

4-15-1985

## UA68/8/2 Dero Downing Oral History

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### Recommended Citation

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Bennett/Downing

This is Jim Bennett interviewing Dr. Dero Downing, President of the College Heights Foundation and formerly President of Western Kentucky University on April 15, 1985.

Jim Bennett: I guess maybe the best place to start would be the Jim McDaniels case.

Dero Downing: Well, I am not sure that would be the place that I would want to start. Let me first share something with you. I have had a personal interest in athletics going back to the time that I came to Western in 1939 on a basketball scholarship. I graduated with a degree in mathematics and had the intention to teach math and coach. I coached for five years. I later did alot of officiating at high school state tournaments and SEC conferences. I mention this to emphasize the fact that it is more than just a passing insight on the activities that associate themselves with athletics. The matter that drew so much attention at the time that brought about the penalty imposed on the University really boiled down to the fact that the disregard to the NCAA regulations, Jim McDaniels signed with an agent prior to the close of the basketball season in his senior year. Let me point out the fact that it is frequently done now. It was sort of plowing new ground with the NCAA and they felt they had to make an example of two institutions. Villanova at the same time was penalized because of a player that they had who prematurely signed with an agent. The position that the NCAA takes now is that if the institution is not aware of that signing, then their is no penalty imposed. About two years ago,

seeing that this had frequently happened in college athletics I took it upon myself to in an unofficial way write Walter Byers, the Executive Director and asked him to review the case which denied the presentation of a trophy for 3rd place in the NCAA tournament. I asked him to view that in fact of the changing attitude that it was being permitted now. As I expected the response was kind and a courteous decline. A lot of people viewed McDaniels case as one which they wanted to cut his throat. I had mixed emotions about it. He was a young fellow reared in a state of poverty in Allen County. He took on the physical capacity to become an All American Player. The pressures that are brought upon a youngster by these slick agents is not surprising that it happened. The disappointing thing about it perhaps more than anything else was that he denied the fact that he had done so. I think that was inexcusable. Jim McDaniels whether he would carry through on it or not I have no way of knowing but he made an overture to me as President of the University to reimburse the University for the \$66,000 that was lost. I declined that offer for a number of reasons. I felt that it would be inappropriate for us to take that route. I felt that there was some responsibility for the University to check more closely and stay on top of it. In many ways he is a very fine person. I feel no sense of animosity towards him. Dr. Cherry said one time our institution needs two Presidents, one for athletics and music and one for everything else. I am not so sure that his insights were far from wrong. Athletics attracts a broad range of emotions and attention by the society. The media focuses on it with such constant pressures that I suppose I will never be too surprised with anything that happens. I think that Western is fortunate to have a great athletic tradition. We have had some truly great people such as coach Diddle. I think I

happened to be associated with athletics Jim; during a period of time that gave me an opportunity to see how this whole plan took shape. When I came to Western you were put on a grant and aid and everyone had a job that they worked. Gradually they did away with the work part of it. As time went on, I think it came about when the athletes returned from the military they felt that their efforts were worth more than room, board and tuition. Most students were like I was from families that were proud but quite poor. When Mr. Diddle would look around and see the kind of clothes that some were wearing he would say, "Let me take you downtown to get a better shirt than that." He would put you in the car and take you down to get a white shirt and a nice tie. Some of the student athletes that were married had a terribly hard time keeping the family going. There were people in Bowling Green that would give them food. Fields Packing Company had chickens that were damaged that they were going to throw away so Mr. Diddle would go get a grass sack full of chickens. He would take them by someone's house and tell them to freeze them and use them during the winter. As a result people may have started to think I can get a little bit more and the demands became greater. It evolved into what can be called benefits over and above the grant and aid. It I think is a very unhealthy situation but anybody that has the answer to it can get a job at Tulane University because the athletic director has just resigned there.

JB: It has really gotten out of hand. I think of the days when I was growing up and on every package of cereal there was an athlete that you looked up to. Today we don't have the same attitude at all. All you hear about is the athlete and his lawyers and managers and how much money he makes.

DD: Part of that Jim has come about through the whole sense of values that has seemed to have taken over in professional athletics. How is a guy like George Foster going to justify playing the outfield for the N.Y. Mets and drawing \$800,000 to chase a fly ball. It is an attitude problem, it is a value problem and I think that much of the inspiration and flavor has gone out of it because of these unreasonable demands that they have placed on it.

JB: You also were President at the time when Blacks and women were wanting more recognition. We had some kind of problem with Blacks wanting to be cheerleaders and women wanting more recognition. Would you please comment briefly on those?

DD: Well, in both instances there has been a nationwide surge of demands some of which are justifiable. With the Black cheerleader there was a crux in that whole situation that brought about by making a decision that did not personally suit me. It was one that I found very distasteful but I swallowed that bitter disdain going in a new direction as I did. It is one that if I had to do over I am not sure I would make it in the same way. It really boiled down to this Jim. For years and years there was no way that a Black student could get elected cheerleader. If you want to get something to arouse the emotions of people let some issue arise out of the election of cheerleaders and the mother's get up in arms and the families bring about all kinds of emotional stress. I tried to put aside my own personal biases and decide that we were going to have a Black cheerleader. A lot of people thought

that I simply did that to appease the Blacks. Anytime that I thought I was right I didn't try to appease anybody. I found it sometimes uncomfortable when a decision was to the dissatisfaction of an individual much less large groups. Nevertheless, I weighed everything from every source that I could and I move in that direction. I took a lot of flack from some sources that thought I was trying to pacify the Blacks. That is one of the prices that you have to pay when you are making a decision. As far as women in athletics that was brought about in a relatively smooth fashion. I recall one time we had a girl on the women's basketball team who was about third down the line as a manager of the women's basketball team who found out she was not getting as much as the manager third down the line on the men's basketball team. She told her father about that and he was terribly upset over it so he wrote a letter to the civil rights commission and that letter instigated a full fledged investigation by a team of people who came here from the commission. They spent about a week here. They went through this thing with a fine tooth comb. Growing out of that was one of the things that they require that we do was go into the women's basketball dressing room and change the floor from tile to carpet because this is what the men's dressing room had. This is how silly it got. I think it was done with genuine interest along with complying with whatever the regulations were.

JB: From the time that John Oldham quit as coach it looked as if our basketball forces declined. Is this true?

DD: What a lot of people don't realize is that coaching has a cumulative effect and John Oldham coached here over those years and that came after

years of coaching elsewhere and with any kind of encouragement at all John would have liked to have retired sooner than he did. I urged him to remain as long as we could possibly keep him in that position because I personally think that John Oldham's record would substantiate this is one of the truly outstanding coaches that we have had here throughout the history of basketball. He not only was an outstanding coach from the standpoint of being able to take a team and win basketball games but his style and manner in which he represented himself I think was great. I am a John Oldham man. It didn't come as any great surprise that whoever would succeed him would not be as successful as John had been. What may surprise some people is that I am a Jim Richards man also. I want to suggest that somewhere down the road somebody listens to this tape and go back and take a record of all the coaches that served at Western. You are going to have Ed Diddle, you will have John Oldham who I don't think anyone is likely to equal his record. Beyond that Jim Richards record is going to stand up with about anybody. I got concerned at times when soon after Jean Kady came someone would say to me, "Well Jean Kady is going to put us in the big time. I said, "Why don't you call Syracuse University. Jim Richards had taken a team and gone down to Knoxville with the NCAA and had beaten an outstanding team in the East. See if Syracuse thinks that we are in the big time because that is a lot of malarchy. I don't think that Jean Kady is anywhere close to the type of coach that Jim Richards is. Jim had the handicapp of two things that he never quite could pull off. One of them was that he was not personally a great recruiter and he seemed to be incapable of bringing together a staff where they would all

compliment one another. That is the secret to the thing is getting a staff where they can go and get the guys and then you have a good help in floor coaching and preparation for the games and then you have to be able to sit on that bench and pull it all together. As far as a pure floor coach it makes me think of Jim Richards. He took some materials that alot of other coaches had not handles as good as him and had a right respectful record. Somewhere down the road I hope they review that because Jim won alot of basketball games.

JB: There is a quality that is important to those that deal with athletics and equally important to those across the University and that is the sense of loyalty.

JB: There was some concern as to the drug problem that sprang up not too many years ago. How serious was that problem?

DD: An institution like Western is actually nothing more than a cross section of a society as a whole. This being the case you are not immuned to some of these social problems and we viewed the matter of drugs as being a very significant problem on the campus. Not that any time we felt that it was rampant but just the fact that it could create academic problems, it could create personal problems for students so we took a hard nose approach. If a student was found guilty of drugs then they were gone. There was a source or two in town that had attempted to build an image that you could get any kind of drug you wanted on any corner of campus. I kept hearing this so I went to the Kentucky State Police in Frankfort and asked them to help me with an in depth investigation of what degree we have a problem at Western with the matter of drugs. He assigned to the campus two undercover agents



that lived in the dormitory and registered for classes for an entire semester. When that report was compiled we called together an Executive Meeting of the University Board of Regents and asked the State Police representatives to read his report. You will find in the record that it is one of the most complimentary reports that I think you could hope for in terms of what was discovered in this undercover work by the Kentucky State Police. They over that period of time made 22 arrests, 19 of which were non-students. I would say that it put to rest some of the agony that was beginning to emerge because of the stories going about campus. I have not heard since the years I was President that there is an ebb and flow in the degree of drug traffic in high schools and also Universities that make up our social structure.

JB: Was this about the time period that you reorganized what used to be the campus Police and we have now the Department of Public Safety?

DD: Well, it came along about the same time. Really what brought that about were circumstances that were coincidental more than anything else. Marc Wallace had retired from 30 years in the FBI and some of that service was a local agent here. He was interested in the University and took a job in the area of student financial aid after retiring from the FBI. He was working there when I came to the conclusion that we had arrived at a point in our development where we could no longer continue with the organizational structure where we had what we called University Safety and Security. I felt that we needed more professional attention to it so I went and talked to Marc. He was very much interested in the program. I think that it was beneficial to the University but I have to admit that there is a little bit more of a police element in

it than I personally felt comfortable with. We moved a little bit far in that direction but I think all in all it has been successful. It has been a professional effort to improve the safety and security of the people on the campus and the campus buildings.

JB: One of the problems that came up was this business of dorm visitation. I think that resulted in some devices among the members of the Board of Regents. Can you comment on that?

DD: My inclinations many times were in accord with the feelings of the highly conservative. Some of the members of our Board were among this category also. Yet my best judgment would indicate to me the changing times bring about some revisions in what I thought were obviously overly restrictive. I proposed what I thought were modest changes and it wasn't an easy time as far as complete Board unity on making some of these changes. When I pick up the Herald now and see where the students openly admit we are going to keep pressing because they are going to give a little bit not too much. I think there comes a point and I reached it during the time that I was President when you had to say if you don't agree with the rules then you move out and live off campus. I think there comes a point where you agree that more liberal regulations are in order and then you come to a point where in your own heart you say, that's it. It kept being rattled around a lot for a period of time. It is the kind of thing where students wanted it far more liberal than I would ever feel comfortable with. There were a lot of issues that were brought up to me such as co-ed housing. I said as long as I am President there will not be co-ed housing. I may not be President the day after tomorrow if the Board of Regents runs me off

but as long as I am President of the University you might as well forget about that. The issues of using nude models in art classes was brought up. No, I don't feel that the University is a place for nude models. It is an issue that has been debated for a long time. My brother is an artist in Paris and he feels it is a silly issue because they have had them over there for 500 years. As long as I am President of the University there will not be a place for nude models. I just felt that there were some things that I personally could not live with. If I couldn't live with it then I was not going to do it.

JB: Well, your proposals were certainly pretty moderate but they still would be opposed by the more conservative members of the Board. I guess the most conservative would be Dr. McCormick, wouldn't it?

DD: Well, in many respects. Dr. McCormick has been a personal friend for 40 years or more. I have high regard for him. There were some issues in which our views differed. He was more conservative in some of his views in University housing that I felt we could be in the current day and age. This did bring about some differences of opinion. It never caused any disregard for the position that each of us were trying to achieve.

JB: Was there substantial change in the personnel of the Board or did they continue to be dominated by Dr. McCormick?

DD: No, I don't think that there was any single individual that dominated the Board. We were very fortunate that the make-up of our Board for anytime that I have been associated with it in having a

great majority of the Board members generally interested in the welfare of the University and willing to engage in the kinds of give and take, checks and balances that are important to the effective operation of any Board. I think we have started to move in the direction brought about through a changing attitude in the Governor's office about the make-up of a Board. I have never had anyone serve on the Board that I have not been a personal friend of and a personal relationship with. I think you can always reason through the issues that affect the University if you have people who have some insight into the University itself. Take members of the Board of other institutions who have no insight as to the heritage or purposes of Western, that type of Board would not be as effective. I think that I had a Board that we always came up with a consensus or a majority that was fair to all parties and people concerned.

JB: Not too long after that the question of voting privileges came up for students and faculty. You were initially opposed to this. Could you state your objections to that?

DD: I still am. When you review actions that have been taken over the years that they have served you will find that they are interested in their own vested interests. We have had some outstanding people that have served. They tend to feel that they are a representative of a vested interest group. They tend to press for things that affect them regardless of how it affects others. I have found that having faculty and students vote is not good and I still feel this way.

JB: We also had two cases involving faculty members. Would you comment on those?

DD: In the case of Flonnie Strike it probably would have been better for her professionally and better for the University if she had not resigned to Middle Tennessee State University if she had not been before she even attempted to move down there to serve and then come back to Western. It was apparent that when the point in time came that she would be given tenure that she never would actually receive it. It would have been better if she had not returned. It was not the fact that she was terminated it was the fact that her annual employment was renewed. She unfortunately tried to pursue it through all kinds of avenues political and otherwise. It was unhealthy. I think that the case with Mr. Dillingham was one that was handled quite professionally. The faculty regent chose to take it up as an issue and I never had any personal animosity towards either one of these professors, in fact, I have much compassion for their welfare. I think that their contribution up to the point of not being renewed was a sound position for the University to have taken. It simply came to the point where there was sufficient opposition that decision was made by the Board. As a President I feel it was the best route that could have been taken at the time considering all persons concerned. I tried to always move in that direction. I think it was an issue that had to be decided and it was done in the best way possible.

JB: Did these people go to the Board expressing their positions?

DD: I think they did it through their own faculty. This is another

reason why the faculty being a member of the Board is not a good idea.

JB: How did you come up with this compromise? Did you develop it?

DD: I think it reasonably worked. There are times when you come to a point where the principal that is involved sufficiently important to spend untold hours over a span of months or years. If you took all of the material that has been exchanged between the office of Economic Opportunity and the Office of Civil Rights, Women's Equality etc. this office wouldn't hold all the material that has been obtained. That has kept people of the University over a period of five years busy with reports.

JB: One of the shining events of your administration was the emphasis that you placed upon the devotion of the library. I thought it was very spectacular.

DD: We set it as one of our objectives while I was President to bring about consistent improvement in the Library Services. First of all I view the Library as being one of the most important facets of the University. I think the first most important is the faculty here. The Library is of very significant value to our campus and students. We did make some real steady progress over a period of time in the area of the Library and it would be something that I do indeed take pride in being an active part of. I think for an institution of our size and type that our mission is we could compare with any other in the country as far as Libraries are concerned.

JB: You mention mission. What would this have done to Western?

DD: There has always been a movement in Kentucky and it can rise and fall, be very prominent at some point in time and rather dormant in others. You see there is a present surge talking about having each institution develop a plan where there would be no duplication of programs. Here is a philosophy that is contrary to what has taken place over a span of 75 years or more. The hope of Dr. Cherry and of others was that educational opportunity would be made accessible. Back in the 1930's they decided that all of the agriculture was going to be done at the University of Kentucky. That was a disaster. When you start talking to people who are attempting to develop these missions one of the big issues has been duplication. You can understand not duplicating the College of Law or the College of Dentistry but when you get beyond the professional schools do you duplicate or not? I think you get to the point then of giving people encouragement to pursue that endeavor where otherwise they would not. It is unfortunate that there has been so much attention given to program duplication.

JB: If you are going to have access you have to have some duplication. Duplication at the Graduate level is a totally different thing.

DD: One of the things that I have been in so many discussions with our Counsel is about the issue of Western wanting Doctoral programs. We have never made any effort to bring about a Doctoral Program. But what we have done is that if some point in time there will be an institution where additional Doctoral Programs will be located we have a very strong Library Services Department and we can make a strong

case for having it there. I think it is the tempest and the teapot. Most of the people talking about it don't know a damn thing about what they are talking about.

JB: I think a lot of people were surprised when in 1977 Vice President Cravens requested reassignment. Would you comment on the situation there?

DD: I think that Dr. Cravens gave greater service to the University and I believe I would be in a better position to assess that than anybody. I have to remind you that Raymond Cravens became Vice President of Academic Affairs under Dr. Thompson and the day he was named that position I was named Registrar. Back in those days they only had four or five administrative offices. I have watched it since that time. I was closely associated with Dr. Cravens when he went into that position. We were right across the hall from one another. Sometimes we would be here working late at night trying to figure out how we could get more students registered smoothly. Raymond Cravens had more innovative ideas than any person I have known. Like so many times when you are in a position of that importance you make a lot of decisions that have a cumulative effect.

End of Tape 2, Side 1



I think Dr. Cravens came to a point where he had made all those decisions and he decided that he could make a better contribution in his own professional life. I can understand that because he carried out his career at Western for a span of almost 20 years.

JB: How did you approach this decision to resign?

DD: I came to the point where I had alot of physical problems over the year and I came to the conclusion that if I was going to maintain any assemblance of health I needed to be in a less stressful situation. Alot of people thought that the movement on the part of a certain faculty group was my reason for resigning. That really didn't enter into it at all. Those kind of issues in the academic community tend to come and go. When the reporter came to interview me from the Courier Journal about the results of the survey, I said to him that I had taught 8th grade math and let me take all these figures and I can make a strong case for Dero Downing. He didn't put that in there. A limited number of the faculty responded and if you took the percentage of those who didn't respond. Some may say well you only served in that position for 10 years but if I look back over my career at Western there was never a time that I didn't work equally as hard as President or otherwise. For about a period of 25 years I never had any time that I took as much as a two week vacation. I had to face up to the fact that for my health I was going to have to give up this thing. It was not the type of job where you just go home at night and forget about it until the next day. Weekends were very busy as well because you were invited to all types of activities around the campus. Many times you had to choose between 3 or 4 activities to go to and decide which

was most important. All of that combined I felt that to retain my health and to do a good job at Western I didn't feel like I could do it so I decided to give it up. One time I was over at Glasgow and I found a man that was an expert at putting the hickory bottoms back into ladder back chairs. His name was Mr. Likens and he was 87 years old. Out in his backyard he had his knife drawing up hickory from a log and some chairs looked like he had done a better job on than others. I had six matching chairs that I wanted him to repair. I put my arm around him and said these that I am leaving here for you to do I hope that you will really try to do a good job on them. I was really trying to make an impression on him. I said they are going to go into the President's home at Western Kentucky University. He didn't bat an eye. He said, I don't guarantee my work but it will last you at least 50 years. He wasn't concerned that it was going into the President's house. He put it in the right perspective. It is just another job at Western and you want to try and do the best that you can. What I tried to do is just that, some things I wish I had done better and some of them I am surprised that I did as well as I did.

END of Tape 2, Side 2

END OF INTERVIEW