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Dr. J. Robert Suriano interview (4) conducted on February 27, 1985 about the Boonshoft School of Medicine at Wright State University

J. Robert Suriano

James St. Peter

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WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY
School of Medicine Oral History Project

Interview date: February 27, 1985

Interviewer: James St. Peter

Interviewee: Robert Suriano
Interview 4

JSP	<p>My name is James St. Peter, and this is the fourth in a series of interviews with Dr. J. Robert Suriano, associate dean for Admissions and Student Affairs in Wright State University's School of Medicine. The date is February 27, 1985, the time is 9 o'clock am, and Dr. Suriano and I are in his office in the medical Sciences Building here at Wright State University. Dr. Suriano, I'd like to continue a discussion on some of the people who have had a prominent role in the development of the School of Medicine. Let's talk about Dr. Anthony Zappala.</p>
RS	<p>Dr. Zappala was a delight to work with when he was here. A very exciting, flamboyant type with the Latin temperament that few understood. Having a Latin background myself, [laughter] I found him very compatible. There was nothing even-tempered about Tony. Tony had a hell of a temper. Tony never reacted in a mild mannered way toward anything. There was no such thing as overreaction; ranting and raving and screaming, crying and gnashing of teeth was the style with Tony. But it was never meant to be destructive or hurtful. It was just his way of life. He would come in sometimes and be upset over something and the voice level would be at a pitch that some could hear in the next building. But after that passed, there was a lot of sense and willingness to solve whatever the issue was. So as soon as you learned that, you let the excitement pass, and you would get right down to business and there was never a problem.</p>
JSP	<p>How did he interact with Dr. Beljan?</p>
RS	<p>From where I sat, it seemed okay. I'm sure there were some contentions that arose, Tony was strong-willed. And he had a mind of what he wanted to do and it wasn't always easy to deter him from that, he could be very effective. John gave him a mission, when I was being recruited as a point in a discussion with Dr. Beljan, and to a meeting that all the three of us were at, Victor was in development of schooling sessions somewhere and the three of us were attending that meeting and I had been pulled aside by John to talk about whether or not I would be interested in coming to right state. At some point I apparently indicated less than an interest than Beljan thought he would like to see so he got a hold of Zappala that evening and said get after Suriano And I spent the whole day with Tony- breakfast, lunch, and dinner- in which Zappala really took that mission and came at me very hard about why I should move and what was nice about Dayton and the school and Beljan and all the rest. And he was</p>

	<p>a very effective recruiter for him. I say that because that was sort of typical of the way Tony was. The authority would say would you do such and such and I think Tony responded. With respect to direction and curriculum or departmental direction, well he was a little more stubborn.</p>
JSP	<p>Why do you think that he left the medical school when he did?</p>
RS	<p>I'm not sure. I was so involved at that point in survival myself with respect to the development of the admissions and student affairs and being overwhelmed by the workload that I sort of pulled out of what was going on at the chairman level. And I knew that there was some unhappiness on Zappala's part, but I was never able to get together with him, I never had the luxury of time - To share some of the intimacies of our experiences and the next thing I knew he was announcing going back home to Brazil and so on. I doubt, and I didn't think at the time, that was something he would've preferred to do, but perhaps some developments led him to. I really don't know. I often wondered at the time but there are times when you have to look at your own survival first [laughter]. And that was one of them.</p>
JSP	<p>John Groves</p>
RS	<p>John who?</p>
JSP	<p>Groves.</p>
RS	<p>Jack Groves? Jack Groves wasn't one of the initial administrators here. He came more recently, is functioning now as associate dean for administration, the post Ed Spanier had held initially. Jack seems very confident and I like working with him very much. As a matter of fact there is no problem that I have that relates to his area that he does not respond to. He is less analytic in his approach than Ed Spanier was, but then again I think there was a time for the high degree of analysis if you will and type of approach that Ed would take and the very different approach Jack takes in his job. I like working with Jack.</p>
JSP	<p>Dr. Paul Kinski</p>
RS	<p>I guess the initial response, the response to hearing Paul's name is that Paul represents a link in many ways to the past. Paul was an able clinician, and is an able clinician, was once very active in his career and was an able, competent, researcher. Unfortunately his peak activity was shortly before the medical school. He remained active while the medical school was starting. Functioned within the Dean's office as dean for research, accomplish some things. I think is more important because he maintained a tie with the community, a tie with activities that we needed to have in those days and more than could have been accomplished had he been young or somebody new in the community had been put into that job.</p>
JSP	<p>Dr. William Sawyer.</p>

RS	<p>Probably one of the finest teams that I've ever worked for, and I guess I worked for a good many now. I think everybody you work for in this job you learn something from and I certainly have learned a great deal from Dr. Sawyer. When he came I thought he was going to be the mirror image of Dr. Beljan. But in fact he's proven to be very, very different in many ways. He's been a fantastic team and I mean that to work for he learns very quickly. It's one of the fastest learners I've ever seen, highly analytical and his approach to problem solving, very scientific in his orientation to a problem and yet beneath it all is a depth of human compassion and understanding very good to see in a dean. So he blends the ability to dissect and analyze a question with an understanding of the humanity that maybe along with that question. I hope he stays here for a good long time.</p>
JSP	<p>Compare the leadership style of Dean's Sawyer with that of Dean Beljan.</p>
RS	<p>They're both very good deans in terms of being leaders and they both were very good deans at the time that they were appointed. I think that in my opinion at any rate Beljan is a much better founding dean than he would be in a subsequent role. At a time when we need leadership that took almost total charge he provided direction around a central individual, generated ideas, moved people. Limited freedom to a great extent because freedom was controlled along the path of establishment of the institution. John had the right style. John was the commanding general sort of type, in which authority was vested in him and you recognize that and you followed that. He established a charisma around himself and part of his authority emanated from the charisma because he stood up and loudly enough stated that this is what we will do and this is the direction we will go. And you can't challenge that for the sake of the good of the order. Sawyer is a leader in a different sense. Sometimes it comes across more subtly. Sawyer believes in delegating authority responsibilities I believe much more so. So authority defuses into the areas it ought to diffuse into and consequently he feels that people ought to take responsibility for the roles they play in the institution and a figure. He likes to reward them and if they don't do it well then you hear about it. You know where you stand with Dr. Sawyer because he praises you at the right time he lets you know otherwise at the right time. Let's see what else can I say about difference in style. There is a much more of an openness I think with Dr. Sawyer. And I don't mean to imply a negative character they are in respect to Beljan. Beljan kept a lot to himself, you weren't always sure about the direction he was going until he told you precisely what he wanted you to hear. With Dr. Sawyer at laid out much more so and I think at this stage of the evolution of this institution that that's a very good thing. We've passed the point with which everything can rest upon one person's shoulders. And yet I think the direction that we're going now, the changes that we've seen in the last few years, are clearly because Sawyer in one way or another has planted the seed. I guess the difference is that once the seed had been planted Beljan would see that it was nourished in the direction that he wanted to see it go, he would put the sun right where he felt there was sunlight needed, Sawyer allows some of the others to do the nourishing.</p>
JSP	<p>Dr. James Taguchi</p>

RS	Very little contact with him. I guess the thing that I remember most about Dr. Taguchi was that he was always very pleasant when he saw you, always extended a hand of welcome and then wanted to be sure that nobody smoked in the room. My role really didn't put me into contact with him very much.
JSP	Dr. Sam Pitnor
RS	Again with Dr. Pitnor the only recollection there is recruiting him and going out to dinner with him with a group of students and enjoying the interaction with Dr. Pitnor with this group of students who are primarily from the charter class and I believe the next class, and responding I thought very amiably and thoughtfully to the grilling he was getting from the students, and I sort of admired the students style in recruitment and I wish that more of that would sometimes spill over into our own style.
JSP	Dr. Funkhouser
RS	I like Dr. Funkhouser. Speaking again from my own perspective in interaction with him, Jim is a respected pathologist in town but he also has a Masters degree in microbiology so there was a little bit of kinship, if you will, because he had an interest in my own field. He also had prior acquaintance with [Dr. Bickley] I believe at Ohio State in microbiology when she was there and he was there. So there was an understanding let's say at another professional level. Jim was the first chairman of pathology. He put together the first course or at least the outline of the first course, and it suffered primarily of being a viewpoint of pathology from the practicing pathologist's viewpoint and as such was not quite in line with the type of pathology and the orientation of pathology that would usually go into a course for sophomore medical students. It ran into some violent opposition on the part of many of us on the admissions committee and I remember Jim took it very personally and felt attacked over that. I thought sometimes the criticism of what he put together went a little overboard and Jim needed guidance more than an overdone critique. I think he needed some re-direction in the differences between practicing pathology and an understanding of patho-physiology and what have you that was desirable for sophomore students. He ran into a good many personal problems which were very, very unfortunate and very sad.
JSP	Dr. Batata
RS	Dr. Batata who now is a course director and has been for several years is an interesting blend, when he's involved in a course, of paternalism and authoritarianism. He has very keen interest in students, gets to know them very well, and cares I think a great deal for the students that he has in his class. Often comes up here concerned about the plight of one student or another. Often has spent many hours talking to the student, delving into the basis of problems. On the other hand he also likes to run the course his way and decide. And finds it difficult at times to reconcile his paternalistic feelings which have developed from the feelings that also emanate from his concern for doing things his

	<p>way. And that's the dilemma I guess we all face at one point or another. Students seem to like him a great deal. He has a difficult job running the course because of the complexity of personalities he deals with or with faculty, I occasionally attend faculty meetings of his that give me the impression I am sitting in on the United Nations, with the conflicting views and sensitivities that have to be dealt with.</p>
JSP	Mrs. Ruth Harden
RS	<p>Oh I love to work with Ruth she was great. I really miss her. Very capable competent woman who did her job very well. We worked on a number of projects together including even such things as the medicine ball and pre-commencement ceremonies. She had great insight into how to do things right and always knew where to turn. I think it's unfortunate that she moved away a year or so ago.</p>
JSP	Dr. Douglas P. Lianmaker
RS	<p>Very interesting and I thought excellent first choice of chairman for family practice. Of the chairman at the time he was probably the most independent-minded. At a time when the Dean's leadership was very clear and very manifest amongst the chairman, Doug was perhaps the one individualist in the group. Who let it be known that he was the chairman on many occasions and sometimes in significant ways and sometimes in less significant ways. Sometimes in [indecipherable] ways. Dr. Beljan would [indecipherable].</p> <p>[Break and recording]</p>
RS	<p>Again an individual that I saw at meetings but not one that I had much close contact with. A few occasions we had students in difficulty and they involved Dr. Roberts, I found that he was very receptive to wanting to help and I viewed this as a faculty member who would go out of his way if he saw desirable or necessary to help the student and I always appreciated, that but I really didn't have very much contact with him.</p>
JSP	Dr. James F. Savey.
RS	<p>[Indecipherable] Jim came here from the University of Cincinnati and was the first associate dean for hospital affairs. Very polite calm nice man. Not too many years from retirement. He had been around a while. Very knowledgeable about medical education and tools in teaching and so on. Always seemed to have a little difficulty reconciling some of the problems he had with making the appropriate arrangements and commitments between hospital and medical school with his own views and those of the Dean and not knowing which direction often to go. He was obviously, having been in medical education a long time, used to a certain level of autonomy. Which was not quite the level of autonomy that the Dean at that time preferred, particularly in issues that Dr. Shively had to deal with.</p>

JSP	Schieffer.
RS	Cheever? I'm just trying to find out if I'm recollected if I'm recalling the right individual. Jim's Cheever, Jim Shively. Shively the surgeon? Let me see how you spell it. Where are we?
RS	Sheedy yeah. Sheevy. James Sheevy.
JSP	So we been reflecting on the right person?
RS	I've been talking about Dr. Sheevy yes yes. He agonized sometimes a great deal over the arrangements he had to make and how to deal with them.
JSP	Why?
RS	He often saw things one way and Beljan saw them another way. And Sheevy didn't know quite how to put those two views into perspective and I thought at times, which way to go, how much to follow, how much to consult with, how much to rely upon whatever decision had to be made by. Him himself when he had the authority to act and when he had to be subordinate to the Dean. And as I said the question of autonomy and keeping negotiations was a real challenge for him, very difficult when he was a very very nice individual I thought, very confident.
JSP	Dr. Bertle F Lawson
RS	Dr. Lawson was another chairman who I had minimal contact with. His role as chairman of ophthalmology gave him a smaller role in the curriculum. We had many students who developed interests in ophthalmology, they were usually not students who had any problems that I had to deal with. I really had minimal contact with him. The only contact really was the few times that he examined my eyes.
JSP	Dr. Joseph D. Alder
RS	Again Dr. Alder too was an area that contact primarily being co-members of the executive committee and chatting a little bit, but not professional contact. I couldn't make an assessment really.
JSP	Dr. Richard D. Burke.
RS	No contact at all with him.
JSP	Dr. Barry Blackwell
RS	Barry I guess I could comment a bit on. Barry was extremely articulate individual, perhaps next to Doug Longnecker he he also aspire to great the autonomy as a chairman and as a result had difficulties. My main contact though with Barry was as a

	<p>member of the student promotions committee. Berry articulated a great deal in the early days of that committee in terms of how we ought to evaluate students, deal with them, and he had strong feelings that once we accepted a student to graduate that student. In fact, he wanted to read into our guidelines that a student would almost be guaranteed graduation. Then one wonders what we evaluate, how we promote and so on but the committee in those days struggled over a great many issues and defined very few. Made many attempts to help students, most of them rather ineffective. It was a day of struggle really in terms of setting standards and implementing those standards, conflicts in terms of how to do both and what the appropriate role of this office would be and the role of that committee. And Barry was very articulate in that. Barry was also very articulate as a member of the executive group and never hesitated, I think, to express his views in regards to where they stood in comparison with anyone else. He did very well.</p>
JSP	<p>It sounds as if the faculty, at least in the early years, was a great mix between those people who were strong individuals and those who are content with working under Dr. Beljan. That cause conflict and the executive committee?</p>
RS	<p>Not really, as a matter of fact, these were probably the dullest executive committee member meetings that anybody can imagine. The meetings primarily in my opinion that served to communicate information more than reach any decision of any profound nature. Beljan was very strong on communication, particularly involving people knowing things that he felt ought to be known, as the executive committee meeting or an opportunity for him to take a information and opportunities for chairman to tell all of us including the Dean of course, what activities were going on in their department. And there were a series of reports. And many of these meetings that go on for hours until it was hard to stand up. They challenge the competency of one's prostate to the limit.</p>
JSP	<p>How are executive meetings with Dr. Beljan compared with the executive meetings with Dr. Spanier?</p>
RS	<p>Dr. Sawyer?</p>
JSP	<p>Dr. Sawyer.</p>
RS	<p>Probably more to the point now. The executive group is a very heterogeneous group. In any school that I've been at a good decision-making body, because of its heterogeneity [indecipherable]. And so on. I think there are times when issues have to obviously be discussed in a group, but they have to be focused. And therefore how effective the group gets in terms of coming to resolve an issue becomes a question of how effective the Dean is in causing that focus and also how effective individuals are in presenting their views without creating at the same time an open warfare between himself and everybody else in the room. In the school, under both teams, I haven't seen what I've seen at other schools, namely chairman aligning themselves and opposing in that committee with the Dean. With Dr. Beljan, for reasons we have discussed before, the chairman basically followed the leadership of the Dean. Committee meetings were</p>

	<p>really in meetings to ratify what the Dean wanted ratified or to communicate information. With Dr. Sawyer there is perhaps a little more openness of issues, but the pattern has already been set in terms of whatever should be decided as a matter of ratification as opposed to something that is presented to it. There doesn't seem to be a tendency for me versus him as so many committees of this sort evolve to.</p>
JSP	<p>Is that something that happens over a long period of time? Is that something the school of medicine, the executive body of the school of medicine tends to change over time?</p>
RS	<p>I think there's always a tendency that the Dean will alienate those who should support him. Chairmen do have a great deal, and should have a great deal, of responsibility in the exercise of their duties. And having a great deal of responsibility, they do have and should have a great deal of authority. They become prominent individuals and institutions and consequently they are part of the governance of the school. Where governance has been established appropriately and deans are functioning appropriately and chairmen are functioning appropriately there ought to be a great deal of harmony between their authority and responsibility and correspondingly with the Dean. Unfortunately in many institutions though the personality factors enter this sort of setting and the ambitions and desires of particular groups to do whatever it is they want do and get into it and so the Dean becomes either an individual who follows the executive committee, follows his chairman or is in open conflict with his chairman. I think we've been very fortunate in that we have avoided extremes. At least to date. We followed I guess in the early days, but followed knowing that at that time it was a very important thing. As we've evolved though, we have not as yet evolved to the point where this conflict, this open conflict and ongoing continuous conflict I think there should be an opportunity for disagreement and resolution of that hopefully. Dr. Sawyer will continue to maintain that and his successor should.</p>
JSP	<p>Well this has been both an informative and very enjoyable series of interviews. I'm sure that anyone who sits down and listens to these interviews that we've had with you will gain a very good perspective of student activities and affairs in the school of medicine. And will both learn much more about the school and the people who were involved with it. I thank you very much.</p>
RS	<p>Thank you very much for asking me, it's been a pleasure.</p> <p>[End of recording]</p>