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Dr. Robert J. Kegerreis interview (3) conducted on February 05, 1985 about the Boonshoft School of Medicine at Wright State University

Robert J. Kegerreis

James St. Peter

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WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY

School of Medicine Oral History Project

INTERVIEW INFORMATION

Interview date: February 5, 1985

Interviewer: James St. Peter (JS)

Interviewee: Robert J. Kegerreis (RK)
President, Wright State University
Interview 3

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION

[Beginning of recorded material]

James St. Peter: My name is James St. Peter, and this is the third in a series of interviews with the President of Wright State University, Dr. Robert J. Kegerreis. The date is February 5, 1985, the time is 8:30 AM, and we are in Dr. Kegerreis's office in the executive wing of Allyn Hall at Wright State University.

[Beginning of interview]

JS: Well, in our last interview, Dr. Kegerreis, we were talking about the lobbying efforts that led to the founding of the School of Medicine-

Robert Kegerreis: Mm hmm.

JS: -the granting of funds from the VA, and the state. How much time did you spend lobbying?

RK: [*Long pause*] That's the kind of a question that there is no precise answer to, and also it depends on the definition of lobbying.

JS: How would you define lobbying?

RK: *[Chuckles]* Lobbying is influencing political processes, and if you accept that literal definition, then- my goodness, I'd say 50%. If you force me to use a more-narrow definition, which is you are a registered lobbyist in residence of the site of the legislative action or the administrative action, and you, um, you know, you hobnob with legislators daily, and you try to influence bureaucratic people in their offices and all that kind of stuff, then I would suppose my percentage would shrink to ten or fifteen percent. Because I didn't make all that many trips to Columbus. I made a couple of memorable trips in this specific regard, although I'm in Columbus on average three or four times a month. Anyhow, the lobbying here was... consisted of huddling frequently with legislative leaders, of trying to evaluate political weights and weaknesses, and as a result of all of that complex series of evaluations and appraisals and analyses, you finally- [it] became fairly obvious that the original, relatively pure concept of Wright State University having a school of medicine in its own administrative framework, on its own campus, completely uninvolved with any other institution, and created in the absence of anybody else's regional or political assistance, that that concept was unrealistic, and probably would not result in us winning the war. So, the Northeast group had always been extremely ambitious for a school of medicine, Northeast being Cleveland-Akron-Canton-Youngstown, the whole Northeast quadrant, where, at least at that time, [was] the heaviest concentration of population, and historically the most influential political quadrant of the state by far. That, uh, we finally- we, meaning legislative people like C.J. McLin and a host of others, Clara Weisenborn and so on- finally decided that they had to join hands with them, and so therefore we concluded that it would be either two medical schools or zero. Frankly, at the time I thought two new medical schools might be too much for the state to swallow, both academically, administratively, financially, politically, emotionally, and so on. But I became convinced that we couldn't do it on our own. The Dayton Area never has been, since I've been in Dayton, never has been a truly powerful state political force. We've had an occasional county chairman who was conspicuous, we've had an occasional single political leader, but we have never had the Speaker of the House, or President of the Senate, or even the chairman of a major committee. We've never had the Chairman of the Controlling Board, for instance. So, despite the fact that we have maybe thirteen or fourteen legislators who think of themselves as being in the general metropolitan area of which Dayton is the center, we do not have one of the strongest regional delegations. It's just a fact. Of course, we- since the '30s we haven't had a governor, we haven't had a prominent state political office holder. So, I don't want to ramble on and on and on, but we were just trying to do too much with too little. So, two modifications had to be accepted. One, we had to go in with the Northeast group, which began to pollute the notion of a single university controlling the school of medicine. Second, Miami and Central State saw this opportunity to become more involved with the medical school. Central State particularly was difficult to dismiss, because it wasn't Central State so much as it was C.J. McLin. And C.J. McLin, thoughtfully- knowing what a small percentage of minorities the other medical schools in the state enrolled- thought if he could upgrade Central State's involvement in the medical school, it could accomplish a lot of objectives. A very honorable objective, to make Central State a more prominent university,

maybe improve its image, perhaps lead to more Blacks being enrolled in medical school, and so on. So, from his point of view, given that he was working so hard against his own governor to do this, it was a reasonable request. Any sensible politician would not overlook an opportunity like that. Miami has always had a curious sort of prominence. It is not a truly political university, but a lot of legislators look at it admiringly, and not knowing anything about its actual character or its personality, the typical legislator can't imagine why somebody wouldn't want to work with Miami. They regard it kind of like Harwich [?] Community College being asked to work with Harvard, you know, why would anybody resist? But we had had a lot of Miami contact, given that it was one of our two parents, and frankly, as nearly as I can distill, [from] five years or so of early history of Wright State, our relationships with Ohio State were always much, much more, um, easy going, realistically unencumbered, than they were with Miami. Miami always was more demanding, more time consuming, more tedious, and less profitable for Wright State than was Ohio State, and there are probably explanations for that, too. For Ohio State, this brand-new little campus in Dayton was immaterial, hardly worth paying attention to. For Miami, it was a real threat, because they had had Western Ohio almost to themselves, and they had used Dayton as a site for a lot of their continuing education courses. Anyhow, we had Central State's and Miami's interests to take care of, and they spoke admiringly of the model the Northeastern group was using. The Northeastern group had three universities, each one of which could claim that it was in a metropolitan area. Kent State and Akron each shared, of course, the Akron/Canton thing, and Youngtown State had Youngstown all to itself. Youngstown in those days was much more of an economic center than it is now. So, I think they realized early but they never could agree on putting the medical school inside one of those three universities. I don't know why Cleveland State didn't become involved, maybe because it was in a city where there already was a medical school, or it was less ambitious, or had plenty of other things on its platter, I don't know. But it could have been a four-way consortium if Cleveland State had become involved. But Cleveland could have clearly overwhelmed Akron and Canton and Youngstown, in terms of political influence. So, the result was that they thought very cleverly that they had the perfect model, which was that the presidents of the three universities- Youngtown, Kent State, and Akron- would be the deciding votes on a board which would operate the medical school of Northeast Ohio. The fact that that was almost unbelievably naïve didn't matter at the time, politically, it was quite acceptable. The medical school also was a so-called six-year school, which enrolled people right out of high school and guaranteed them admission and took them into the medical school earlier than the traditional route. So, they had a number of experimental- or I should say, not quite conventional aspects. They wanted to locate the university out in the country somewhere, where it would not be identified so clearly with any single metropolitan area. They wanted to... the think that was similar to our design, they did not have any ambitions to build a university hospital and they were going to work in the metropolitan areas. For them, this was a much more cumbersome, awkward model than ours, and yet to Miami and Central State this was quite appealing, because then they would become, in a sense, one-third owners of the school, and Wright State's influence would be limited simply to the fact that the university

was in the same general location as a medical school. At this point, I guess you would say I tested the political waters to see how [or] what the chances were of preserving what I thought was an absolute necessity- administratively and academically- which was to have the medical school a part of a single university, and of course that one university was Wright State. Uh, so-

JS: How did you test the waters?

RK: Hmm?

JS: How did you test the waters, as you said?

RK: Tested with the universities, and with the legislators, whether or not they would still go along with a version of their tripartite interests that would still allow the medical school to be an integral part of Wright State University. I tested various schemes, "What do you think of this arrangement?" or "What do you think of that arrangement?" Each time, they would say, "Well, why don't we just do what Northeast Ohio's doing? That way we don't confuse the legislature with two identical schemes" and so forth, and I would simply say, "Well, we're convinced that won't work in our preliminary talks with the hospitals", and so on and so on. So, I held rather fast to the idea that I really did believe that it would be hopelessly messy to have us try to operate a school in which we were one of three partners, and yet we had the entire administrative responsibility. So anyhow, the result of all that testing was we set up an advisory committee and the legislation establishing the school. There was a paragraph which refers to the other two universities that Wright State will operate the school with the advice and cooperation- or some language like that- of Miami University and Central State University. We converted that legislative language into an advisory committee that met with the dean once a month, and we began with an elaborate consultative arrangement, and we had... particularly in the case of Miami, we had two or three faculty members who were appointed to the new medical school, who made regular trips back and forth and who taught for a while. It wore them out, they got very tired of going back and forth to Oxford. So, after- and I think there was only, I believe, one from Central State, and his trip of course was much easier, and so I think he was a Biologist, who worked out well. All of these professors worked out professionally and academically all right, but it put quite a burden on them to conform to the schedule of the school and so on. So, today we still have the advisory committee, it meets with the dean periodically. But to my knowledge, we no longer have any faculty, although the opportunity is still presumably open from the other two schools. Remembering now that this was... all of this activity was worth the express distaste of the governor and of the Ohio Board of Regents. It was necessary, therefore, to be sure we had sufficient backing in the legislature; that the intention of the legislature was unmistakable. I will say that once the legislation passed, the Board of Regents adopted a passively permissive reconciliatory posture, and did not put as many roadblocks and as much messy, bureaucratic hurdles in our way as they might have, had they been truly... um, how should I say... miffed or

insulted that we had gone around them. They properly take a very dim view of a university going directly to the legislature and bypassing the Board of Regents, because the Board of Regents was set up with the very purpose of trying to avoid having all of the universities going to the legislature. And in terms of my presidency, leaping forward a few years, I did it again with the School of Professional Psychology, and by the time I got through with that one, the Ohio Board of Regents began to think of me as a renegade, and the university as a very, very insufferable upstart. The kind of institution that didn't have the proper respect for the rules of the game. But I would cheerfully do it again, if I thought... if I were as convinced as I was in both those instances that the Board of Regents was so conservative and non-progressive, as to invite disregarding them. I think that particularly in the latter case, the School of Professional Psychology is still the only one in Ohio, the need is still there and can be demonstrated very easily, that there are vacancies for PhD- or not PhD, but doctorally prepared psychological consultants, counselors, and a horrendous parade of social problems based on drugs and alcohol, families, mental illnesses of all kinds. We have an unfilled need that is still quite vast, and this is still the only school- one of only two in the Midwest, and the only one in Ohio, and the need is still there. The Board of Regents ought to direct some other university- probably Cleveland State- to establish a doctoral school of professional psychology. They ought to be much, much more aggressively positive, but they have been for years now quite reactionary, hoping- it's almost funny- they hope nobody comes up with any new proposition, because then that means, 'My goodness, we have to deal with this new proposition'. I'm facing that again with our PhD proposal in Computer Science. They're just... their official attitude is, "My goodness, if we were to approve that very quietly, what if somebody else heard about it and came to us with another proposal for another PhD in Computer Science?" So, as long as the Board of Regents has that kind of attitude, any truly progressive, innovative proposition of any consequence or any size will just set them into an automatically negative posture. So, I've never really felt guilty about going around them, because their posture was so insupportable.

JS: You serve on a joint committee with all of the other university presidents in the state of Ohio, the state university presidents.

RK: Yes, mm hmm.

JS: What is that called, and what was their reaction to the ends-around that you've been building?

RK: Well, it's called the Inter-University Council, or IUC, and it is an unofficial organization, because the Ohio Board of Regents really doesn't recognize it, organizationally. When the Chancellor meets with the university presidents each month, he does not meet with the IUC. He meets with the presidents. He's very, very careful. He doesn't invite the Executive Director of the IUC, our chief staff person in Columbus. [Laughs] Well, anyhow, that's what it's called. The

mood or the attitude of the presidents was critical, I mean, when I say critical, I mean negative. However, they were not obstructive, as presidents. They were... they tended to be negatively jocular about it, saying, 'There goes Wright State again', you know, 'No accounting of the brassiness of that thing', or they would say, 'Have you upset the Governor this week, Kegerries?' That sort of stuff. It... they, those presidents that were most outspokenly- though somewhat lightheartedly- negative about the thing, were those schools, primarily, with medical schools. Ohio State, the University of Cincinnati, and the Medical College of Ohio at Toledo, those were the three state university schools at the time, and the deans of those three schools were very much against having any more medical schools in Ohio of any kind, owned by anybody. Because they saw... it was the old, 'If we keep the pie the same size, then any newcomer will cause me to lose my current chair'. Our proposition, of course, was the pie will get larger, and with more medical schools and more attention to medical education in Ohio, you're likely to get a larger share. I mean, that your share of the larger pie will be larger than your share of the smaller pie now. It turned out to be an accurate forecast, that's exactly what's happened. So, the IUC itself and the members of it were not an obstruction per se. Some of them were unnecessarily caustic in their comments, but it was... the IUC is pretty much a fraternity of peers, and it hesitates to discipline one of its members, or to embarrass one of its members. So, most of the talk there was just kind of needling, rather than true obstructionism.

JS: Would you say that your efforts, in pushing and getting a medical school, would you say that's helped your efforts to get a school of professional psychology and the Research Park?

RK: Um, yes and no. Uh... some people in Columbus, the Ohio Board of Regents in particular, are wary of me- of me, personally- and through me, wary of the university. They know I wouldn't be able to do this sort of thing if the university weren't sympathetic. So, they tend to view Wright State University as having to prove more about a case than another university might have to, and we knew that might be a consequence, but we thought the stakes were so high that we really couldn't hesitate. And it really hasn't been all that damaging, as I try to assess it. It just is sort of an attitudinal set, rather than a case in which we've suffered, even in the medium-term. We've had, over the past few years, two or three graduate programs introduced, and in a couple of cases- a master's in English, and a master's in Computer Science- those proposals were handled much more roughly, and were rejected preliminarily by the Regents in a way that led me to conclude that we might not have been treated so harshly had we been another university. Had we been one of those that never caused any trouble, in quotation marks. We got both programs, but it took us months longer, maybe a year longer, than it should have, and occasionally there would just be the drop of a phrase or sentence, or just a touch of sarcasm in a comment that to me revealed that it was attitudinal, rather than professional, that was causing us the delays. I needless to say, I was furious. I would guess, then, that we have paid some penalty- and that I have- but the penalty was not sufficiently large to begin to offset the gains that we had from adding the programs.

JS: You mentioned before some memorable trips that you made to Columbus. Were those specific instances where you had a harder time talking to people?

RK: Well, I described the trip of Marvin Warner to our campus, in his chauffeur-driven limousine one day? I did not? Marvin Warner is a transplanted Alabaman who came to Cincinnati years ago, and earned/acquired a fortune, a multi, multi-million-dollar fortune, in a variety of ventures. Real estate. Financial sorts of things. And he became- he was an attorney by background- he became a well know horse breeder and political leader in the Democratic party. A significant financial angel and so on. So, Gilligan appointed him to the Board of Regents. He of course heard Cincinnati's, the University of Cincinnati's review of our proposal for a medical school. He I don't think knew much about Wright State University, but he thought that he could take care of this picayune little problem from the outlanders up in the sticks. He had and has an advanced case of the virulent disease that effects Cincinnatians, namely that anybody outside of Cincinnati has to be unsophisticated and uncultured, and that's particular true of that little village north of them called Dayton. I don't know whether you've encountered that or not. But a lot of people have that ailment, and Marvin Warner had an acutely advanced case of it. So, one day he called me- he still has traces of his southern accent- and said that he was coming up to see me, and he assumed I'd have time to see him, I said I'd make time. He arrived at the University Center in a stretched, Cadillac limousine, as I recall it was silver colored, with a forest of antennas sprouting from it, a chauffeur- a uniformed chauffeur. He arrived with his entourage, which as I recall include the Vice-President for Health Affairs of the University of Cincinnati and the Dean of the School of Medicine. Both looked very uncomfortable to me. Marvin, however, was in command of the situation. He strode into the University Center, we went back to my dining room, and he told me that he had solved the problem of Dayton's ambitions for a medical school. Occasionally, he would seek corroboration from his two people that he'd dragged along with him. His solution was to establish a branch residency program in Dayton, and the University of Cincinnati Medical School would very magnanimously agree to send twelve [and] maybe even fifteen residents- these were graduate medical students- to Dayton hospitals, and they would allow Wright State University to be in nominal charge of the residency program. So that we could say to our friends that we have a medical school branch here in Dayton, and it would be University of Cincinnati's contracts with the hospitals, and it would be University of Cincinnati students. But they would allow Wright State University to kind of shellac this thing with our emblem somehow. So, as I recall, there wasn't much for me to say while he was outlining this, and he paused dramatically, obviously waiting for my expressions of gratitude and adulation at his remarkable perception of the solution to this dilemma. I don't recall my exact words, I remember being seized with an almost irresistible need to laugh almost hysterically, but I suppressed that, fortunately. I think I asked him, "Is that all?", and I turned to Dr. Gall from Cincinnati, whom I knew, and I said, "Are you serious? Is this it?" So, finally I said to Mr. Warner, "Well, you have misjudged badly the state of our planning, [and] the resolve

that we have to establish a full-fledged medical school, and not just a kind of a crumb dropped in our path by the great University of Cincinnati". It was hard to keep an edge out of my voice, but I tried hard not to offend him, because he is a very influential Democrat, we had a Democratic governor, and many of the legislative processes were dominated by Democrats. One of our staunchest friends here in Dayton in terms of medical school promotion was a Democrat. I couldn't afford to offend Warner even if I'd wanted to, and I've never seen any profit out of deliberately offending somebody, and I think in his own mind, he thought he was making a real gesture of conciliation. The fact that it was so picayune, I don't think he fully realized how that would affect someone. So, I had to tell him finally, in plain language, that we weren't interested in any kind of subsidiary arrangement with the University of Cincinnati, whom we admired very much and who had a fine medical school. Yet we were the largest metropolitan area in the country without a medical school, we had plenty of medical facilities here to support a medical school, and we were going ahead, but we appreciated his effort. So, he tried two or three times to win my acceptance of this bizarre proposal. Finally, he said he was a very busy man and he'd wasted enough of his time, and people were waiting for him back in Cincinnati and he'd have to go. That was somewhat similar in reverse to a trip I made to the governor. Governor Gilligan had been very public in his outright refusal to even consider the addition of any medical schools in Ohio, either Wright State's or Northeastern Ohio, but if there had to be another one, he thought maybe Northeast Ohio had a better case. So, C.J. McLin, and Paul Tipps- who at the time was Montgomery County Democratic chairman, and about to be named state chairman- Joe Shump, as I recall, and maybe a couple of other Democratic leaders, went to call on the governor with me. And he was very cordial, he received us, and we started talking about the medical school. He's Irish, and the color started to come up out of his collar to his face as we talked, and he became upset at me, whom he described, I guess, as the architect of the scheme. He became upset with C.J. for going along with it, and the Democrats in the entourage for not acceding to the leadership of the governor. There was not- I was a little dismayed at the start, because no one countered very firmly. They all mumbled about that they wanted the medical school, and that it was important to the party to be seen as the mechanism for obtaining it and so on, and I wanted them to say, 'Governor, you're full of shit'. I mean, nobody said anything like that. So, finally C.J. did- he didn't use that word- but he said, 'You've just misjudged this situation, and this thing is just rolling along, and the worst thing you could do would be to veto the legislation, because we probably would override your veto. So, don't fool around with this. There is far more harm politically in it for you with your continued resistance than if you would climb aboard.' Well, he just couldn't bring himself to climb aboard, and so the meeting wound up in a somewhat mixed sort of way. We all shook hands as we left, you know, and these meetings tend to go through a parabola or sine curve or something. You start out being very formally friendly, and then you get really angry, and then towards the end you realize you don't want to end on that note, so everybody gets friendly again, and that's the way this meeting went. But that's typically the kind of meetings we had. One of our most significant adversaries was a good friend of the governor who was a trustee of Ohio State University, and have I mentioned Dr. Sirak to you?

JS: Mm hmm.

RK: Compounding it was that Dr. Howard Sirak was an Associate Professor of Surgery in the Ohio State School of Medicine. Dr. Sirak was a very good friend of Governor Gilligan's, and therefore was a great influence on the way the governor looked at this. To Sirak, this was just a hopeless ambition of an unprepared university. His idea was that we could not possibly create a medical school that would turn out anything but defects, and that the students would be ill-prepared, they would not find honest work, that they would be scorned by their professional colleagues, that this immature, brand new university down here had no possible justification for lusting after the crown jewel of higher education, namely a medical school. And he carried on publicly and privately, and we thought it was just a blatant conflict of interest for a member of the Ohio State University faculty, who was also a trustee, to-

[*knock on the door*] Yeah?

RK: The trips to Columbus, probably of all the trips to Columbus, the trip to the governor's office that day was the most colorful. Of the trips to Dayton, the trip by Marvin Warner was probably the most... in retrospect, the funniest, and of all of our adversaries, Dr. Sirak was probably the one who was the most outrageous. He was a super-snob, and apparently oblivious to his conflict of interest. He had married a Lazarus woman, and therefore- the "Lazari" of Columbus and Cincinnati were very, very powerful, influential people. A grand family, so to speak, and so they have been leaders of cultural, civic, and political activities for fifty years or more. So, it's a formidable adversary to tackle. I talked to Mrs. Sirak and another one of the Lazarus women two or three times on other subjects, and they were very, very gracious, as you could imagine, super-sophisticated people. But Howard was just so sarcastic, so filled with righteous indignation that it was very, very irritating.

JS: Well, that's just about the time that we have today.

RK: Mm hmm.

JS: That's a fascinating aspect of the political process of getting the medical school involved. I don't think anybody's got the ability to give us that perspective for the project.

RK: Mm hmm.

JS: The next time I want to concentrate on the search for the School of Medicine dean, and Dr. Beljan's deanship.

RK: Mm hmm.

JS: Thank you very much for the time that you've given me today. And for the search for the finalists-

RK: It was fairly conventional and straightforward. It was a very cumbersome, very elaborate, and lengthy search, but it was relatively conventional. We wound up with, as I recall, five good prospects, three very attractive ones, and our first choice was Beljan, and we got him. That's the synopsis.

END OF INTERVIEW