

## **Interview with Barbara J. Muesing**

**Interviewer: Ann M. Pflaum, University historian**

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**(final text)**

**Barbara Jean Muesing= BJM**

**Ann Pflaum= AP**

AP: Barbara, you have had a long connection with the University in three significant positions: 1967 to 1985, as a staff member, rising to district director, in University of Minnesota Extension; as secretary (executive director) of the Board of Regents, 1985 to 1994; and at the University of Minnesota Crookston, 2005-2012, where, as the spouse of Chancellor Charles Casey, you have carried out multiple roles: giving talks, hosting events and entertaining guests, as well as meeting with students, alumni, and members of the public. To begin this interview, could you please describe your family and where you grew up?

BJM: I grew up in Columbia Township in Polk County in the northwestern part of Minnesota. My parents farmed and my father also did plumbing and installed furnaces, which he was very good at doing.

I have one brother, Tom, 5 years younger than me, which meant I was a senior when he was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Not easy for him, he reminds me.

I was a 4-Her taking “girl” projects: clothing, home assistance, and food preparation. My parents were thrilled that I was crowned “style queen” at the East Polk County Fair in 1961. This meant a trip to the State Fair – my first trip to the Twin Cities. Style queens from across the state were treated to a style show at Dayton’s in downtown Minneapolis. A very big deal!

I participated in several extra curricular activities in high school, most notably band and choir. Marching band was a big part of summer. We marched at town celebrations all over NW Minnesota.

After graduating from high school in 1963, I attended a summer session at Bemidji State University for an intensive biology course and then entered Mankato State University that fall. I lived in a dormitory my first year and then in an apartment. I majored in Home Economics and was a member of a professional fraternity Phi Upsilon Omicron. During college I worked part time at the local J.C. Penny Store, selling women's clothes. Still, I managed to graduate in three and a half years, receiving my degree in December of 1966.

Upon graduation, I took a position as Extension Home Economist in Owatonna, in Steele County, January of 1967 – a great job for a new graduate not yet old 21 years old. Two years later I transferred to the extension office in Stearns County.

AP: Can you describe a bit more how you managed to carry out such senior responsibilities at such a young age? This must have been challenging.

BJM: One thing that helped in my first position was an experienced secretary, Connie Abbe, and there were good files. In the summer, there were prescribed activities such as 4-H and there was a solid network of county people who were supportive. In addition, the University of Minnesota Extension offered excellent professional development.

While we didn't think of it at the time, University Extension provided a wonderful career path for women. Then it was customary for women to be supervised by women which meant opportunities to move into supervisory positions. Soon, the glass ceiling cracked a bit allowing women to move into district supervisory positions for all staff, regardless of gender.

After a dozen plus years in county positions, and a Master's degree in Educational Administration, I was hired as an Extension District Director in NW MN, with an office at the Crookston Campus. Dean and Director Norm Brown hired me after I served a year in his office as an administrative intern. Sometimes called "stormin Normin" for his assertive leadership, Dr. Brown was a champion for diversity. He never gave a speech without a message of inclusion. This was good time for women to advance, including me.

AP: What did you do your master's degree paper on?

BJM: I wrote about how, in extension, the members of homemaker clubs interacted with leaders across the county, how they developed leadership skills and interests, and the contrast to the emerging culture of community action programs which came to the fore in the mid-1970s.

AP: Coming to Crookston allowed you to return to the area where you had grown up.

BJM: Yes

AP: What path did your career take in 1985?

BJM: Duane Wilson had retired as secretary to the Board of Regents. Duane had an Extension background and he encouraged me to apply. I was selected to follow him and served in that position from 1985 to 1994.

AP: As I understand it, your official title was executive director and corporate secretary. It is a critical position at the University with supervisory responsibilities for the Regents office and with responsibility for maintaining relations with the twelve members of the Regents, the presidents and vice presidents and their staff members (co-located at that time in Morrill Hall), as with members of the faculty, staff, and students, as well as other key constituencies within and outside of the University.

BJM: At the interview, when I was being considered for the position of board secretary, I recall using the word “facilitator” to describe the role. Regent Wenda Moore told me she was impressed enough to support my getting the position.

AP: Could you add a few sentences that would add an overview on the role of the Board of Regents at the University? Perhaps describing how regents are selected, the types of issues they typically address as a full board or as committees?

The role of the Board of Regents is to set policy in support of the University’s land-grant mission. Given that the University was established prior to the State, the University has what we call “autonomy” which makes the Regents’ role all the more important.

Regents' selection often takes on drama for one reason or another. Having in place a citizens committee to recruit and interview candidates has opened up the process, which is a good thing.

AP: Your first three years as Secretary to the Board of Regents coincided with the tumultuous time (1985-88) when Ken Keller was president. Perhaps, if I provide a brief overview of some of the events between 1984 and 1988, it may be helpful to the readers of this interview.

In 1984, President Magrath's resignation came unexpectedly and so there was not the customary time to plan for an interim president. Kenneth H. Keller was the vice president for academic affairs and was seen as a possible candidate for the office. He was also the logical person to serve as acting president. The Board of Regents, however, let it be understood that if he wished to be a candidate for president, he should not assume the position of acting president. Keller reflected on his next steps and decided to accept the position until a successor was found.

Minnesota Governor Rudy Perpich asked for a meeting with the regents and stated emphatically his belief that the University was not capable of planning or setting priorities. This was a blow to the institution since planning and priority setting had been a hallmark of the administration of President C. Peter Magrath. In response, on February 9, 1985, President Keller wrote a nine page document "Commitment to Focus," (CTF) outlining major themes related to University of Minnesota planning.

Among key themes, were raising admissions standards for undergraduates, emphasizing graduate education and research, smaller undergraduate enrollments--thereby improving the student experience, and changing the General College (known as an entry point for students with marginal transcripts) from a degree granting college to unit for academic enrichment to under-prepared students. The Board of Regents accepted the plan.

On another front, there was public concern when Minneapolis and St. Paul papers, engaged in circulation wars, printed accounts of costs related to remodeling Eastcliff, the official residence of University of Minnesota presidents. The dollar amounts for the kitchen—actually a catering kitchen to serve the large number of University sponsored events —seemed outrageously large when compared to what ordinary families might spend to re-do a kitchen.

In early February 1988, there was good news. Legislative support for the principles of Commitment to Focus seemed to be rising. But later in the month, public confidence was again undermined as cost overruns were reported in the installation of a University telephone system, the men's basketball team was placed on probation for rules violations, and there was a report of the existence of a \$50 million dollar reserve fund. In terms of the latter, it was developed as a matter of financial stewardship, carried out by the vice president for finance. By this time, however, Keller decided that he should no longer continue as president, and so, submitted his resignation on March 13.

Obviously, this series of events were challenging. Can you summarize how you viewed these three years?

BM: I respected and still respect Ken Keller. I did not work with his predecessor, Peter Magrath (1974-1984), but people told me that the two Presidents had different approaches to leadership. President Magrath spent a lot of time on Board communication. It seemed to some that President Keller made this less a priority.

As a land-grant institution, the University is for all the people. There was concern about what Commitment to Focus might do to access. At the same time, there was a convergence of issues related to how the University was managing its money, coupled with attention from the local media.

I remember being thanked for my work preparing for a meeting. "You did all you could" should have made me feel better, but, well, I'm a Minnesotan and I always wished I could have done more to help resolve the problems facing the University at the time.

A lot of people were working hard, none more than David Lebedoff, who had become Board chair in 1987. Regent Lebedoff masterminded the process after President Keller's resignation and on January 1, 1989, Nils Hasselmo became the University's 13<sup>th</sup> president.

AP: Hasselmo did not back away "Commitment to Focus," although he softened its image through renaming his approach to it, "Access to Excellence." As you know, one of the most challenging decisions he made was to close the Waseca Campus. I believe the rationale was the decision

was that it was losing enrollments and that there were similar offerings in other institutions in the region.

BJM: Closing the Waseca Campus was a huge decision and it's hard to know two decades later if it was worth it. At the time, we thought it might mean other campus closures, but that never happened.

While President Hasselmo certainly deserves credit for his leadership and courage on the issue, others were in the thick of it too, especially Regents from rural Minnesota.

In 1993-94, President Bruininks was faced with a challenge of similar significance to rural Minnesota. He supported a vision to move toward a regional delivery system for University Extension. Over time there came to be general agreement that this decision was wise, and indeed is now a model for the country.

AP: Let's now discuss the next stage in your life at the University of Minnesota-Crookston from 2005 to 2012-- the years your husband, Charles Casey served as the fifth senior administrative officer of the University Minnesota Crookston.

BJM: I am a born helper. One of the things I enjoy is helping write speeches and reports. I hope not more than is appropriate. I play a role as cheer leader for the campus and attend numerous events and activities. I enjoy finding ways to support the mission of the University of Minnesota, Crookston.

Chuck and I host a number of events, and especially enjoy entertaining at our home north of Lengby MN.

AP: Do you have help with this entertaining?

BJM: I was a home economics major, and I'm a German girl, so what can I say. I just do it, and I love it.

You asked earlier about other volunteer roles, and I'm pleased to note that I have been blessed with many opportunities for service, including the United Way of Crookston, and the hospital board in Fosston, where we live. I'm past president of the Minnesota Rural Health Association, and currently

president of the Healthcare Auxiliary of Minnesota, representing more than 23,000 health care volunteers at hospitals and care centers across the state. We're pleased to partner with the Minnesota Hospital Association and Aging Services of Minnesota.

AP: What are your thoughts as you look back on the years you have been at Crookston?

BJM: I treasure time with students, faculty and staff, alumni and friends.

The times are challenging as we face declining public support for the University. People seem to be questioning the worth of investing in higher education. I quote President Kaler often when he said "I know of no challenge that is served by having less educated people work on it."

AP: What are your plans when you retire?

BJM: I look forward to living in one place, and to travelling from there to places we have been before, and new places. I never thought I would ever go to China, and I've been there five times. Going places near and far is a blessing. Whenever husband Chuck asks if I would be interested in a trip to ....., he doesn't have to finish the sentence, I say yes.

I thank the University for giving me opportunity beyond what I would have thought possible, starting with that first trip to the State Fair in 1961.

AP: It looks like we are out of time. Thank you very much for the interview.