

9-12-2011

Nick Piediscalzi interview, Professor Emeritus Department of Religion, Wright State University

Pablo Banhos

Wright State University - Main Campus

Nick Piediscalzi

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WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY
Retiree Association Oral History Project

Interview date: September 12, 2011

Interviewer: Pablo Banhos, Assistant Director of Development and Alumni Relations, Wright State University

Interviewee: Nick Piediscalzi, Professor Emeritus, Dept. of Religion

Pablo Banhos: Hi, this is Pablo Banhos, Associate Director of Development. Today is Monday, September 12, 2011, and it is my pleasure today to be here interviewing Dr. Nicholas Piediscalzi, Professor Emeritus from the Department of Religion. Dr. Piediscalzi, thank you very much for joining us today. To begin, please tell us a little bit about your background before you came to Wright State, for instance where you grew up, where you studied, and your previous work experience.

Nick Piediscalzi: Okay, that's fine. I'm so happy that you're here, and it's really exciting to be able to talk about myself and also then about Wright State, which I hold dearly in my heart. I was born in Chicago in 1931 and I grew up on the west side of Chicago, then I went to Grinnell College in Iowa where I did my undergraduate work, and then from there I went to Yale Divinity School, and I received a Bachelor of Divinity degree from Yale. After that, for four years from 1956 to 60, I served as a campus minister at the University of California at Berkeley, and while there I decided that I really wanted to enter the teaching profession. So I returned to graduate school at Boston University and did my graduate work and earned my doctorate there in the field of contemporary religious thought and ethics. While there and before finishing my degree, I taught for a year at Colorado College in Colorado Springs, a small liberal arts college, and then I returned and spent two years, 1963 to 1965, writing my dissertation and teaching in the Department of Religion at Boston University. While there, in the spring just before I received my degree I was invited to interview at Wright State for a position. I went out and- actually it was in February and I almost didn't make it; there was a huge snow storm in Boston and we sat in the airport for over three hours in the plane before we finally got clearance to leave. It was interesting because at the same time I got an offer to go to the University of Hawaii, and while I was sitting in that airplane I thought, what am I doing here in all this snow when I could just be going to Hawaii? But I'm glad I decided to continue with the interview, and afterwards I was offered the position, and the understanding was, as most people know, at that time there was not a Wright State University; it was the Dayton Campus of Ohio State University and Miami University of Ohio, and I was hired by the Department of Religion at Miami to serve as a faculty member at the Dayton campus, with the understanding that if we became an independent university then I would found the Department of Religion. And fortunately, it all worked out.

PB: Dr. Piediscalzi, do you remember who offered you the position and how was the opportunity described to you?

NP: Let's see. The final offer came through two people: one, Philip Bordinat, and Warren Abraham, who were administrators for Miami at the Dayton campus, and prior to that I was offered a tentative offer from Stan Luzby [sp], who was the chair of the Department of Religion at Miami. And the job was described to me as an opportunity to be on the ground floor of a new university and with all of the opportunities, then, to experiment and do new things and to have the excitement of being able to participate in the formation of a university. So it was a very exciting, very heady experience to be invited to join into this project.

PB: Did you have any idea or time set that you planned to be at Wright State, and then how long did you actually end up staying at Wright State?

NP: I didn't have any timeline in my mind, but I thought that maybe I'd be there for five or six years and then I'd go somewhere else. I ended up spending 23 years at Wright State- very, very happy years and productive years- and I wouldn't have it otherwise now.

PB: Could you describe your department and what the work environment was like in the early years at Wright State?

NP: Yeah, the Department of Religion- well, first of all, I was the Department of Religion for two years and taught a little bit of everything, and then we added Leonard Thompson- who later went on to his alma mater in Wisconsin and became a dean there- and then a year later we added Hee- Jin Kim, a young person from Korea who had just gotten his doctorate from Oregon State, and he taught eastern religions for us. He stayed a few years and then went on. So that was the core, at first, of the department, and again we were all young and excited about being there and developing new courses. One of the emphases I brought with me because of my training- I did a great deal of interdisciplinary work in graduate school and I had talked both to Stan Luzby at Miami and then Phil Bordinat and Warren Abraham about the possibility of our doing team teaching and interdisciplinary work, and as we developed our own curriculum, we had the freedom to do a lot of experimentation. So I began a course jointly with a member of the English Department- the first person was David Koch, who went on then to Southern Illinois University, and that was followed by Norman Cary, who is still living in Dayton as I know- and we designed a course called "The Religious Quest in Contemporary Literature", and we taught that for many, many years and had a great time with it. Out of that grew other interdisciplinary courses; there was the course on evolution that we developed with Marvin Seiger in the Biology Department, and then one on business ethics with the School of Business, Robert Thobaben and I designed a course on Marxist-Christian dialogues, and that was an interesting way in which that course came about. I had just received a journal with a picture of Karl Marx on it, and Bob had come into my office, as he usually did, for a cup of coffee and he said, "What in the world are you doing with Karl Marx on your desk?" and I showed it to him and said, "You know, there's

something very interesting going on in Europe right now. Marxists and Christians are having dialogues' and he said, 'No way' and I said 'Of course they are.' So he read it and after that he got very excited about the subject, so the two of us designed a course on Marxist-Christian dialogues. We taught that for seventeen years, had good student participation, and it gave us an opportunity, the two of us, to do two books together and to travel all over the world attending Marxist-Christian dialogues. We conducted two dialogues at Wright State, one at Wright State itself that drew people from the Midwest, and then we did a national one that we held out at the Bergamo Center, UD's [University of Dayton] Bergamo Center, and that drew people from all over the United States and Canada.

PB: Dr. Piediskalzi, that leads me to my next question to you. You have a reputation for being innovative and always trying to do outreach programs, and in fact you developed a consortium in public education, I believe, and religion, and there was an institute. Could you tell us a little bit about the program and the consortium?

NP: Yes, I'd be very happy to do that. The Public Education Religious Studies Center, which we founded, was a joint project of the College of Liberal Arts and the Department of Religion, and the College of Education that all began very simply. Some teachers from the Dayton area came and first they asked Peter Bracher at the Department of English whether he could do a course on the Bible for them because they felt that they needed to know more about the Bible as they taught about literature, especially American literature. At the same time, some other teachers, social studies teachers, talked about wanting to learn how to teach about religion in the social studies. This was in 1967 or so, it was shortly after the Supreme Court decision that said that public schools could not require students to pray in the schools, but what they should do is teach about religion in the public schools. So they cleared the legal air for us so that we could go ahead and develop programs. So Dr. James Uphoff of the School of Education and I got together and we designed a course on teaching about religion in the public schools, and we discovered that there were people all over the United States interested in this topic, so we continued to offer that course and we held a conference to see if we could get people together to talk about how we do this and how to improve it and how to increase it, and out of this we were able to get some funding. First of all, we received money through a man by the name of James Panoch over in Indiana. He was doing some work in this field and he had received a large grant from the Lilly Endowment, and we worked with Jim for a while and he suggested that we transfer his project over to Wright State. This was what led to the beginning of the Public Education Religious Studies Center, and then we also got a large grant from the Religious Heritage of America. Then Dr. Uphoff and I co-directed that and James Panoch, who I just mentioned, he came over and he was what we called our field director. We did several national programs, and we had a national symposium to inaugurate the center at Wright State. There was again representation from all over the country. We invited the Chief Justice, not the Chief Justice, the Associate Justice from the Supreme Court who wrote the majority opinion for the Schempp decision, Tom Clark, and he came and he gave the keynote speech, and then we had scholars from all over the country give presentations and that was published in a little booklet. We published many different materials, evaluated materials, led many workshops. We were

very fortunate to get a very handsome grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and we had a summer workshop at Wright State for teachers from all over the country, it was a two year program, and that was very exciting. By that time, Dr. Uphoff had become the director of the Lake Campus, so he was replaced by Dr. William Collie of the College of Education, and Bill and I worked very closely together and became very close friends.

PB: Dr. Piediscalzi, it seems like you has the opportunity to work with faculty from different units at Wright State or colleges. Could you please describe a little bit of your relationship with your colleagues during your tenure at Wright State?

NP: Yes, I was thinking about this before you came. How, you know, in the early years, the first three or four years, we were really a small faculty and in fact in 1965 when I arrived, we only had one building, Allyn Hall, and we were all together in that building and the faculty offices were all on the fourth floor of Allyn Hall, and over in one of the corner there was a faculty lounge. That's where we all had our lunch and we got to know each other very well, and it was all cross-disciplinary, and it was wonderful to be able to establish friendships. There was an openness and sense of cooperation that was just delightful. There were several people that I got to know around that lunch table and through interacting in other venues that made it very exciting, a lot of wonderful people.

PB: I'd like to shift gears a little bit and if you can, could you please tell us a little bit about what the students were like in the early years?

NP: It was a very interesting mixture of students. There were the commute students who grew up in Dayton and this was their first opportunity to go to college out of their families. So they came and they had a great curiosity but somewhat limited backgrounds, and we had to do a lot of remedial work with them. Then there were the children of the air force families over at the base who have travelled all over the world, and they came with a different sophistication. And many of the air force wives would come and take our courses. So this was an interesting blend. It was great to have the air force people who brought their sophistication and world experience, and we began to mix and it really helped the younger students come along, by their association with the people from the air force.

PB: What were some of the memorable issues expressed by students over the years that you can maybe think of?

NP: See, the students were really always interested in doing their work and getting their degree so they get a job. Again, being the commuter campus that we were, I would say there was a great deal of interest in completing degree work so that one could get employment. Also, there were many students, though, interested in intellectual development and doing graduate work. So again, it was a mixture there.

PB: You talked about how from the beginning we were known to be a commuter school and that's how campus was like. Could you describe what activities and events were taking place on campus beyond the academics?

NP: One silly one that comes to mind right now is there was also, in addition to the faculty lounge, in the basement of Allyn Hall there was a large room that served both as a cafeteria- and that's really being generous because it wasn't a cafeteria, it really was vending machines and a microwave- and we would gather there for lunch with students. And one of my early memories was of Dr. Robert Thobaben from Political Science, who was quite a character, jumping rope with students. So that's a very silly thing, but I remember Paul Lane, who was one of the early members of the Theatre Department, doing productions over in Grange Hall on Grange Hall Rd. That was a tiny little building and one of the productions I remember the students just enjoyed very much was one of "Peanuts", one of the Charles Schultz plays. On campus, other activities were picnics... let's see, what else did we do with the students? I guess there were some relay races and activities like that, and then some intramural sports began to develop.

PB: Well, earlier I just asked you about your relationship with your colleagues during your tenure. Now I'm interested to know your relationship with your students. You were well respected on campus by your colleagues, and I'm interested to know how you interacted with your students and if you keep in touch, or kept in touch with some of them over the years-

NP: Some of them, over the years, I've kept in touch with. I'm always surprised how every now and then I'll get a letter from a student who has looked me up. For example, Charles Schwart [sp?], I know this name won't mean much to anyone, he's in Texas now and he's a ranch owner. But he wrote to me and wanted to talk to me and we did, and we had a great recollection of our times. Another one was a gentleman who lived in Pennsylvania. There were two people who I kept in touch with over the years, but unfortunately both of them have died now. One was Margaret Swanson, and she and her husband were at the base, and she completed her undergraduate work- Margaret was our first Religion Department major graduate- and over the years we kept in touch and she and her husband when they retired they moved to La Jolla, California and we were able to keep in touch that way. The other person I'm thinking of who was in the Dayton area and she died a few years ago, was Peggy Swanson. Peggy was our first honors graduate in the department, and we maintained a good relationship over the years. So that gives you a little idea of some of the students. I often think about many of them and would like to get back in touch with them. There was one, Tim Meyerling [sp?], and I think his friend was Bill Wallace. They were some of my first evening class students and we had a great time together.

PB: Now we talked a little bit about the faculty and the students. Could you describe the role of the administration during the early years of the university?

NP: Sure, yes, the administration, that's very, very interesting. You know, at first we were sort of a child out there on our own, with these representative administrators from

Miami and from Ohio State, and so we worked with them but they had to go back to the mother campuses all the time, and get permission to do things and get funding for us. This is where I think Warren Abraham played an important role for us on our side, for the liberal arts faculty that came from Miami, and for the Ohio State [side] it was Jack Redden was his name, as I remember, and he was a geologist if my memory serves me correctly. Everything was very tentative; very, very tentative. All of our titles were “acting deputy”, like I was acting deputy chair of the Department of Religion, Jack Redden was the acting deputy director of the campus for Ohio State, and we all, again, it was more a family atmosphere where we all worked together in very informal relationships, and that was really delightful. There wasn’t a bureaucracy at that time, and that was very, very enjoyable. I’m trying to think of, let’s see, what else about it that was so good. It was easy access; I could walk, any time I wanted to, into Warren Abraham’s office and ask to see him and usually I could see him immediately, and we could talk about a program we wanted to initiate, and it was all very loose and flexible at that time.

PB: Do you remember or could you share with us some of the important issues or perhaps problems that the university encountered over the years or during that time in the early years?

NP: Well, I think maybe I’d begin... it was the spring of 1966, we formed an academic council. By faculty initiative, we formed an academic council and elected officers, and I happened to be elected chairman of that council that first year, and Norman Anon of Economics was elected what was called “president of faculty meetings”, and we shared responsibility. The theory behind an academic council was that there would be administrators and faculty working together- in what we thought was a unique idea- and not keep faculty and administrators separate. Now that worked for a while, but the larger we became and the more bureaucratic we became, then that didn’t work as well and we had to separate out. Now I look back and see what a powerful force the faculty has become as an independent entity, which we did not have then, so that was it. At first, the curriculum decisions were not in the forefront, because we used and in fact we were required to use the Miami University curriculum; that is, their core curriculum and then I had to follow the department’s curriculum, so I didn’t have any freedom there at first and likewise for the Ohio State people. Probably one of the points of friction was that there was a difference in treatment between the Ohio State people and the Miami people; that is the Ohio State people were the science and engineering people and they had lighter teaching loads to do more research, and their salary was higher than those of us in liberal arts, and for a while that was really a point of contention between us. Often in liberal arts we felt like we were being criticized because we did not publish as quickly as the people over in science and engineering, but we had a much heavier teaching load and didn’t have time to do the research that we would like to have done. So that was one of the tensions. Another tension that began to build up was the “we” and “they” with the administration, which we didn’t have at first. Also, the development of bureaucracy; I often chuckle when I think... you know my first year at Wright State, the supply room was a room in the basement of Allyn Hall and it was on the honor system. You walked in and you took whatever supplies you wanted and just wrote your name and what you took. So that would be some of my memories from that time. Another memory is when Brage Golding

was appointed- I can't remember his title whether it was deputy, acting president, or whatever it was until we became independent. I was very fortunate to work with Brage because of my position on Academic Council, and I found it very easy to work with him. In fact, as I recall our bylaws called for the president of the university to become the chair of the Academic Council, and I went in to talk to him about that and he said that he did not want to do that until he really became the president of the university. So we met monthly, at least monthly, before each meeting to plan the agenda and work out all the issues.

PB: I'm interested to know now a little bit about what was the perception of Wright State in the early years and how you think this has changed over the years?

NP: I'd like to answer that in two different ways. One is the community was really excited about the formation of Wright State, and one of the things that surprised me when I arrived was how much community support there was for Wright State, and wherever I went I was welcomed and I was offered help. And I know that was true of all of the other faculty members. So there was that great sense of- you know the city of Dayton raised three million dollars, and two million dollars was used to buy the land for Wright State and to put up Allyn Hall, and one million dollars was given to Dayton and UD used that money to put up Marian Hal- so there was that sense of community involvement and "This is our university", and that was really great. I remember, as I said, wherever I went people would offer help. For example, when I arrived on campus our library was that little pagoda structure, you know, that's next to Allyn Hall, and I went up to look for books on religion and there were just three books: there was a Bible, a Bible atlas, and a book on 'How I Became a Christian and a Millionaire at the Same Time', and I went, "Oh my God, what have I gotten myself into?" But people began offering help; for example, the president of the United Theological Seminary, John Knecht, and his dean, Newell Wert, called me and invited me to lunch and they said, "We know you're having a big job to build a library, so whatever books you think would be of help to you for your academic program that we have here, let us know and we'll loan them to you, or you can send your students here to study or use our library." That was a big help. Another person that was a big help was Rabbi Selwyn Ruslander at Temple Israel. He was a very scholarly rabbi, and he offered me books and journals so we could use until we could build our own library. So there's that part of the perception that here's this great, young university that we're going to build as a city and we're very proud of it. I think people over at Miami and Ohio State sort of looked upon us as country bumpkins and that we didn't know what we were doing and [they] didn't expect much of us. In fact they didn't want us to succeed, I think, because they wanted to keep their prime positions. So there was that rivalry that began. So I think there seem to be two ways of answering that. And of course as you travelled around the country in those early years, you'd say "I'm from Wright State", and they'd say, "Oh, Wayne State", and you'd say, "No, Wright State." I think you're beyond that now.

PB: Dr. Piediscalzi, you had the opportunity to work in different universities in different states. What is unique about us? What is unique about Wright State as compared to other schools?

NP: Well, compared to the schools where I taught, of course Wright State in the early days was purely a commuter school and drawing mostly students who were attending college for the first time from their families, the families [going to college] for the first time. So it was a very young and in some ways unsophisticated student body. That's how we differed at first but now as I see it at Wright State, it's really become an international school and quite sophisticated, and I'm very, very impressed here. When I think back now when we had one building, and now today you tell me you have forty-four. When I left I think we had twenty-one buildings. It's just amazing, and to think that there's a school of medicine, a school of professional psychology, and all of those special programs now that we never dreamed of when we were just beginning at Wright State.

PB: You know, with this in mind, what do you think are some of the noteworthy contributions Wright State has made to academia and higher education in your opinion?

NP: Well, I think a lot of the programs now that Wright State has developed, and especially research; research has made some very, very valuable contributions. When I think back also, what we did in our areas, the interdisciplinary work that we did was featured in a book once and became a model for some other schools to use. The Public Education Religious Studies Center was a model that was duplicated in other parts of the country. So I think in this sense, Wright State has become a university that has contributed academic models, and now from what I gather from what you tell me and others, there is a lot of contribution to technology and to the development of medicine and science, so in that sense it has become a very well-known and very well respected university.

PB: If I'm not mistaken, I believe [the Department of] Religion has been connected for a few years now with Classics, correct? Was it always like that? My question is how has your department changed over the years and then also, to add to that, how has Wright State changed over the years in your opinion?

NP: In my opinion, yeah. Well, we began as an independent department and then there was an experiment for a year or two where we were the Philosophy, Classics and Religion Department, and I chaired that with sub-chairs; we had William King for Classics and Ronald Hough for Philosophy. But then as we grew it became evident that we could be more effective if we could become separate departments again, so we were separated out. At that time we were joined together it was to save administrative costs but then it was decided that it wasn't cost effective. But we still worked together closely, the three departments; we were always housed next to each other, we shared a secretary, so in that sense we remained closely related. When I talked to David Barr three years ago when I was on campus he told me about this new experiment and from what I gather it's going well, and I think it was again administrative costs that were driving the bringing the departments together again.

PB: That will lead me to another question. During your tenure at Wright State, what did you struggle with the most and what did you find most appealing about working at Wright State?

NP: Well, to me it was so exciting and fulfilling to be able to help a university develop and grow and to be able to grow professionally with that. Because, you know, most of us were very young, inexperienced people. I had just taught a year at Colorado College and I taught a year at Boston University, and here I am given the opportunity at the age of thirty to begin a department and help begin a university. So that excitement and that sense of fulfillment and the opportunity to grow with that, grow professionally as the university grew, was very exciting and a very important part of my life and the lives of many others.

PB: Well you've touched a little bit about on this, and if you don't mind could you please expand a little bit- I'm curious to know, looking back what are some of your most memorable experiences at Wright State?

NP: My most memorable experiences, hmm.

PB: Or some of your most...

NP: Well, one of them was becoming the chair of the Academic Council, because again I was so young and inexperienced, and to be able to learn as I went along, and that year, especially to be able to work with Robert Oelman, who was the chair of the Board of Trustees, a man whom I came to admire very, very much. Truly a gentleman, a true gentleman was Robert Oelman, and also to work with Fred White and with Brage Golding was quite memorable. A couple of personal things about Brage, because Brage often came across as aloof, like he'd often talk about "the young faculty who needed to be disciplined", and that rubbed the wrong way. But that was just one part of Brage. There's a deeply personal, warm, open dimension to Brage, and his wife Hinda. What I remember right now thinking about him was the night... we had night classes and I was on campus when there was the shooting of the students at Kent State. I remember there spontaneously began a sort of candlelight vigil after classes and he and Hinda came over from the president's house, they walked over and joined in that vigil and they comforted the students. They were very, very kind and helpful in that way often to students. And then personally again- this is very, very personal with Brage- was that I went through a very painful divorce and he and Hinda helped me a great deal, and they knew my children were having a very hard time. So they often would have us over for dinner, and Brage was quite a piano player, and at the time the song, "Michelle, My Belle"- you know, the Beatles song that was very popular- and I have a daughter named Michelle and Brage when we would arrive would sit at the piano and play "Michelle, My Belle" for her. I'm recalling this now because I would like to get that part of Brage Golding's personality on record for his warmth and his tenderness, which publically often didn't come out. So that's it, and then of course the memorable things were some of the cooperative projects we had, and there were some others that we haven't mentioned yet. Early on, we formed what was called The Consortium of Higher Education Religion Studies, and that was a unique combination of the Department of Religion from Miami, the Department of Religion from Wright State, the Department of Religion from the University of Dayton, the Department of Religion from Antioch, and then the seminary [UTS?]. We formed a consortium to help each other and to give each other the support and the exchange of resources so that we could have stronger programs, programs that

would not be as strong if we were not in consortium. We were able to get a very nice grant from the Danforth Foundation for three years that helped us, and we did a lot of cooperative things, like we did faculty enrichment seminars for our faculty and we exchanged professorships. For example at that time we were quite weak in the study of Christian literature so we had a faculty member from the seminary come and do a course for us at Wright State, and I went over to the seminary and taught a course on contemporary religious thought. So there was a lot of exchange and support of each other and that was a memorable experience. Another one was again through the work and help from Rabbi Selwyn Ruslander of Temple Israel, we were able to get a significant grant from the Sanders family and we established the Sanders Judaic Studies Program, which was a unique and I think it's still a unique program as it was then. Now it's different at Wright State now that there is a specially endowed program. But at that time we received that grant so that we could share a scholar with Antioch, and the seminary, UD, and ourselves at Wright State, and we were very fortunate to be able to obtain Dr. Eric Friedland, who has become a person of great respect and love in the Dayton area, and we brought Eric on as faculty and he did a monumental job. You know, to be able to go from Wright State to Antioch to UD and then the seminary, back and forth like that, and to keep his own sanity and to become such an outstanding teacher. That was another very memorable program that I hold in high esteem.

PB: Dr. Piediscalzi, if you were asked to describe Wright State then, in one word, what would that be?

NP: A budding flower [laughs]

PB: Okay, on the same note then, if you were asked to describe Wright State now, in one word, what would it be?

NP: A huge tree, productive tree. Now that's more than one word, but I'm so impressed with the way in which it has grown. It's like... maybe another way to say it was we started as an acorn and now it's this beautiful, beautiful tree with many, many branches; it's both literally and figuratively. Because one of the things that impressed me three years ago was how the trees have grown at Wright State. You know, we were just terribly barren cornfields when I was there at the beginning and watched the planting of trees, and now those trees are full grown. It makes a big difference. But as a metaphor, those trees also represent how the university has grown.

PB: Dr. Piediscalzi, if you could, could you share your thoughts on the major challenges in higher education today, and I know you still keep in touch with Wright State and some of the faculty and staff, and you still are aware of a lot of things that goes on on campus. Could you share how has that issue been affected?

NP: I think higher education today, and certainly Wright State is part of this, is affected by the tremendous economic downturn and the struggles that we have with maintaining excellence with fewer, fewer resources, and how to maintain strong faculty, strong programs, adequate scholarship programs. I think that's one. One of my concerns is the

way in which higher education has been pushed more and more to work for and with corporations, and that corporate money while it's very helpful I think compromises the integrity of the university and its independence and compromises the idealistic role of the university, to be the independent, unfettered institution that can speak openly to the community. So those would be some of the... Another thing, I think, is the way in which universities have grown so much that there is an impersonal dimension to them now. Back in the '60's it was not as prominent.

PB: Well, I'd like to ask if there is anything that I did not ask you that you would like to share or talk about, any additional unique perspective regarding Wright State, or I know there is also at one point you helped establish the Piediscalzi lecture series and I know we've talked about some of your colleagues that you had the pleasure to work with, but there are so many others. For instance, I believe Eugene Cantelupe-

NP: Oh yes, certainly. Two names come together immediately; one is Andrew Spiegel, and Eugene Cantelupe. Both of them came to Wright State from C.W. Post in New York. First, Andy came and he was the provost, Brage Golding's second provost. Then we were looking for a dean of liberal arts and Andy suggested to our committee that we look at Gene. We brought Gene Cantelupe to Wright State and he was a very vigorous, very creative person, very lively. He brought a great deal of strength and integrity to the College of Education [Liberal Arts?] Again, we became fairly close friends and I enjoyed his support very much. Likewise, I thought Andy Speigel did a good job as provost, and then of course he became a member of the History Department and taught well there for a long time. So does that get at some of the things you'd like? The other person who I mentioned earlier was Fred White. Fred was a very creative person, unfortunately at first a lot of the younger faculty members sort of looked down on Fred because he came from the business world, and they didn't see Fred's vision for Wright State as compatible with theirs. But in the long run Fred provided a stability, a maturity, and a sense of wisdom that we needed, and he made great contributions. You know, when Brage left to go to San Diego State, Fred was the acting president until Bob Kegerreis was appointed, and Fred was sort of like a grandfatherly figure during that period, and I remember his being very interested in faculty and giving faculty support. At Christmas time he wrote personal notes to faculty members thanking them for specific contributions that they made to the university. I thought that was a valuable contribution during that interim period. He was really a fine person.

PB: Well thank you, Dr. Piediscalzi. This concludes our interview today, but I want to thank you on behalf of the university, for all that you have done for us. And also thank you on behalf of the Retiree's Association for taking the time today to be part of the oral history project. Thank you so much.

NP: Well, you're welcome. It's been really a privilege and it's been wonderful to recall those days, I'm just flooded with memories right now and I could go on for hours with you. But I think it's time to end. [laughs] Please give my greetings to everyone at Wright State, especially all the ones in the Retiree's Association. I know that one of the

drawbacks of living so far away is not being able to participate in that group. I've gone to some of their meetings when I've come back and I've always enjoyed it very much.

PB: Okay, I surely will and hopefully we can see you on campus soon.

NP: I look forward to coming back.

PB: Thank you.

WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY
Retiree Association Oral History Project

Interview date: September 24, 2011

Interviewer: N/A [Addendum]

Interviewee: Nick Piediscalzi, Professor Emeritus, Dept. of Religion

Nick Piediscalzi: After Pablo Banhos left our home at the conclusion of the oral history interview that he conducted, it occurred to me that I had moved too quickly when talking about the members of our department and on to other topics, and some important individuals were omitted. So I'd like to send this addendum to Wright State to sort of fill in the record. Also, I have some other memories that have come to me since that meeting with Pablo.

First, after Hee- Jin Kim left the department [of religion] we hired Dr. Robert D. Reece, a recent graduate from Yale University, to teach courses in ethics and also New Testament studies. After serving the department with distinction, Dr. Reece moved on to the School of Medicine where he became chair of the Medicine in Society Department. He still taught courses on ethics for the Department of Religion for several years.

Next, after Dr. Reece, we hired Dr. Willis Stoesz. This was a great fortune for us because Western College in Oxford, Ohio where he had taught for many years was closing, and the dean of the school, Marianne Micks, had called me and asked whether we were looking for a new person. She suggested highly Dr. Stoesz, who was trained in the areas that we were looking for, history of religions and Eastern religions. So I went to talk to Warren Abraham about this possibility and since he held the rank of associate professor and we were only authorized to hire an assistant professor, I asked whether we might make a change so that we could bring a person with experience to our department and also to the College of Liberal Arts. Because at the time we were still hiring quite young, inexperienced people, and Warren thought it was a good idea and so we proceeded to hire Willis for the department. As I said, his specialties were history of religions and Eastern religions, and also then he developed courses on death and dying, and he did a very fascinating course with the Department of Geography; he team taught it with a member- Dr. Kenji Oshiro- that was called "Space and Faith".

After two or three years later, the department hired two members in the same year. The first was Dr. Catherine Albanese, a new graduate from the University of Chicago with a specialty in American religions. She had been recommended to us highly by Martin Marty, the dean of the graduate school at the University of Chicago. During her fifteen years with us she published prolifically in the field of American religions and established herself as one of the leading scholars in the country in this area. She received

an invitation to join the faculty of the University of California in Santa Barbara in 1987 and moved on, where she continued to publish a great deal, a good many books, in the American history of religion fields and she eventually became chair of the department. Catherine also became president of the American Academy of Religion.

Along with Catherine we hired Dr. Herbert Neve. He came after serving several years in Geneva, Switzerland as an academic research fellow with the World Lutheran Federation. Prior to that time he had taught at universities in the United States. He developed an interest in the religious dimensions of the Ujima Party in Tanzania, in addition to teaching courses on the history of Christianity in western culture. After Dr. Reece switched to the School of Medicine, we hired Dr. David Barr, a graduate of Florida State University and a specialist in early Christian scripture and literature. He also brought experience in the field of public education religion studies so we utilized him quite effectively at the Public Education Religious Studies Center. He helped us with our workshops and special programs, and evaluation of curriculum materials. In 1980, Dave became chairman of the Department of Religion and after serving two terms at that post he became director of the University Honors Program.

These five faculty members whom I just discussed along with Dr. Eric Friedland and myself formed the core of the founding faculty of the department; a stimulating, creative, productive group. I should like to add a few remarks about the contributions of the members of the department to other university programs. Prior to the opening of the School of Medicine, Dr. Stoesz conducted research in the emerging fields of medical ethics and humanizing the practice of medicine. He presented papers on these topics and led some discussion groups, and emphasized the importance of including these areas in the medical curriculum. At the same time, I conducted research in these areas and led a seminar for physicians and nurses at Kettering Hospital. It lasted about two months. Also, the Department of Religion sponsored a dinner meeting at the University Center for Dayton area physicians and hospital administrators. The speaker at this event was a leading medical ethicist at Duke University, Dr. Roe [sp?], and he too emphasized the importance of including medical ethics in the humanities in a medical curriculum. We also met with Dr. John Beljan, after he was appointed the founding dean of the medical school, to pursue these topics and this eventually led to the formation of the Medicine in Society Department.

The department also took the lead in the establishment of the Master of Humanities Program. Dr. Albanese was the department's representative to the founding committee and served then on the governing committee for several years. In 1984 I succeeded Dr. William Rickert as Director of the Master of Humanities Program and I served in that position until I took retirement in 1988.

Next I'd like to correct a confusion in names in the original interview with Pablo. Margaret Swanson was our (Dept. of Religion's] first major to graduate at Wright State's first commencement, and Peggy Strong was our first honors major to graduate, a few years later.

Other memorable events have come to me. In the summer of 1966, the Academic Council accepted my suggestion that we sponsor an opening convocation in the early fall with full academic regalia. The proposal was forwarded to Robert Oelman, who endorsed the idea. So on a beautiful sunny morning in early September, we held the first convocation of Wright State in the open space between Allyn and Oelman Halls. President Dixon of Antioch College was the speaker. Because we did not have a university band at that time, Fred White and Dr. William Fenton of the Music Department arranged for the Wright-Patterson Air Force Band to provide music for the occasion. And if memory serves me correctly, Robert Oelman announced at that convocation the Kettering Foundation's grant of enough funds to purchase the entire University of California "list of texts", essential for a university library. Of course that was received with great, great enthusiasm and delight.

Another memorable event, many faculty, students and staff members awaiting the arrival of Brage Golding and Fred White from Columbus on the day that the state legislature voted to establish Wright State as an independent university. We all gathered at the main entrance of the university waiting for them to drive in. Also, that was the time a group of students used some white paint to cross out on the sign there "Dayton Campus" with a new title which they painted, "Wright State University". This recollection brings to mind another person who played a role in establishing Wright State University, and that is David Atwater. He was the person who wrote the bill for the Ohio Legislature that established Wright State University, and shortly after that he was hired to become Wright State's liaison with the Ohio State Legislature and also as a special assistant to the president. Dave served in that position admirably until the presidency of Dr. Mulhollan.

Shortly after Wright State was established, if memory serves me, the Dayton Chamber of Commerce sponsored a celebratory dinner at the old Sheraton Hotel at First and Main Streets in downtown Dayton. Faculty members were paired with leaders of business. My business partner at the table was Vic Cassano, the founder of Cassano's Pizzas, and I think we were paired together because of our Italian heritage. So we swapped stories about our families and our ancestry, but also I remember what delight Vic took, he took a napkin and drew a plan for the open space on the other side of Colonel Glenn Highway that was being re-zoned for commercial development. Vic drew out a plan for restaurants, a motel, a bookstore, and of course a Cassano's pizza place for that space. He was really eager to get involved and help develop that. I'm not sure whether he did eventually participate in it but at least at that dinner meeting he was very, very enthusiastic about such a project.

Another memory that comes to mind is after Brage Golding left, we formed a- the Trustees formed a search committee to choose Brage's successor. I served as co-chair of that committee with John Keto of the Board of Trustees. It was a very interesting experience, an unusual experience for me in that eventually John had to resign as co-chair because of illness in his family. It was a large, unruly committee and we had many contentious sessions, and we did an unusual thing which in retrospect I think was a mistake is that we divided up into subgroups and went to different campuses of

candidates we wanted to interview and we interviewed them in their own setting. Finally, after much wrangling we chose two people from the list- which included internal candidates, but our list did not contain internal candidates- and submitted them to the Board of Trustees. Then after about a week we were called together by Robert Oelman, who was still chair of the Trustees at that time, and he informed us that the Trustees had decided not to accept our recommendation, but rather to appoint Robert Keggereis as President of the university. And of course there was great gnashing of teeth and objection at that meeting, and I was impressed at how Robert Oelman maintained his composure and in a very gentlemanly way handled the situation, but was firm and made it clear that the Trustees had made the decision and would pursue the appointment of Robert Keggereis as the next President, and also it became clear that Andrew Spiegel, who was also an internal candidate, would become Executive Vice President and Treasurer of the university.

I also would like to return to a person that Pablo named in our interview, and that is Eugene Cantelupe, who was Dean of Liberal Arts. He brought a highly sophisticated approach to the college and helped us unite and develop strong academic programs. He was a specialist in Renaissance literature and iconography, and was a very popular lecturer on the Renaissance, both at the university and in the community, and as a result he established several important relationships with the community, especially in the area of the arts and the symphony. And this brings to mind, talking about the symphony, Paul Katz, the originating founder of the Dayton Philharmonic Symphony, who became a part time member of our staff in the Music Department. Paul was a delightful person and had a wide range of interests, and one of them was the religious themes in music. We used him very effectively in our course on religious and ethical themes in music. He was a very good lecturer and a very, very thoughtful person.

Also, I'd like to mention Perry Moore, Eugene Cantelupe's successor as Dean of the College of Liberal Arts. Perry strengthened the academic program of the college by guiding a significant reformation of the curriculum, and his associate, Lilly Howard, obtained a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to implement the program, including purchasing equipment and resource materials for the curriculum and also to train the faculty in new ways of approaching the humanities and how to teach the new courses that were designed for that curriculum.

Two other memories come to mind as I reminisce. One is being approached by members of the Department of Religion at Miami University about Central State. They were concerned that there were hard feelings at Central State, especially among faculty members, by the fact that Wright State was established so close to them and that the development of Wright State would hinder their development. This was an area that we tried to establish some relationships with Central State, at least our department did, by inviting Francis Thomas to come and teach courses on African religions for us. But it's a topic that was never really taken seriously in the university community, that is Wright State's community, and I feel that was a loss both for Wright State and Central State.

One of the things... another memory is when Millett Hall was built there was an open space Between Millett Hall and Allyn Hall, and underneath that open space was the loading dock, but the top of it was left open because the university under Fred White's leadership had applied for a grant from the federal government to build a lightweight monorail from downtown Dayton right to Wright State, a direct line. Unfortunately, the funding never came, and that would have been a boon I think both to the community and to Wright State, and to the whole environmental movement, had we gotten that grant. The space eventually then was filled with a new low building which now has a lot of offices in it.

Often when we talk about the people and the makers and shapers of Wright State, we overlook people who behind the scenes were very significant, and I'd like to pay tribute to the first three secretaries of the Department of Religion, for example Nancy Ferris, Diane Johnson and Rita [?] Horton, who were a great help to us. Also, I'd like to mention some other people. One was Verniece Osborn, who was in charge of the audio-visual department. She went out of her way to be of help to faculty members and developed a very strong department. Mildred Calsik [sp?] in food services was a great help to us with all of our social events, especially for community events and all. I also recall Paul Reece, one of the first maintenance men at Wright State. He owned a little house and some agricultural land just to the north of the main campus entrance, and Paul was a very gracious person and very, very helpful, and would always come around asking if there were other maintenance problems other than the ones we reported that needed attention. And then when we entered our offices in Millett Hall after it opened, that is after the College of Liberal Arts entered Millett Hall, James Frazier became the lead person for maintenance- the supervisor- and James was a very helpful person and I appreciated him very much. I enjoyed talking to him, because he brought a perspective on the university and faculty members and students that we overlooked at times and it was very helpful to me.

Also, I did not mention two other faculty members when I was talking to Pablo that I would like to mention now. One was Rubin Battino, Dr. Rubin Battino of the Chemistry Department. He and I developed some honors courses on religion and science which we enjoyed teaching together. Rubin in many ways was a renaissance man who has so many interests in the humanities, drama, poetry, and also psychology, and I appreciated his friendship over the years. And another unsung person I think is Dr. Peter Bracher of the English Department. Eventually he became chair of the English Department. Peter was the first secretary of the Academic Council and performed excellent service in that position. He was the person who taught the first workshops on "The Bible as Literature" for teachers in the Dayton area, and he helped us a great deal with the Public Education Religious Studies Center. Peter was a very thoughtful person, a very creative person, and I appreciated his contributions immensely.

This concludes now my recollections that I wanted to add to what Pablo had elicited from me, and I'd like to end with two humorous stories. One is that a group of us who lived in Dayton View in the early days of the formation of Wright State formed what we called the Dayton View Library Committee, and what it was was we met once a month at a local

bar up on North Main Street just to socialize, but we teased each other about the title of our group and encouraged each other to put it on our resumes as service to the community. It was a delightful group of people from various disciplines. There was Sam Bernstein, Dr. Stanley Bernstein from the Chemistry Department, there was David Koch from the English Department, James Hughes from the English Department, I think also Emil Kmetec from the Biology Department joined us. I'm having a little senior moment here now, but Will Hutzell from the Political Science department was a member of that group.

And finally, in the spring of 1967 the Academic Council received a report on where the 2nd annual fall faculty picnic would be held, and the committee recommended that we have it in the open space between Millett Hall and Allyn Hall and Fawcett Hall, on the grass area there, and someone jumped up- I can't remember who it was at the time- and said we can't do that, and we said why, and he said because we've always held the picnic on Achilles Hill. That was a little hill off to the south of the campus, at that time open corn fields, and we all laughed because this was certainly an example of how traditions begin so quickly, that someone could jump up and say we've always held it there, and there had only been one previous picnic, the year before.

Again, I'd like to emphasize what a privilege it was to participate in the early days of Wright State and how much I appreciated the opportunity to teach and work with a wonderful group of people. Very stimulating, very challenging, very creative. And also now I'd like to thank my grandson Nathan for serving as cameraman for this addition to the interview. Nathan, do you want to come around so people can see you?

Nathan: Okay. Hi!

Nick: Here's Nathan, my grandson who lives nearby and we enjoy having projects like this, and other things like playing squash and going out for ice cream. Thank you, Nathan.

Nathan: No problem.