

Taylor Patterson:

Hello. This is Taylor Patterson. How are you?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Good.

Taylor Patterson:

So, I am so excited to speak with you this morning. I just have to do a little introductory spiel, so this is Taylor Patterson for the David Sabiston Oral History Project from Duke University and it is July 30, 2020. I'm speaking with Dr. and Colonel Walter Pories. How are you this morning?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

I'm doing fine, thank you.

Taylor Patterson:

Yay. I'm really excited to speak with you. Can you just give us a little bit of a sense of your background, and what got you personally interested in medicine?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

I was a failure as an artist and even though I majored in that in college, I finally decided I would do what the rest of the family did, and go into medicine. I went to the University of Rochester, where I went to medical school, and then also took my residency there in general surgery, and then in cardio-thoracic surgery. I was in the military, I spent 24 years in the military, but also at the same time was in academia at Case Western Reserve... first at the University of Rochester, then Case Western, and then finally came to East Carolina University to help start the medical school. I got to know Dr. Sabiston when I was still a Chief Resident, and he was a close friend with my Chair, whose name was Charles Rob, and so I got to know him. As I learnt more about this remarkable man, I really began to admire him, because in almost every area of surgery, he was a pioneer, and he was a nice guy.

Taylor Patterson:

Really.

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

So, when I arrived at East Carolina University, my problem was, how do you help start a medical school, build a strong department of surgery, and recruit people to what is really a rural area of the United States? To give you an idea, in Greenville, North Carolina, when my family and I arrived, there was one

red light. The only restaurant was a Waffle House, okay. So how do you get first class surgeons to come here?....Am I going on too long, or should I go on like this?

Taylor Patterson:

No, we've had people go nearly two hours. They've got great stories, so anything-as much time as you have, we would love to hear it.

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

So, at UNC we were part of the system of the University of North Carolina, but the people at the UNC Medical School felt that we were really an intrusion, because they were the only state medical school in the state, and here we were. In addition, we were also intruding on an area that sent them a number of patients, so they were to put it mildly, not helpful. I called Dave Sabiston and I said, "Dave, I really need your help," and he was the most gracious, wonderful guy, and he helped me to recruit so many of my surgeons that we called ourselves Duke East. So, he was just terrific. He helped us develop research. For example, one of the people that he had, a resident who had been there forever, for 10 years, because he had this eternal residency at Duke under Sabiston.

But he was sort of a fiery, young guy, and he said that's the best resident he had ever trained, but there wasn't a chance that I could get him, not a chance. But he would certainly have him come and visit. So Chitwood came, and he was sort of a brash guy, so I liked him immediately and I said, "I want you to come here." I said, "What do you want?" He said, "Well, I had never thought about that." I said, "Well, here's a blank sheet of paper. You write down what you want, and I'll get it for you." So he wrote down some suggestions for beds and various things, and funding, and I said, "You're not asking for enough." I said, "I've got to take this to the trustees, and the hospital, and I've got to have a big package," so I said, "Start writing again." So, he wrote some more, and I said, "That's still not enough." And so, to Sabiston's surprise, we got him to come.

He built a whole heart institute. He developed a whole new way of repairing mitral valves, but to do that, he developed a whole set of instruments and cameras to go inside the heart, and to do these things, and pretty soon East Carolina had one of the world's largest series of mitral value repairs, and we were the first of anyone in the state to do robotic heart surgery. So, in addition, to Steve [inaudible 00:06:56], Mark Williams, and some other real leaders....so I don't think there's any doubt that we still have the best cardio-thoracic unit anywhere in the state, or perhaps in the East. Just amazing, and that's all Dave Sabiston's legacy.

Taylor Patterson:

Wow! So maybe UNC had the right idea, that you were going to become a big competitor!

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

They still don't like us, but that's okay. (Laughter)

Taylor Patterson:

I bet. That's amazing. You said... it was your advisor who initially introduced you, or who was the...?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

My chair, where I trained was a guy named Charles Rob. Charles Rob was about six foot two, gangly [?] and he was trained during the Blitz in London. He became a pilot. He then parachuted behind German lines, found a grade school, turned it into a hospital, captured some Germans, whom he used as a blood bank, never more than one unit, okay? And then, although he had broken his ankle when he landed in the field, he operated on over 60 people, before putting on his own cast.

He got the equivalent of the National Medal of Honor, Congressional Medal of Honor, from Britain, and then became the Chair at St. Mary's, where he developed the whole field of vascular surgery. So, he was something else. He decided to become the Chair at the University of Rochester, just as he was about to be knighted, and I asked, "Why in the world would you leave?" And he said, "Well, it's easy. It's money." [Laughter] So, he was a wonderful guy to work for. After I left the military, I then went back to him, and became his new partner in vascular surgery. Then when he retired, and I took over the department, he joined me at East Carolina.

He also had a twin brother identical to him, who was a spy for England in G7. He said he would quite often be walking in the streets of London, and somebody would come up to him and say, pass him some information. They got the wrong guy.

Taylor Patterson:

Oh, no! You'd think that's the last thing you'd want with a spy. That's amazing.

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

So, he and Sabiston were close friends.

Taylor Patterson:

And, they were associated through medicine, or do you know how they met?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Well, you know it was a different time, because there weren't many surgeons, and so the surgeons all knew each other, and they were these giants that lumbered across the earth.

Taylor Patterson:

Wow. Do you remember hearing a lot about Dr. Sabiston before you initially met him? Did they give you a big rundown on his reputation?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Well, remember I was a medical student and resident, and went to surgical meetings, and so here was this giant, and so, of course, we knew about Sabiston. There are probably 10 or 15 really famous surgeons in the world, and he was one of them. So, that's one Sabiston story, but I have some stories. He invited me to be a visiting professor at Duke, and God knows why in the world he would choose me, but anyway, I went. So, with us rounding were the residents, and then the Chief Resident came, and Sabiston looked him over and noticed that he had golf pants on, and instead of being the regular grey pants, or blue pants, they were sort of light-colored, and he said, "You literally came to Grand rounds with me wearing those pants," and he sent him home to change clothes.

Taylor Patterson:

Oh, I love that.

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

So, that set the scene. This is a guy to be reckoned with. And then, the tragedy, of course, you know in his last years, he had probably a stroke or something, but it's too bad. He lingered on, but he was not the same Dave Sabiston.

Taylor Patterson:

Right, right. We had heard other stories, about-, in terms of the adherence to wardrobe standards, and those kinds of things, that residents would dive out of the hall, if they had coffee in their hands, or anything like that, too?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

As I said, it was a different age, really. To give you an example, when I started residence at the University of Rochester, we started with 12 interns. They had what was called the, pyramid system, so they had like they had at Duke and you started and they said, at the end of four years, we will notify two of you that you will become chief residents, and the others, you'll have to find another job. So, we did that for four years, living in the hospital, now and [inaudible 00:13:56] living in that [inaudible 00:13:56] in light uniform, and room and board.

Taylor Patterson:

I didn't quite get it, say again? What was the last part?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

And free room and board. That's why you were called residents, right?

Taylor Patterson:

Oh, I get it.

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

And you were on 24 hours a day, seven days a week, period. Of course, you were in total competition with these other people, and then, you finally come to the day when you are going to find out who are going to be the two, because if you're honest, you realize that all the others are both smarter, and probably better surgeons, and better-looking. So, somehow, I ended up being one of those two, and I was in trouble, because I'm a cartoonist, I publish cartoons, and one of the things that I did was I made a bunch of cartoons about the faculty over the previous several years. I didn't realize that that was probably a terrible mistake, but anyway, somehow they made a mistake, and picked me, and I said, "What happened?" And, they said, "Well, the only ones who weren't particularly enthusiastic, were the ones that you didn't cartoon." [Laughter]

Taylor Patterson:

Oh, no. "Where's our cartoon?" Oh, no!

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

So they made [inaudible 00:15:30] many things.

Taylor Patterson:

Oh, I love that! They all wanted theirs. So you said that Dr. Sabiston was sort of a giant in the field, and you would have first encountered him at conferences or...?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Remember now, you're just a little guy, and here's this giant up on the podium giving talks, but he was the first to put in a coronary artery bypass graft, and that's being done all the time today, but at the time, it just seemed impossible. How could you take a vein out of a leg, and then he opened up the chest, and this heart is beating. I mean, it is beating and you are going to sew a very tiny little vessel into a moving heart. It isn't until you sort of think about it, and describe it, and then you say, "You're going to do that, and you're going to do that in a human being?" Does that bring it into focus a little bit?

Taylor Patterson:

Wow! Yeah, absolutely. Do you know, did you get a sense of what sort of gave him the confidence, when he first started pioneering that procedure?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Well, you know, I think that those giants were really giants, and they practiced over, and over, and over again in dogs. In addition, they were unusually talented, and then they had vision and courage, because all those guys would fail periodically. Well, imagine you operated on some child, and tried to fix a hole in his heart, and the child died, how do you even get over that? And so, we tend to overlook what it took to do this.

Taylor Patterson:

Is it a compartmentalization, or how did they grapple with that emotional aspect of it, do you think?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Well, you know there were some that just quit, and wouldn't go on. So it took a very special kind of guy to go through it, and then get successes where nobody else ever got a success.

Taylor Patterson:

Right. Wow. So, you said he's sort of a giant up on the podium, while you're more of a little guy, did-

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Yeah, and you said, "Wow". What it did, of course, was inspired a whole bunch of people. That inspired the young people then, to become the next generation of surgeons.

Taylor Patterson:

Wow! Do you remember sort of hearing about that procedure, specifically? Would that have been at a conference, or in a journal?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Well, it's both. One person goes to a conference, the next person sees the publications, and you look at the publications, and you just wonder, "Yeah, I got to learn how to do that." There was a time where these breakthroughs were coming all the time. Imagine someone saying, "I can take a kidney from a twin, and put it in the other twin because he's in kidney failure." How could you do it? Well, that guy's name was Murray, and he won the Nobel Prize, and then some guy named Starzl in Pittsburgh said, "That's nothing. I can transplant a whole liver," and he did, and he showed, yes, that's possible. So, they were a different generation.

That's why you've been asked to do this assignment, because I think people never remember what that must have been like. Prior to those guys... and it all started, really, with the Second World War, but prior to that time, surgery was limited to taking out an appendix, and taking care of breast cancer, that kind of thing. To take out a stomach was a big deal. Then these guys came back from the war, and they just knew that there were more things that needed to be done. They had better machines, better anesthesia, all developed in wartime.

Taylor Patterson:

Wow. So, you think in terms of the surgical innovation, you think Sabiston's contributions are up there?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

They were huge.

Taylor Patterson:

Really, yeah?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Sabiston's contributions were huge... [inaudible] especially his method of training his residents.

Taylor Patterson:

How so?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Well, he gave them responsibility, and he let them take responsibility for patients, and he supervised them in their new research, and he was active in how to explore in new areas. So he inspired a whole group of leaders, who then in turn raised their own residents. So, his biggest contribution was in education, both individually to residents, and also on a national basis, showing that this is the way a good program runs.

Taylor Patterson:

Okay, and in that sense the Duke Program was unusual for the nation, in terms of his emphasis on training, or education?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Yeah, it still is.

Taylor Patterson:

It still is?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Yeah.

Taylor Patterson:

Oh, that's interesting.

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

That's quite a legacy.

Taylor Patterson:

It's amazing. Do you get a sense of sort of how his emphasis on education... did you work with surgeons he had trained as well?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Well, you know, they're the ones I got. His residents came to us then, to become our faculty members. So, I've learned quite a bit about his approach to education, which was that every detail has to be attended to, constantly. They have to have a total dedication, and that example of the golf pants simply showed that you have to adhere to standards, really good standards, and then that translates into consistent care.

Taylor Patterson:

Okay, because it's that consistency or...?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

... and that they're compulsive.

Taylor Patterson:

Okay, nice. So you mentioned the first, sort of the grafting of the leg vein? What are some other ways that you think he influenced the field of surgery, besides the education and training that you mentioned?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

He was a leader in the American College of Surgeons. I think he also became president. I'm not sure, but that or the [inaudible 00:24:15] of the American College of Surgeons set the standards for quality in the United States and what that meant... you know, in the past, a guy named Semmelweis in about 18-

Taylor Patterson:

Ignaz Semmelweis. Sure, right?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

In 1844 or so, and he found out that women were dying in childbirth, because the doctors weren't washing their hands.

Taylor Patterson:

Right. The puerperal fever?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Yeah. He demanded that. They pursued him, so finally he... [inaudible 00:24:56]. They literally pushed him out of practice. It was just not appropriate to ever show that surgeons might have bad results, so then, that's when we ended up with, "We've got to keep those things secret, and that will happen to anybody," and then there were things like blame. Blame the nurse, or blame whoever you can, and what the American College of Surgeons started doing, was to set standards, that these complications will be reported. They will be analyzed, so that they can be prevented. Huge, huge. It may not sound like much, but it really, really was.

Taylor Patterson:

It really was. So, those standards and his sort of being exacting, establishing that kind of thing, that really does trickle down everywhere, right?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Right, and then you see he would reflect that in his dress, in his actions, always wearing a tie, all the time. In other words, every detail counts.

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Taylor Patterson:

Every detail, okay.

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Am I giving you the information you want or...?

Taylor Patterson:

Oh, perfect. No, this is great.

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Or am I just droning on?

Taylor Patterson:

No, this is wonderful. It's just extraordinary to hear about him. He sounds like just such a fascinating man. What was he like sort of interpersonally? I've heard lots of stories, he was very kind of gentlemanly, or courtly, or...?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Precisely. I don't think he ever, as far as I know, I don't think he ever got close.

Taylor Patterson:

He never what? I'm sorry.

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

He never really got close to anybody.

Taylor Patterson:

Oh, okay.

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

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I just couldn't imagine sitting down over a beer with Sabiston, and having him say to you, "Oh, you know, I'm really irritated, or I didn't sleep well last night," or something like that. At least I was never able to have any small talk with him.

Taylor Patterson:

Right, he sort of maintained that formality?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Oh, yeah.

Taylor Patterson:

Interesting. Did you sort of ever socialize with him, or Mrs. Sabiston or they were kind of...?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Well, I sat across the table from her once.

Taylor Patterson:

Oh, really.

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

She didn't say much.

Taylor Patterson:

Okay. Was that at a dinner or...?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Well, it was some kind of a dinner. We were there. My wife and she talked a little bit to each other. It was kind of was a whole different- it was a really different generation, different style.

Taylor Patterson:

You mean in terms of the deference and formality?

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Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Absolutely. Really today, it's just almost impossible to think of how different behavior was.

Taylor Patterson:

Really?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Oh, yeah. Fathers and sons were not particularly close. Relationships were formal. I mean, in the Depression, if you look at those pictures, those men are standing in white shirts and ties and suits in line. It was a very, very formal, and very different culture.

Taylor Patterson:

Interesting. And you think instilling that formality that trickled down to all of the surgeons he trained, as well?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Yes, yes.

Taylor Patterson:

And then, they came all over the country, or all over the world like that?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Right.

Taylor Patterson:

Interesting. Did they stand out in any way? Was there a way you could tell a Sabiston-trained man, or something like that?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

I'm not sure. Mostly that's just the way you dressed. That's just the way you behaved.

Taylor Patterson:

Okay, other than the golf-pants gentleman, right?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Oh no, the whole thing. How you addressed him, you would never call him anything but Dr. Sabiston, and [inaudible 00:30:05], people in his department.

Taylor Patterson:

Right, so we heard that he was... obviously, you mentioned the American College of Surgeons, and he was active in all of these national societies, did you interact with him a lot in those environments?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Well, you know, when you would go to these meetings, it would be the same. There were six. There was the meeting of the American Surgical Association. Now that is a very top, top association in the whole world. It's [used up?] Now and I think the membership... I can't quite remember the rules, so don't quote me, but it looked like they had 100-200 active members, and so to become an active member, one of those had to either pass that age, or die, to get the next member.

And so, Charles Rob took me to this thing, and it was like going to the zoo, because he said, "Look, there's [Ollinger? Ehrlinger?], there's Sabiston, and so on." They would point out these guys.

Taylor Patterson:

And, they would be harassed by crowds?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Yeah, because they were such heroes.

Taylor Patterson:

Oh, wow. They were such rock stars! That's so interesting. I know one thing that he really focused on with his residents in training, was the importance of grant writing, and the NIH funding? Was that something that was known about him, in terms of his reputation?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Yes, as a matter of fact, if you didn't do it, you wouldn't get promoted. Very simple.

Taylor Patterson:

So it was very critical. That's so interesting. Can you tell me a little bit more about your experience with the founding of the Brody School of Medicine? You said he was helpful?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Oh yeah, he was tremendous. The Brody School of Medicine is in Greenville, North Carolina, and we take care of 29 counties, 1.4 million people. It's one of the most under-served areas in the country, with a very high minority population, and one of the highest prevalences of diabetes, and heart disease and so on, and people are also quite poor. So it was a very attractive place to come, if you really wanted to be dedicated to improving things. So it was just wonderful to have his help in recruiting people, because to recruit to a place where they're not going to make a whole lot of money, they're going to work very hard, under sometimes challenging conditions, you had to have somebody to say, "This is a place you really ought to go." And then, once they came- I mean, there's so much misery here, and then that has led to some major discoveries made here at East Carolina University. It's a very prominent place for surgical research, and clinical education, and with it we've sharply improved the health of this region, with really major change.

Taylor Patterson:

Wow, for over a million and a half people, that's amazing!

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

There's 1.4 million... there's an old adage, "Never go to a place that's successful. Go to a place with a lot of problems, because otherwise, you won't be able to show that you're any good." There was a big opportunity here, and fortunately, it's really worked out.

Taylor Patterson:

Wow. Just because of that access to that population, kind of driving the research? That's so fascinating. So, how did he help with the recruiting? Was he recommending you, or just sending you the people, or...?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

I think those were the days where your Chief would say, "This is where you got to go."

Taylor Patterson:

And they would say, "Okay."

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

I became Chief of Surgery in Cleveland, at the Cleveland Metro General Hospital, and was not aware that I had the job. I never applied for it. I came in to see Dr. Rob, since I was on the faculty, and I'd accepted a really nice offer to join a vascular private practice. So I came in to tell him that I was about to leave the faculty, and he said, "Oh, you can't do that, because you've already got a job in Cleveland." I just said, "What do you mean?" He says, "It's all arranged. You're going to be Vice-Chair of the Department at the University, and you're going to be Chief of Surgery there, and they're building a new hospital." And then, he never said anymore. I thought, this is really crazy. I came home to my wife, and said, "This is really nuts."

But then, about two weeks later, these two great big guys showed up- I'm a little short guy. These two big guys get up, and came in with rolls of paper, and they introduced themselves. One was the Chief of Medicine, the other one was the Chief of OB in Cleveland, and they unrolled the map of architectural plans and said, "We want to make sure you like the operating rooms where they are."

Taylor Patterson:

Wow, and what did you say?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

I thought they were pretty good. I didn't know anything about reading plans. [Laughter] It was a whole different culture.

Taylor Patterson:

Wow. And that's changed now, in the sense of just...?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Oh yeah, these guys are independent. There are a whole lot of surgeons out there. There are a lot of places. The surgeons are so specialized. This guy will only operate on this, and this guy will only operate on that. This guy's a transplant surgeon, this one's a trauma surgeon.

Taylor Patterson:

Oh, interesting.

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

But they're very independent. Of course, the other part is that we have a lot more women who are now surgeons, and they're very good surgeons, and they have other ways of deciding their lifestyle, because they have kids, and they have husbands, and so on. We also are now training a lot of minorities, who are very capable, and so they again, have some other requirements, and positions. So, it's just totally different.

Taylor Patterson:

One of the things we have heard a number of people speak on was Dr. Sabiston's role in that, specifically, in promoting women and minority doctors at Duke. Was that something that other people outside of the University were aware of, or was it...?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Until now, I wasn't aware of it. Wow were the first residency in North Carolina to train a woman, to finish a woman.

Taylor Patterson:

Wow, really? You mean she started the program, and completed it or...?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Yeah, and I really caught hell from the private community.

Taylor Patterson:

How so?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Oh, when I said that she would be the Chief... she's now a superb plastic surgeon in practice here, and when I said she'd be the Chief, they called me in, and said, "How could you possibly do that? You're cheapening the residency, and you know damn well that she's going to become pregnant, and once she becomes pregnant, she'll never use the training, and it's just terrible."

Taylor Patterson:

Wow, and what did you say? Did you...

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

I said, "She's my Chief Resident. I'm making my decision."

Taylor Patterson:

That's it, it's already made. You stuck to your guns, that's amazing. Oh, wow.

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Dr. Walter J. Pories:

It wasn't very hard. She was so good.

Taylor Patterson:

Really?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Oh, yeah.

Taylor Patterson:

Nice! So she proved you right?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

I also have a daughter who's a surgeon, so I'm prejudiced.

Taylor Patterson:

Oh, wow. Does she have a similar specialty to you, or what does she practice-?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Well, she's a failure, too, she's a surgical oncologist at Harvard. [Laughter]

Taylor Patterson:

Oh, no!

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

So, she's at an inferior institution, but that's okay.

Taylor Patterson:

Oh, that's amazing, wow. You must be very, very proud?

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Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Yeah.

Taylor Patterson:

So, one of the other things...

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

God, how long a list do you have?

Taylor Patterson:

Oh, yeah. I'm sorry!

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

You're going to let me go pretty soon, are you?

Taylor Patterson:

Oh, yeah, absolutely. If we were doing a biography of him eventually, if there's anything else you would like us to know about him, or that you would think should be included or...?

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Well, I would make sure that you talk to people like Mark Williams, and especially Ranny Chitwood.

Taylor Patterson:

Ranny Chitwood, okay.

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Did you have those on your list?

Taylor Patterson:

I'll have to double check. We've got about, I want to say, maybe 150 people-

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Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Oh, my god.

Taylor Patterson:

But we're always eager for other recommendations, and anybody else that you think of, because everybody had a unique perspective in a lot of ways. It sounds like he was just incredibly generous, and supportive in helping you all found the School of Medicine, which is amazing. Oh, that is just so fascinating.

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Yeah, he made an absolutely huge difference.

Taylor Patterson:

Wow. Well, that's just so wonderful to get to hear such positive stories about him, and I just wanted to say, thank you so much for your time, and supporting it. And I also just wanted to say that I have really enjoyed looking at your cartoons, I think they're wonderful.

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

Have a good day. Thanks a lot.

Taylor Patterson:

Thank you so much. Take care. Bye

Dr. Walter J. Pories:

You too. Bye.