

**RG53.1 History of Wake Forest University Oral History Project
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Leon Corbett, Vice President and Counsel; Secretary to the Board of Trustees

Interviewer: Tanya Zanish-Belcher

Leon: I grew up in deep east in North Carolina, the little town of Burgaw right near Wilmington. My father was a small town lawyer and he had gone to Davidson College and Wake Forest to law school in the days when some of the legendary early teachers were there. I always wanted to follow in his footsteps. I went to Davidson College for two years and then transferred to Wake Forest to go to the undergraduate school for a year. They had a combined degree program so that I could enter law school in my senior year and finish undergraduate school and law school in six rather than seven years which my father thought was a wonderful idea since he was paying the tuition.

I did that. I also got worried about drafts going on then and I went back and finished ROTC during law school, the last two years. I was commissioned to second lieutenant in the military police school the same day I got my law degree. At six months all of this was going to go clerk for my father's former partner on the Supreme Court and they built the Berlin Wall and I face two years. I transferred to the Judge Advocate General School and went through that school and was assigned to the office of the Judge Advocate General in Washington DC. I was there for approximately 22 months. I did a lot of correspondence with [inaudible 00:01:43] people who'd been tried by courtmartial, that sort of thing.

During that time there was the Cuban Missile Crisis and everybody was under defense condition orders and that sort of thing. Then [00:02:00] Martin Luther King's march in Washington happened and my office was beside the reflecting pool and a temporary building has been torn down. Then in November before I was released from the army in February, John Kennedy was assassinated. That was a very exciting period of time. After that I went back and practiced law in Eastern North Carolina for a while with my father. Then I went to the Attorney General's office to work with the general statues commission as reviser of statues.

For two years I worked on writing legislation for the general statues commission. Generally legal types of things like corporate law or the rules of several procedures and a variety of things like that that were public interest type of legislation. Then the legislature then they only met every two years, they came to town and I became a lobbyist of sorts and had to go down and get that

legislation passed. That was a good experience, met lots of people from all walks of life and the legislators. There's an old saying that nobody who likes sausage or law should ever watch either one of them being made. I wouldn't say that's completely true.

Tanya: How did you end up back at Wake Forest teaching as part of the law school?

Leon: Well, after that I went back and practiced another year but Dean Reynolds had asked me if I would come back and be assistant dean. After an additional year of practice I came back and joined the law faculty as a half time teacher. Dean Reynolds notion of what half time was in teaching was a lot larger than today's version. [00:04:00] Then I spent most of the day is working in administration, admissions, planning schedules, all a dean has to do, I was assisting him and doing that. I continued to teach for about 12 years after that and then I taught full time for three years.

Then, Dean Bowman got in a disagreement about an institute that he had started in the law school. The upside of it was they fired the dean in the spring right before graduation.

Tanya: Was that pretty uncommon to have something like that happen?

Leon: Well, it wasn't my experience but yes I think it is uncommon. They had deep seated disagreements and army men say if you attack the king you've got to kill him and I don't think the dean could kill the president. He lost out and he left. A good friend, trustee, mentor was James Mason and he recommended to Doctor Scales said he'd make me acting dean for the year.

Tanya: Did you enjoy being acting dean, did you like that?

Leon: I enjoyed it, but it was a very traumatic time because there were some deep seated divisions within the school. Professors were leaving and finding other places. It was a struggle to keep things going, find people to teach, get people satisfied. Yes, it was an enjoyable and rewarding experience but a very, very difficult experience.

Tanya: When you think of the Wake Forest law school, what comes to mind for you as a student, as an interim dean, [00:06:00] as an assistant dean, what do you think it's brought to the university?

Leon: More than some people thought I believe. It has grown and developed from the years when my father was there and they were four professors to the multitude over there. It changed a great deal during my time. It changed as much as the rest of the university has. The law schools have seen a time of bruise and interest

in the law that's whining now. They have different challenges now so they've got a tough road to do.

Tanya: How did you move from being interim dean to serving as counsel?

Leon: I think Doctor Scales really didn't want to cut my salary and he asked me if I would like to also do some legal work for the university. He said that Reid Morgan who was graduating that year would be working part time in development and could work part time with me. Reid and I virtually hung out a shingle at Wake Forest because they had never had somebody in-house as counsel on a regular basis. Ed Wiggins had done some work in that early on but only in just a pick up sort of basis. We really sought to establish the office then but I was still in the law school. Of course, I have worked with the board of trustees, would go to their meetings as counsel and that sort of thing.

Tanya: Did you ever find any conflict of interest between serving in the law school and serving as the general counsel for the university?

Leon: No. Because it was a gradual transition and the law school didn't have a lot of legal problems. [00:08:00] They didn't have to call on the legal department. They have had occasions but not on a regular basis and not then. A university is like, sometimes I say it's like the circus. It takes a lot of people working behind the scenes to feed the elephants. You have to have a substantial business enterprise to keep the teachers in the classroom and free to concentrate on what they are doing. It takes a lot of people to do that.

At that time there was a change too in the way schools were looked at, much more regulation of schools, the things you have to do to run a school, think of the athletic program, think of the medical school. The things that you have to do to support a university are different. There was really a growing need for the type of services that we provided and we grew along with that change. When I left there were six lawyers instead of the two half-times.

Tanya: Would you like to talk about the search for Tom Hearn?

Leon: Doctor Scales said to CCO who was number two man in First Union by candidate that time chairman of the board of trustees that he was thinking of retiring. CCO picked up on that and proceeded. He asked me if I would work on a search. He wanted somebody affiliated with Wake Forest but did not think it would work well for it to be too tied to the central administration. That was really [00:10:00] before search firms were so popular and so it became my task to work with the trustee board of committees, this is followed by the board and it was all trustees to select the president.

I wrote the advertisements, I wrote letters, I collected the material, I sorted the material, I arranged the meeting to the committees and set up the interviews and we wound up with a number of, it was four good candidates and they selected Tom Hearn. He said that my voice was the first Wake Forest voice that he had heard.

Tanya: What for you stood out about Tom Hearn during the interview process and after he became president?

Leon: He had an interesting background. He invented the University of Virginia philosophy, winner of the Thomas Jefferson award for teaching there. Then he had gone back to Alabama to the University of Alabama at Birmingham, they asked him to form the philosophy department. They had had a medical school there and they wanted to complete another branch of the university so he was the founder of the philosophy department there. Then he became an administrator and really became the person in charge of the non-medical school side of what they had there.

He had a good background as an academic and he had strong administrative experience and he had a good personality and he was forward looking, he was the perfect candidate.

Tanya: As general counsel, you [00:12:00] fulfilled a new role with the board of trustees, would you like to talk about how that changed from previous years and what were the biggest challenges on working with the board of trustees?

Leon: Traditionally the board secretary had been the present secretary and they'd come meet, eat, go to committee meetings and go on in one day. It was a very low key thing and as I said times were changing. Mrs. Drake, Doctor Scale's secretary died in a heart operation in CC. Hope said usually the counsel is the corporate secretary. I became corporate secretary but then that entailed working with the board of trustees in many ways. Helping organize the committees, planning the meetings, helping work with a progression of who is going to be chairman and every way that you could think of supporting the board.

The relationship between the board and the president is critical to a university, I think. There have been times when boards have fired presidents and that sort of thing. We've never seen anything like that at Wake Forest in recent history. I can't speak to the far past but I don't think it's ever been true. We worked closely and Tom Hearn worked closely with his board and so that it was an endurable thing.

Tanya: I know one of the things that you oversaw during your time with board of trustees was the split with the Baptists. Would you like to talk about that or that process?

Leon: That really comes under the [00:14:00] armpit of counsel for the university. When Tom Hearn came he said, I want my lawyer next door. Leave the law school, come on up here [down 00:14:09] the hall and so I did. There had been an earlier problem with the convention relating to a grant that the biology department got and the convention said that was not for services rendered and you can't take that kind of grant. They had a dispute and they came up with a covenant relationship. The Baptist convention elected the board of trustees and they had to be North Carolina Baptist. In the covenant relationship they relaxed a little bit and let Wake Forest nominate about four non-North Carolina Baptist trustees which out of then 36, later 40 was a small number.

Even that became a matter of dispute because they would turn down some of those people. Their relationship had a five year time after which it should be reviewed. When Tom Hearn came he looked at what was going on in dealing with all of that and he said we're spending too much institutional effort on a relationship with the Baptist church and we need to change that. They didn't want to review the relationship they later got and then said, no we are going to review it. There begun a period of three years that he described as everyday when we went to work we knew the most important thing we had to do that day was to work on that relationship.

[00:16:00] Some people are saying today that oh, they just got tired of each other and went their separate ways. That was not the case. There were stringent arguments against us. They had counsel from Charlotte, Robin Hanson. There was discussion of lawsuits and whether we had contractual obligations and whether we owed them the right and all sorts of disputes like that. For two years we went to meetings and met with their committees and that sort of thing and we came up a compromise solution under which we'd expand the board and Wake Forest would elect more trustees and some on it along with that question.

A compromise we thought both sides could live with but we went to the convention in Charlotte and it did not pass, they turned us down. We came home defeated. I remember driving on to the Wake Forest campus and just coming around that curve and thinking what a wonderful place this is, a place of intellectual activity the academic freedom and forward looking people and I think I've just hit a barrier. We went back to work, we redoubled our efforts, we actually changed our own by-laws and we really had a threat hanging there. Tom Hearn had a small group of his vice presidents within his cabinet that worked with him and we'd go and meet in his office.

Finally Russell Brantley who was the publications guy for years and I said almost simultaneously, [00:18:00] Tom, you've just got to go down to Charlotte and meet with Bill Paw, he's a lawyer from down there who has been then president of the convention and just talk to him face to face. Tom really was not entranced with the notion of making that trip but he went and they had a good conversation. Tom explained the bill, what the aspirations of Wake Forest were and Bill Paw said well, Tom I think it's about time we got a divorce. He came back and at that point then we knew we were working with some support within the convention.

We worked out a fraternal relationship where Wake Forest would elect its own trustees. Nobody can own a nonprofit but who elects the board of trustees is critical in who controls. Wake Forest would elect its own trustees and continue to provide some services like the Baptist collection that the library maintained and some scholarships for pre-ministerial students and that sort of thing. That convention it passed, not without opposition. There were speeches made against us. When Joe Branch was chairman he was chief coordinator. He said well, right now I'll have to get [inaudible 00:19:29] and talk to them. He went up and made a talk.

I have often thought that the people who were against us were tired of us and the people who were for us were for us and in that one 15 minute moment in life both sides were good for us and so Wake Forest begun a course that I think changed history. To say any less Tom Hearn had the courage [00:20:00] and the understanding and the tenacity to get that done would be to sell his greatest achievements short. Because if we had lost, Wake Forest would not be what it is today and it wouldn't be on the trajectory that it's on right now.

Tanya: That's one of your, probably your proudest moments in a lot of ways.

Leon: Yes, it was.

Tanya: Are there some other that come to mind when you think back that you think had as big an impact?

Leon: Let me sort of put it in context by telling you a little bit about what the legal department does and then pick two or three things. I don't want the things that I think are interesting to talk about to give a full picture of what we did. Now obviously writing the documents for the convention relationship and our by-laws and their revisions was legal work. I once told him I didn't want to be just counsel, I wanted to be consigliere. I got to do much more than talk about the policies and that sort of thing.

His alliance became more complex. You've got Title IX coming in, over in the medical school. You had all of the healthcare regulations coming in and just running the place you have Usher Developing. At the same time many buildings were built during that time. The professional center as designed by Cesar Pelli, one of the world's leading architects. We spent weeks drafting the contract for the design of the professional center and then the construction contract. Then the contract with the movie company for Friday the 13th ready, you remember?

They filmed an episode in the framework of that building while it was going up [00:22:00]. Then there were two or three movies that parts were filmed here. Mr. Destiny used the rentals building and that sort of thing. Personal things would come through. Lots of real estate transactions. You know we've got office buildings and you've got the lease due, we've got a shopping center and you've got leases and contracts. The legal department was very busy just doing legal stuff. But you get interesting other things as well and the convention thing was certainly was one of them. One was the house in Venice. We had had that building for something like 12 years probably we'd been there but it had been a consulate.

When Wake Forest bought it or got it, the deal was if they ever wanted it back we'd have to sell it back to the government for what we paid for it or what we paid them for it. The Italian government does not work quickly. Within the state department we had an undercurrent. The wife of a former counsel was from Venice and always had the notion that she would like to see that building become a consulate again. They also had the right to use the building at any time. They had an economic summit there one time and they used the building.

Anyway this former counsel's wife went to a senator from Ohio and he made a speech on the floor of the senate saying that if this school sells the building it will profit from it and all of this stuff about [00:24:00] why, following her suggestion. We were faced with the intransigence of the state department, they would never move to finish the title and this political thing. A great nemesis of the state department was Jesse Helms who happened to be our senator and also went to Wake Forest for a while. We went to see Jesse Helms and we hired an outside counsel who'd worked for the state department.

After a while the senator apologized on the floor and said he was wrong and the state department begun to see our way and we finally got the title to the building. I had said to Reid Morgan he had been when they had the conference and that sort of thing. If we ever get title I'm going to go get a piece of paper, I'm going to Venice. The day we got the title, we also received the gift at the world headquarters building. John Anderson and I were assigned the task of figuring out what to do with 500,000 square feet of [inaudible 00:25:16] office space and Reid got to go to Venice and I had to go on that trip.

Later the board went [inaudible 00:25:22] answer. I did get to see Venice. That was an interesting thing. In a different vein, Silas Creek Parkway used to end right at Wake Forest front door before it curved and went around. It was aimed like a rifle at us. Cars came through and this Wake Forest road which then came up at the center of the hill and round behind the chapel and out the other side [00:26:00] side was considered a city street. All the people going to the world headquarters building and to rentals would pass through the campus. We ran our traffic count, we had 17,000 cars a day coming through the campus.

The city decided that we're going to extend Silas Creek. They actually talked about bringing it through the campus what is now Allen Easley Drive. If you can imagine Silas Creek running through the campus there. They finally decided on where it goes now which cuts off a whole back part of the lot that Wake Forest has a building on which was a gift to Wake Forest years ago and now it's leased out to the banks and others. It was going to take a big part of the parking area and they had a condemnation going and we decided that rather than fight we would play.

We've got all this information, pictures and all the data you could possibly get and furnished it to the state's appraisers and we got our own appraiser and worth three million dollars. We kept getting word from them we can't pay you three million, I couldn't understand why they knew what our appraisal was, we hadn't told them. Turned out that their appraiser also said that it was worth three million dollars. They brought a whole delegation from the department of transportation and the city to sit down and talk and say if we pay you the three million dollars we won't have enough left to buy the rest of it.

We had to cut a deal and we took a million dollars in cash and said we'd like to have the roads back so that we don't have traffic through the campus. We couldn't have the gates [00:28:00] and we ended up getting them back and some of the other properties. We'll donate to the city the piece that was cut off. We made a deal. The result is that Silas Creek goes round the other way and we don't have all that traffic through the campus. That was fun to do.

Tanya: Anything else that sticks out for you?

Leon: One of the more intriguing ones was Makhtar Ndiaye. Now everybody has heard of Tim Duncan but Tim Duncan was not the recruit who was supposed to be the star. Tim Duncan was found by Chris King playing basketball in the [inaudible 00:28:48]. Makhtar was to be the star but he was from Dakar (Senegal) and spoke French. His father was a French diplomat and Dave Odom had gone over and watched him play in Paris in a tournament. They had to contact his father and get his father's permission. His mother was a university professor, they were separated so he had to talk to both of them.

School was out and the coaches couldn't find anybody to translate to French that the father spoke. They asked a gym guard who was from Africa, do you know anybody who speaks French and he did. He had a friend from Africa who spoke French and they got him to be the translator and they made telephone calls to and the translator did that for them. Then to their surprise the translator stayed on and used his US airways pass to go meet Makhtar when he arrived and take him up. They had to do a year's prep school [00:30:00] and learn to speak English and do some academic work to get in.

The translator just kept doing things for him. Would take him food and have him to his house at vacation time and that sort of thing. Then in the end he demanded payment. The coach goes we can't pay you. He says of course you're going to pay me, I'll go to the newspapers and so he did. Then the NCAA came down on us because the rule is if you've brought somebody into the picture then you're responsible for everything he does and you can't do all of that sort of thing for recruits. We had hundreds of violations on the NCAA rules and we had a guy from the ACC who had worked for the NCAA who was telling us how bad it was all going to be.

That went on for a year or so. We had meetings with the NCAA and they had an accelerated process that would have ... They explained to us we don't really want to do that because that would take longer than the normal process, figured the NCAA. At any rate, we were so guilty we were trying to figure out why did this happen and how did this happen. There was [inaudible 00:31:29] who was a missionary sign and he told me about cultural differences and put us in touch with an expert in African affairs from an American university and we had him to write a white paper.

The difference that we presented to the NCAA is that in our culture when we've got to do something, it was over dramatic I guess, we write our agreement out and we understand what we're going to do and this is [00:32:00] what and if we're going to pay you something we do and we have the understanding. In the African culture which is this translator's background, if you're asked to help then you are being asked to form a relationship with somebody and he did that. Under that view, if you're successful then you get rewarded so he expected that his task was to form a relationship and then to be rewarded in the end and we had [inaudible 00:32:37] on what he expected us to do.

That's what we presented to the NCAA. The coaches, it really was hard for them to understand what is going on. They did find us guilty of a major violation but they sentenced us to be on probation for five years and to give up a couple of scholarships for a while. Then Lenox Rawlings who wrote the column for the Winston-Salem journal in the sports page said, Wake Forest had been lashed on the wrist with limp spaghetti. We got a major violation but it was, the penalties

was something we could endure pretty well and we didn't get a death penalty like SMU or some of the others.

Tanya: So you think that's been a major change through the years as more NCAA regulation of athletics?

Leon: The NCAA has changed a great deal but Tom Hearn was on some of their commissions. Father Hesburgh was on the commission. There's been a great deal of change in the years since I retired the changes in the conferences, the freedoms that they've given some of the larger conferences which the NCAA qualifies to [00:34:00] make some rules of their own. No I don't think it's becoming more intrusive. I think they're evolving with the time. Athletics has become a very different thing from the days at old Wake Forest. If I had started at Wake Forest instead of Davidson I would have had one year on the old campus. Athletics and the school and everything else were a very different thing from what they are today.

Tanya: I want to touch on the fact that you were on the newer campus when it was fairly new. Was there a sense that this was a new start for Wake Forest at that time in the student body?

Leon: That might be one of the larger understatements I've heard in a while. I was here the second year. There was more red clay than there was grass. The trees on the quadrant, I have seen three sets of trees on the quad because they were elms and elms died and then the [acacias 00:34:59] were planted and there was no way we could save our acacia trees and they had to go to too and now they're planting again. They have moved them in and out. When they planted the acacia trees they decided they'd put them in the wrong place and so when everybody was gone over a break they brought in this huge shovels and moved them over a little bit.

There's a reason for that. The campus was designed for the main road to go right through the middle and for there to be parking in front of the little stores [inaudible 00:35:30]. The early drawings show that. They changed that. They had located the trees to fit of having a street around there and so they could move them out. That's stage was ... Yes, it was very raw, very small school, rattling around I mean there were rows of vacant dormitory rooms. Classes were in the library and [inaudible 00:35:56] hall [00:36:00]. Lots had been built. A lot was built during the Tom Hearn era. Kept us busy with contracts.

Tanya: What do you think is the main challenge facing Wake Forest right now at this moment?

Leon: Probably the same thing that always has been and that is that things change. I believe that we have seen only the first beginnings of what the computer revolution is going to do. I think that is going to put the industrial revolution to shame in terms of how much it changes things. Sweet Briar went out of existence the other day. You can have a model that's worked for hundreds of years and if you don't change as times change then you find yourself out of business one day. There's always going to be that struggle to move to new and different things.

That's one of the importance of being able to get the kind of board of trustees that we did. People like Vick Flow and Don Flow and Wayne Calloway who was my classmate, CEO of PepsiCo. His parents worked at R.J Reynolds and he said the difference between being CEO of PepsiCo and working on the docks at Reynolds was the education he received at Wake Forest, came on a basketball scholarship. Getting those kinds of people and the board of trustees, I think we have an extraordinarily good one we should be very happy about that.

Constantly to change the model I think the business school just the other day said no more day time classes. We are at night and evening. That's a fairly bold step I think but you've got to be willing to do that [00:38:00] sort of thing. The leadership that we've had and got I think the future is pretty bright for them.

Tanya: Is there anyone at Wake forest that you considered a mentor or it sounds like you also had some peer mentors too that you would like to talk about?

Leon: I think more than the latter, obviously in the law school in my day Dean Carroll Weathers they sometimes referred to him as the great white father. The man like the light of Americans that they called the president. He certainly was and a lot of the teachers there, there were eight teachers when I was in law school and I was number nine when I came back. Certainly they were mentors. A lot of what I did as counsel was something that had not been done before. In the sense of having a mentor for that. But I had countless colleagues who contributed just vast amounts to understanding and personal development.

You cannot talk about Wake Forest without saying Ed Wilson. Certainly Ed Wilson has been one of those and Tom Hearn was. We were born the same month and we were colleagues but he was my supervisor and boss. There's members of the board of trustees that I've talked about. People like Ron Wellman, it's hard to imagine what a good director of athletics Ron Wellman is, the things that [00:40:00] he's done. He is an absolute gentleman of honor and just extraordinarily good person.

Reid Morgan who worked with me from the beginning who's my successor is now senior vice president and general counsel. We worked together from day

one and I've never had a more enjoyable and fruitful relationship in my life than I had with Reid Morgan. Countless teachers in the undergraduate school and the law school. It's been a great place to be, it really has.

Tanya: Is there anything else that you would like to share that you think you haven't touched on yet?

Leon: Well not that we have time in the next month. No, I think that's enough.

Tanya: Thank you very much.