Library Panel Part II

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Name of Interviewee: Tyler Veak, Carl Merat
Name of Interviewers: Randy Miller
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Miller: (00:00) Welcome to this interview in the oral history project of the Liberty University Archives. This interview is being conducted on December 10th, 2013 and is the second of several parts to be recorded. Today we’re having a panel discussing some of the initial steps in the history particularly of the Jerry Falwell Library building. My name is Randy Miller and I’ll be moderating today’s discussion, and so let’s let the other panelists introduce themselves: Tyler, um, good to have you with us today.

Veak: (00:33) Good to be here.

Miller: (00:35) This is Tyler Veak. And can you tell us the position that you held when the first idea came up for the new building here?

Veak: (00:48) Uh, chief cook and pot washer. Um. Gadfly for the library. Um, the, uh, I think the title was scholarly communications librarian, right, Carl?

Merat: (01:05) I believe that’s right.

Miller: (01:06) Okay, and our other panelist is Carl Merat. And what was your role at that time?

Merat: (01:11) At that time, I was head of collection management.

Miller: (01:15) And, um, I’m Randy Miller, and I was the head of the reference and instruction at that point. So let’s begin with some questions, here. Um. Tyler, this was one reason that we wanted to get you in this interview. Can you tell us, how was the idea for a new library building first introduced?
Veak: (01:40) Well, yeah, it’d been, you know, bantered around the librarians for- I guess, ever since I came to the library in 2006, and, uh, I guess it…I never got the feeling, of course I never talked beyond the library administration. At that time, Dave Barnett was the dean and whenever it was brought up, I always got the feeling that there wasn’t a chance of, um, in hades of it, of it happening. You know, and I didn’t know what the kind of discussions were going on, you know, between, um, Dave and the administration while he was here, but Dave was pretty pessimistic whenever it was brought up, so I guess, you know, there wasn’t a lot… I don’t think that the librarians were very optimistic about something like that happening. But, um, there was a faculty meeting, I think it was… I think it was in November, when. It had been, what, how many…when was that, Carl?

Merat: (03:19) 2010, I believe.

Veak: (03:20) You remember?

Merat: (03:21) 2010.

Miller: (03:23) November of 20-

Merat: (03:24) November, that’s right.

Miller: (03:25) November of 2010. We typically have an all-faculty meeting once in the fall semester and once in the spring semester, so this was the en masse meeting. It was held in the Towns auditorium, and I’ll let you go on from there.

Veak: (03:39) Yeah. So right at three years ago, then, we were, you know, we had the faculty meeting and part of the- part of that is usually, you know, them telling us about the financial health and how we’re doing as a university. And, so, you know, they were, you know, bragging about, and rightfully so, how well the university was doing, and, you know, we had this surplus income and, and that, we’re talking about some projects, and, um. But also, you know, along with that, you know, it’s the usual, you know, how we want to make this- want to make LU a world class, you know, university. Christian university, and all that. So in my mind, you know, I was thinking, “Okay, well they’re telling us how much money they have and they’re telling us how they want to make this, you know, a world class university,” and I’m thinking in my mind, “Well, you know, a world class, you know, or a good library is always a part of a good academic institution.” You know I’ve been to a number of universities because of my graduate education and teaching at different places, so in comparison, you know, from the beginning, Liberty’s library, I guess, would look lacking, to put it mildly. So, uh, I don’t remember the thoughts that were going through my head, but, I’m not normally the type of person who would stand up in a room full of faculty and ask a question like that. And, well, the question was—I don’t know how I put it, but I said something about ‘What about a new free-standing library?’ And uh, I wrestled quick, you know, with standing up. I remember feeling anxious about it and wondering ‘is this
worth it.’ So, in some ways I feel like it was a “god thing”, you know, in some ways that prompted me to stand up and ask the question where I normally wouldn’t do that.

**Merat:** (6:50) I think you thought pretty fast, too, because I believe that you were the first person up when they asked for ideas and questions.

**Veak:** (6:59) Yeah, I don’t remember what—well, I’d been brewing on it, I guess, you know, when they were talking about how much money they had, you know, and how much they wanted to be world class university and that sort of thing. So, yeah, I was thinking along those lines. And then the question— you know, they gave us the opportunity to ask questions. And I think I remember I was sitting by Kim Day, and I think I asked her, you know, ‘Should I ask this?’ And she said, ‘Well, he’s asking for questions so…’ And so—and so I did.

**Merat:** (7:44) And that was the, the chancellor at that time. Uh, Jerry Jr. And I think, did he also ask that did we have any ideas for something that would represent on the academic side—something similar to what was done at the football stadium? I think I remember that being part of the talk that day.

**Veak:** (8:11) Yeah, I don’t remember, but that sounds right—idea. That makes sense that he would ask for ideas, I guess.

**Miller:** (8:20) Well, they typically end those faculty meetings asking for faculty input, and usually always parking was a question back in those days. Here and now, they’re building a new parking ramp here. But my recollection of that meeting—one thing that really stuck out to me was at that time the seminary was headquartered over at the Campus North what is now “Green Hall,” and so part of the plans of what they were going to spend money on was a new seminary library. That the seminary was going to have their own library, much like the law library is a separate entity from the main library, so I was kind of wondering about that. And so, I was really glad at that time that you asked the question. Um, but what was the chancellor’s response to your question? Do you recall?

**Veak:** (9:13) Uh, I think that he was pretty dismissive. He… he shifted it over to, uh you know, “somebody in charge of something.” And that, something about off-site storage. I think his response was, you know, “We can handle that. We have enough other space that we can use. We don’t need to build another building for a library.” And there was some shift to a talk about off-site storage and using that as some kind of retrieval system. Do you guys remember anything else that was said?

**Merat:** (10:10) I think that was all I recall was, again, he did talk with Charles Spence a little bit. It seemed like they were already having a conversation about something like that. They knew that we would eventually run out of space in DeMoss, and we had been talking with them—Dave Barnett and some of the library administration about those problems. And another point that is
running parallel to this, and I mentioned this in the last meeting, that it had also been under
discussion with a strategic planning committee. And kind of the background which a lot of us
didn’t know was making that progress that it had made. Dave Barnett had asked for some
feedback for ideas about a new building, but they had actually—the board had just actually
approved the idea. But over a period of years investigating and then potentially building a free-
standing library as one of the items under academic excellence for the strategic plan.

Miller: (11:08) And my, so my recollection was that I was involved on the faculty senate at
that time, and so we had seen the strategic plan. And so, we’re all kind of looking at ourselves,
here. “Oh, that’s one of the things as a possible thing to have a free-standing library. So, it wasn’t
like when it popped into your head that was the first time that anybody had ever spoken about it.
But it was the first time that I recall it ever being spoken about in a public meeting and that the
idea was really broached with the chancellor. But, if you go back and look in the paper,
obviously, in that strategic plan it was something that had been mentioned and had been
approved by the board of trustees. And so, I was thinking that it was coming up a little more
quickly than perhaps that they anticipated. As I said, they were planning on adding on something
perhaps for the seminary to have a special collection there for the seminary, thinking of the
distance from there over to have the students come over to the campus here. So, after you asked
the question, you said he was a little dismissive, and I recall him just saying, ‘Well, there’s
plenty of room and if we do need to go into the area where the former bookstore was—if we
need to expand on that first floor. They might have mentioned the weigh bearing capability and
that lack of that on the upper floors, there. But we could expand out a little bit, but we certainly
don’t need a whole building for the library. Perhaps we could do that with off-site storage.’
That’s my recollection, there. So, then, when did things turn around? What was the next thing
that you heard? Did the chancellor contact you? Or did he contact Dave Barnett? Or do you have
any idea with that?

Veak: (12:48) Well, there was some discussion after the meet—well, some banter after the
meeting. Uh, the chancellor walked up the aisle towards me, just to exit. He wasn’t—I don’t
think he was coming to talk to me. And Diane Garber, I believe said something like, ‘We do
need a new library.’ And the chancellor I think he said ‘Why?’ That’s when I jumped in and just
forgot who, you know, who I was and who I was talking to, basically.

Miller: (13:38) You forgot that you were an introvert?

Veak: (13:41) I forgot I was an introvert but also a peon talking to the king. And I mean I just
kind of went off. You know, not in a rude way, but just telling him, you know, how really poor
our facility was. And I told that, had he walked through there, the first floor was just ugly, you
know—aesthetically it was just ugly. I think I said something about, you know, we have tours of
students come through there every day. And they’re visiting other colleges and universities and
they’re looking at their libraries and comparing them to ours. And uh, you know, I think I
actually used the word—that it was a joke. So, I was pretty blunt, you know, in terms of what I thought about the current facility. And he said something like—he was, again, pretty dismissive at that. He said, ‘Oh, you know, we can fix that with some remodeling or whatever.’ And uh, that was pretty much it I think. He went on his way, and I went on my way, thinking ‘Well, that’s that.’ I sure didn’t that I had made any impact on him or persuaded him in any way. He didn’t give me any impression like, ‘Oh well, yeah, that’s a good idea. Let me think about that.’ It was—there was none of that. And then, uh—it was probably maybe within a couple of hours after that. I got an, uh, e-mail from him, saying, you know, ‘I rethought your idea about an academic library, and I think that it’s a good idea.” And he would—he wanted to, you know, build. I think the word he used was a “showcase library,” and that he wanted to get together with me and the library administration and some other people and talk about it. And that’s where the ball got rolling. Right there.

Miller: (17:09) And so, that initial meeting then, how long after the faculty meeting—later in the day, you get the e-mail—any idea of how long it was before the first meeting was actually set up?

Veak: (17:23) It was fairly quick, as I recall. You know. I mean he was anxious to—it seems like, you know, from what I experienced around LU—once a decision was made, you just do it as fast as possible. So, as I recall, we were meeting within a couple weeks, wasn’t it, Carl?

Merat: (17:51) Yeah, it was, and it would have been even sooner except it was right before Thanksgiving, if I’m not mistaken. And so, uh, I think it got cancelled once and rescheduled into the next week.

Miller: (18:06) And so, who were some of the folks that were in on that first meeting with the chancellor?

Veak: (18:13) Uh, I’d have to pass that one to Carl. I know that they invited an architect firm, which eventually was the firm chose to do the library, to kind of show some things. They came to the first meeting, right, Carl?

Merat: (18:37) They did. VMDO—there was two of three of their staff there with us. I think it’s good to mention as well that, actually, Dave Barnett was not dean at this time. Dave had actually just left for another position at the beginning of November, and Lowell Walters was the acting dean. I believe that was his title at that time. And, you know, I think you sent me your e-mail, because I was your supervisor at that time. And I forwarded it on to Lowell with some excitement that it had actually generated a really positive response. I think Lowell then called you and Greg and me together, so that we could do some planning before that meeting.

Veak: (19:42) Right, he wanted to have an idea of what we thought we wanted or needed before we went in there. So, I remember us doing a lot of head banging to try to think that. You
know, what we really need—just to ask that question. And then, it seems like, uh. The chancellor
is—it seems to me that the chancellor had made up his mind that we did need this standing, a
free-standing library. And it could be a real benefit to, um, you know, just, I guess, marketing
Liberty, but also just as part of the progress that they’re trying to make. I think maybe some of
the others in the room—the names escape me—weren’t so convinced. But I think because the
chancellor, because of the chancellor’s attitude, they just went along—went along with king. But
the VMDO, the architectural firm that was there, they had-- they were doing work doing work
at… uh….

**Merat:** (21:36) Sweetbriar.

**Veak:** (21:38) …Sweetbriar. Yeah. They were putting, or remodeling and putting in one of the
automatic retrieval systems, so they showed these pictures and things that they were doing there.
And I think, initially, at least I was reluctant about the automatic retrieval system. I think the
chancellor was—seemed to be—interested in the idea of, you know, just I think primarily
because it was novel and cutting edge. I think in his mind he’s thinking this is something that we
can say ‘this is unique and something that very few libraries have.’ But I obviously don’t know
what was going on in his mind, but that seemed to be the tone that I was getting from the
conversation.

**Miller:** (22:56) Well, by having that automated—I was going to say that by having that
automated storage and retrieval system, you are able to compact the books and have a lot more
room for people. I remember I initially was a little bit hesitant about it, because I like the
serendipity of going to the shelf and seeing all of the books there. But when you have all of the
books there, it means that there is less room for people—when you have them spread apart with
three foot aisles in between for handicapped access, also. I’ve since come around on the concept,
here a little bit. In those meetings, there, it seems as though Greg Smith was kind of doing some
of the number crunching, and he said in our first interview that he was fairly accurate as far as
the number of square that they would be needing in the final product compared with what he had
brought to that initial meeting, there. So, the architects are bringing some preliminary type of
plans and all. And so then was there a library committee that was formed then to kind of work
with the planning process?

**Veak:** (24:06) Right, uh, that would be Greg Smith, myself, Carl—Carl Merat—and Lowell
Walters.

**Miller:** (24:22) And so, what was your focus in those early meetings? Was it to kind of say
‘this is what a twenty-first century library should have in it??’ Where were you really going with
the meetings that you were doing?

**Veak:** (24:42) Um, I think there were three things, you know, that we were trying to figure out
how much space we needed. You know, to try to get a ballpark figure in terms of square feet and
justify that. You know, we were doing a lot of work on space for the resources and then people space. So, you know thinking, okay, you know, and that’s where we were, you know, looking at options of automatic retrieval system keeping. I think that we were also looking at adjustable shelving—what’s it called?

**Miller:** (25:50) Compact shelving.

**Veak:** (25:53) Yeah, compact shelving. Yeah, that was something else that we were thinking about. And then, um, maybe another option was, you know, having some of the collection in a basement or something like that and having a smaller group of browseable stacks. The other—yeah, we were thinking in terms of growth, where’s this collection? You know, how many volumes are we gonna end up with, ultimately? And uh, how many people are we gonna end up with? At the time, the chancellor told us that, you know, straight out, plan for twenty thousand. Isn’t that right, Carl?

**Merat:** (26:49) I believe that is right. I was thinking that that changed once or twice through the process, too, whether it escalated higher than that or whether it started lower than that, it was right in that ballpark between fifteen and, I think we may even have heard twenty-five thousand, throughout the whole process, again.

**Veak:** (27:12) Well, later we were surprised, I think we were- I think…what I remember is, we were told to plan for twenty, and then we read in a media blurb, or something, that the goal was twenty-five thousand residential ultimately for the campus, there. So, um, that what we were, you know, planning for, and so, um, our- a lot of what we were doing was looking at other, um, other institutions, libraries that had, um, student populations around, you know, that twenty thousand, um, number. And seeing what size they were, uh, they were at. Um, you know, I think we were looking at, um, that place in Nashville.

**Merat:** (28:25) Appalachian.

**Veak:** (28:26) Yeah, App State and Georgia Southern, and…um. What was the other one, Carl, in North, uh, North Carolina?

**Merat:** (28:41) Um. We looked at some of the, um, NC State and UNC schools, uh, and also James Madison, up the road.

**Veak:** (28:52) Yeah. So, James Madison had recently built a second stand-alone library. Um, but they- it was. I mean it’s kinda hard to…I think we- as I remember it was kinda hard to find a comparable, um, you know, peer institution to really compare. Plus, we, you know, the rapid growth, or, you know, the potential growth that we knew was coming. So there, you know, there were all these variables, uh, that we were dealing with, you know, this is where we’re at and this is where we think we’re gonna end up. But then the other big variable that was talked about a lot
was, you know, how many, because of the shift to electronic books, you know, how many physical volumes are we really, you know, gonna end up with? Um. And that was, uh, you know, just a real, you know, unknown, I mean, you know, the experts in the field, you know, really didn’t have an answer to that, it was really just kinda using the best guess.

**Merat:** (30:30) Tyler, I remember as well, you, as we started to work, after that meeting and you know the architects started to ask for data information from us, you were part of a meeting I think, with Lowell and the main architect. Do you recall that? I wasn’t there that day but I thought that was a meeting you were a part of.

**Veak:** (31:02) Uh, like one of the first meetings with the architect?

Merat: (31:10) Yes, uh-huh, outside of that meeting with the chancellor I thought you came back to Lowe office and met with you and maybe Greg by phone. Well anyway, they started to ask for a lot of data and I remember you worked with a swat analysis for us.

**Veak:** (31:30) Yeah, uh, I mean we started thinking well what do we have, you know. Let’s take inventory of, ya know, where we’re at now, what are our space needs, what are we where are we short already. And take an inventory of where we are already at and then thinking about where to go from there so, you know there are all these issues of well what department. You know, what departments are going to grow and what kind of space are they going to need and uh so that began. Those kinds of discussions.

**Merat:** (32:32) And I know you’ve had some specific concerns that came out of that-- a couple of things, one of them was in the early email from the chancellor. And again talking about space, what would be remaining in Demos and what, you know, would not if we built a new free-standing building would we leave anything in Demos.

**Veak:** (33:03) Right, we didn’t know and that was part of our conundrum at the time was we didn’t really have a straight answer about that. I think, uh, I had concerns about number of computers, you know. I think one of my concerns was that, um, they would leave the computer lab in Demos for the time being and then we would be short, we would count those computers as user facilities and then we would be short on the library side for floor computer use. Or no, what I mean is that, we would plan that way and then the computer lab would be taken away and they would end up using the Demos space for academic things and take away the computer space that was left there and then there would be a computer shortage. Yeah.

**Miller:** (34:41) Now, were there some other entities like the honors office, the writing center? Were they looking for some other things to perhaps go into the new library space? What should be added and what should stay where it is or move?
Veak: (35:01) Yeah, as I recall, there was, I mean it seemed like it was initially pretty wide open, and we were thinking the more the merrier, if they would give us the space. Cause we wanted, we wanted to make connection with those other academic related services, I guess you call them. Like the writing center, it seemed to make sense. The honors program had been library and the writing center was in the library so- okay, bring them along. It was uh, what was the new academic faculty development.

Miller: (36:10) The center for teaching excellence, is that what you were thinking of?

Veak: (36:11) Yeah, yeah the center for teaching excellence and you know things like that it made sense to connect to the library but then, you do that, and you have to obviously increase the size, or theoretically you would increase the size.

Miller: (36:39) Here’s a question for you: Did, as far as the questions from the architects, were they only asking you guys about library information and number of books and number of seats libraries have? Did you have any input into the whole architectural style and how is it going to look on the outside? Was that between them and the chancellor and the building folks? Or did you have some input on that or were you mainly looking at the functional aspects of things?

Veak: (37:17) Um, I think he had some initial sketches of, you know, just to kind of show the chancellor. I don’t remember him asking our opinion. I don’t—do you Carl? I mean, I don’t. I think the idea was to stick with the Jeffersonian style. But I—I guess that kind of got pushed to the wayside, right?

Merat: (37:53) Uh, I think they say that it’s a Jeffersonian style building still, with Jeffersonian elements. But uh, later in—late in the process there in the actual design of the exterior of the building, there was a lot of discussion about it. But I think early on, the committee, and you know we shared this with library staff as much as we had opportunity, the [Sheret], uh, scenarios where we went from spreadsheets to building shapes with, uh, the shapes of different spaces within the building. And then again, it’s a little bit functional, and I think they did try to incorporate our opinions into things that we thought were important. Some of the different elements from different libraries that we feel we would like to see. Remember, we had a lot of discussions about the reading room.

Veak: (38:58) Yeah. I mean the—definitely, the—I felt like the VMDO was receptive. Uh, yeah, I think that I remember us focusing on space and what that space, initially; it was how much space do we need. Then, we started narrowing it down to particular areas and departments and thinking about how big that space needed to be. And then, we moved to looking at, you know, what that space might look like. And we talked about, you know, the common areas where, you know, people would just be hanging out, reading and um doing their studying. And then having more quiet areas and how much of that do we need. And group meeting rooms—that was a big debate. There were, you know, at least as I recall, and I know Carl put in the most—
Carl and Greg probably put in the most work. But I know that we, in those early months, put in a lot of time thinking about the space needs of particular areas. And then, hanging over our heads, was, you know, this just not knowing how much the chancellor was going to allocate, you know, in terms of money for the facility. And so the architect had that ambiguity to deal with as well. So, you know, there was, uh—we were working with the ideal situation, you know, planning for the ideal situation and hoping for it. And I think in the end it was, the square feet was less than what we had hoped for in planning for 20,000. And I guess we will see if it was big enough or not in the end.

Miller: (42:09) There were, so you kind of shot for the moon, and then as realism sat in, and here is the budget, then what size can we have. And so within those size parameters then I suppose there was a little bit of juggling around and moving things around on a piece of paper and all, and working with those figures there. Um… was the site where it eventually ended up, was that always where it was going to be or was there some discussions as to the whole idea of kind of the academic precinct or quad type of idea? Do you have any recollections about the discussions and the history of that?

Veak: (42:55) In the very first meeting, I think is when it was brought up— this quad, academic quad idea. But I think the plan was to put the library at the end of a long quad in the back of DeMoss. I imagine kind of like a football field type length maybe. And then the library would sit parallel to DeMoss, and then eventually replace the buildings along the sides that, you know, the low single story buildings.

Miller: (43:51) Which are called the courtyard buildings. The courtyard buildings.

Veak: (43:56) Uh huh. So that was the plan. It seems like, I guess. Well, Schilling, basically where Schilling was, that was to put it in that area, I think was brought up in the initial meeting.

Miller: (44:28) And I recall at one point they had talked about straight ahead from DeMoss, having it be a religion hall. Then it switched over, and so the latest plan is to have a music hall, with a music auditorium straight ahead of the back end of DeMoss, and they are going to add on to the back of DeMoss as well too. So as we kind of bring this to a close here today, Tyler, some thoughts on the whole process here. Has this been an exciting thing for you? And perhaps some reactions to the whole process, your involvement, in kind of giving that embryo seed thought, and then just seeing it come into completion here.

Veak: (45:21) Well it was a, I told you everybody at first was like, “ah this is exciting.” Then we realized what the Pandora’s box we had opened and how much work this was going to take. And at the time I was not feeling well and had some health problems. So I was limited in what I could contribute, but I was, of course I was as excited as anyone to, you know, see this happen. So you know I was, I was excited to play a part, and it was, I hadn’t ever been a part of some kind of building process from the ground up like that. And I thought it was all interesting, in
meeting with the architects and seeing how they put things together, and create models and that sort of thing. I was just disappointed that I wasn’t able to continue to be a part of the process. But again, my health got in the way of that. But, you know, it’s pretty amazing, like you said in the beginning. It’s been right at two years since the idea was first approached, and uh…

Miller: (47:17) Three years…

Veak: (47:18) It’s uh, three years, yeah. Even then you know, three years you think that anyone would think that’s pretty remarkable to spring up an idea and then three years later you got the building.

Miller: (47:39) Ready to dedicate

Veak: (47:43) Yeah, so I don’t know, I haven’t heard what’s the latest on that.

Miller: (47:48) January 15th is the date for the grand opening, January 15th of 2014. One of the things that came to mind is at what point did they decide they were going to call it the Jerry Falwell Library? Was that a decision of the board of trustees or the chancellor? Or were you privy at all to the naming of that?

Veak: (48:08) Um, no but I’m pretty sure that Carl was pushing that from the beginning. I shouldn’t say pushing but saying that that was a good idea and appropriate given the role of Jerry Falwell Sr. in founding it and to put his name on it.

Miller: (48:42) Well, while he was alive he never wanted to have anything named after himself and I think one time they did something and he even had them take it down, but uh, and so they didn’t want to honor him after his passing here. Carl, uh, kinda same question to you as of this phase or portion of the planning process, with the building, any parting thoughts between that initial meeting and meeting with the architects and all.

Merat: (49:08) I think all of us are just amazed that uh.. just part of that process starting with spreadsheets and then seeing uh, you know, drawings uh, shapes on paper to renderings. Uh, you know the parts that different people played in this from Tyler bringing up that idea in such a crucial way that it really became energized, and then the architects showing us things from time to time that they, you know, interpreted a lot of we talked about and the data we gave them. Uh, again, thinking back to what Greg said about how close, really, the estimate was. I don’t know if they worked from our estimate as a price to try to establish, uh you know, a starting point in discussions with the chancellor. Or again that’s just something that works out for buildings of academic libraries about our size and universities about our size to go hand-in-glove I’m sure. But, you know, as I get to see some of the pictures of the, uh, new library now and how they resemble the renderings but, uh, even better than what you could imagine so, it’s just been a pretty awe inspiring kind of process.
Miller: (50:36) Well good. Well, thank you both of you, Carl Merat and Tyler Veak for joining us today. And with that we’ll conclude today’s discussion on the history of the Liberty University library today, particularly focusing on the early days of the planning process for the Jerry Falwell Library. That will be the facility that we will move into here and are going forward with the, uh, long history of the library here at Liberty University. This interview has been conducted as part of the Oral History project of the Liberty University Archives.

[End of Interview]