

Interview with Barbara Parnell (BP)

Date: 4/5/21

Interviewer: Konstantinos Economopoulos (KPE)

[BP] Hello

[KPE] good morning Ms. Parnell?

[BP] Yes

[KPE] Hi, I'm Konstantinos Economopoulos

[BP] Yes I've been expecting your call.

[KPE] thank you very much for taking the time to speak with me this morning

[BP] I'm happy to do so. I'm not sure what I can add to what you already know, but I will answer any specific questions that you have and I will certainly tell you how I was treated by Doctor Sabiston. Do you have any direct questions?

[KPE] That's great. So just to recap we have several history researchers and some medical doctors who are conducting these interviews over the phone. We're aiming to interview almost 150 people to get an archive oral history of Doctor Sabiston's influence at Duke and in medicine, in general. The eventual goal after this is to construct hopefully a formal biography, and just so you know, these interviews are going to be recorded and archived in the Medical Center Library. I will work on the transcript of this, I'll send it to you after we're done, and of course if you can read it. You don't have to feel like editing it or anything but it is for you and if you see anything that is significantly wrong let me know and we can go back and fix it before we archive it in the library.

[KPE] OK so let's start. I'm going to repeat my name and your name for the recording. OK?

[BP] Alright

[KPE] So this is Konstantinos Economopoulos. I'm interviewing Ms. Barbara Parnell who was Doctor Sabiston's secretary. It's April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2021 at 11:30 AM and we are speaking over the phone.

[BP] This is Barbara Parnell. I was Coordinator and Honorary Member of the Sabiston Surgical Society (not really his secretary). I did not work in the office with him.

[KPE] Thank you for correcting me there Ms. Parnell. Can you tell me a little bit about where you grow up?

[BP] where I grew up?

[KPE] Yes please

[BP] I grew up in North Carolina. My family moved to several other states because of my father's job but we returned to Durham and have lived here since.

[KPE] Great. So what years were you at Duke?

[BP] From 1963 until 2012 when I retired.

[KPE] and how did you get to meet Dr. Sabiston?

[BP] I believe I may have been the first person to see him on the day of his arrival. When he arrived, I thought there would be a lot of people to meet and greet him. Apparently, there weren't. I was in my office alone; he came into my office because the departmental office was locked. The first thing he asked me was what time zone we are in? So, I told him it was Eastern Standard Time. He then proceeded to knock over a box of file cards that were on my desk. My first thought was, oh goodness, he is Chairman of the Department, I should probably pick those up from the floor. Then, I thought, no, if he is a gentleman, he will pick them up, and he did.

[KPE] That's a great story, thanks for sharing that. And so I guess that was your first interaction with Dr Sabiston right there, but do you remember your first like formal interaction later on for any particular like issue that you were working together?

[BP] Actually, I pretty much worked behind the scenes as far as Dr. Sabiston was concerned. But during my time as Coordinator, he did not interfere with the planning of any of the Sabiston Society events. I would make all of those arrangements. They were never changed. Dr. Sabiston was very grateful with what I had done over the years. He did on one occasion, after a meeting, he sent me some crystal candelabras from Tiffany's with a really nice note. I was so appreciative to get that.

[KPE] Do you remember what the note was saying?

[BP] It was just "thank you for the work that you do"

[KPE] that's great. How was it like to work so close with Dr. Sabiston?

[BP] I admired Dr. Sabiston. I respected Dr. Sabiston. I liked the protocol when he was Chairman of the Department. You knew what you were supposed to do. You did your job. He did have a firm hand over the residents. As you probably already know, his telephone extension number was 2831 and people would cringe when they got a page to that number not knowing what was coming. But he was a gentleman, scholar, and great educator. He promoted Resident training and expected excellence from each of his Residents.

[KPE] yeah that's exactly right. Can you describe me his daily routine at least in the office and from what you know?

[BP] I wasn't directly in his office. He had a number of different people who worked directly in his office and helped him with whatever was going on in the Department, but I was not involved in that at all.

[KPE] Understood. Do you have like a first hand impression of part of his routine or at least the one that you were familiar with?

[BP] His routine... I don't really know.

[KPE] were there a few things that Dr. Sabiston was passionate about? You already mentioned a few but is there anything else?

[BP] Well I just think basically it was education and patient care. You know he was known worldwide. He authored several books. He included a lot of other people in the Department in those writings. Basically I'm sure you've already heard he was called "THE MAN." One thing I do remember was that he was passionate about his rose garden at home. There was a time when a former resident, Jim Alexander, was asked to "babysit" the rose garden while the Sabistons were away. I remember that Jim panicked thinking what would happen if these roses died when he was gone. He called him mother for advice. Good news, the roses survived!!

[KPE] Yep exactly. It's really telling about his time at Duke and his leadership at Duke. I want to ask you, so I've heard that his memory was phenomenal. Do you have any examples to give us to portray that?

[BP] Of his memory?

[KPE] Yes I've heard specifically that he was able to remember all residents names, residents wives names, medical students...

[BP] I don't know that for sure, but I would imagine that is accurate.

[KPE] So I've heard also a lot about how gentlemanly Dr. Sabiston was and you kind of portrayed that in one of the interactions.

[BP] my first interaction

[KPE] yes exactly. Can you talk a little bit about what he was like sort of interpersonally in that sense?

[BP] He just portrayed a presence, you know, I mean... like I said, he was "THE MAN" when he walked in you knew you could look at him and tell, this man is in charge. So basically that's all I know about that.

[KPE] I've heard that Dr. Sabiston suffered a stroke in 1977 (???should be 1997) while traveling from the University of Virginia to Boston. Is that accurate? Do you remember any of the details around this event?

[BP] I do not, I just remember the first time I saw him afterwards. I don't know how long that was. We had a meeting in Durham at the Washington Duke Inn on the Duke campus and he was wheeled in by Mrs. Sabiston to our meeting. He did attend. And I think that was the last time I actually saw him.

[KPE] Did Dr. Sabiston continue coming to the office after this event?

[BP] I think that's true for a while, but I'm not sure.

[KPE] How did things change in his working life due to this event, do you remember?

[BP] No I don't. We didn't see him after he left. I never saw him after that.

[KPE] Got it. I want to make sure that you kind of get the chance to tell the stories about Dr. Sabiston that you would want to tell, and I know you already told some but are there any others that you would like to share?

[BP] I don't know of anything else that involved me personally. I had heard stories that you probably have already heard from the residents. He showed strength and poise and commanded respect. I think the residents were a little afraid of him. Not afraid in the manner that he would do anything to them physically but when he called, they jumped. You know that sort of thing. He also demanded that they look professional and act professional. No beards and always a necktie and definitely always socks with shoes. Residents were never allowed to talk to families between surgery cases unless they had changed into their street clothes, put on their necktie, and their white coat. Imagine how many times they would have to change their clothes throughout the day.

[KPE] Yeah and was it the same with you and other staff members of his office as well or only with the residents?

[BP] Just the residents that I'm aware of.

[KPE] Was there anything that I didn't ask you today that you want to make sure that we have on record about you or about Dr. Sabiston or about your work at Duke?

[BP] well obviously I loved my job at Duke. I worked for Dr. Newland Oldham from the day that he came on the faculty until the day he retired. During this time I was still Coordinator for the Sabiston Society and planned all the meetings that we had from the inception of the Society. As you probably know, some of these meetings were during the time of the American College of Surgeons meetings and they were scattered around the Country like San Francisco, New Orleans, Chicago, Atlanta, and Kiawah Island. Finally, the last few years when there were ACS changes in their schedule, we finally started having a meeting at Duke. That went well and everyone seemed to love to return to this area. It was like Dr. Sabiston's "home."

[KPE] yeah talk to me a little bit more about these meetings. Cause he was a national and respected figure in those days, so talk to me a little bit more about the meetings.

[BP] We only had a one-night meeting during the ACS. It was always on a Monday night at the beginning of the ACS. I did attend the meeting in Chicago one year and the Kiawah Island meeting. The residents presented their research that they were doing at that time. Other than just camaraderie and having a meal together and enjoying each other's company and seeing what everybody was doing after they left Duke. As you know, many of our prior residents went on to be Chairman of Departments of Surgery all across the Country.

[KPE] And you went in those meetings yourself. Any stories from those meetings?

[BP] I could have gone but I chose not to. I had completed all the planning and always had one person to contact in each of those cities. I, of course, was at all of the general meetings held at Duke.

[KPE] got it, as you said as the Coordinator, you didn't have Dr. Sabiston's direct contact?

[BP] I did not.

[KPE] OK, well those were kind of all the questions I had prepared. You answered a lot of the ones without me asking, which was awesome. So if you don't have anything else that you want to share I don't have any other questions. Like I said, reach back to me and we can set up another time to talk if you think of anything else or if you remember anything that we missed during this conversation. I would be happy to talk with you again if you have anything.

[BP] Let me get your number.

[KPE] yes. Xxx-xxx-xxxx. yes that's my cell phone number

[BP] OK, are you still in surgery?

[KPE] yes I'm a general surgery resident in my 4th year here at Duke.

[BP] I thought you would be in the 4th year, yes. Well I hope you're enjoying it.

[KPE] I am enjoying it a lot.

[BP] it was nice to talk to you.

[KPE] it was really nice talking to you too. Thank you so very much for taking the time. Thank you. I hope you have a fantastic day. bye

[BP] bye