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WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY
Retirees Association Oral History Project
Interview with Larry Prochaska

Interview Information

Interview date: March 20, 2019

Interviewer: Dan Abrahamowicz

Interviewee: Larry Prochaska

Interview Transcript

DA: Okay. You ready?

LP: I'm ready.

DA: Hello, everyone. This is Dan Abrahamowicz, former vice president for student affairs and current member of the Wright State University Retirees Association. Today is Friday, March 20, 2019 and we're very pleased today to have Dr. Larry Prochaska, professor of biochemistry and molecular biology, and former vice-chair of that department, with us today. I should also note that Dr. Prochaska has been recognized as a Frederick A. White Distinguished Professor, and that he worked for the university for 35 years, from 1980 to 2015, and he actually is still working for the university, as he is incoming president for the retirees association, on Athletics Council, and doing a bunch of other stuff. So, Larry, welcome. Nice to see you.

LP: Sure, thanks.

DA: So let's start off – we do this with everyone, tell us a little bit about yourself. Where'd you grow up? Where are you from? That kind of stuff.

LP: I'm from Cicero Brewerton, Illinois, which is – if you look at Chicago, where the thinnest part of Chicago is – that's the suburbs that I grew up in. I was about seven miles from the Loop, I could get down there on the L in about fifteen minutes. It was a middle class neighborhood – a working class neighborhood.

DA: What'd your parents do?

LP: My dad was a rug salesman – a manager at a rug department at a department store. My mom was a book keeper, she ran payroll for a small company.

DA: That's interesting, how did you get into – did you have this ambition to be a professor as a youth? Were you an outstanding student? How did that happen?

LP: [*Laughing*] we can say no to all of those. I was an outstanding student until I got to high school.

DA: So as a younger child you did well.

LP Yes, I did well. They wanted me to skip a couple grades when I was growing up.

DA: See? You did well on those standardized tests and everything.

LP: Yeah, and my parents said no, and I'm glad they did because I was already within a week from being a year behind, so physically, I was a little slower than a lot of the kids.

DA: So they declined the opportunity for you to skip a grade.

LP: Twice. I was happy about that.

DA: Was that grade school?

LP: Yeah, grade school. So when I went to high school I found high school to be too regimented for me. I wanted freedom.

DA: Did you go to public school?

LP: I went to public schools all the way through, in fact I've only taught at public universities and public schools, and I believe very strongly in public education. So, my high school years - I had the typical growing pains of being an adolescent, which of course – I didn't like those years [*laughs*].

DA: Yeah, not me.

LP: Yeah, I was going to say it was horrible. My school – I was in a district where many of the kids in the school, because we were in a manufacturing area – Chicago used to build a lot of things, like washing machines, vacuum cleaners, and stuff like that. Many of the kids in high school, didn't even bother to finish high school. They left high school when they were sixteen and got union jobs that paid them significant money.

DA: Sure, sure.

LP: And that was a weird environment because most of those kids didn't care so much about learning. The good news is I was in accelerated classes, but I thought it was bad news to be in such a regimented – you couldn't even leave our building during the day. I was in the city of course, and our school was one city block – five stories tall. You had to go and get there at 7:30, you had to stay in the building, and then got out of class at ten after three or something. So my grades started out okay, but decayed as I got deeper into high school, and it was because I wanted freedom. The thing that saved me was that in that same building there was a junior college, and because I did so well in my science classes they allowed me to take junior college classes as a senior. That gave me the opportunity to not be a normal high school student. I still had to go at certain times of the day, but I could go out. I had the highest grades in my college classes but my high school classes were pretty pathetic [*laughs*]. And it's not because of time – I just didn't care about them.

DA: You were just more devoted to the college classes.

LP: Yeah, it was interesting and maybe it had something to do with the pace. Maybe the pace of the college classes was more accelerated and I could pick it up. I went to college on a lark.

DA: Where'd you go to school?

LP: Illinois State University in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois. I majored in biology – I started as an art major for about a week and then I decided to switch to science.

DA: Why did you pick that university?

LP: Because my brother went there [*laughs*]. Believe me, that's the only one I applied to. My life has been somewhat serendipitous in that way.

DA: Where is Illinois State?

LP: Bloomington-Normal. They're in the Missouri Valley conference. Doug Collins went there, if you've ever heard of Dug Collins.

DA: Mm hmm [*nods*]. Actually, I know a lot of people who worked at Illinois State. Student affairs type people.

LP Yeah, yeah.

DA: I know they had a strong student affairs training program or something? Maybe they did.

LP I don't know that, but when I went there it was about 11,000. Now it's about 22,000. It was fine, got to play a lot of basketball, which was great. I played basketball in high school.

DA: Intercollegiate basketball you mean?

LP: No, they wanted me to walk on, which is suicide, right? Didn't want to do it [*laughs*].

DA: Although they do get a lot of gear.

LP: Yeah.

DA: Shoes and jackets and stuff like that.

LP: I did that in high school – I learned all the other teams' defenses.

DA: Oh, is that right?

LP: Which made me a pretty good player because every week I had to learn a different offense or defense - but I wasn't that good a player. So the environment there was good enough that I liked college a lot.

DA: Biology major?

LP: Biology major, but I was almost a double major in chemistry and biology, and I found that biology wasn't quantitative enough for me. So I began to take more and more chemistry classes and I ended up almost having a double major. Then I took biochemistry when I think I was a junior, and the instructor said to me after the class, he said, "Well, why don't you take the second semester?" He said, "The only thing is that you'll be the only undergraduate in there" and I said, "Well, okay." So I took that that and about – they were on semesters –

DA: Yeah.

LP: -about seven or eight weeks into the – maybe four weeks in to the semester, he pulled me aside, and I told him I was applying to graduate schools and I wanted to go into some level of science – some kind of molecular science –

DA: You weren't at that time thinking of being a professor - or were you?

LP: No, I was thinking about the next step. I don't think I planned that for a while. So I guess what happened was, he pulled me aside – I wasn't getting in, I naively was applying to Wisconsin and Berkley –

DA: Naively because why?

LP: Because- Illinois State, my GPA was good but it wasn't great –

DA: I see, I see.

LP: My GRE's were okay but they weren't great - quantitative scores were good but my English scores weren't so good. So he pulled me aside and he said, "I can get you into Ohio State, I know people on the admissions committee there" and said, "Do you want to apply there?" And I said, "Sure!" [*Laughs*]. So I was late to apply to them –

DA: For a master's program?

LP: No, for PhD.

DA: PhD program.

LP: I applied to all PhD programs.

DA: So you went from bachelors to a PhD program.

LP: Yeah I have no master's degree, just a PhD program. So I applied and they interviewed me, they said, "Come over we want to talk to you." So, I went and interviewed with them and they offered me – when I got back to my apartment they offered me a stipend. It was great. It wasn't the greatest department, but it was an opportunity –

DA: Biochemistry department?

LP: Biochemistry – my PhD is in biochemistry. It was great, I moved to Columbus, Ohio – I knew no one in Columbus Ohio – zero. I didn't know where to live – you've probably gone through that in your career. You walk into town and don't know a person – don't know anybody.

DA: Where did you live? You remember?

LP: Yeah, I lived at 124 West Oakland, which was North campus. Then I lived 314 North High Street, which was near Northeast Broadway and High. Then I lived in the Royal Neil Apartments at 2650 Neil Avenue. So I've mostly lived on the North side of campus.

DA: That Buckeye haven on Summit Street [*laughs*].

LP: [*Laughs*] I bet that was a real haven! How far north was it?

DA: Well, it was High Street, and Indianola, and Summit, I think.

LP: Yeah, I know where it is, but how far north was it?

DA: Oh, two blocks north of like 17th street maybe.

LP: Yeah, it was better there –

DA: No, it wasn't bad.

LP: If your down further, [inaudible], that was pretty bad.

DA: No, no, no. Not that far.

LP: So, many of my colleagues in the biochemistry department was just like me. They didn't know anybody there, so we had friends, and I enjoyed my time at Ohio State immensely.

DA: And how long did you spend at Ohio State?

LP: I was there four years. I worked with my PhD advisor, Elizabeth Gross – a woman – biochemist, I guess more of a biophysicist who was trained in Berkley. One of the things I saw in my time there was that the bottom line was that she had all sorts of issues with the male faculty. The male faculty treated her horribly, absolutely horribly. As a result of that I became more of an advocate for women scientists throughout my whole career. They denied her tenure for no reason other than they didn't like her.

DA: They didn't like the fact that she was a woman in science?

LP: Well yeah, and she was aggressive – she wasn't shy and I liked that about her, she would tell you what she thought and she was a good mentor – always helping us. Two of us worked in her lab – another guy my age, he ended up being the chair of chemistry at the University of Arkansas. You know, she treated us well – we both got publications. They just didn't like her – so she sued them, and she won. Then three years later she was a professor [*laughs*]. They realized this was a problem – and she had grant money and all of the things you should have –

DA: -to be tenured.

LP: Yeah! National reputation and all that stuff – and we wrote letters to the tenure committee. Anyway, that's a side, but she also gave us the opportunity to give talks at national meetings, scientifically. So that's when I began to think about it, because it was a great environment.

DA: So during those four years, as you approached graduation, that's when you began thinking about being a professor?

LP: Yeah, because I saw the freedom - which I mentioned earlier that freedom was an important issue for me. Freedom to do what I wanted.

DA: A less structured environment than high school, certainly.

LP: And less structured compared to any other kind of job.

DA: Yeah.

LP: This is an aside, and I don't know if I'm supposed to be talking about this, but whenever they gave those tests – University of Iowa tests, where you would pick your vocation, mine came out either being a high school teacher, or an ice cream sales person.

DA: *[Laughs]*.

LP: You know, one of those guys who ride the bike –

DA: Less structure on the ice cream cart.

LP: That's right. The high school teacher was because I liked to learn, I guess.

DA: Sure.

LP: It's funny that I was raised in – I'd say about a 500 square foot, tiny apartment.

DA: So you lived in an apartment when you were growing up in Chicago?

LP: Oh yeah. Lived in a basement apartment.

DA: Not a house or anything like that?

LP: No – well it was part of a house, there was two apartments in the house.

DA: I see.

LP: There was an upstairs and a downstairs. I guess my point is, my parents didn't have a lot of money but I always had food, I always had clothes, and I always had mom and dad around.

DA: Sure.

LP: I was a lucky man. Very lucky.

DA: So you're working on a PhD, you start to see a career pathway for yourself – so what was your first job?

LP: Oh, well – you mean... my first job?

DA: No, I mean what was your first job after graduation with your PhD.

LP: I was going to say– by the way, when I was in college I worked in factories, and oh man, I made a lot of money. Lots of money.

DA: Paid your way through school, or did you have scholarships?

LP: My grandfather in his wisdom left me money for college.

DA: For college? Specifically for college?

LP: He paid my tuition, which was –

DA: Quite a visionary.

LP: Of course, it was nothing when I went to college. Tuition was a hundred bucks a semester, and my dorm room, by the time I was a senior I had to pay it myself, but he left me money and I'm lucky for that. But I worked in factories over the summer. I don't know if you'd call postdoc a real job because it's a temporary position. So, I was naïve – my mentor said, "Well, why don't you go to Purdue?"

DA: For a postdoc?

LP: For a postdoc, "Go over there and talk to those guys and see what you like." You know, I was naïve –

DA: Why did she say Purdue?

LP: Because she had postdoc'd with a fellow who was over there, and she got along well with him, and I was doing a lot more chemical things than a lot of people in the field, I would say. I was in photosynthesis, believe it or not. They were doing a lot of chemistry – modifying chloroplasts and trying to figure out how they work, so I had that expertise. This guy wanted me

for that project. So I went over there and interviewed and I got the job. Going from Ohio State as a graduate student in Columbus- where in those days parties didn't start until ten o'clock at night and we were single a lot – I was living with my wife, we weren't married yet but we were living together –

DA: In Columbus?

LP: In Columbus. The bottom line of all that is that we never went out before ten o'clock – I went to this place Purdue and it was [laughs] –

DA: It was Lafayette [laughs].

LP: Yeah, it was Lafayette – it was like, “Holy cow is this different!”

DA: How so? In what way?

LP: Well, because when they had parties they expected you to be there probably at the time it started [laughs]. You know, we never did that at grad school, we showed up whenever we did.

DA: And these are parties held by faculty at this point I assume.

LP: Yeah, so that was my naivety. So it was a little bit – we were shocked, we were a little shocked. But that lab – the mentor was hypothesis driven and he liked data that fit his hypothesis and if it didn't fit his hypothesis –

DA: He changed the data [laughs].

LP: [Laughing] No, he never changed the data, he never did that. But he didn't like it. I said to myself, “This isn't the way to do science.” So I hung there as long as I could –

DA: How long did you hang there?

LP: Three years. The first two years weren't so good – the last year was good. He wanted me to stay after the third year because I stopped listening to him [laughs]. I just did my own experiments.

DA: Is there a standard number of years for postdoc experience?

LP: Well, in those days it was two. Some people would do three – I did three so that I'd get some more papers, and I did get more papers. Then I decided – I tried to get a faculty position

at that time, which at the time was... I tried to get a faculty position and industrial positions, but I was really only interested in faculty positions.

DA: And where did you look for those?

LP: I did all the big – now they're biotech companies. There was Malakoff –

DA: What about university positions? Where'd you look for those?

LP: I looked – University of New Orleans was one, I looked mostly north of the Mason-Dixon line. California –

DA: So, all over.

LP: Yeah. Not so much on the east coast –

DA: So when are we talking about? Mid to late seventies at this point?

LP: This would have been late seventies. So then I decided – the guys said, you know, "You ought to look for another position", and I said, "Okay, I understand that. We've finished this work." So I went to the literature, in those days you had to go to the library [*Laughs*]. In fact, I even use this library here, I used to come up to this floor. I remember I could come up the stairs a hell of a lot faster than I do now.

DA: You do microfiche and stuff like that.

LP: Yeah, it was crazy. So I started looking in the journals and I wrote to four or five guys – one in Toronto, one in Oregon, one in Chicago –

DA: What were you writing them about? About a job?

LP: Postdoc jobs.

DA: Oh, additional postdoc –

LP: Yeah, because I was naïve. I didn't get any interviews – I remember one day I got nine letters of rejection.

DA: In one day?

LP: [Nods]

DA: Holy mackerel.

LP: Well, I applied for everything.

DA: Yeah, yeah.

LP: I was applying all over the place – and that's okay. So I ended up applying to this guy in Oregon – he had a position. It was at the Institute of Microbiology at the University of Oregon, which was a great place. He called me and we did an interview and I moved out there –

DA: Wow, that's a change of scenery for sure.

LP: We needed a change of scenery, after Lafayette –

DA: Columbus, West Lafayette, then Oregon.

LP: Yeah.

DA: Where in Oregon?

LP: Eugene.

DA: Eugene, yeah.

LP: Yeah, the football field was smaller – it wasn't 65,000, I think it was 40,000, but they were football crazy. In fact, we even went to a game once. The environment there was outstanding. I mean he had people coming in from all around the world to do experiments. That's why I switched fields to mitochondrial biology or biochemistry, biophysics... My experience at Purdue allowed me to make unique contributions in the field of mitochondrial biological eugenics, and I have to thank the guy at Purdue for giving me the opportunity to do that, and I transferred all of that knowledge I had to Oregon. Oregon was great.

DA: So how long did you stay there?

LP: Two years, and one of the things – so, I got there and I had no furniture, because coming out from-

DA: So, were you married at this point?

LP: Yeah, we were married.

DA: So you got married in West Lafayette, or in Columbus?

LP: No, we got married in Columbus, the last month before we left, because I figured I couldn't get an apartment in West Lafayette if we were still living together, because those were the days, you know [*Laughs*]

DA: Yeah, West Lafayette.

LP: Because we were going to get married, anyway. That was a terrible thing to say, but she won't listen to this anyways. But she agreed. So, we moved there and I had no furniture, and because people did that, everybody gave us, like, I had a kitchen table that was a piece of lawn furniture, we ended up with a couple of lawn chairs, and I borrowed a mattress. We were sleeping on the floor for a couple of weeks. But one of the things they said to me right away was, "You know, you're going to have to buy a camera because you live in Oregon". Because you live in Oregon –

DA: And it's beautiful there.

LP: It's so beautiful there, yeah. I could look out the window of our lab and I could see the Three Sisters Mountains.

DA: Yeah.

LP: They were snowcapped. Looking out right where my desk was, I could see a hill that was forested. It was pretty nice.

DA: So, when did Wright State come into the picture?

LP: Yeah, so I wanted a job because it had been five years as a postdoc and I was getting a little ripe by the vine. So, I wanted a job, and I only applied to eight places because another guy said I could stay as long as I wanted – because, you know, I could generate data, I could talk... So, Wright State I applied to – I applied to mostly – you know, I wasn't looking at Wisconsin for jobs. I mean, that was clearly not my cup of tea. Clearly too high a tier, so to speak, but I applied to places like this. But I applied to Wright State out of a lark. I said, "Ah, let's try Wright State".

DA: So, this is like 1979 by now?

LP: Yes, this was 1979 exactly. And I said to myself – when I was in Columbus I wasn't so happy with Columbus, but then I moved to Lafayette [*laughs*] and it made me appreciate

Columbus a lot. I thought the people in Columbus were decent – they were good people who were honest. You know, if I'm going to live somewhere it'd be good to work with honest people.

DA: Started parties on time...

LP: [*Laughs*] Well, that's not so true, actually. They still – anyway, so applied here as a lark. They called me on the phone and said, right after the first of the year, "We'd like to have you interview" and I said, "Sure, why not". I had interviewed at SUNY Buffalo in the biochemistry department, so I came here, and Bob Weisman and Dan Organisciak and Michael Leffak all talked to me.

DA: And this is at – they had a microbiology department here?

LP: No, biochemistry.

DA: Excuse me, biochemistry.

LP: Because Biochemistry then – we needed biochemistry more than microbiology. I talked to the chair, the chair was good. He was honest – Bob Weisman. I talked to all the young faculty – one woman came from Case Western. Another guy, Jerry Alter, came from Harvard, Mike Leffak came from Princeton, Dan Organisciak came from SUNY Buffalo. They were all scientifically awake.

DA: What do you mean by that?

LP: I mean that they were active, and they were doing research, and they were publishing it, and they were getting grants, and I didn't want to go to a teaching department. I became a good teacher, apparently, but it wasn't my number one interest. My number one interest was to have a lab and have students – teach them science and publish, and all that stuff. And I came here and I was blown away. I can tell you when I got on the plane I knew I got the job.

DA: And blown away by the quality of the school?

LP: The quality of the faculty! The quality of the faculty.

DA: It's sort of interesting for a new university that was really primarily a commuter institution at that time, having faculty with those kinds of credentials. Pretty impressive, actually.

LP: Yeah, it has to be that the chair recognized people that were good, and I think that's a skill a chair should have. I talked to them and they weren't – they were easy to talk to. They were

collaborative, they were interested in building the department, and it was a good thing. I got on the plane and I said, "I just got a job, I can't believe it".

DA: So you knew at the end of the interview day –

LP: I knew – I knew I had the job.

DA: Did you know because of a feeling or did they tell you?

LP: No, they didn't tell me.

DA: You connected well with them?

LP: Yeah, I connected well with all of them. I mean, the senior faculty, you know – the people who set the department up before Bob Weisman came did a great job of setting up curriculum and stuff like that, but they weren't active researchers. The people I spoke with who were active researchers all were from high quality places and were actively researching. Had I not seen that I wouldn't have gone.

DA: Did you know about Wright State because your time in Columbus, or...

LP: No – well, yeah, I drove by here [*Laughs*]. I drove by on I-70 and –

DA: You said you applied to Wright State on kind of a lark. How did you find out about it?

LP: Oh, it was an ad in Science Magazine – that was typical. They were putting their ads in places where you would get quality candidates – there were 150 people who applied to my job.

DA: Is that right?

LP: [*Nods head*] so they interviewed five or six, I guess – I don't know. They told me I was their first pick, but I didn't care, because I got the job [*laughs*]. I didn't care if I was first or fifth.

DA: So, you started here in 1980.

LP: Yeah.

DA: What was your impression of the place as you arrived here and started working?

LP: They gave me a half a lab and 10,000 bucks to put equipment and chemicals and stuff in, which is nothing really, but the department had all sorts of shared equipment that was decent. So, I knew I could get my work done, and they said, "If you get grant money, we can get you stuff" – and they did. They've always been honest about stuff like that. So when I came in I walked into an empty lab – I had been in research environments my whole career and I went, "Wow" [laughs]. You think when you're a scientist that you need to have help with stuff, but this is finally the focus point when you look at yourself and you say, "It's all up to you, you got to do it on your own". So once you get past that...

DA: [Nods head].

LP: So, I had to do everything. I set everything up, I bought all the chemicals, I got a grant, I hired people. The worst part was the first three months here – I didn't know anyone at first, but I had a lab that had a similar room number as a program called the weekend intervention program. I don't know if you know about this, but this is a program that was to help people who had DWI's –

DA: That still have it, probably.

LP: They don't have it here, no.

DA: No?

LP: They used to have it in the Med Science building –

DA: So it was a community program that was held on campus.

LP: It was, yes.

DA: But there used to be – there were a couple of faculty who did something like that.

LP: Oh yeah, Harvey Siegel did this – this was his program. So I would be working in the lab and, you know, it was me, and these guys would come at five o'clock or 4:30 on Friday – I'd go home around 5:30 or 6 – they'd come knocking on my door and they looked like the cat dragged them in, "Is this the weekend intervention program?" And I said, "No, no, it's the next building over." You know, that was a little shocking. And it was empty a lot. One of the things when you build a lab is that you have to be there all the time - I was there Saturdays and Sundays. Until I could get money to hire people to do things, I had to do everything myself. So I was working alone in the lab – I had to make all my buffers, wash my dishes... So I was there a lot, and there was hardly anyone around.

DA: What was your impression of the university at that point? It's students, the administration, and so on?

LP: Well, first off all I was not –

DA: You were too –

LP: Yes, I was not involved with the administration.

DA: You were too buried in your lab.

LP: Absolutely right. The students? I didn't have a graduate student until three years in –

DA: What were you teaching during those first years?

LP: The first year I didn't teach – that was part of the deal. And that was a good thing. Because it enabled me to write grants, it enabled me to get preliminary data for grants – a reason why I came. Because if they would've put me in a classroom that fall, I would've been a mess. Because you have to develop a course. You've done that, you have to develop a course. I started with a seminar class, and then I did medical biochemistry, and then I did graduate level biochemistry. But I never taught more than a course a term.

DA: Ever?

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LP: Well, no, at the beginning. At the end I was doing, you know... because a professor makes more money [*laughs*].

DA: Who was majoring in biochemistry in those days?

LP: There were no biochemistry majors.

DA: So, these were from other departments? Chemistry majors, biology majors – things like that?

LP: [*Nods*] Yeah, we were a service department. Now there is a biochemistry major. I helped write some of that stuff that's been approved.

DA: What were the students like? Were you impressed with them? Were they –

LP: It was a mix. There were good students, you know, there were some good students in graduate school, and some of them not so good. One of the quickest things you learn when you come to an institution like Wright State is you have to invest time in people. You know, if you're going to have a student in your lab – first of all it's a privilege to have a student in your lab, especially a PhD student. Then secondarily you're going to have to spend time with them, you're going to have to spend time training them, and there's no one else around to do that. You have to do it.

DA: Where was your office, by the way? Where was your lab, where were your offices and so forth?

LP: Well, my first lab was 247 Bio Sci II. It was a teaching lab. Like I said, I got a half a lab, and I shared it with Nadine Cohen, who was another assistant professor, she was from Case Western. We at one time had nine people in this really little lab and we had two NIH grants - It was insane – we had shifts. But that ended, and I eventually had all that space. I was there for about twenty years and then I moved a couple times. I can tell you the last five years I've worked I was in Diggs in the basement, and that lab was wonderful. It was just wonderful, and my office was wonderful.

DA: New building.

LP: [Nods] I was in the basement – I was in the basement and I was at the end of the last tunnel, all the way at the end. I never saw anybody wondering around because they could never get to me because they had to go through so many turns and twists – it was wonderful. The only people that came down there were people who wanted to see me.

DA: No customers of the DWI program?

LP: No [laughs].

DA: So, talk about your evolution as a citizen at Wright State University.

LP: So, I can tell you that... what happened was – and Dan, you know me a little bit- because of my special personality, so to speak, I eventually ended up running medical biochemistry for a long period of time. Which is a hundred medical students who –

DA: So you got a joint appointment then with the School of Medicine and the –

LP: Yes – tenure in the university and half of my salary came from the med school, and my chair decided that I should do medical school teaching. And I did other- in the graduate school.

DA: Why did your chair think that?

LP: Because of my special personality [*laughs*]. Well, because I didn't tell medical students they were not smart or anything like that, I would sit with them and try to help them. You know, that wasn't hard to do, I was being a decent human being. Many PhD's don't like teaching MD students, because MD students have little to no time – and that's true. So, they're really focused, and they really want to know what they need to know. You can steer them, and you can empathize with them, and it's true they take 23 semester hours a term. They're a little busy. And my colleagues – some of my colleagues never understood that. So, as time evolved, basically I took more and more responsibilities on, I ran the seminar program, I was doing more service stuff to help people out. I have to tell you about an incident I had at Purdue – and this has to do with my interest in diversity, when I got more senior, especially in my last ten years. This ties in with being involved with the administration. So, what we would do at Purdue, if it was a nice spring day, we'd go out and get a couple six packs and go out to the city park and we'd all sit around –

DA: You and the students? Other students, I mean?

LP: Yeah, students and the professors, we'd go out. Postdocs- I was a postdoc- and the students – well, grad students, not the little ones. We'd go out and talk science and talk. So, I was there once and they started talking about one of our technicians in a course manner, and I went ballistic. I just said, "You work with this person every day. You cannot talk like this about her. This is wrong. You can't do this." I said, "I never want to hear this stuff again from you guys. This is wrong, you should never talk like this." I mean she's working with us!

DA: Person of color?

LP: No, no, no. A woman – an attractive woman. And they started talking, and it's like, "Come on, guys. You're PhD's, or going to be PhD's. You don't talk like that!" So that's when my interest in diversity issues became more focused. And there were some other incidents that bothered me where black people were really poorly treated. Not in science, though.

DA: How did that lead to your involvement with the administration here, then?

LP: Yeah, well, what happened was- I can tell you I did very little until I got professor. I did very little-

DA: -outside of the department and the lab and teaching and all that.

LP: Yeah, I did some stuff with the PhD program, administratively, but I didn't do a lot. Because, well, its money, man [*laughs*].

DA: Sure.

LP: When I got to be professor – although I was known as a decent person in the med school for my fairness – I think.

DA: When did you get to be a professor? What year was that?

LP: 98'. So, in 98' I can tell you that I went to the dean – the dean of the college. I'm trying to remember her name...

DA: Yeah, yeah okay.

LP: Michele!

DA: Michele.

LP: Michele Wheatly. I went to her and I said, "You know, Michele, I'm really sick of this stuff, about men being rotten to women, even their colleagues", or whatever.

DA: And you saw that?

LP: My department did a little bit of it, but you'd see it all the time. You know, you'd talk to the women faculty – it isn't overt, it's just part of the culture. So, I said, "I'm sick of this. I've really had it – I've got to change this". And it had something to do with Iraq, I was just tired of listening to this stuff. So, I went to her and I said, "I'll do anything you want to help with diversity issues. I'll do anything you want me to do." So, she put me on the campus – Jeff... names are bad – I should know Jeff's name. Anyway, Jeff is passed – he had a diversity committee.

DA: Faculty group or...

LP: Faculty and staff. It was a university wide committee, and I was on it as the college rep. There was staff and all of the colleges were on it. We came up with diversity plans – I knew Jacqui McMillan, too.

DA: Programming and stuff like that?

LP: Yes, absolutely. There were programs, we had "Diversity Days" and all that stuff – I planned one of those for our college. Then they got this leader grant from NSF – Dan Goldstein and Michele got this grant. They gave me diversity officer for the college of science.

DA: You became the diversity officer for the college of science and math?

LP: Right, and what I did was whenever a new faculty would come in and interview me, I would talk with them about it – I would talk with them about it and let them ask any questions that they had, and I can tell you that was a great recruiting tool because the bottom line of all of that was they would send me a note afterwards – because I gave them my card – and they'd send me an email and say, "None of the other places did that, where I got to talk to somebody and see faculty where I could say anything I wanted."

DA: That's great.

LP: So, it was very successful, and so I tried to change the culture, and that eventually evolved into me getting involved in the community for the same reasons for the faculty.

DA: The faculty union was pretty new then – it must've started around '98. '97, maybe?

LP: Yeah, I think it was '97. I helped organize it – I helped organize it because of the fact that when Mulhollan said, "I'm taking a half a percent of your raise and I'm going to put it into the Nutter Center", I got a little upset [*laughs*].

DA: Oh wow. So that helped spur the creation of the union, I assume?

LP: It did.

DA: So that was late '80s, probably – the Nutter Center opened in '85, something like that?

LP: Yeah, it was around '89. That started me down that path, and then when we had the one president- I'm terrible with names, it's the senility – when he said we were going to have to start teaching –

DA: Harley? Was that Harley?

LP: Yeah, Harley, Harley Flack- that we'd have to start teaching classes in high schools at night – that was enough. That's when I went to the dark side, so to speak, for administrators. So, I did some diversity things in the union, which most of it was secret [*laughs*].

DA: So, you were also a long-standing member of the Athletic Council. How did you get involved with that?

LP: Yeah, I got involved with that because of the fact- and I'm being honest- that the college used to call and say, "Somebody nominated you for this", to me. "Do you want to run?", and I'd said, "Sure." I ran for senate that way, too, once. I lost, actually. But they said, "Do you want to run for this", and I said "Yeah, that sounds good, I go to a lot of games" – I had tickets. As soon

as the Nutter Center opened I had season tickets, because it was a decent place to see a game, and I like the games – not so much recently [*laughs*]. There were a couple games this year that were okay. So, the bottom line of all of that was I got elected, and I started going to it, and I got to know Mike Cusack – I was there probably from 96' to 2000. I was secretary one year.

DA: And you were chair?

LP: No, no. Later I was, when I came back. I rotated off, and I took a year off. When I came back, I became chair.

DA: One other thing I wanted to touch on, you had some experience- and maybe as a result of your appointment in the college of medicine- in the Middle East.

LP: Oh yeah, sure. So, I can tell you the whole story that I know.

DA: Sure.

LP: Course directors in medical biochemistry get together once a month and they talk about their issues. You know, what are new things we can try, and how do we try, and how do we get better? Dean Parmelee, who was the dean of student affairs at the time –

DA: In the college of medicine?

LP: In the college of medicine, yes. Anyway, he came in one day and he said, "What do you guys think of this idea? What if we sell our curriculum to somebody in Saudi Arabia? How much do you think we should charge them?" I said, "Yeah, we should sell it!" This was on a Thursday or something, and I gave a budget on Monday.

DA: Where did that come from? The idea of selling a curriculum – and what does that mean, actually?

LP: So, where it came from is the Saudi's- Dean Parmelee was quite well known for his teaching credentials. He has very strong teaching credentials. He's done a lot of this small group stuff –

DA: Small group teaching?

LP: Yes, small group activities – he's been one of the advocates for that for a long time. So, he does consulting work, and he must've gone somewhere in Saudi Arabia and met the dean of the school.

DA: A medical school in Saudi Arabia?

LP: Yeah, it's Qassim University School of Medicine, Unaizah campus. So, he met this fellow and they started talking. The curriculum was that we gave them all our stuff; our notes, our PowerPoint slides, our lectures –

DA: Syllabi?

LP: Syllabi – everything. The whole thing.

DA: Now, when you say “we gave them our notes”, all the faculty in the school of medicine, whoever taught anything, put together a binder and it got shipped off to Saudi Arabia?

LP: Correct.

DA: And so, what's the value of that?

LP: Okay, well-

DA: You put together the budget, right?

LP: Yeah, but they didn't follow it, of course.

DA: Oh [*laughs*].

LP: I think it was worth ten million, but they ended up settling for five. The Saudis never completed it, but yeah. What happened was, yes, all of the faculty put their lectures in and then the medical school came up with a formula – took X amount of dollars and divided it by how much you were teaching in the curriculum, how many hours- and they gave you an option. You could either put it into your RF account, your research foundation account, or you could take it in cash. So, by the time they got around to paying it out I was in my last year, so I took the cash [*laughs*].

DA: So, you went to Saudi Arabia and taught?

LP: Yeah, let me finish, yeah.

DA: Okay.

LP: So, you asked about financial. It went for two years, they got 2 ½ or 3 ½ million dollars – that was it. 3.25 [million]. There was money left over at the end, but I don't know what happened

to that. Then the Saudis canceled it, because they didn't like – they wanted our PowerPoint slides, but many of our slides were pirated – they had a copyright still. We can't sell those, internationally. We had them on our server, and they were locked down, you had to go through three or four firewalls to get at them so the only people that could sell them were [inaudible]. So, when we went to Saudi Arabia the first time, Margery Bowman and Dean Parmelee and myself went. I was the basic science guy, Dean was dean of students, and Margery was the dean of medicine. Why they took me, I have no idea, but I went. So, I went three subsequent times –

DA: What did you do there?

LP: The first time, basically I consulted with their faculty and tried to show them some stuff. The second time I helped design their undergraduate program for the medical school. The third time I taught for two weeks, and the last time –

DA: Taught Saudi medical students?

LP: Yes, in fact I was the first male to teach women medical students on that campus. It was interesting. It was a great experience.

DA: What was the longest time you spent there?

LP: Three weeks.

DA: Three weeks, okay.

LP: The food was great. Unfortunately, I would've loved to have a glass of wine, but that's just not going to happen.

DA: Yeah, not there.

LP: When we went to teach the women – they were all cloaked of course – but the Egyptian guy, who's a biochemist, came with me and he was scared for his life. He said, "I don't think I should be doing this" and I said, "Well, they told us we could go here". They led us there, of course. They led us to their lecture room, with 11 men – Saudi men, and then a Saudi woman came and got us –

DA: So, they were separate, the women were separate.

LP: Completely separate. Now, that may have changed now, with the new prince or whatever, and the dean said it's not going to last long, because on the clinical side, the men and women are mixed, where women see men as patients and all that stuff.

DA: That must have been a very interesting experience.

LP: Yeah, it was interesting. I was there four times. They paid me from the contract for my time. I took it all for my lab, money for my lab, so I didn't take any of that for personal gain. It was interesting, it was just interesting.

DA: Let's take a – so you spent thirty-five years at Wright State. Talk about your perception of how the university evolved or changed, or maybe devolved?

LP: Oh, I think it's evolved. You know, when I came here, ordering chemicals was a challenge sometimes, and frankly when I was writing my first grant the libraries were closed on weekends. It was before the days when you could go on the internet and get them, and I threw a fit over that – of course nothing happened. That's all changed. The university is more open in research. They understand research much better. Are they comparable to a big university? No. But the bottom line is they know people do research, and the people that are doing research take it seriously. That in itself is quite a bit better. So, my PhD students are at all levels – one of my PhD students is the dean of a college, University of Texas in El Paso. I have a woman PhD student who is worked for Glaxo Wellcome Pharmaceutical, and then ended up at IDEX Corporation. So, I've had some good students. My last PhD student, a Palestinian woman who was a U.S citizen, she's at Yale doing her postdocs. So, would I say that I've been cheated by anything? No. I've been lucky. So, the research environment is better. The teaching – there's always a push for it to go up, and that can be detrimental to young scientists.

DA: So, you've worked for... one, two, three, four presidents? Mulhollan, Flack, Goldenberg, Hopkins? Any observations?

LP: Well the first – I can't remember his name – Bob...

DA: Kegerreis.

LP: Kegerreis – Robert Kegerreis. Well, I didn't know a lot of them. Well, I knew Kim Goldenberg was –

DA: Dean of medicine.

LP: Dean of medicine at the time. I never knew where I stood with him. He was always cold with me, so I never where I stood with him. I used to see Flack shooting baskets, President Flack, and I told him one day I'd take him one-on-one, but I never did. He used to go over to McLin Gym and shoot baskets.

DA: Is that right?

LP: Yes, he did. I'd be running up on the track. And, you know, with regards to President Hopkins, the guy was pretty active all the time. I'm sad what happened – I can't believe that he let it happen.

DA: Budget-wise you mean?

LP: Yeah.

DA: So, you worked there in the beginning of the union. We're just at a couple weeks out of the end of the strike. Can you talk a little bit about what led to that, in your perspective?

LP: You mean on the strike?

DA: Mm hmm [nods head].

LP: So, I think the biggest thing was that they just wanted to impose healthcare whenever they wanted. They were going to give people sixty days' notice on change of premiums –

DA: So, that was a real tripping point for the faculty?

LP: Yeah, and then they wanted to have abilities – the contract now allows them- the old contract, before this one is ratified- it allowed them a reduction in the force of faculty if they declared a financial emergency. There's a process involved – which that's the way it ought to be, and it would take a year or a year and a half to get that all resolved. But there were processes in place if they wanted to reduce faculty. And I think the idea of having furlough days is ridiculous, especially when all the financial mismanagement is not due to the faculty or staff, it's due to the people running the place.

DA: So, from the faculty perspective, the AAUP perspective, who were the enemies so to speak? The administration or the board or both?

LP: I don't- [laughs] I'm not sure I should be saying this, but I don't think the administration had anything to do with this. I mean, it was the board, I think.

DA: The administration were just simply instruments of the boards will?

LP: That's correct.

DA: So, in a sense the negotiations were between the board and the AAUP.

LP: That is correct – and they weren't negotiating.

DA: Do you think their intent was to wreck the union?

LP: Sure – but they didn't do it in a very smart way. I mean, the way they could've done it is they could've taken an offer the union gave them early on – they would've gotten a lot of the stuff. The union gave them a decent offer. They turned it down because they wanted it all. Now, the fact that a lot of this stuff is still on the contract for the long term for the administration is going to be a problem. If they want to destroy the union, they're going to have to really do something. And, you know, the strike was crazy. Just crazy. It's going to kill the university. It's not going to kill the university, it's going to hurt the university, and it's sad. It's just sad.

DA: [*Nods*]

LP: I mean, I was there listening one time – one of the contract negotiations. The union and the administration always tried to get to some resolution, and I can say the only reason the union ever got the best of the administration was because the union always had better numbers. The union had hard numbers, and the administration never had hard numbers. That's a problem if you're trying to negotiate and your numbers aren't there. It's sad, it's a sad situation.

DA: So, do you feel optimistic about the university at this point?

End edits

LP: Well, I think the board should resign [laughs]. Well, I don't know the answer. I don't know, because I'm out of the picture. I don't know what the administration's plans are. I think that the president is right, that we have to get by this, and I think the way to get by this is for her to stand up- and the provost- and say, "We've got to fix all of this." And she was saying that, probably. The retirees went over there and talked to her and she said she wanted to fix things- that was before the strike- and now she has to act and do that. I think most faculty don't want anything to do with running the university. They just want to do their jobs, and they want to be paid appropriately for doing their jobs. And frankly, the union is not interested in protecting faculty that are not doing their jobs. The union is interested in using the contract processes. They have to use the contract processes. So, I was talking to one of my friends, and he was in the dean's office, and he said, "Why don't you get rid of this guy? Why didn't the union get rid of him?" I said, "No, there's a process in the contract. You have to write that person up and follow the process. Do you really think the union is going to prevent you from firing this guy if this person isn't doing a good job?" The union's not going to do that. They want to make the place better. They don't want to destroy the place. So, there are processes involved, and if you use those there should be an opportunity to do that. So, if I look at my whole career here, times change, you know. I think I've been given a lot of opportunities to evolve, and I like that. I like new things all the time, and I guess I would say I wish I would've had more chances to be a leader of things, but I have found other outlets to do that – like the American Heart Association. But then again-

DA: Talk about what your role is in The American Heart Association.

LP: Sure. It might take a few minutes. I got a grant- two grants- from them, then I served on their study sections, then I was chair of their study section- peer review study section.

DA: Mm hmm.

LP: Then I became the chief of all of the study sections – all five or seven of them, the study sections that reviewed grants in Ohio. Then I was on their board of trustees at the state level, and then I was president-elect at the state level, and then I stepped off the state board and came back here, and I've been president-elect – I mean, I was president once and now I'm president-elect again. So, I advocate for them, I go to the statehouse and talk to them about health-related issues, I talk to the legislators. It's been great. So, all those leadership positions I had there, I never had them here, but that's okay.

DA: Well, what else? Anything else you want to talk about that we haven't touched on?

LP: I don't think so.

DA: Well, listen, congratulations on a distinguished career. I think you and others like you are what helped make this university a great place to work, a great place to be a student, a great place to learn. And you are a leader, you're going to be the leader of the retiree's association next year – I look forward to that, and best wishes.

LP: Yeah, okay, thanks a lot.