Interview with Donna Peterson

Interviewed by Ann M. Pflaum,
University of Minnesota historian

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Donna Peterson -DP
Ann Pflaum -AP

AP: I am interviewing Donna Peterson associate vice president for government relations here at the University of Minnesota. Donna, I know that you have been involved in lobbying and government relations at the University for the past twenty-two years and also are a University graduate. My first question is to ask you if you would describe your family background, where you grew up, mentors, interests, and things that were important to you?

DP: I grew up in northern Minnesota on a 160 acre Minnesota dairy farm located between Sebeka and Wadena, where my family raised Holstein milk cows. I went to school all twelve years in Sebeka –a very small rural town. I started in first grade, as there wasn't any kindergarten then. I graduated from high school in 1964. My father was a farmer and my mother a farm wife—neither had attended high school, but both of them were determined that both my brother (eleven years older than I am) and I should both become college educated. For me, that translated into a desire to come to the University of Minnesota. One of primary activities outside of school was the 4-H. The skills emphasized for girls at that time were sewing, baking, fixing meals, and yard work. In addition, flowers and gardening were emphasized by my mother. At that time girls did not do diary cattle in 4-H.

AP: Can you describe how you became a student at the University and what your experience was like?

DP: It somehow was always in my head that I wanted to attend the University. When I arrived as a student at the University, I was 17 years old. It was a major adjustment—At the time I was the only girl in my high school class of approximately 60 students, who went to college. So I had no friends from home to turn to. I had no money, I worked that summer and fall to save enough money so that I could pay my tuition. January,1965 was when I actually started classes. I stayed at the University for two quarters through May of that academic year, and did some traveling.

I didn't live on campus, but I lived in an apartment –it was pretty typical at that time. I had a roommate who was not a college student. It was somebody I met at my first job and she and I got an apartment together. I didn't know anybody at the University. I couldn't have a conversation with a faculty member because the classes were very large, I didn't work on campus, I had no friends on campus.

AP: If you had no friends, how did you get on? Did your parents send you supportive messages? Did you have faculty or staff advisors?

DP: From a distance my parents were supportive, but they really had no first hand sense of what I was going through, so it was hard for them to be helpful. All they could do was be encouraging. I didn't meet with an advisor because I didn't know they had them.

AP: Could you describe your decision to become a VISTA (Volunteer in Service to America) volunteer and a give an overview of your experience in that program?

DP: There had been a recruiting effort on campus to attract students who would be willing to become public service volunteers. Like others in the mid-1960s, I was idealistic and

wanted to make a difference and so applied for the program. I believe that the year I entered was first year that VISTA was in existence. As a result, from January to December 1966, I left the University and got a first-hand experience of poverty of in migrant camps in the Willamette Valley in Oregon, where the volunteers were working with Hispanic workers as well as some African Americans and Native Americans.

This was an eye-opener for me. I saw poverty and horrible living conditions. Although our family was not rich, we had clean clothes, a car, and enough for some extras. When I was in Oregon one of the buildings (not one I was in) had a fire and burned down just like a matchbox and several people were killed. Some of the housing I saw reminded me of the housing my Dad had pigs in.

DP: When my VISTA experience ended, in January 1967, I entered Moorhead State University—where my brother had gone. In the fall of 1968, I got married and came back to the University of Minnesota. I worked as a waitress or bar tender to earn money. My then-husband was a Vietnam veteran. Having no female friends at the U, the Veterans Club was my social support group. The veterans were all going to college, but their wives were not. So again, I didn't have female peers on campus. At the University I recall courses in anthropology, sociology, social work, and political science. I was very much interested in these courses because of the worlds that had opened up to me through VISTA. I knew that those were directions in which I wanted to go and hoped that I could find employment in an area that would keep me connected to trying to make a difference and in some way to try to make things better.

DP: I didn't have friends, did not know faculty members, and didn't have any sense of how I might have found an advisor. I was impressed with Theo Stavrou's course on Russia and Ted Farmer's course on China. Both traveled regularly to the countries they

taught about and their lectures made their subjects alive helping me understand how the past has influenced the present. In anthropology I learned about other cultures and developed a sense of respect about how other people think. Although I didn't appreciate this at the time, anthropology was to be a perfect subject for someone who ended up in government relations as a good part of that work involves understanding different points of view and perspectives.

AP: When you think about your childhood in Sebeka, Minnesota would there have been many families who would have been comfortable exposing their daughters to such broad perspectives or was this unusual?

DP: I'd say it was unusual. My parents were very open to that kind of thing and my brother is eleven years older and he had graduated from Moorhead State University and he felt strongly that I should go to the University. He thought that having University of Minnesota degree was going to open a lot of doors for me. When I received my University degree in 1971, I don't think it was until later in my life that I really began to understand the importance of my family's respect for higher education and for the University.

DP: After graduating I took a position with Northwestern Bell Telephone Company as a service representative in their business office, assigned to address customer concerns and problems: installing a phone, a repair problem, or a question about a bill. I was the face of Northwestern Bell to a number of their customers.

AP: Can you describe your time (1980-1990) in the Minnesota legislature?

When I started at the legislature, I was elected to the House of Representatives from South Minneapolis (some of the Seward, Longfellow neighborhoods) in a special election held in January of

1980. There were 201 legislators and, I believe that my election brought the total number of women in the legislature to 15. So it was a very different institution at that time, from what it is today. I believe I was one of the first women legislators to have pre-school children. Every election brought a few more women, so it was very gradually changing. In 1983, I was elected to the Senate.

AP: Can you describe what it was like to work there in government relations for the University of Minnesota?

DP: When I came to work at the University in January of 1990, Stan Kegler had left the position as the University's chief lobbyist two years earlier. Tom Nelson, former state senator who was working in the Rosemount School district in their business office replaced Kegler, but stayed at the University for only about six months, when Governor Perpich tapped him to become Commissioner of Education.

Nils Hasselmo was in his first year as UM president and Kathy O'Brien (later vice president for University Services) was assistant to the president. Gordon " Gus" Donhowe was vice president for finance and operations, having come to the University from a career at Pillsbury, as commissioner of finance for the State of Minnesota, and had been at Fairview Hospital. He became major player in the operation of the University. He was a brilliant man, gifted and very much respected—both inside and outside of the University. At the Capitol, he was respected by both political parties. Because he had been Commission of Finance, he was not thought of as a Democrat, he was thought of as Gus Donhowe- a man of many talents. He wonderful mentor to me. I recall that when President Hasselmo was facing one of his toughest decisions, closing the Waseca Campus, Gus Donehow accompanied him to the campus to inform them of this decision. Sadly, Gus died in January 1991, about a year after I got here. Subsequently the

University Services building on the north side of University Avenue was named in his honor.

AP: What I think I hear you saying is that through a combination of your study in anthropology and history where you got a sense of balance and the mentorship, as an example of someone like Gus Donhowe, you have tried hard to take that "on the one side" and "on the other side" perspective in reading different points of view. I assume that would have stood you in good stead.

DP: I certainly hope so. I guess the fact that I stayed here 22 years says something.

AP: Could you describe what you see as the major accomplishments and challenges of your time here?

One of the challenges of government relations when I first came was that, although in theory guided by all-university priorities, in fact it was very decentralized. The Dean of Agriculture and the Health Sciences had their own full-time lobbyists, and a number of other colleges had their own contract lobbyists. The University had no one voice at the Capitol. Federal lobbying at that time was primarily in the health sciences and was not connected to the president's office. There was not a prioritized agenda. I recall feeling embarrassed when, escorting President Hasselmo to meet with the legislative leaders, I found the dean of Agriculture coming out of the office along with his lobbyist. I had no idea that they were there, nor what they had discussed. That convinced me that we needed to get our house in order and get one lobbying team for the president and that vice presidents and deans had to toe the line for the agenda of the president and the regents.

It took until June,1997--the end of Nils Hasselmo's term as president—for that to happen. His successor Mark Yudof arrived and put his foot down and said, 'there will be one lobbying team.'

We then developed a strong government relations team. We still have three full-time lobbyists (we had three lobbyists when I came), it is just that we now work as a team and we work on behalf of the agenda that the president has set for the University.

DP: I think every year at the state Capitol is a new challenge for the University because there is a new set of players over there representing the people of Minnesota. I think of the legislature as a focus group for the state population. They don't think differently than the populace does and so we have to pay attention to what they think and where they're going.

Also, the state's responsibilities have become much broader in the twenty-two years that I have been at the University. The needs of pre-school children was not something the state paid much attention to in 1980 and today it's a huge issue. Grandmother in the nursing home is also a huge issue today in comparison to what it was in 1980. Corrections have exploded in this state. So it isn't that the state policy makers don't value the University, rather the competition for the state dollar has grown greatly in these twenty years. So, the question is, how does the University continue to make its case of why the state should fund it? What is the benefit the state derives by funding the University? As competition for these dollars grows, it is going to be harder and harder for the University. In the 1970s, the University got a higher percentage of the state budget than health and human services did. Today, there is no comparison. At the rate the health and human services budget is growing there won't be funding for higher education in another twenty or thirty years. Although this trend affects all states, Minnesota is one of the states where this trend is exaggerated because we have an aging population.

DP: Among the things we have accomplished over the years is that in the fall of 2010, the University got the new stadium built and brought football back home making it again a collegiate event.

I believe this is going to have a long-term impact, lasting 50 or maybe even 100 years. The bio-medical bonding authority to get those research buildings located north of the stadium at was an enormous accomplishment. I know it didn't get the fanfare the stadium did, but it was a bigger accomplishment than the stadium. Also, if you look at the campus over the last twenty years, there has been much needed attention to preserving buildings (many of which had been in terrible shape) and we have to thank the state for that. All people have to do who get discouraged and think that we are a state assisted, but not a state supported institution is walk around the campuses and you will see the investment the state is continuing to make in the University.

AP: Are there people, books, or articles with insights about government and legislative relations?

DP: I can't cite books, but meetings with Big Ten peers were helpful. Lobbying is not something you learn out of a book or reading articles, but emerges from all of the life experiences we have been talking about. You have to pay attention, be respectful, and listen to people who don't think the way you think. Possibly as result, they in turn might come to accept new perspectives. There is no rocket science of what to do to convince the public and the legislature to support higher education. We are all trying the same things, in different ways, attempting to make them applicable to our own states. We are all up against the problem I mentioned previously that state budgets are being cut and that higher education is one of the first things to get cut. When there's new money we get some, but not a lot of it. Actually, when I get together and compare what is happening with Big Ten peers, we are doing pretty well.

DP: Lobbying for higher education is somewhat different from lobbying for corporations or other organizations. We do not do fund raising for legislators, what we have to build our effectiveness

on is our reputation and credibility—by this I mean more than talking points, I mean trust. It helps to speak on behalf of the President, to offer not-book-based, but live experience, and to gain the respect of people of different opinions.

DP: Almost every legislator wants the University to be successful, but our five campuses are only in a small number of their districts, compared to the 31 campuses of the Minnesota State University system. In some ways, we belong to everybody at the Capitol, but we don't belong to anybody. Taking as examples legislators in districts with Worthington Community College or Winona State University, their local legislators are going to fight hard for their campuses or for the MNSCU budget to ensure that their campuses have necessary funds, for example, to get a building for their campus in a bonding request. When they go into the chair to speak about bonding they are going to talk about the building they want in their community. It is not that they don't want the University to get things and they think the University should have things but they have to go home and answer to their own constituents. As a result, it becomes even more important for the University to have a relationship with the governor and with the leadership to help get the University its due at the Capitol.

AP: Donna, thank you very much. You certainly have had a major impact on the University of Minnesota. Good luck in your retirement.