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Don and Jan O'Dowd

Santa Barbara, California

Jeannie Phillips, interviewer

Leslie McCartney, interviewer and videographer

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[President of the University of Alaska from 1984-1990]

Jeannie Phillips asked Dr. Don O'Dowd what attracted him to the University of Alaska president's position. Don O'Dowd said he was always intrigued by the north and the arctic when he was a child. He grew up in New Hampshire and attended Dartmouth College which had a historic tie to the arctic. The college had a northern orientation. He didn't know anything about the University of Alaska until he became a candidate for the position. Phillips asked him how he found out about the position. O'Dowd said he was an executive vice-chancellor of a state university in New York. David Resone was one of a half dozen important people in higher education at the time and nominated him for the position. O'Dowd said he wasn't aware that there was an opening at the university. At that point they had been in New York for about four and a half years. He commented on the operation of state colleges in the state of New York. O'Dowd said he thought he should look at the position at the University of Alaska. Phillips commented on the autonomy of the University of Alaska. O'Dowd said that was an appeal. Phillips asked Mrs. O'Dowd how she felt about Fairbanks. Mrs. O'Dowd said that was interesting because she was a native of the state of Washington and she had been angling for the opportunity to go west. She said he overshot a little bit. She was agreeable to the idea. It was better weather wise than Albany, New York. She was happy to go out west. Phillips asked if their children were at an age where they would come with them. Mrs. O'Dowd said they were all grown up and fine with the idea of them going to Fairbanks.

Leslie McCartney asked if there were other people in competition for the position. O'Dowd thought there were three or four candidates. Mrs. O'Dowd said they had a schedule that was five or six days. They went to Nome, Bethel and other locations. Mrs. O'Dowd said there was a rumor that the last person standing was going to get the job. Phillips said they still do it that way currently. Mrs. O'Dowd said it is important to know what the state is like. McCartney asked what their impressions were of the communities. O'Dowd said it is hard to remember, but they were fascinating places. From Nome they flew up the Kobuk and stopped at one of the really small communities.

Phillips asked when he took over the position did he get to meet with Jay Barton, his predecessor. O'Dowd said no Barton had gone. Phillips asked what the challenges he perceived at the university were. O'Dowd said when he arrived he didn't have an idea how the university was functioning. He said you learn that as you went along. At that time the university was very well funded. Oil money was flowing

and the budgets were generous. Phillips said in 85 and 86 it changed. Phillips said her memory of him was getting them through a crisis and asked him to share the strategies he used to get them through. Mrs. O'Dowd said he was looking forward to using all of the things he had learned from the various places they had been and felt he knew how to do these things. O'Dowd said the oil prices had tanked and state funding began to go down. He saw it as an opportunity to do some things that should have been done previously. The university had expanded in a way that didn't make much sense. They were more politically driven than programmatically or educationally driven. It was a chance to remake the university into a more rational enterprise than it was at the time he got there. He said you couldn't do that in good times. You couldn't cut back staff or programs during good times since there would be so much resistance. In a period of crisis you can do a lot. They assembled a small group of people in a working group. They met for several weeks trying to figure out what the options were. They put together a plan and he announced it on Halloween at UAA. Phillips said she remembered the public forums and appreciated the involvement of so many constituents. O'Dowd commented about the time limitations put on those testifying and the hours of meetings. He said the community colleges felt they were losing local control. Phillips asked about the legislature. O'Dowd said for the most part the legislature was neutral on this and Wendy Redman and Brian Rogers were in contact with the legislators. O'Dowd commented about the merger of the Anchorage Community College. They could not have merged the other community colleges and left ACC standing. They had three personnel offices in Anchorage for the different groups and it didn't make a lot of sense. They merged all of them.

Phillips said at one point O'Dowd was UA president and UAA chancellor at the same time. O'Dowd said Marv Looney was the chancellor and he didn't work out. They were trying to bring the UAA and ACC faculty into one unit. Don Behrend and O'Dowd went down to get that done. O'Dowd said he took over UAA and Don was vice-president. They spent six months doing that and had wonderful faculty help. Phillips commented about the unions at ACC. O'Dowd said there was a standoff between him and the unions. Phillips said it was resolved in the courts. O'Dowd said it was the leadership there that were threatened. Their role was in jeopardy and they fought back. Phillips asked about the appointment of Don Behrend as chancellor at UAA. O'Dowd said he did that and consulted widely with the faculty, students, trustees, and others and got high consensus on making that appointment without a search. Phillips commented about Behrend who was her boss at the time. O'Dowd said Behrend was academic vice-chancellor in the system and had come up from environmental science and forestry from the state university of New York. O'Dowd had recruited Behrend.

Phillips asked O'Dowd if there was anything major that he would have done differently. O'Dowd said it interests him that none of the changes they made have been reversed. Lee Gorsuch was an outspoken critic of the restructuring and later became the chancellor of UAA. He didn't make changes to the restructuring and he was in a position to reverse a lot of things they did. O'Dowd said bringing together the oceans and fisheries didn't work for a while. It was a personality problem and not a conceptual problem. There had been four different groups at one time. There were too many separate groups all going in their own direction. They created one college and he hopes it works together more effectively.

Phillips asked O'Dowd to talk about his relationship with the Board of Regents. They talked about the different members of the Board of Regents at that time including Ed Rasmuson, Ann Parrish, Ruth

Burnett, Tom Miklautsch, Roy Huhndorf, Herb Lang, Gordon Evans, and Don Abel. O'Dowd said it was an excellent Board and a pleasure to work with. O'Dowd said they were all good people. They had some problems such as the student regent who got into a bit of trouble. Phillips asked if he had any influence on Board appointments. O'Dowd said he doesn't remember playing any role in that. Bill Sheffield and Steve Cowper were the two governors during his time as president at the university.

Phillips asked if any of their restructuring did not work. O'Dowd said he doesn't remember anything that he thought should have been reversed. He said they had one shot to make as many changes all at one time. They were trying to fix everything that could be better. Phillips said a subsequent president dealt with a lot of the funding cuts across the board which weakens everything. Phillips said the lateral cuts hurt a lot more. O'Dowd said they were preparing for a fifteen percent cut in funding. That is what they were being threatened with at the time they made those decisions. It turned out that cuts were not that bad. Phillips said in the present scenario there are some cuts that are considered the sacred cow of the university such as athletics and KUAC. On the list for next year are the extended campuses. O'Dowd said in Anchorage he remembers swimming and something else were considered and the parents and students complained. The Board of Regents backed down. This happens everywhere in the country. He didn't remember KUAC being an issue at all. He has been reading about the proposal to create a single university. Phillips asked if that was ever a consideration for him to return to a single institution. O'Dowd said no, he never remembers talking about it. He can't imagine how you would do it without causing a lot of auxiliary problems. Phillips asked what was going on with the research units with these cuts. O'Dowd said he doesn't think they ever discussed any reduction in their research. A lot of it was outside funding. There may have been a percentage reduction in support of research. Most of the research was at that time at UAF. He moved WAMI to UAA because Pat O'Rourke said he would eliminate WAMI and use that money for other things so O'Dowd moved it to UAA. Phillips talked about physically moving the WAMI program down to UAA. The extension courses at the military bases were also moved to UAA to protect it. O'Dowd felt they had an obligation to keep them. Leslie McCartney asked about cuts to cooperative extension and agricultural farm. O'Dowd said there were some cutbacks, but mostly in Anchorage and the Mat-Su. O'Dowd said when they came they were growing barley in Fairbanks.

Phillips asked about the community rural campuses and the decision not to close them at that time. O'Dowd said he didn't remember a lot of discussion about closing those campuses. They weren't inclined to close them, but they were looking at making them more efficient. He recalls that they were all separately accredited at that time. There was a lot of overhead to serve the students there. They were looking at reducing the need for a lot of administrative overhead and continue to serve the people in those communities. The tradeoff was to permit them to have advanced courses or to access such courses. Phillips asked if there was a lot of push back from the accreditation agency. O'Dowd said he doesn't remember that as a problem. They just did it without talking to the accreditation people. There was no objection or challenge from them. Phillips said the University of Alaska is very unique in the nation in that there is a range from community colleges up to Ph.D. programs all under one institution. O'Dowd said that was their initiative to do that. They weren't sure about how well it would work. They did go to the accreditation agency and explained their financial constraints.

Phillips asked Mrs. O'Dowd what her memories of this period in their lives. Mrs. O'Dowd said it was thoroughly enjoyable. It was different and challenging. It was in contrast to Albany, New York. Albany is an old community and a newcomer is considered a newcomer for at least a generation. Alaska was very welcoming. She was active in groups. The wife of the president was always a member of the League of Women Voters. She was immediately heading up a committee on roads which she knew nothing about. She also went to the University Press and volunteered her time. She ended up editing a book on East Greenlandic language. The author translated many of the folk tales from Greenland. She was also involved in the University Women's Association. Irene Payton was one of her close friends and they kept in touch.

Phillips asked O'Dowd to talk about some of the people he worked with at the university including Darrellene Myers. O'Dowd said she was a superb colleague in the office. Mrs. O'Dowd said everything was secure with Darrellene. O'Dowd said she was politically knowledgeable and would offer some advice. She was helpful with information when he first arrived. Phillips said her unique title was Confidential Secretary to the President. They talked about how Darrellene dealt with modern technology. O'Dowd said he dictated everything and Darrellene would edit it. Phillips asked if he worked with Sherman Carter. O'Dowd said yes he was distinctive. Phillips said he was the vice president for finance. O'Dowd said he was the toughest, meanest and most effective person he has ever worked with. He could get the job done and when he first arrived they desperately needed him. He said from a president's point of view you have to have a good business officer. If the finances are in trouble then everybody is in trouble. Brian Rogers took over after Carter resigned. O'Dowd mentioned Bill Kauffman who was general counsel. Astrid de Perry was the general counsel before him who was unqualified for the position. Margaret Morehouse was in Human Relations. Phillips said he worked with some incredible regents including Ed Rasmuson. O'Dowd said he knew Elmer Rasmuson quite well. Ed Rasmuson was supportive and helpful.