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Bernadette Beljan interview conducted on November 23, 1983 about the Boonshoft School of Medicine at Wright State University

Bernadette Beljan

James St. Peter

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WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY
School of Medicine Oral History Project

Interview date: November 21, 1983

Interviewer: James St. Peter

Interviewee: Bernadette Beljan
Wife of John Beljan, Founding Dean WSU School of Medicine

James St. Peter: The date is November 21st, 1983. My name is James St. Peter and this is an interview with Mrs. John Beljan. This interview is a part of a series of interviews in an oral history of the Wright State University School of Medicine. Mrs. Beljan, how long have you been married to Dr. Beljan?

Bernadette Beljan: We've been married for thirty-one years. We were married when John was a sophomore in medical school.

J.S.: How long had you been at Davis before he got the position here?

B.B.: We were in Davis for eight years, almost nine, then moved to Dayton.

J.S.: What were your activities as dean's wife in California?

B.B.: He was not dean in California. He had various positions, but was not dean at California. But I was very active with the auxiliaries there and with the medical school. He was the second faculty person at Davis so we more or less knew how the school was being built, and Mary Tupper, the dean's wife, and I were very very close.

J.S.: When Dr. Beljan got the position as founding dean here in Dayton, at Wright State, what was your first reaction?

B.B.: Well when the position came up, and John said Dayton, Ohio, I had asked him what is a Dayton, Ohio to tell you truthfully. But found out that Dayton, Ohio was a very acceptable place after say three visits here and we really were looking forward to the challenge, mainly because of the community people that we had met and the university people that we had met.

J.S.: What was your first reaction upon coming to Dayton, Ohio in your first visit?

B.B.: Coming from really kind of an arid, flat area –what Davis was – I enjoyed what people over here say, we have no hills, but I did enjoy the hills, and the trees. The established trees.

J.S.: How difficult was it getting settled in here?

B.B.: For myself, none whatsoever, it was difficult for the children. They were teenagers at the time. The two boys settled in extremely well, because they were sports-oriented and immediately got into sports within the Centerville area. Our daughter, who was going into the eleventh grade, was very, very upset, and as girls go, it was difficult for her and for us.

J.S.: So you have three children.

B.B.: Three.

J.S.: How did the boys find, did they go to school at Centerville High School?

B.B.: When we first came here one was at Hadley Watts, he was in the eighth grade and then John R. started in the ninth, and then Anne, I guess she was in the tenth grade. They were eighth, ninth, and tenth grade.

J.S.: What was your role as dean's wife when John was developing the program?

B.B.: John and I worked very closely together. We talked about this before we came here and we felt that this should be a cooperation both of us and teamwork, so it was one of the things – anything I had to do – one of the things was helping in recruitment, not recruiting the people, the medical school was doing this, however it was entertaining the people that were coming here. Usually the person being recruited would come here for one visit, the next visit the spouse would come and that's when I took over. And it was showing them around the community, introducing them to a realtor, having lunches either in my home or taking them out to lunches with other women with the university and community, to have them get an all-around picture of really what Dayton was like.

J.S.: Is this the type of thing that usually happens when a faculty member comes into a new area?

B.B.: It did for us and I think it worked out very very well.

J.S.: So then you would just apply the same to other faculty members that came in?

B.B.: Yes.

J.S.: Were you involved in that right off the bat?

B.B.: Yes, let me tell you our household goods on a Wednesday and the Friday I had my first cocktail party in this home, told people that they should not go upstairs and they were only in one area of the house because there were boxes around. So after that there were usually two to three cocktail parties or gatherings, social gatherings of some kinds, and usually in our home, and then a dinner at a restaurant. I couldn't handle dinners that early but it was always a social gathering in our home.

J.S.: When did you feel you finally were "at home" here at Wright State, in Dayton?

B.B.: In Dayton, I think I felt at home that Friday after I arrived, when we came here on that Wednesday.

J.S.: That's pretty fast.

B.B.: Very fast. When you start seeing people and meeting people, when I began meeting the Dayton people. And of course I did get a listing of the various people in the different specialties because this was, if you had a surgeon and you usually had the people from surgery, if you had internal medicine it was that, so I did have a list of those people and I just began rotating them through. So when you see them that often you are home in a hurry.

J.S.: Did you have a social secretary who helped you out with the various lists?

B.B.: Not at the beginning. No I was it, because I was no one here whatsoever.

J.S.: Did you keep track of Dr. Beljan's appointments at the same time?

B.B.: No, the office took care of that, but I did all of the social work for a good six months, those first six months. After that there was Liz Lewis was here and so Liz was helping me out with a few things.

J.S.: What was her position?

B.B.: I don't remember right now.

J.S.: Something similar to a social secretary at that time?

B.B.: Yes, and community events and things like that.

J.S.: You mention as a part of your activities in the area, the auxiliaries and the hospitals. Let's take the auxiliaries first. What kind of auxiliaries do you mean?

B.B.: The Montgomery County Medical society auxiliary, and the Greene County Medical Associates auxiliary. In Montgomery County I had a full membership which was for national, state, and local dues and with Greene County it was an associate membership, which I paid only the county dues. But worked really on quite a few activities with all of them.

J.S.: What kind of activities?

B.B.: Money-making, I helped with the scholarship program at Wright State University, and that's an ongoing scholarship fund right now with the foundation. And at Greene it was somewhat similar in their scholarship, mainly for health related fields.

J.S.: Besides fundraising, what other kind of activities were you involved in?

B.B.: As far as what? Auxiliaries? Just about anything that they had asked me to do. I was Vice President for membership in Montgomery at one point. In Greene I could not hold any office since I was an associate member, but it was just about anything that was asked of. For various dinners, for dinners including spouses, and so forth.

J.S.: Were these auxiliaries basically the wives of the physicians?

B.B.: Yes.

J.S.: What about auxiliaries outside of the Green and Montgomery county areas?

B.B.: While John was dean I did not feel it was proper to join any of the, say various hospitals or health related fields, because the School of Medicine was associated with so many hospitals at that point and it just wouldn't be fair to single out one hospital from another. So I had declined the hospitals that asked me to join their volunteer work and their auxiliaries.

J.S.: Was that the only place where the political situation kind of affected the way to deal with the organizations?

B.B.: I think so. I felt I had to be very careful at that point not to single out one specific hospital. And when I asked John about it he thought that if I wanted to do it that I should do it but myself I didn't feel it was politically good to do so.

J.S.: Did this element of political caution carry over into your work with the auxiliaries?

B.B.: No, not with the auxiliaries, because this is something entirely different. Auxiliaries take in all of the medical people within the community. So it had really nothing to do with Wright State School of Medicine. I must say though that I did approach auxiliaries and other auxiliaries within the Ohio area had approached me wanting to know more about Wright State University, so I did extend invitations to them to come and visit the school and set up luncheons, which some were self-sustained where the auxiliaries did pay for their own luncheons and had always asked John to come by and talk, and a few listened around the assistant dean, Bob Jewett at that point would come and talk to the group and we had a slideshow that we would show to them and so forth.

J.S.: How much of Dr. Beljan did you see at that time?

B.B.: Not very much.

J.S.: What was it like?

B.B.: It was very exciting, it really and truly was. To come here, and in fact I must say I just thought about that, we came here and our household goods were put in the house, we sat in the middle of the family room, right there on two boxes, and said "Aren't you scared?" and both of us were very frightened at that time, and saying "What are we doing here?" because essentially at that point he was the only person associated with the medical school. So it was frightening for

that one evening for a few minutes. But after that it was really tremendous, to see something like what we have now grow from just one little seed.

J.S.: When you were talking about the recruitment of the faculty, and your interactions with the spouses, how many faculty would you say you entertained?

B.B.: Well, all of the main chairmanships, that is for certain. All of the chairmanships in each department. Are you talking about each evening, or just total?

J.S.: Total.

B.B.: Oh, I couldn't even wager a guess because sometimes there might be ten or twelve here, sometimes twelve or fifteen, but we did try to do this in smaller groups. At Davis we found that with some of the recruitment there were very very large groups that the dean there was entertaining. And it was most difficult for the person who was being recruited to meet everyone. And my thought, my feeling was that we want whoever it is that is coming in to at least meet everyone that is at his recruiting social gathering. So we kept our things small. We might have twelve or fifteen people here for a social hour, but then there may be only four or six of us going out to dinner together. So a lot of questions could be answered, both to the recruiting person and the spouse. And I say that because we did have some females coming in so there was the male spouse.

J.S.: How did you handle that?

B.B.: Very easily. Actually the same way. Well, no, not really. Because with the male, I think I would feel more about what are you looking for, your job? Maybe I'm still a sexist person, but I still start feeling like what your job is and so forth. But it usually worked out extremely well. And then too, we were recruiting male M.D.'s or P.H.D.'s coming in with female M.D.'s and P.H.D.'s, so that was sometimes a little on the different side. Because I would be taking the spouse that was not being recruited to other places within his or her field, and that was very interesting also.

J.S.: What kinds of things did you come up with?

B.B.: Oh, let's say people in theatre, one coming in here as an M.D., and the wife is in the theatre. So this is where Ed Basset came in handy extremely well, and too in music and things like that. So I started from the university and then worked down into the community and found names and got interviews for them, and that was very interesting and self satisfying too.

J.S.: Why's that?

B.B.: Because we got to recruit the person that John felt was the best fit for the job at the university and I felt I had something to do with the spouse, making them feel happy and finding there is a place for them also in the Dayton community. And I think that was very self-satisfying for me.

J.S.: Were there any particular faculty that you and Dr. Beljan felt had to be recruited especially hard, that had to be convinced more than others?

B.B.: Oh yes.

J.S.: How did you do that?

B.B.: It was by follow-up telephone calls that I made to the wife, and from what I can think of right now it was mainly the wife that did not want to come. And I know I can think of two or three instances where the wives did not want to come for various reasons. But I would follow up with a telephone call, first of all with a letter, and a telephone call, and maybe another telephone call and a note, and through both, either the note or the telephone call they would give me even more questions about Dayton and it was mainly because of the small children, the schools, this type of thing. And that's another thing that I did do, I did get information from all of the schools in the area, on north, south, east, and west. And the principals of the schools were very very fine and very cooperative, they'd give me brochures, and when I did have people in, they did say just let us know ahead of time if they want to come and go through the schools, which I did. So this was something that was a follow-up. And I would send them information on the schools, and theatre, on Cincinnati, since some wives felt Dayton was too small. So I did have information of Cincinnati and all of the doings in Cincinnati, the restaurants, etc.

J.S.: Would you care to elaborate on some of the people you felt you had to convince more than others?

B.B.: Yes. In the department of surgery, and it was mainly that the wife was kind of holding back on moving to Dayton. He was here alone once and we had a social gathering at our home, and took him out to dinner. And the second visit the wife came, and I had taken her around, drove her all through the areas, had made an appointment for her to see a realtor who could get her more information on this, and nothing was happening so I followed up with a letter, stating that if there was anything further I could do, and heard nothing from her. Called her on the phone then, about two weeks later, and she did have some information that she wanted on schools so I did mail her information, I went to the schools in the various areas and I mailed her information on the schools. They came back a while later, and I had twelve people, twelve women and they were all from the surgery department, from the various locales, north, east, south, and west, from the Dayton community, and I had them all for lunch so she could really open up and ask questions, which she did. She really and truly did. After that, the two of them came out again and the two of them went out with a realtor, and I think it was about three weeks later, so this was in the interim of maybe two months, two and a half months. He declined the position. Which was very sad because he would have done very very well from what my husband said, as far as in the department of surgery, and she would have done well, and I think that we did lose a good person, but you win some, and you lose some.

J.S.: Sounds like two months was a lot of effort.

B.B.: Oh yes. And you do this, because I felt that I had to, this was a part of my job.

J.S.: That's an interesting way you put that, your job. Did you feel you had an official function in the development?

B.B.: I really feel very close to the development, yes. As I said beforehand, before we came, I kind of had a feeling of what it was going to be like to build a new medical school, since we were seeing a new one being built, but I never thought that I could do it in that particular position, as a dean's wife. So we talked about it and then finally I did say to John, "If you do take the position, I would like to take kind of an official position with you, I would like to help." Because I'd like to see this through.

J.S.: How did you perceive Dr. Beljan's activities? Besides the fact that you felt it was a mutual challenge?

B.B.: I think when he came here, he really took the bull by the horns, so to speak. And I'm very, very proud of him. I think he did an exceptional job, and not only within the university, and this is something that I keep saying, the university and the community, and this is something that we feel is, you need the town and the gown in whatever you do, to succeed. As far as building any kind of relationship with the university and the community. And I think this is something that John should really be proud of, and I feel proud of him, to jump right into the community, and meet the community people and more or less challenge them to help the university and the School of Medicine to grow.

J.S.: Dr. Beljan has the reputation of being a straight shooter. Did you feel that that ever carried over into your activities as the dean's wife? And how?

B.B.: Yes. Particularly in recruitment. If there were things that people had asked me about Dayton, and of course I got this all of the time, in driving people around you take them through Oakwood, Kettering, Centerville, Washington Township, and so forth, and then at that point, John had an office at the VA, so I would always drive them going to the VA, with the boarded up houses, and this type of thing. So this is where I think I was straight shooting with them. That there are lovely places and there are not too nice places and would always point out too, every city has them. Every community has them. Too with a few other things about, a few of the spouses would ask me, "Do you expect me to do what you're doing?" And I would say, "If your husband is the chairman of the department, I feel that perhaps you should have some doing with it, but it really is up to you." But this is my feeling, so this is where I feel that I was straight shooting with them, in ways. Can you think of any other ways?

J.S.: When Dr. Beljan was say, going through a liaison committee or medical education visit, how would he react to those at home? Would he maintain the same outwardly calm demeanor that he maintained at the medical school?

B.B.: Oh, now that's... now you want me to straight shoot. I think when he'd come home, he'd relax a little more and maybe not be as calm as what he was at the medical school, but I think that's natural for any man, any woman. You've got to have that, and present yourself to the people working with you, because if you start falling apart, the rest just tumbles down. But he would open up to me and I think I was a good sounding board for him too.

J.S.: Sounding board and safety belt and...

B.B.: Yes. Exactly. I hope that I was, and I really feel that I have been all through our married life.

J.S.: What was your perception when he took the role of vice president for health affairs and then ultimately finally became the provost?

B.B.: When he became vice president for health affairs, I was very happy about it because he was wearing too many hats as dean and life was getting very very hectic. So it was kind of nice having him home for dinner, two or three nights a week, rather than one or two nights a week. And he more or less regained his, what should I say, stamina or got caught up. That's what I wanted to say, got caught up with paperwork and private work and so forth. But then, only holding that title as vice president for health affairs, my feeling is I think he was getting very bored. There was not enough to do. So when he took on the position of provost, then things really started to roll, and I could see a change in him. He needs work, and he needs to be busy, he needs to have a lot of irons in the fire, in order to keep happy.

J.S.: What were some of the activities that you and Dr. Beljan participated in when you weren't very active in the development of the medical school?

B.B.: Oh, we're fisher-people. Both of us love to go up to Canada, and usually go up there twice a year, he goes up there three times a year, one time with a group of men, and the two of us go there, and then we go up fishing on Lake Erie, which is a lot of fun. We have a granddaughter that comes and stays with us, so we go up to – they live in the Cleveland area. And so we do that. He likes to do the – make lures for us, so he does the molding and all of that and I do the baking because you dip them into the plastic and then you've got to bake them. We make wine. And of course, the outdoor work. It's that type of thing that we enjoy.

J.S.: When you have the time to do it of course.

B.B.: When we have the time to do it, yes.

J.S.: What are you looking forward to, going to Hanuman College?

B.B.: I'm looking forward. At first I wasn't, now I am, I'm looking forward to living in a bigger city. My first time to Philadelphia, was really very depressing. It was so busy and so many people, and I just said to John, I don't know whether or not I could take this. But now, after four visits there, and knowing that we're going there, I'm really looking forward to life in the big city. One nice thing about it - we have no children to worry about, no one is going with us, we have the two married children and Paul, our youngest, is going to be staying here. So it's just the two of us, so I don't have to worry about schools, education, this type of thing, and it's just to kind of jump in with two feet into an entirely new organization.

J.S.: How does it feel to be recruited, instead of the recruiter?

B.B.: Kind of nice. It's nice to be wined and dined for a change. And they've really done a very fine job in recruiting. Because I was, like one of the wives that was not too hell-bent on going to Philadelphia, but they were doing a lot of the, a few of the things anyway, that I had done. Sending the information on Philadelphia, and this type of thing. So, not as much as what I did, but... so I think once I do get to Hanuman, particularly with the School of Medicine, where John's doing recruiting, we're going to do a few of the things that we did in Dayton.

J.S.: When you talk to the new dean of the School of Medicine and his wife, what kind of recommendations and advice did you give her?

B.B.: I really didn't have to give Jane Ann too much. Jane Ann has a lot on the ball, and we did talk about particularly being interested in the auxiliaries, and being interested in being visible in the community, and this is something that we really felt we had to do, and we did enjoy doing it. And in the community, I mean the community of hospitals, if a hospital had an event if we could we would always be there. Because we felt this was very very important for the School of Medicine. So it was mainly that, but the new dean and his wife were I think very aware of what their position would be, and what their challenges would be.

J.S.: What do you look forward to, now in the next couple of years with you and Dr. Beljan?

B.B.: Well, first of all, taking care of Hanuman, and getting things straightened out there, getting settled in. We'll take one year at a time right now.

J.S.: That sounds like a good way to look at it. Well I want to thank you very much for sitting down here and talking to me about yourself and Dr. Beljan. I hope you have a real good time in Hanuman. Enjoy Philadelphia.

B.B.: Thank you very much. Thank you.