fifty years.

DC: I think we have our finger on the pulse, and that's because we stay close to business and industry. And we meet with business and industry leaders. It's just like we had our fiftieth anniversary back in April. We had a symposium on Friday

morning – we had 180 business leaders around the table sharing with us what they think Guilford Tech Community College should be in the next ten, twenty, thirty, forty years, whatever it is. And they gave us some great insight and we will soon use this information to help build our strategic plan for the future.

KS: So you're directly meeting their immediate and future needs.

DC: Well, we like to say we're developing a plan and we hope we are able to meet it.
[Laughs]

KS: That's amazing.

DC: Yes.

KS: Now, when did you join the Rotary Club?

DC: In 1981, no, 1982.

KS: Tell me about your experience with the Rotary Club.

DC: Well, I'm probably not as active in Rotary as a lot of people are. You know, I was a probably a little more active earlier on I am probably not as active now as I used to be.

KS: Do you have anything to share about Rotary Club – about what they do for the community?

DC: Well I think, you know, there is no doubt about the Rotary Club of Greensboro. They do a tremendous job. If you take a look at what they became involved in with the polio movement, you know there's been a tremendous amount of money raised, and the leadership that our club provided was just astronomical. In my opinion that was a dedicated movement, a dedicated force. If you look at a lot of the projects that our Greensboro Rotary Club has undertaken, they are a driver in our community; all the participants. There are probably 300 plus members and, they're concerned citizens, they are leaders in our community, they care about this community and I think the Club represents what these leaders want this community to be. And, you know, I'm very high on the Greensboro Rotary Club, I think they do and super, super job.

KS: Now I want to ask you, do you have any children?

DC: I have two children; one son and one daughter and both are gainfully employed.
[Both laugh]

KS: Good. Well is there anything else that we haven't covered in our interview already that you'd like to mention?

DC: Well, I think you've done a good job of asking the questions. I can't think of anything right now.

KS: Okay, well I sure appreciate you sitting down with me this morning. Thank you very much Dr. Cameron.

DC: Thank you.

[End of Interview]

[End Tape 1, Side A]