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Ms. Susan Williams interview (1) conducted on February 20, 1985 about the Boonshoft School of Medicine at Wright State University

Susan Williams

James St. Peter

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WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY
School of Medicine Oral History Project

Interview date: February 20, 1985

Interviewer: James St. Peter

Interviewee: Susan Williams
Interview 1

JSP	My name is James St. Peter and this is the first in a series of interviews with Mrs. Susan Williams currently the Executive Assistant to the Dean of the School of Medicine at Wright State University. The date is February 20, 1985 the time is 10:30 AM and Mrs. Williams and I are in room 110 G of the Medical Sciences Building here Wright State University.
JSP	What was your background prior to coming to the school of medicine?
SW	I worked for 10 years as a secretary to the Assistant Superintendent of a local school system here in Dayton
JSP	When did you come to Wright State?
SW	In September 1975.
JSP	What was the state of the medical school when you came?
SW	It was brand new, just beginning, not all the faculty, not even all the chairman, were onboard. It was a mad rush to recruit. I think my first experience or exposure to a chairman was Dr. Zappala in anatomy, Dr. Suriano as a dean, and of course Dr. Spanier and Dr. Beljan.
JSP	Were those the only people on board or were there others on board at that time?
SW	Dr. Lindower was just coming, Dr. Kolmen was just coming, he'd been hired. Dr. Longanecker who was the first chairman of Family Practice was on board. That was about it.
JSP	That was right then at the very beginning during the most hectic stages of the School of Medicine's development. What were your exact responsibilities or did you have exact responsibilities in those days?
SW	I had exact responsibilities, and an exact responsibility, and that was typing; typing typing, typing, tape after tape of dictation from Dr. Beljan. And I was immediately responsible to Regina Borum. This was very early, I should back up a little bit. This

	<p>was back in April- March and April of 1975 and I wasn't a Wright State employee at the time. I was temporary manpower. I hadn't worked for about a year and a half and I wanted to do something to get back into the mainstream of things. I was bored and this just came about. I came - the offices then were at the Kettering Center and I came to work a week-</p>
JSP	<p>Sent by Manpower?</p>
SW	<p>Sent by Manpower to work for about a week and ended up staying about six weeks and for about the first four weeks, everyday I thought this is too much, I cannot handle this pace, I will not be back tomorrow, but I kept coming back. Then I didn't work that whole summer. I took the summer off and came back in the fall as a full-time Wright State employee. Again pretty much did the same position, reported to Regina, doing Dr. Beljan's typing and filing.</p>
JSP	<p>What kind of boss with Dr. Beljan? Did he have a lot of typing to do? Was that what kept you occupied almost full-time?</p>
SW	<p>Almost full-time as I said, tape after tape of those little mini cassettes dictation. He was an intimidating boss because I let him be - and know him - and for while quite frightening. Regina was a tremendous buffer and my dealings with Dr. Beljan at that time were through her. I had almost no contact with him, other than through Regina, and through his voice on the tape</p>
JSP	<p>What did his voice sound like?</p>
SW	<p>Very precise. Easy to understand. Easy to take dictation from. Hard for me because his vocabulary was so much greater than mine. I spent a great deal of time with a word finder in my hand. And during the years that I worked for him, it increased my vocabulary, at least my thinking vocabulary, tremendously.</p>
JSP	<p>You made a statement a few minutes ago that he could be frightening if you let him. What do you mean by that?</p>
SW	<p>He's a very decisive man. Not easy to know in the beginning, not cold, but rather standoffish with people he didn't know well with people - to do a job he wasn't there to socialize. He didn't have time always to be friendly and a lot of it was because he was so very busy and so into everything: getting the school going. I come from a situation which was much less formal. I worked with people whose minds - it didn't work like his or were as agile as his perhaps because they didn't need to be and I probably came into that position expecting more warmth, more person-to-person contact and there were many times that I felt that I wasn't necessarily a human being but a machine doing a job.</p>
JSP	<p>This seems to contrast with Dr. Beljan's image of being a very outgoing public person. Do you feel that there was a private and a public person?</p>

SW	Oh yes.
JSP	Regina acted like a buffer, did other people at the school of medicine get the same buffer treatment?
SW	Yes
JSP	Was that a value to the school?
SW	Oh yes. Very much so I think. Regina had worked with him long enough and had - or I should say, has the type of personality to not be intimidated by a very forceful person. And she worked extremely well with Dr. Beljan. He had quite a temper and when things didn't always go the way he thought they should he could vent that temper. He is extremely expressive – it's not always comfortable with - not always comfortable to be in that line of fire when that opinion was being expressed. And Regina could soften that - through the message that he gave to her to give to another person there could be some softening in her transition, in her transfer.
JSP	Did you ever see him lose his temper?
SW	No I never did. I've seen him when he was to the point of losing his temper. I've seen him when he was ready to lose his temper. He was very careful not to lose his temper with anyone other than the person he was losing his temper with.
JSP	What were the physical arrangements like there? Were you very close together? Was there a lot of space at the Kettering Center?
SW	At the Kettering Center – yes very close. It was the same old story that Wright State has now - there was a space crunch. There were three people in an outer office, and Dr. Beljan's office of course, he had a fairly large size office. In this one particular area it was Regina, myself, and one other typist. Back, or out in the front, there was a reception area with five or six desks of support people working for Ray Palmer, Dr. Zoffula, Dr. Suriano, Dr. Spanier.
JSP	What was Regina Borum like to work with? As a superior and as an individual?
SW	Extremely fair, very demanding. I learned in working with her to be careful about what product I gave her to pass on to Dr. Beljan. She expected the best and wouldn't tolerate anything less than the best, but to get the best from a person she was gentle and able to bring that best side out. She never raised her voice, she was friendly, a great deal of warmth there but also a very private person.
JSP	Do you feel her style of leadership influenced your style when you became -
SW	Absolutely very much so she became a mentor for me.

JSP	Can you describe some of the people who were there like uh, for instance Dr. Zoffula?
SW	He's - I never knew him extremely well, but he left an impression with me that was good. He was a very quickwitted, fast talking, friendly, happy-go-lucky individual knew a great deal about the anatomy program and donated body program. I never did any work for Dr. Zoffula so I can't tell you about his style of work, but he was very instrumental in getting the donated body program off the ground and in a working order and did it in such a way that someone such as I, who came into this a little bit awed of doctors, especially MDs, made me see that this was a very good gain, a very important and vital part of any school of medicine, and took away any ill feelings I might have had about cadavers and this kind of thing - the anatomy classes.
JSP	How would you describe the interaction of the principal people related to the school of medicine at that time - related to the pace of development?
SW	Close. I think that at that time each department chair and dean knew what the others were doing and all were involved tightly with the recruiting process. All worked closely with Regina and Dr. Beljan - lots of meetings, lots of planning, lots of brain thinking.
JSP	Was this closeness, do you think that was a result of the development process or was it because of the correct mixture of personalities?
SW	I think it was because they saw the potential - they saw the job that had to be done, that needed to be done and knew that it took this closeness and this business of working closely together, to get it done. I think the personalities were very very very different and I'm sure in different circumstances, in an established school, there wouldn't have been that closeness. But I think that there was a common goal that they were working for, an act - common goal created that relationship.
JSP	Did you ever take minutes at the executive committee meeting?
SW	No. Not while Dr. Beljan was here. In fact the people who talk toward the person who took minutes at the executive committee meetings was a member of voting member of the executive committee.
JSP	How would you describe Dr. Spanier?
SW	Very private. Slightly chauvinistic but - well chauvinistic isn't the word, he was very protective of women. Perhaps not always giving credit to women for being able to think and do and work intelligently unfortunately.
JSP	Did he seem unemotional? Dispassionate in his performance?
SW	Somewhat to me. He reminds me - his mind is so very like a steel trap and so analytical. He was very quick to see through red tape and smokescreens. He was able to

	<p>get right down to the heart of whatever he was reading or working on and always able to present, for a problem, a solution. And why that solution might not work - two sides, he was able to see all sides of any problem or anything he was working with.</p>
JSP	<p>Was Dr. Buzzard on board at that time?</p>
SW	<p>Dr. Buzzard came on a couple of months after I started work - September of that time.</p>
JSP	<p>What was the size of the secretarial or support staff? Was at large was near you and how many others?</p>
SW	<p>There was me, they were four others at that time, three others at that time- there were four of us. We worked and I'm talking about my full-time work now, there's evil all from all of this at the Kettering Center. We worked for Dr. Beljan, Dr. Sheedy who was the dean of academic affairs, Dr. Spanier, a little bit for Dr. Lindower- eventually he did get his own secretary. We whirlpool worked to us was put in a basket we did it, I gave it to Regina when it was ready again.</p>
JSP	<p>So she coordinated the secretarial pool?</p>
SW	<p>Uh-huh.</p>
JSP	<p>There's a camaraderie that develops among people who are doing the same task together. What was the camaraderie like at the school of medicine? Was it a close-knit group?</p>
SW	<p>It was kind of like a sorority. You're right, it was very close, it's close to this day. I'm very close with those girls who are around or even in the vicinity. We reminisce a lot, we stuck together, we helped each other. And sure you've heard it said that if you get more than two women together usually you have a problem, a conflict of interest or conflict of personalities, but we didn't have that. It was a total team effort and one of the reasons is because it wouldn't have been tolerated if personality conflicts had come about. I'm not sure what would've happened, but I don't think those personality problems, whoever caused those problems would have been gotten rid of because we needed the team effort to get the job done. And I don't know who - Regina interviewed and hired us all and maybe it was her ability to pick that personality mesh or maybe it was her ability to keep things close and on an even keel – teamwork, but whatever it was it worked and it was a good feeling, a very comfortable way of work.</p>
JSP	<p>Was there ever a time when you all felt the same I of exasperation by the demands placed on you by the staff?</p>
SW	<p>I'd say - I'd say our biggest- I don't want a say fear, but our biggest apprehension was that we might give Dr. Beljan something that he didn't like, then by this time we'd all heard enough rumored to know that it could get hot.</p>

JSP	What were the rumors?
SW	Oh that he would, if the quality of work that went into him was substandard, then the person generating that substandard work would be asked to leave. And that apparently had happened several times before I came and Regina came, that he might - I told you I never heard Dr. Beljan lose his temper and that's true, but I have heard him make some barbed remarks to people he felt were giving him less than what he wanted. These were quiet and calm, but they carried his temper anyway I think, we were all a little bit weary of that staying and did everything we could to make sure we weren't the brunt of it.
JSP	Did you ever see the same kind of reactions from the other members of the school of medicine, the other faculty and senior staff?
SW	Yes. Yes I think they all hoped to avoid any confrontation, but I don't think - I don't want to give the impression that they would lower- not lower their standards, but change their opinion just to conform with Dr. Beljan, that wasn't the case, not at all, but I think perhaps other members of the staff, before they would differ with him, would do perhaps quite a bit of soul-searching to make sure they were on the right track.
JSP	Did you ever find that Dr. Beljan's leadership style set the tone for the other members of the school of medicine? Did they all start picking up on some of his traits and characteristics?
SW	I don't think so. I think each one had his or her own style of operation. I think they conform to standards and office procedures and styles were pretty much the same.
JSP	Tell me about Dr. Sheedy and Ray Palmer.
SW	Dr. Sheedy was tremendously, is perhaps the most laid back so to speak. Where Dr. Beljan was so exacting. He had a good sense of humor, is very kind, and easy to get along with to the support staff there. He was a person we could talk with, "good morning", "how are you doing with House, your family?" it's not that we didn't necessarily get that from Dr. Beljan, yet he had a tremendous job to do and laid the groundwork for all the affiliated hospitals in the agreements did the initial writing of the agreements and that was such a long drawn out process I think we all became close with him in reworking in reading, working, in rewriting his agreements. Ray Palmer kept pretty much to himself generated a lot of work too - speaking from a secretarial standpoint. Seemed to have an understanding of the amount of information and knowledge about setting up a health sciences library. Worked long hours. Interesting, quiet man.
JSP	Introspective?
SW	Not so much. Not very much. No he seemed to have his own private life, private world, the way he worked - when he is at work he was total business, total librarian. I never

	saw much socializing or he never had time to stop and chat.
JSP	When the office made the move from the Kettering Center to the VA, how long did that take?
SW	I wasn't involved with the move. They moved during the summer when I was not working, but from what I heard it was up in a quick couple of days.
JSP	When you came back after the summer, and you came back to the VA instead of the Kettering Center, did you find conditions had changed?
SW	Physical conditions were different.
JSP	What about working conditions? Did you find responsibilities changed in any way?
SW	No. There was more work there seemed to be quite a bit more work generated. Not everyone was at the VA that had been at the Kettering Center. Dr. Suriano was not at the VA, he was here on campus. Dr. Spanier had an office here on campus, he worked back and forth. So too Dr. Beljan, he had two offices, but all of Dr. Beljan's work was done at the VA. Doctors Zoffolo was not at the VA, he was here on campus at that time - at the Bio Science I building was open. Ray Palmer was at the VA for while and then he moved to the dayton public library and then to campus This building parts of this building came open
JSP	Was there still a secretarial pool style of administration?
SW	Yes.
JSP	Were there the same number of people in the secretarial pool?
SW	We had added one. We had added a receptionist.
JSP	Who were the members of the secretarial pool?
SW	Joanna Aaron was the receptionist. Diana Porte was a secretary. Rosemary Neill was a secretary. And this is going to contradict something I said earlier, I can't think of her name, another lady came in as a secretary at the same time I did. She worked at the VA for maybe six months and then transferred to campus, to another position to work with Dr. Reese I believe and I'm sorry I said we were close knit, and we were, but I can't think of her name.
JSP	Did you find yourself, in terms of space, did you have more space at the VA center?
SW	Uh-huh. It was building 115. Old, not air-conditioned, steam- heat, very hot in the winter from the steam-heat ,very hot in the summer from the lack of air conditioning. We were on the top floor, secretaries were all in one big room to themselves. Regina

	<p>had an area out away from the secretarial pool, a little cubicle along with Dr. Spanier, Dr. Siva, Dr. Beljan, had an office - large office. Then there was an executive committee meeting room, then the other end of the floor was not in use or not at least officially, but later opened up for the chairman of the Department of medicine, the chairman of psychiatry, briefly Dr. Blackwell. He lasted out there maybe a week and refused to come back.</p>
JSP	<p>Why?</p>
SW	<p>He refused to work in those conditions he called them.</p>
JSP	<p>Was it that primitive?</p>
SW	<p>Not primitive no. But it was certainly - no carpet on the floor, no privacy as far as offices are concerned. And I think that Dr. Blackwell felt in his position - and for his department privacy is a must. We had just cubicles or he did, with the tops open, it was not fancy. The furniture we had was Wright State furniture and it was nice, but the other arrangements were not certainly not like what we have now. Dr. Sukowitz was chair of medicine, his office was there. He was rarely there. Dr. Davies, who was a faculty member at that time, was there, his office was there. I think those were the only two department chairman we had there at the time.</p>
JSP	<p>What other kinds of facilities-</p>
SW	<p>Dr. Lindower was there.</p>
JSP	<p>What other kinds of facilities did you have there? Did you have a common room for preparing food and things like that?</p>
SW	<p>We had a room with a coffee pot. We always had a coffee pot, that's standard school of medicine fair. We couldn't exist without it. We had a large restroom with a lounge area for the women. The coffee room, that was a room we could take a sandwich into. Getting something to eat at the VA, that wasn't an easy thing to do [laughter] we had a lot of potluck type lunches there. We were small and close-knit we shared whatever we had.</p>
JSP	<p>Tell me about Dr. Lindower.</p>
SW	<p>Dr. Lindower is the kind of man who always has time to talk with anyone who needs his assistant for any reason, no matter how busy he is. He was very knowledgeable about curriculum, setting up the whole curriculum for the student body. He demanded, I think, and got his own secretary early on, Caroline Teane, Caroline Elliott at that time. He operates, did operate, does operate well in committee settings, is very careful to be fair at all times and tried to see any implications of any decisions he might make, down the road how it's going to impact on the entire school. He was the doctor we could go to, if any of us had a cold or sore throat we can go to him and say Dr. Lindower what</p>

	can I do about this and he, no matter what he was doing would take time out to sit down and say, take an aspirin, or, it will go away, you will feel better, you feel this way because, very much a family type doctor in my opinion.
JSP	What about Dr. Suowitz?
SW	I never worked with or dealt with Dr. Suowitz. The only information I have about him is secondhand but I understand he was an extremely difficult man to work for.
JSP	Was there a particular secretary for him?
SW	Deborah Margaret was the secretary. He also had an assistant, he had several assistants - some of them seemed to work while others didn't seem to stand up under the strain very well. Deborah was the secretary and worked in the department for quite some time under quite a bit of stress - eventually replaced the young lady whose name I can't remember as a part of our secretarial team working for Dr. Beljan.
JSP	Was it usual for the chairman to have assistants?
SW	It was becoming the thing to do to have an assistant and have a secretarial support. And yes Dr. Sipowitz it did have an assistant, Dr. Blackwell, later did and the chairman now almost all of them.
JSP	How long did you stay in that team, at the Veterans Administration?
SW	A year and we'd been in this building that year.
JSP	Was it finished yet?
SW	Pretty much so. Very close to being finished. We moved in and a big snowstorm – the snow was as deep as it was this past week. We weren't familiar with campus, many of us who had been out there having been on campus except for maybe once or twice. I remember coming and not knowing which building, which door to come into the building. It was very confusing to me, we parked up at the University Center and tried to walk through the snow drifts not knowing there was a [indecipherable] in ending up with snow carrying our office supplies with snow up to our waist [laughter] the other morning I tried to come in trying to find the front door now and the [unintelligible] elevator door open and thought that's a good way to come in so I did it wasn't in use as a [unintelligible] at that time.
JSP	It's like the overall relationships were either very formal, as in the case of work, or are very informal in the case of overall operations. Would that be an accurate description?
SW	Yes.
JSP	Why do you think that was?

SW	I think there was situations that demanded formality. Especially if we had dignitaries visiting. There were other situations that demanded we let our hair down and be human, if for no other reason, to keep us all an even keel.
JSP	Was that the general office atmosphere? Was that the general office atmosphere of the school?
SW	The informal formal? I think probably the Dean's office had more of a fluctuation than the others. I think the others perhaps at their offices were more on an even keel than we were.
JSP	When you came here to the medical sciences building, was that when the major offices became distinct unto themselves?
SW	Yes.
JSP	You were with the Dean's office with who else?
SW	With Regina and Deborah Diana, and of course JoAnn is the receptionist.
JSP	So from then on you became the Dean's pool?
SW	All of us back in that little area where we are now, we were all very, except JoAnn, for about three days until we decided that would not work. Then it became apparent that Dr. Jewitt was going to need his own support person and Frannie Paris, I can't remember whether Fran had replaced Dr. Sheevi by that time as hospital affairs where they were recruiting, but Deborah went with hospital affairs segment and I stayed. By that time Rosemary, the other secretary, resigned to raise a family and I became Dr. Beljan's soul typing support person.
JSP	Did that increase your responsibilities?
SW	Yes it did. Again Regina was a major help, as a buffer. I did the typing and the filing. I did not keep his calendar. I did not make his appointments. Only if Regina was gone then I did do those kinds of things. I didn't take minutes at meetings unless she absolutely could not attend and I went in her place increased my responsibilities and increased my awareness that I had this one man to support now instead of pooling my work with the others. I think he gave me a sense of, maybe more of a sense of pride self-satisfaction, perhaps to move into that light.
JSP	Tell me about Dr. Jewitt and Dr. Suriano.
SW	Dr. Jewitt was also a very private person. Very careful - too he was a bachelor and I think he was always very careful to treat the ladies in the office with the utmost respect. I think that perhaps he had a fear of being the source of gossip or being the brunt of

	gossip even.
JSP	As a single man?
SW	As a single man. Through the years of working with him I saw a different side of him a very warm and friendly side, that he's like most of us. I think that he had two lives that he led also, his business life here at the school and his private life. Those of us who worked with him over the years developed a close working relationship with him we work for and won his respect and vice versa. He was probably one of Dr. Beljan's closest confidants was able to work with Dr. B. and have an opinion of his own and be able to express it advised Dr. B. listened to him. Dr. Suriano I didn't work as closely with up until I started working with Dr. Sawyer but Dr. Suriano seemed to be extremely good with students, as he should be in his position. His dealings were mainly with Regina when he came to the office. He had ,and this was true of a lot of the chairmen and program directors he Regina and I were both there - they naturally went to Regina with any questions or any business they had. If she were gone, then they worked through me, but this is only if she were not around. So my dealings with Dr. Suriano were very limited. Usually if Regina were not around he would wait until she was and then come back and talk with her.
	[break in tape]
SW	-interesting sitting here talking with you I realize I'm seeing this from two totally different angles.
JSP	What do you mean?
SW	I'm seeing it from for my early years, as a secretary and now as an assistant to the Dean. And I see two different sides of people when I look at them.
JSP	You mean a hierarchical perspective? Based on your different roles now?
SW	It could be it could be - for instance Dr. Suriano, I worked very closely with him. Now back then I didn't. If I were still in my position as secretary I would not work closely with him. I'm not sure that's hierarchical, I hope this comes out right, as much as just the nature of the position. He knows that I do work very closely with the Dean and because of that he comes to me with different pieces of business messages for Dean Sawyer.
JSP	While you were the Dean's secretary, how would you see him in this environment, in the University? Is his role the same? Was he as involved as he was in the community?
SW	You're talking about Dr. B. right?
JSP	Yeah did you see his role changing? How did it develop, how did it stay the same?

SW	What changed was he became a very powerful figure on campus. Also my feelings were that people on campus feared his power.
JSP	Why?
SW	I don't know. My theory was that people really didn't understand the man and didn't know what he was capable of or felt perhaps that his power would take something away from them. But I often felt that the animosity or the fear that was here for him was unfounded. As I said he intimidated me early on in I was actually frightened of him, and remember even once telling Regina that I was sure I couldn't please Dr. Beljan and perhaps she should better find somebody else to do that job. She gave me a good lecture, had me see things in a different light.
JSP	What did she tell you?
SW	She told me that no matter what he did or what he said, that I was still a valuable human being and nobody can take that away from me. And what I was doing was good and needed and that I shouldn't let his personality get to me. Those weren't her exact words but in essence that's what she said. Made a lot of sense to me. I went back and continue to do the job and these were things I never said to Dr. B. Through the years, I worked for him for five years, and in the end he had my respect, loyalty, devotion and it was very hard to make the decision to stay with the school and not go with health affairs.
JSP	Did he make an offer?
SW	Yes. Not as an assistant now, but as a secretary.
JSP	Why did you decide to stay with the school?
SW	I felt I was ready to move up. I had an administrative position before when I worked for the school as an assistant, stopped working because I was just tired and thought it would be nice to stay home and be a housewife. Probably had some emotional upheaval along the way and when I came back to work I wasn't ready for a lot of responsibility. Typing and filing, that was all right with me, I didn't want a lot, but through the course of the years it got to be that it wasn't enough. That I needed more of a challenge and I knew that if I went with health affairs as a secretary then that challenge wouldn't be there. I would continue to do -and Regina knew my feelings and knew my capabilities and encouraged me. That's basically why I stayed. That, and by that time, I was familiar with much of the workings of the school, and I felt that I could be of value to Dr. Sawyer.
JSP	Well thank you very much for this first interview our time is just about up. In our next -seems like a natural stopping point for today – in our next interview I'd like to go over the arrival of Dr. Sawyer, how your responsibilities evolved as the new assistant.

SW	Okay
JSP	Thank you very much