JANE MEYERS (JM): My name is Jane Meyers, and today, Wednesday, February 27, 2019, I will be recording the oral history of Sally Roush, the ninth president of San Diego State University. This oral history is funded by the Adams Humanities Endowment for San Diego State University’s Special Collections and University Archives.

Sally Roush has the unique experience of working at this university in senior administrative positions for thirty-one years, thus working on and seeing monumental growth. In 2017 she was appointed to return as president of the university. After graduating from the University of Denver, Sally worked at the University of Colorado, before, in 1982, beginning her career at San Diego State University as director of Personnel Services. In 1994, she was promoted to senior vice-president for Business and Financial Affairs, a position she held until retiring in 2013. After thirty-one years of distinguished service to the university, she returned in 2014 as interim vice-chancellor and chief financial officer for the California State University System.

While at San Diego State, Sally worked with three university presidents: Thomas Day, Stephen Weber, and Elliot Hirschman. When Hirschman in 2017 accepted a position as president of Stevenson University, Sally Roush accepted the appointment as president in the interim while the university hired a new permanent president.
Roush’s term as SDSU president began on July 1, 2017. While serving as
president, she worked to lead the university through an extraordinary year of great
opportunities and monumental challenges. Sally Roush’s service to the university
has earned her recognition and honors that include SDSU’s Monty Award, the
CSU’s Wang Family Excellence Award for Administrators, the Albert C. Yates
Distinguished Service Award for the Mountain West Conference, and the CFO of
the Year Award from the San Diego Business Journal.

Sally Roush loves San Diego State University as a living, breathing entity,
and demonstrated her love each and every day to everyone from students to the
three presidents with whom she worked. I am honored to introduce and interview
Sally Roush.

Good morning, Sally.

SALLY ROUSH (SR): Good morning, Jane.

JM: Perhaps you’d like to start our conversation with where you were born, and about
your growing-up years.

SR: I’m happy to do so. I’m a native of Denver, Colorado. I grew up in Denver,
although both of my parents were raised in a small mountain town in Colorado
called Central City. So I have a lot of connections to the mountains as kind of a
place of my beginning, in a sense. I have three younger sisters. Growing up my
parents were kind and loving and simply assumed that we would all go on to do
good things, including going to college, although neither of them attended
college. I was the first in my family to attend college. It was a challenge for me.
Neither of my parents had any idea what it was to attend college, and I actually
spent my first year, my freshman year, at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon, a long way from home, difficult financially for my parents. I had a scholarship, but of course scholarships never cover the whole cost. Truthfully, I don’t think they understood the whole cost. So after a year there, it was too challenging for them, so I returned home and then attended the University of Denver, from where I graduated.

[00:03:59] After graduation I was at something of a loss, and my mother happened to see an announcement for a position in the Colorado Department of Education, so I went there and applied for that, not really knowing what to expect. They were just seeking entry-level professionals, I guess I would say. And so I didn’t know what I would be doing. There was a probation officer position. I mean, that was clearly not something I was capable of or particularly interested in. And they happened to have a position in the Colorado State Department of Education, so I started at the State Department of Education in an entry-level position where I became the assistant personnel director there. That’s really how I got my start in human resources.

After a few years there, I actually became pregnant with my first child, so I took a break to have my first daughter, but for financial reasons, found myself soon needing to go back to work. And the University of Colorado Denver Campus had a position as human resources officer. So I went there, and that, kind of again not only furthered my career, I guess I would say, in human resources, but started my love of working at universities. I will say when I was a student at the University of Denver, I had a sociology professor, Dr. Edith Sherman, a
remarkable woman. I’ll give a little bit of a kind of personal experience. She was a sociology professor and we had a project to pick a current topic to research and write a paper on. So I don’t know why I picked the issue with migrant workers in the grape fields of California, but I did, and I found myself in the library, just lost in the story and the experience of the grape workers. And I immediately stopped eating table grapes, and Cesar Chavez became a figure in my view of the world. In Denver, growing up, there was no concept of any kind of social injustice like that. I mean, it just wasn’t anything that I had contemplated in my life. So it was a very powerful experience.

[00:06:36] When the papers had been turned in, she was handing them out, and she castigated the class for the poor quality of the papers. I was just devastated. I had worked so hard on that, and I was like, “What could I do better?” I remember her saying, just vaguely, because I was so distraught, “There was one paper that was really of high quality,” and it turned out to be mine. Couldn’t believe it. So she then asked me to be her graduate research assistant, even though I was an undergraduate, which I did for the last couple of years that I was a student at University of Denver. So University of Denver really was the beginning of my kind of employment affiliation with universities, and then when I went on to the University of Colorado at Denver, it was like it set me on that path of universities. I love universities. I just think that there’s no other experience quite like it. I’ve been to many universities, many of them in California, the public universities, but across the country. You know when you’re on a university campus there’s a library, and there’s trees, and there’s students and
faculty members walking and talking, and it just has an atmosphere like nothing else, so I love universities and I particularly love San Diego State.

[00:08:00] So I found myself working at the University of Colorado Denver, first for the chancellor at the time, Harold Hack. Harold Hack had been the dean of the College of Professional Studies and Fine Arts at San Diego State University. Then he went on to be the vice-president for academic affairs at Fresno State. And then he was hired at the University of Colorado at Denver where he and I got to know each other. He left being chancellor at UCD to go back to Fresno as their president. And when he left, we had a couple of interim chancellors while a search was underway. I was a member of the search committee, and the choice for chancellor was not the choice that I thought was a good one for the university, and it turned out that I just didn’t think that that person had the kind of qualities that one needed to be a chancellor or president of the university. So I found myself quite unhappy, and happened to be sitting in my office on a snowy day in March, and I saw a notice about an HR director for San Diego State. So what do I have to lose? So I sent in my application, and quite a few months later they called and said would I come for an interview. So I came and I met people that would become so impactful in my life. Bill Ericson [phonetic] was the vice-president at the time, a truly remarkable human being who had assembled a team of people that became my friends and colleagues, that in terms of their intelligence and capability and integrity, they just were incomparable. And then President Day, of course. I met Ethan Singer, he was part of the interview process. I don’t know if he’s in part of your oral history or
not. He was the long-time associate vice-president for Academic Affairs for Senator Albert Johnson. Then under Ron…. Oh gosh, I’ve forgotten Ron’s last name. It’ll come to me.\(^1\) And then under Nancy Marlin [phonetic]. So he was a big part of the university family there at the time. But my really definitive experience was working for President Day.

JM: [00:10:32] So when you moved to San Diego, how did that work out? It’s a different atmosphere, different weather conditions. What did you think of San Diego?

SR: Well, when I moved here, I had two young daughters, they were three and five. I was a single parent by then. It was a lifestyle change in terms of the weather, but it was a comfortable change because I was going from one university to another. I also had some childhood friends who lived in San Diego, and their parents lived in Redondo Beach, so I had kind of a family affiliation. And not too long after I moved out here, my sister and her daughter moved out as well. So I had family here, as well as the university family.

JM: Oh, wonderful.

SR: And you know, the university embraces you in its activities and its atmosphere. So if I thought about it a long time…. I’m not really someone to do things quickly, but the whole thing happened so quickly that it was quite unlikely to just say, “Okay, I’m going to move to San Diego,” you know, now kind of all of a sudden. But fortunately it worked out, and my children have thrived here. I’m the proud grandmother of two granddaughters, who are native San Diegans now. And those friendships, my childhood friends are still, obviously, my dear friends, \(^1\) Hopkins.
but I have such a much wider array of friends now from being part of the university for so long.

JM: [00:12:19] Yeah, I certainly share your love of universities. I haven’t worked at the university, but I’ve taught at most of them around San Diego as teacher education kinds of things, and got my California credential here at San Diego State, and basically love campuses. I understand what you’re saying, and appreciate it.

SR: Yeah. Thank you.

JM: So when you started San Diego State then as personnel director, how was it, how was your job? Was it different than the other university you worked at, or what did you like about it and how did it work out?

SR: Well, as it turns out, it was quite different. The University of Colorado is similar to the University of California in the sense that its regents have far more authority over the university than San Diego State as part of the state university system did. So early on that was just really confounding to me a little bit. And at the same time, the CSU system was just beginning to embark on collective bargaining, something that was really quite a change for the university, and something very new to me. I ended up being on the first negotiating team for the faculty contract, which was one of the early ones that was done, and that was just an eye-opening experience, watching a university move from, I don’t know, still collegial but a very different environment where there is a union. And President Day was quite involved in wanting to ensure that the collective bargaining contract didn’t minimize or impinge upon the normal faculty senate relationships with the
university administration, and so that was a significant kind of experience. Within a year and a half, or probably two of when I first came, then virtually all the university employees, other than management and student employees, were under collective bargaining contracts. So it was quite a change, getting used to working in that environment. At the University of Colorado at Denver, staff employees had been part of the civil service system there, so there were grievances and hearings and things like that on disciplinary procedures and stuff, but it was just very different working under that structure. And then on top of it, in probably the end of…. I started in January of 1982, so probably near the end of 1982 there was one of many, many, many—way too many—budget crises. So working through that, under a very new circumstance of collective bargaining, was quite an experience, an amazing learning experience, yeah.

[00:15:27] And President Day has—some people consider him a micromanager—I didn’t find him to be that at all. What I did find was that on the very big issues, so not a little complaint here or there, but a very big issue, he wanted to understand it completely, and be very involved in the understanding of it, the strategy about solving it, the solution itself—be very definitive about that. And a lot of those things involved people, human resources in one way or another. So he and I very quickly started to work closely together. I was saying before we started, for many, many years I thought he was a very tall, big person, because his personality was so big and brash. And that was very difficult for some people to deal with. But I had the opportunity to work with him so much, that I saw underneath that exterior was a very thoughtful, kind, and caring human being.
JM: [00:16:42] Was he involve—in the early years working with him, was he—with financial issues, was there difficulty with losing faculty?


JM: Yeah, I do know about that one.

SR: Right, right. The early budget reductions that we had, and they seemed to come with some regularity every four or five, six years, but the one that was really the most difficult, and I think unfortunately has come to define his career in the minds of many, is 1992. You know, he had worked very diligently through the vice-president for Academic Affairs, Albert Johnson, to develop a framework within which to deal with this impending budget reduction. The framework was to preserve the infrastructure. And so people thought that made sense, until they found out exactly what that meant in his mind, and in his mind it meant preserve quality. And so look at the academic departments that were the highest quality and then really reduce or eliminate the others. So I happened to have—the only time in my life that I’ve ever had surgery—I happened to need to have surgery right at about that time, and I had worked with him, and people from the chancellor’s office labor relations, and all the vice-presidents and everything on layoffs, and order of layoff, and where the layoffs would be, and it was a very difficult time because there was some discord among the vice-presidents. And so they would meet with the president, they would burst out of his office red-faced and angry, then he called me because it’s all people stuff, and say, “We’re going to do this, this, this, and this.” Honestly, it was overwhelming to me, so I would call Ethan Singer; Sharon Edwards, who was a budget person in Student Affairs;
Linda Stewart, who was the budget person in Business and Finance; and say, “This is what the president wants to do. We have to figure out a way to do this without killing each other.” So I kind of started my own underground collaboration, if you will. The president was fine. “However you do it, just make it happen.” He didn’t really care. And I remember I went into the hospital for surgery, oh, probably, I don’t remember, like early June or something like that, and he called me the afternoon of…. And he said, “Sally, this is Tom Day.” I said, (weakly) “Hi. How are you?” You know, just his gruff, “How are you?” And I said, “Fine.” And he said, “Well, we just sent out 192 layoff letters to faculty members.” I’m like, “I don’t think I’m so fine anymore.” But what happened was, the governor of California at the time, Pete Wilson, and President Day were close, and the president was trying to manage the budget impacts to the campus, and minimize what he considered to be potential for long-term damage by preserving this core of quality and infrastructure, while at the same time impressing upon the governor that this is so difficult for the university. So I don’t want to imply that President Day influenced the governor, but I think with [unclear 00:20:34] the governor listened to and that led him to authorize an early retirement program throughout the state and for the state university system. And so what happened was, enough faculty members and staff members retired, chose the early retirement option, that we were able to unwind, I think, all of those layoffs. So it was such a difficult time, and it led a few months later to the vote of no confidence in the president by the university senate. I remember standing in the back of the room and hearing various faculty members rail against him, and a
few who said, “You know, we might not have liked what he did, but we can’t
argue with how or why. He had the best interests of the university at heart, as he
understood it.” But in the end the vote was, you know, a majority of people voted
no confidence in him. It hurt him deeply, I think.

JM: [00:21:40] Yes.

SR: I don’t know if he talked about that in his interview, but what people don’t
remember, and I remember as if it happened yesterday, was a couple of months
later…. So that was in September of 1992. In November of every year we had an
event called the Staff Awards Banquet, something like that, and at the time it was
kind of an over-the-top…. People wore costumes, there was a theme, President
Day dressed according to the theme. He came that year, and when he stood up to
greet the staff, they stood up and gave him a standing ovation, because they
seemed to understand, in a way that the faculty didn’t, that he wasn’t intending to
harm people, or undermine the university or anything. It was what he did because
he thought it was in the best interest, long-term, of the university.

The other thing people don’t really know is that very shortly after that, the
state university system negotiated a new budget framework, budget allocation
framework, with the State of California, where it was less kind of line-by-line
budgeting and more sort of funding for enrollment growth, but the university had
the ability to put the resources where they thought the resources were best spent,
in order to support enrollment growth. And at the same time, the university was
given far more authority over whether or not to carry funds forward. Part of that,
you had to spend every penny or you’d lose it. So it didn’t allow the university,
in the old framework, to prepare for future budget reductions. President Day retired in 1994, I want to say.

JM: Uh-huh.

SR: [00:23:52] So right as those new budget rules and regulations were coming into place that would have made it so much easier, if they’d been in place in 1992. So he never really got the advantage of being able to work in that framework, which is really too bad.

JM: My goodness.

SR: But I want to tell one other story. He had nine kids.

JM: I did read that, yes.

SR: And he would always say, with some consternation, “I have nine children, they’re all different.” His youngest was Adam Day, who’s now the chair of the board of trustees. But he loved children. And I remember being in his office one time—all the meetings were intense, no matter what the topic, it was just intense. He’d sit up on his chair and lean over the desk, almost like he was shouting—he wasn’t, but it felt like it sometimes. There was a knock on the door, and his assistant said—I forget her name—“… is here to see you. She has her new baby.” Now, it never would have occurred to me that anyone would knock on his door and say, “Here’s So-and-So with her new baby.” He immediately stopped the meeting, he sat back in his chair, welcomed her in, took the baby in his arms, and it was such an insight into the real person that he was and is today. Remarkable person.

JM: Do you still see him?
SR: [00:25:25] We’re in touch. Over the years, especially early on when I became vice-president, he’d send me these e-mails, “What sense does that make?!” And I’d write back. He’d said, “Well, okay.” So we stayed more in touch by e-mail, I would say. We’d see him at events here and there. A lot of time at, like, Mortar Board events or something like that, I would be seated next to him, so I stayed in touch that way. And then, you know, over time, those interactions became less frequent, but every time something significant happened, when I retired…. Was he here that day? I don’t remember. I know Bill Ericson came down from Sacramento where he had moved after he retired. I don’t remember if Tom came. But we stayed in touch, and then when I went to the chancellor’s office (chuckles), I sent him an e-mail, which I sent to my closest friends, and the title of it was, “Stranger things have happened, but not many,” for me to go up there and serve in that role for really just a few months, but quite impactful on me, and I think helpful to the system to have a campus person there that knew Chancellor Tim White was also a campus person, so that was helpful. But I certainly got an e-mail back from him. As he had done through all the years that I knew him, he had more confidence in me than I had in myself—which is the way I felt when he asked me to become vice-president for him, for those last two years.

Recently his health is such that he doesn’t really get out, but I did have lunch with him, what, a year ago now—almost two—when I was president, and we met in the president’s office and had lunch. He brought his daughter Monica with him. He’s very hard of hearing and she helps….

JM: Interpret?
SR: Interpret, right. And he’s very proud of his son, Adam, who’s now chair of the board of trustees, which is…. You can never predict the future, but that’s really a remarkable thing that’s happened.

JM: Uh-huh, that’s wonderful.

SR: Yeah.

JM: So then when you became senior vice-president for Business and Financial Affairs, describe that job.

SR: Well, you know, human resources is the hardest job on campus, because it’s people, it’s just all people. So for me, being vice-president was more fun, in a lot of ways. We had gone through a period, before I became vice-president, when it looked like the State of California was never going to build another building on campus. But in fact, money came back, so we really have to look back at history and see how cyclical everything is. No matter what a governor says, “we’ll never do this again,” there’s always going to be a new governor, as we have with Governor [Gavin] Newsom. So we went through a period of enormous building of buildings, some budget reductions, but none under Tom Day. So I was really vice-president for him for only two years before Steve Weber was hired. So all of the really fun stuff that happened, lots of buildings happening, huge increase in our budget from the 1992 years, we had a few dips and everything, but all of that occurred under Steve’s leadership. And of course his personality was so different from Tom’s. Without commenting on how Tom Day would react sometimes, the harshest thing I ever heard Steve say is, “Oh poo!” If he was really upset, he would say it twice. And then I knew, uh-oh, we’d better pay attention to this. But
very congenial, great to work with, very smart, as was Tom Day. I mean, very, very smart. And we had the ability to help him implement his vision. He saw the university as a social good for the community. The Compact for Success with Sweetwater was his idea. The program that we have with the... Oh, I forget the name of it, but with Price Charities.

JM: [00:30:30] City Heights?

SR: Yeah, City Heights, that was under his leadership. Looking at how we were admitting students, basically if you submitted an application, and you met the very minimum qualifications, which were very minimal, you were admitted, but very low graduation rates. We didn’t have the money to provide the core sections, or we hadn’t had for a long time, so when I first became vice-president, we [were] just coming out of that horrible budget period. We had had students during that time where we had as many as a thousand students who were admitted and enrolled and could not get a single class, because we didn’t put the resources there. So one thing very early on that we agreed on as a budget principle is we will fund core sections, or we will not admit students if we can’t provide.... That was a big deal in the CSU, to go to them and say, “We want this thing called impaction.” It’s an ugly word, it sounds like you have a toothache or something, but it means that you have more students applying than you can possibly serve well. So after a lot of issues about whether or not that was going to be approved by the chancellor’s office, it was approved. Our university senate was magnificent in insisting that if we went forward with this, we would do so without compromising the students that we serve. So to ensure that we retained our
diversity, that we focused on the achievement gap. And that topic, enrollment management, under Steve’s leadership, I tell people we talked about that every single week for the better part of the fifteen years that he was here.

JM: [00:32:33] That was a huge part in the community, discussion about San Diego State University.

SR: Absolutely, absolutely. And not everyone agreed with it, but, you know, if you’re not qualified to be in college, you won’t do as well. We started focusing on ways to help students who were less prepared, become prepared. But the number of students interested in San Diego State University just was overwhelming at times, so more and more enrollment management tools were put in place, and I really want to give so much credit to President Weber; Nancy Marlin as the provost; Ethan Singer; Ernie Griffin, faculty member from Geography; Sandra Cook. They were so devoted to enrollment management being done well and right. And it was not easy. It’s remarkable what the university has accomplished. The CSU has its Graduation Initiative 2025. It’s a great goal to have, but I keep saying it’s a lot to accomplish in a very short period of time, and it’s not as easy as it sounds. And I go back to we talked about it every single week.

JM: What is the 2025 initiative?

SR: That by 2025 the CSU as a system will have doubled its four-year graduation rate from a very low percentage—I don’t know what it is now—to, you know…. And we’re second to Cal Poly San Luis Obispo in our four-year and six-year graduation rate, but we started at a very different place from Cal Poly. They’ve always been kind of competitors of UCLA, just because of the kind of universities
they are. So for us to do what we did in that period of time is really remarkable. It was written up in lots of higher education publications, but often resented locally and within the CSU that we were succeeding by admitting more qualified students. Well, yes, (laughs) that was the answer to that.

JM: [00:34:53] Did the community colleges cooperate with helping students to ready themselves?

SR: Well, that’s a really good question. Community colleges in California are interesting. The number of students who attend there, who graduate with a two-year, four-year-college-ready certificate or whatever it is, is very, very small. But they’re also a small percentage of all the students who attend a community college. Lots of people go to community college not to prepare to go to a four-year university, but for a lot of other reasons. So there was a lot of focus on the community colleges at the same time. And I also want to give credit to San Diego area community colleges, Constance Carroll [phonetic] in particular—she’s the San Diego Community College System chancellor—for recognizing that they needed to step up to the plate to provide the two-year kind of preparatory courses that students could avail themselves of. So she still wishes we would admit more of their students. I haven’t talked to her for a while, but I’m sure she still does. We’re a limited commodity. We had other budget reductions over the years, so near Steve Weber’s final years, we had probably the biggest budget reduction we’ve ever had.

JM: I think it was 25 percent, all told, over the period of the two years.
SR: And if you look at the state appropriation, because at the time CSU was increasing tuition to offset it a little bit, but during that time the state university system state appropriation was reduced by 30 percent. San Diego State University’s state appropriation was reduced by 50 percent, and the money redistributed throughout the system. I’m not complaining. I’m probably not really over it. But what we went through was *traumatic* any way you describe it. And we got through it by constant communication, working with our university senate every step of the way; painful, painful conversations, but no fights, I guess I would say. I remember spending hours agonizing over the next budget update e-mail to go out. I’ve gotten a lot of credit for those budget updates, but they weren’t singularly mine. I would do a draft of it, and then send it out to probably eight or ten people: all of the vice-presidents and their budget assistant, the chair of the senate budget and planning committee, just smart people that I knew would be able to read it and say, “This makes no sense whatsoever,” because what happens is you can get caught up in this budget gobbledygook that makes no sense. So those e-mails really benefitted from having that large group of editors to make comments and make it more clear. That communication I think was part of what helped us get through it all. Plus we had the ability to carry funds forward, so we had a little more time to plan for when things went crazy. You know, we had the furlough year. That was *so* hard for people. The truth is that San Diego State saw what was going to happen, we made the decision to not renew hundreds and hundreds of temporary appointments, which saved us all that expense. So we, San Diego State, did not have to do a furlough to meet our
budget. But the system, you know, at that point in time, then the chancellor was Charley Reed [phonetic], and everybody had to do the same thing, whether it made sense or not, and so we had to do that. It was very, very, very difficult, but we got through it. I will say later on Charley Reed said it was one of the worst decisions he ever made, was to declare furlough, because people never get over that, never get over it.

JM: [00:39:39] Right. That’s right. And with the enrollment, keeping it down so that you have the right classes, every year there’s more and more and more applicants, it seems, for San Diego State.

SR: Yes.

JM: For a while they went down…..

SR: A little bit.

JM: A little bit. But now it’s just mushroomed, in all colleges and universities.

SR: Right—in California. Across the country it’s a little bit different, but in California, that’s true. Part of it is because a lot of students apply to many universities.

JM: Yes.

SR: A lot of students apply who aren’t really qualified, there’s just no way. But you still have far more than the university can ever absorb. So it’s a new budget coming up next year, a new governor, very different approach than Governor Brown, more money for the CSU system. You know, they put out the comment after the governor’s budget was announced, that it was the biggest single investment in California State Universities ever, over $300 million. Some of it’s
one-time money, about half of it is one-time money for maintenance and things like that. But along with that comes a promise of no tuition increases. So we’ll see how it plays out. And for San Diego State, how it plays out will depend on how they allocate it to the system. Will we get our share based on the enrollment growth that we agree to take, or will there be some swapping? There’s reason for the swapping, it’s long and complicated, and I won’t even begin to talk about it here. It has to do with the state university fee financial aid program. I’ll just leave it at that. So it’s difficult. We’ve done well to offset the consequence of that with our focus on international enrollment. And so balancing that with the resident enrollment has enabled us to provide core sections to the residents that we wouldn’t be able to provide if we didn’t have the nonresidents. So you’ll hear…. People resent the nonresident students, thinking that if we didn’t have them we could have more resident students, but no, because 30 percent of our resident students do not pay any tuition, none whatsoever. So it’s the nonresidents that enable…. And if we didn’t have them, we couldn’t admit more resident students, and we’d probably be unable to provide as many core sections. Now I’m talking budget gobbledygook.

JM: No, that’s okay.

SR: You know, the other thing about Steve Weber that he did that’s so impactful for the university is he saw that we needed to have a separate organization to be our philanthropic fundraising arm, so embarked on the process to create what became the Campanile Foundation. That he was able to see that and articulate that so early on in his career was really one of the few most-powerful changes in San
Diego State that I think has ever been made. President Day’s focus on research university, which was not uniquely his, but he really, really focused on that while he was president. Steve was enrollment management and the Campanile Foundation. Those were just two remarkable contributions of his, and that the campaign was so incredibly successful. I tell Mary Ruth Carlton, vice-president for University Relations and Development, who really oversaw the two campaigns, I was a $500 million doubter, from the time they first said the first campaign was $500 million. “That’s really a lot of money.” And it wasn’t easy, as she is quick to say, but we achieved that to such a degree—we overachieved the $500 [million], so the board and the president at the time—it was Steve Weber—decided to go for $750 million, and I’m like, “Really?! You can’t be [unclear 00:43:56] twice!” And then we ended up with $815 million. My favorite part of the $815 million is that $88 million of it is from our own faculty and staff.

JM: I read that. It’s phenomenal.

SR: Other universities are dumbfounded at that, that just seems impossible for them. But it just goes to the relationship that San Diego State individuals have with the university that they love. I said when we talked on the phone, the university is really a living, breathing entity, because it is the people: it’s the students, faculty, and staff. And it’s just this wonderful experience that we all share that makes the university so wonderful. And regardless of our ups and downs over the years—and we’ve had a lot, and they’ve been grueling, many of them, the downs—but
still people care enough about the university that they gave that kind of money. Really remarkable.

JM: [00:45:04] It’s wonderful.

SR: It is wonderful.

JM: I know in education K-12, too, we had pretty much the same ups and downs, and I remember as an elementary teacher thinking, “Oh my goodness, we have this extraordinary band here,” that the kids are learning musical instruments, and you never know if it’s going to be there the next year. Every fall you go back…. And then of course when I was at the county office of education, I got into learning about the May revise and all the other things, so I guess I was more into what was happening, than I was as a teacher.

SR: Uh-huh, yeah.

JM: Always, always a problem. So when you were in both jobs, personnel and finance, are there particular assistance or staff people that were there for you, basically helped with everything from scheduling to, “oh yeah, I have that one on file, I’ll get it for you,” that kind of thing?

SR: Well, the answer to that is yes, and I want to talk about the people kind of at two levels. There were the wonderful people in Human Resources from the time I first started there—all sorts of wonderful people: Connie Sadida [phonetic] was the person who was there when I first started. But Jerry Ladeen [phonetic] was the associate director of Personnel Services at San Diego State University when I came here. Just, again, one of those remarkable human beings that I just wonder how there can have been so many at San Diego State. And he’s part of a group
that I call the Originals, only because they were here when I got here. And they include Ken Perry [phonetic] who was the director of Finance at the time; Joe Vasquez who was director of Auxiliary Services; Tony Fulton with University Architect; John Carpenter, chief of police; Liz Brilliant [phonetic] was assistant to Bill Ericson; Bill Ericson himself; Linda Stewart [phonetic]. I’m sure I’m forgetting someone, and I don’t mean to overlook anyone. They were hired by Bill Ericson and benefitted from his leadership that was based on integrity, loyalty, and don’t ever say “we can’t do that.” We can do so many things. And don’t ever say, “because we’ve always done it that way.” So he instilled in everyone a kind of spirit of adventure and commitment to the university that I think still serves the university well. That was the group that was here when I was hired, and then stayed with me when I became vice-president. Elene Gibbs [phonetic] is another one in that group.

And then we get into kind of the midterm people: Scott Burns, who passed away unexpectedly in 2012, died of a heart attack. He was associate vice-president for me at that time. That was just a tremendous loss. Sue Blair [phonetic], Michelle Failer [phonetic]—these are people that some of them were graduates of the university; some of them just love the university; but they’re all remarkable. A very special person is Nanc Laktawalla [phonetic]—she’s still here. She was my most recent assistant when I was vice-president. I have no words to say how wonderful she is. But she’s part of that same group of people. And I always talk about Bill Ericson because a little bit like President Day, some people were put off by his personality if they didn’t know him very well. But a
more kind and warm person, you just couldn’t ever meet someone like that. He used to say, “All you need for a party is some good friends and a bag of potato chips.” And actually, at his funeral—he passed away in July of 2017—they had a big box of potato chips for everybody to take. But he was a mentor of mine. People often ask me who were my mentors, expecting for me to say a woman, and there just really weren’t any women in roles like that, that I could…. And I don’t…. And it’s fine with me. I mean, he was a wonderful mentor, as was President Day. I learned not only what to do, but what not to do as I went through my career. When Nancy Marlin was hired as provost, that was just a wonderful change for the university. Ron Hopkins was the previous vice-president for Academic Affairs, whose last name I couldn’t [remember earlier]. I really liked him a lot too, after Albert Johnson. But Nancy came in so confident, so sure of herself as provost. I mean, she defines what a provost is at a university: someone who cares deeply about the faculty, about the students, but who also sees the bigger picture of the university in a way that some of the previous vice-presidents for Academic Affairs I had worked with really hadn’t. So she’s been a role model for me, and we’ll still very, very close friends.

JM: We didn’t talk at all yet about Elliot Hirschman.

SR: Uh-huh. Love Elliot Hirschman. By the time he, you know, became president, I was nearing thirty years in my career—probably, what, twenty-eight or twenty-nine, I don’t remember—and so having gone through a successful presidential search when we hired Steve Weber, but having in my memory an unsuccessful search at my previous university all those many years ago, I said to myself, “You
know, if it doesn’t work out, I don’t need to stay if I don’t want to.” So the interview process was set up such that it was my job to…. Somebody else picked him and Mrs. Hirschman up from the airport, brought them to the University House, and then my job was to meet them there, show Mrs. Hirschman the University House while Steve talked to Elliot, and then I drove them both back to campus to start the day of interviews that day. It was Sunday, it was my granddaughter’s first birthday party, so I couldn’t stay the whole day because it was her birthday party, but I drove Elliot and Geri [phonetic] to campus and we drove around campus first, and I’m sitting in the car, saying to myself—he was the first candidate we saw, so I didn’t know who else was coming—but, “I really, really like this person.” I said, “Don’t get your hopes up. Your hopes have been dashed before,” but I was so, oh, thrilled beyond words when he was the one who was selected to be the president of the university—unlike Steve who came in and kind of wanted to change this and fix that, and also do his long-shared vision, strategic planning process which we started kind of right away, with a lot of enrollment management, “we need to fix this,” Campanile Foundation…. I’m like, “Whew! Okay.”

Elliot was very brilliant, extraordinarily bright, but he watched and listened for the first two years. After the first three months, I went to him and I said, “You know, I don’t have to be here, I can retire. I’m fine, but I’m going to be retiring sooner rather than later.” He said, “Oh, you can stay for three more years.” “Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa! Let’s just….” So he kind of knew that at some point I was going to be moving on, but he was watching and listening those
first two years, and we were just about to begin the strategic planning process. The State changed their retirement rules, and so I decided I was going to retire. And then Scott Burns was going to be the interim—I’d mentioned him earlier—he died, he just literally dropped dead of a heart attack. We were all just devastated. So that kind of put more urgency on a lot of things. Elliot wanted to get the strategic planning process really underway, so it started in that fall with the student body president and the senate chair kind of picking people to be on the strategic planning committee, but we started in January after the faculty got back, like the twentieth of January, but he wanted it done before the faculty left in May. So four months.

JM: Wow.

SR: [00:54:52] Having been through many strategic planning processes over the years, including the shared vision one, which lasted well over a year, I think, it was masterfully done. We had a job to do, and President Day used to say, “Nothing focuses the mind like facing the firing squad.” Well, we were facing the firing squad. We spent so many hours in this room, going over various aspects of the strategic plan, and what we ended up with was something that, in a way, no other strategic plan that I’ve ever been affiliated with, became an actual roadmap for how to spend resources. All these wonderful initiatives were developed under the various goals of the strategic plan. So I worked on the strategic plan, I was co-chair with Nancy, but I basically retired June 30th of 2013, and the strategic plan became effective July 1. And then I was literally away, either in the chancellor’s office or retired or something, and not seeing it day to day. So when
I came back as president and saw _all_ of the remarkable changes that had happened because of that strategic plan, it’s just a masterpiece and a tribute to him, it really is. And he also was so, so smart about everything, but particularly about administrative things. And you know the issue I talked about earlier, where San Diego State’s budget was reduced by 50 percent when the CSU went down by 30, he kind of attacked that problem and planted the seed, I think, with the chancellor to have a group set up to make recommendations about financial stability for the university, going forward. And he was a co-chair of that committee. He did a number of remarkable things that I think only he could have done. I mean, I look at the three presidents: I wasn’t here when President Day was hired, but I know that he did things that he was uniquely capable of doing; Steve certainly did. I think Elliot did too. The visible outcome of his excellence is the Engineering and Interdisciplinary Sciences Building. What I love about that building is it looks like it’s always been there and just got a fresh coat of paint. I mean, the architecture of it is wonderful. But that was remarkable, and it spoke not only to his administrative capabilities, but his fundraising skills. He’d never really done much fundraising. He was _magnificent_ at it, tireless. Being president is a grueling job, but particularly when there’s a capital campaign going on, because you do what you do during the day, and then you go out with donors and to events, you know, evenings, weekends—it’s just nonstop. And he was tireless at it, and so very, very good at it. He had a vision of the university that would elevate it to kind of the next tier of research universities and really was able to do so many things that advanced us toward that end. I was _very_, very sorry to hear
that he’d decided to move on. I understand. Their son is on the East Coast. Their daughter met someone here and got married, because he’s from San Diego, or she met him here, and I thought, “Well, that’s it, the daughter will live happily married in San Diego,” and then when I learned she was moving back to the East Coast, I was like, “Oh no!” And their family is really all back there, so I totally understand, but very selfishly for San Diego State, another five or six years of his presidency would have been wonderful for us.

[00:59:16] Each one of the three presidents thinks differently—thought differently—so whenever there’s a problem I think about, I think about each one. Elliot has the most administratively elegant solution to whatever the problem is. He’s a remarkable, remarkable human being, really.

JM: That’s great to hear. So basically then…. Is there anything else you’d like to talk about? I know in my research I was reading about the projects, like the Paseo Project and the ups and downs of trying to get something like that actually completed. Now is the Paseo Project [unclear 00:59:55] and all that?

SR: Yeah, South Campus Plaza. You know, the Paseo Project was originally assigned to be done by the research foundation, and it really, organizationally, didn’t belong there, and there was a lot of turmoil about that. But it was envisioned to be a million square feet of retail. That’s a lot of retail!

JM: Yes.

SR: So we downsized it. I think the amount of retail that’s over there right now is a little bit of a challenge, because the university is a busy, vibrant place, except when it isn’t, which is holidays, summers. A lot of our summer enrollment now is
online, so there isn’t as much activity to keep those retail…. And even though there’s a great parking structure there, so far the community, I don’t think, has not been using that parking structure to get to Trader Joe’s and things like that. So it’s a little bit of a challenge, but it’s a wonderful improvement and amenity for the university there.

[01:00:57] You know, all of the projects over the years, from the arena, our master plan for growth, all of these things were fraught with conflict with the community that loves and hates us at the same time. And so those were experiences to go through, and at the end we were able to get our projects done with really minimal impact, considering that we’re really big. And in the middle, surrounded on three sides by neighborhoods, and on the north by a freeway that’s kind of a barrier there, that’s why the Mission Valley opportunity is truly once in a lifetime. And when I honestly hadn’t been paying a lot of attention to what was going on about it, one of the nice things about retiring is you can care as much as you want to about all these complicated issues, and so the [chargers?] and [unclear]. You know, like eh! But when I came back, it had kind of reached a crisis point between the university and the city, and then there was this private developer. So for me, when there’s a really big problem, I start by breaking it down into small pieces, and it seemed to me that the university had been criticized a lot for not having a clear vision of what it would do at Mission Valley stadium site if we were able to get it. So I said, “Well, okay.” Two other times we had been in conversations with the City about possibly acquiring the site, but never—it’s a long story, I won’t go through it all—it never came to fruition. We did have
some initial plans, but definitely needed more substance to them. So we embarked upon a vision for Mission Valley. It was a planning exercise, it was not an attempt to [unclear, laughing 01:03:09] which is where we ended up. But it was an attempt to say if there’s an opportunity for something different to happen, we want to be ready if the City decides to do an RFP. There was a lot of controversy about the private developer. And I’m not opposed to private developers—they [unclear].

JM: I’m not either, but I was for SDSU from the beginning.

SR: Yeah. And it makes sense. As close as it is, it made a lot of sense. So I just wanted to be sure that if the opportunity ever came along, we’d have something of substance to show people. So we were working on that. A lot of politics going on about the private developer. And some people started saying, “Well, you know, the City should just give the land to the university.” Like that’s going to happen! But okay. So those conversations went on, and then the City talked about maybe doing an RFP, because there was conflict within the City about the private development as well. And then in a way that as I look back on it was…. I can hardly even describe how it happened. I was sitting with a group of people: Jack McCrory [phonetic], some others; Kitt Sickles [phonetic]; our planning team for the site; and there had been an effort to use kind of a process where the City could give the land to the university under a certain provision. The City didn’t want to do that. And so I don’t even remember how it first came up, but somebody said, “Well, what about a citizens’ initiative?” I’m kind of looking around like, “What?! What?!” “What about a citizens’ initiative?” So the
conversation just started about that, and at some point somebody said to me, “Is that alright with [you]?” And I’m like … yes. It’s not something we can be part of, but if there is a citizens’ initiative and it’s successful, we need to be ready. So I’m still focused on we need to be ready. And then it dawned on me with really some seriousness about this. And so I said, “Well, time out, if there’s going to be some group of people pursuing a citizens’ initiative, we can’t be part of it, so we need to part ways.” So we actually divided up who was going to keep working on the vision, and who was going to go with the citizens’ initiative. And so Jack McCrory, because he’s so uniquely brilliant and capable, kind of headed it up with a bunch of other people. One of the communications consultants, Tom Shepherd [phonetic], went with that group because they do a lot of political consulting. And so they separated off and became the Friends of SDSU. And much like the capital campaign, it seemed—and I feel badly saying this, because I know San Diego State can do the most amazing things, but it just seemed a little bit too far of a stretch to me. They had to raise money to write the initiative, which is no easy feat to get signatures on the ballot, to run a campaign. It just seemed like a lot, and in such a short period of time, because there was conversation about was the Soccer City initiative going to go on the ballot in June of that year, or would it be November of the following year? So at the time they needed to try to be ready for June, and we needed to have our plan ready in June. It didn’t turn out to be June, which in a way was…. But so they succeeded. It was just remarkable, amazing. So I’m glad we had our plan ready, and it’s now kind of the foundation for what will become the environmental impact report. So
again, it was something that happened kind of organically, I guess I’d say, because it’s what San Diego State University does—look at something that seems impossible to achieve and say, “Okay, let’s go do that.”

JM: [01:07:29] Well that’s the optimism of a university, and we hope that that always continues.

SR: Yes. Here, I think it will.

JM: Yeah. Is there anything else you’d like to say about your position here before you retired in 2013?

SR: You know, one thing I do want to say, because there was a question here, was my career something I carefully planned, or did it evolve in unexpected ways? Even though I’m a very cautious person, it would not be accurate to say that I carefully planned my career. And so when people ask me about career advice and how can they get to where they want to go, the best advice I have to give them is always “be prepared to respond to the unexpected.” When Bill Ericson retired, it was the furthest thing from my mind to apply to be a vice-president. And he said to me, “You should apply.” I’m like, “No. No, no, no.” He said, “You should apply, I know you can do it.” He knew I could do it. I didn’t necessarily know I could do it. So, well, what’s the worst that could happen? They could say no. But then President Day chose me. And so my best advice to anyone and everything about almost any topic is be prepared to take advantage of the unexpected thing that might come your way. Never, never put yourself in a box that you’re afraid to get out of.
JM: Absolutely. So when you were appointed then to be president, you had talked about that prior to the appointment. What was that like, how did that come about?

SR: Well, I would say early on people started kind of teasing me about I should be the next president. (laughs) There’s no way! So I kind of dutifully talked to people about some folks that I thought would be good for the chancellor to consider, and I had worked with the chancellor for those five or six months up there. For four months I was actually the interim vice-chancellor a month before and a month after I was there in kind of an advisory capacity, so I knew him reasonably well—totally different personality than the prior chancellor, really a fine person, as was the prior chancellor. But he, like President Day, had this big personality that often overwhelmed his good qualities. So I made a list of people that I thought, and I forwarded the list on to someone I knew at the chancellor’s office, that had three people.

So I was at the San Diego Wild Animal Park, or the Safari Park, with my two granddaughters, a two-year-old at the time, and a seven-year-old. We’d been there all day, we were leaving, I had my two-year-old in a stroller, and my cell phone rang, and it was a 562 area code. I normally don’t answer the phone if I don’t know who it is, but 562 is the chancellor’s office area code, so I thought it was somebody calling me to get information about the names I had submitted. So I said, “Hello,” and this voice said, “Sally?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “It’s Tim White.” I’m still thinking he’s wanting [unclear 01:11:14]. And he said, “I want to ask if you would consider being president at San Diego State University.” It was one of those moments when the world just comes to a halt. And I think I
blurted out something like, “I have this wonderful, peaceful life! I have to think about this.” So he said, “Would you be willing to call me back and talk about it?” And I said, “Yes.” And he said, “Okay, well you’re telling me you’re not saying no right now.” So we had a follow-up phone call and I had to think about it a lot, because my granddaughters were, like I said, two and seven, and picked them up from school, and all this sort of stuff. I knew that the campaign was concluding, so there wouldn’t be the grueling fundraising activities, but it still, you know….

And my job before, when I was vice-president, was a 365-day-a-year, 24-7 job, you know. But it’s not the same as being president, when it’s more public in a way that was hard for me to contemplate. So I thought a lot about it, it’s complicated to un-retire. That sounds silly, but it’s really complicated. Then you have to go back and retire again, and all this stuff. So I wanted to make sure I had all my facts in order. I wanted to talk to my two daughters. One daughter had my two granddaughters, but the other daughter lives in Northern California, but I didn’t want to just kind of make a decision without saying, “Guess what,” you know. So they said they thought it was great, so after I got all of the retirement things sort of sorted out…. And I had said to the chancellor, “If I may ask, what if I say no?” And he said, “Well, I have other options, but….” And then I started worrying about what were the other options. (laughter) So at the end of the day I agreed to do it. And the chancellor, I can’t say enough good things about him. He’s just, again, like so many leaders, he’s a remarkable human being. His own life story is fascinating, and he is just a good, decent person—extremely smart, hard-working, sense of humor that’s just, you know…. I can’t say enough good
about him. And he was wonderful to me. He said, “I want you to be sure you understand that you’re not an interim president. You are president in an interim capacity. And what I mean when I say that is, you go out there and be the president, you make the decisions as you need to.” Because I’d been here for so long, I think it was a little bit easier for him to have confidence in that Elliot had been part of the scheme, I think. He talked to Elliot about it. But that gave me, really, again, the confidence that I could do what I felt I needed to do. I will say I tried to remember what I learned from all three of my presidents here, that a nasty surprise, or even a good surprise, is never a good thing. So if it was a big issue, I’d let him know, just send him a text or an e-mail. “Fine.” If I needed advice from him, I could get advice. Just a couple of times on a couple of really difficult issues I did call and say, “This is what I’m thinking.” He was just wonderful. I can’t say enough good about him.

Other than the Mission Valley thing, the other big public issue was the mascot issue. I’m shaking my head here as I think about it. It has been an issue off and on over the years. It was a significant issue while Steve was here—Steve Weber—and put together an advisory committee, made recommendations and everything. There were a lot of good recommendations that actually were never followed up on. In part, I think that’s what led to the second iteration of it, although not…. It just will always be an issue. So it was something I was not looking forward to, but you can’t choose what the issues are. So I put together a wonderful, wonderful advisory committee, whose names I still protect. The newspaper was snotty about that, but we don’t have to say who our advisors are.
I’m the one who’ll make the decision. I raised my hand and said, “No, that was me. Here are my reasons why. You can disagree. It was all me.” They don’t need to take any of the nastiness on either side of the issue, because at the end of the day, it’s all me. So they were wonderful.

[01:16:42] We still had the report that had been done in whenever it was, I don’t remember—2000’ish, something like that—and it was remarkably well done. Oh my goodness, that group had, I want to say, fourteen months, to do their job. They did it so well. It was just exquisitely done. So I said to the new committee, “Here’s a resource if you want to use it. You don’t have to, but you may.” So they did use it as a resource, and then they did their own work, and they did remarkable work, they really, really did. Each and every one of them put not just time and effort into it, but their heart and soul. And they were not of a single mind, and they had very difficult interactions with each other. It was very, very challenging, and I cannot thank them enough. And I always tell people you have to read the whole report if you want to understand the decision and the outcome. The thing that struck me the most is there is not an overwhelming majority opinion in either direction. Even to say “either direction” kind of oversimplifies what’s the complex range of issues. So that was a huge effort. People ask me, “What’s the difference between a mascot and a spirit leader?” I say, “It’s the difference between a caricature and a dignified representative.” I hope, my intent was to move away from the caricature to a dignified representative, because in the end, the strongest message that came through from almost everyone was, “Be respectful, be respectful, be respectful. Whether you have a mascot or you don’t
have a mascot, whether you have a spirit leader or don’t have, whatever it is you do, be respectful.” It’s more complicated, because the name, the moniker that we use is Aztec, which is an Indian nation of Mexico, but we’re right here in Kumeyaay-land. I met with the tribal representative…. They have a council that meets once a month, and I met with them. They were remarkable, and also not of a common mind. One tribal chairman said, “My wife is from Mexico and she loves the Aztecs, and that means something to her that it doesn’t mean to me. So who am I to say, ‘You can’t have your Aztecs’? So I don’t know what you’re going to do, but it’s not a simple issue.” Some members of the Kumeyaay nation said, “You know, you’re honoring Indians when you honor the Aztec, all Indians, I think it’s all good.” Others were, “Well, if you have to have a mascot, at least be respectful about it.” I didn’t get anyone in that group saying to me, “Eliminate the mascot.” But they are a remarkably polite, thoughtful group that having met with them, I can’t imagine any of them standing up and pounding on the table and saying, “This is wrong! This is racist!” or anything like that. They’re a remarkable group of people.

JM: [01:20:22] While you were president, can you think of any anecdotal, humorous incidents, or something that might have come up that was unexpected when you were at an event, or whatever it might be?

SR: Well, a couple of things. I haven’t talked very much about students, but it’s the students that—I just absolutely love the students. And over my career, because of the way we have organized our Associated Students Organization to be a separate corporation, which is very unique, I’ve had a lot of interaction with student
leaders. And we think of them as kind of the elected leaders, but it’s a huge group of people. They’ve got councils and representatives and committees and everything, so it’s probably easily a couple hundred students. And the students always bring reality into whatever it is that you’re doing. So the current student body president, Chris, was the vice-president for—we’ll have to look it up so we can have it be clear in this history—last year. But he was running for president, and he knew he was going to be the president. We were at the event where the incoming officers are announced, or are installed. Well, they’re actually formally announced, and the outgoing officers give speeches and awards and all that. So I’m sitting by Chris, and I’m looking at him, and he’s got on this sort of pink jacket. “I’m pretty sure I have a jacket that’s that same color.” He goes, “Really?! You’ll have to wear it someday. We can wear our pink jackets together!” “Okay.” So the president of the university actually installs the president of the Associated Students. It’s a little ceremony and everything. So I said to him, “Well, I’ll wear my pink jacket for your installation.” He said, “Okay.” So I get there and there he is in his pink jacket, and I’ve got my pink jacket. We both have our black glasses on. So we had our picture taken with our pink jackets together. (laughter) That was just a fun thing of many. And the students all wanted to have a picture with me, to send to their mom. I mean, to the last person, they all wanted to send a picture to their mom—maybe to prove that they were really being good away at college, or whatever it was, you know. I don’t know, if I start talking about the students, I’ll never quit, they’re so wonderful.
You know, the students, every year for quite a few years have done this food…. They raise money for hunger relief, and every year they set the bar higher for how much they want…. It was started out as a competition between San Diego State U., CSD, and USD, and San Diego State just blew them out of the water every year, so the others don’t even participate. So Aztecs Rock Hunger. It’s one of the A.S. officers who leads it, and then they get [unclear 01:23:37]. So we had the Aztecs Rock Hunger, and they had set themselves a goal that was quite a bit higher than the year before. Near the end of the campaign they were like, “Oh, are we really going to make the goal?” And then the number is always kind of kept a secret until the end. And we had the little announcement ceremony out in front of the Student Union, and they had a stand with a cardboard sign that said, and it was covered. All of the students who were on the committee were standing there waiting. It was kind of like the Academy Awards. I pulled the sheet off, and they had far exceeded [their goal]. To a person, every one of those mostly guys burst into tears. They were so thrilled! And I thought, “You know, this is what people don’t hear about college students.”

JM: That’s right.

SR: And it’s what they really are, most of the time. They’re working hard, trying to graduate, go to class, make friends, do these good things. It’s what people don’t really hear often enough about students.

JM: Uh-huh, gives them opportunities to take to life in the future, [unclear 01:24:50].

SR: Yeah. And then our doctoral students…. Mark Sessman [phonetic] has a group of doctoral students that I have no words…. They’re amazing. And the things
they’re working on are amazing. And there are other faculty members—I just
happened to see his more than others. Amazing, just amazing what they’re doing
in their quiet way, contributing to the discovery of new knowledge that’s just so,
so important—so important.


SR: Yes.

JM: So we’re heading to your retirement and what you like to do. We’ll save the final
words about the university until after this.

SR: Okay.

JM: You obviously love your grandchildren.

SR: I do.

JM: I have five, so I basically love mine too, and they’re so much fun.

SR: Uh-huh.

JM: And ours are out of the baby stage now. They’re almost eleven to eighteen.

SR: Oh my goodness! Yeah, mine are four and almost nine right now. We just got
back from Hawaii, actually, so they call it Who-Y-ee for some reason.

Well, you know, the first time I retired, I was actually here on Saturday,
June 30th, I think, and July 1st was when the new person started. So I was here on
Saturday, doing some things. And then I came back the next week because I had
some other things to kind of finish up, that I just wanted to get done. But on June
30th at midnight—I call it the sound of silence—because I knew the phone wasn’t
going to ring in the middle of the night, there was not going to be some
emergency that I had to deal with. I knew the person who was taking my place,
Tom McCairn [phonetic], I’ve known him for quite a while, had a lot of confidence in him, so it was this really profound experience of the sound of silence. It took me a while to kind of get my head around it. I had some things that, oh, kind of personal life things. My cat was sick, and I had to take care of that. And I had a project out in the back yard that I had a contractor working on, so I had things to distract me. And then of course my grandchildren and everything. But it was really very profoundly different. And then I got the call from the chancellor’s office in, like, October, and started to fill in up there until they hired somebody. So right away started getting e-mails and documents and phone calls again. So I had that period from October through June, really, when again I was involved in a lot of that stuff. So it was really the following July 1—that would be, what, 2014 maybe—where it all just kind of set in again. But I dabbled enough in retirement that I was…. Again, I had some big home projects and some travel and everything, but didn’t really have a focus for it. And by the time I got the phone call from the chancellor in that April of 2017, I kind of settled into living a quiet, peaceful life—you know, reading books, having lunch with my friends, visiting, travelling, things like that. And it was just kind of a puttering existence. I’m a great putterer. But then having that year as president, I had a moment when I was talking to Elliot before he left—it was almost a physical sensation where all the information I had in my head about the university sort of clicked back into place. I remember the moment, and I always will, and it literally was almost like a physical sensation, the door opened or whatever it was, and all that information that I had was still there. But I was ready to be done
when the year was over. Having it be a defined period of time probably contributed to that. I mean, if they hadn’t been able to find someone, I certainly would have stayed on for a little while, but I had in my mind that it was a defined period of time. Getting older, my grandchildren are getting older—that’s the worst part! I keep telling them, “Don’t have another birthday!” They’re going, “Yes!” So I have a different kind of determination to be retired in a way that is fulfilling, but doesn’t detract from experiencing all the good things about retirement. I just joined the board of the Monarch School for Homeless Children.


SR: Absolutely, our alum, Sandra McBrayer, right. And they have some interesting administrative challenges which I’m all about administrative challenges, you know, so I’m looking forward to helping with that, and fundraising for that. I’ve been a long-time volunteer for Project Wildlife, and little critters and everything. I used to bring injured birds into my office and feed them cat food until I could get them to the facility down there. So a few things like that. But I’m more focused now about being about my family and my friends, and maintaining those relationships.

JM: And to wrap up, would you like to talk a little bit about San Diego State?

SR: Uh-huh, I would. Every university has its own personality, people that love it, and every university feels it’s unique. And I agree they are all unique. I’ve been to enough universities that they are all unique and wonderful. USD is a wonderful university here in San Diego, as is UCSD, but the one I know the most about is San Diego State. I love it for what it is now, and what it’s had to go
through to get here. It isn’t easy being a research university in a state university
system that says you’re not supposed to be that. They don’t say that anymore, but
for years, you know, “You’re not supposed to do that,” all of that. San Diego
State has a—“defiant” isn’t quite the right word, but if somebody says “you can’t
do that,” we kind of say, “hmm, yes we can!” (laughter) I like that kind of
attitude about San Diego State. I love the way the people who are affiliated with
it love it so much, and there’s a commonality of interests around how much we
care about the university. And it’s achieved far more than one would expect we
could achieve, given the strictures that we work within—you know, state
government is a bureaucracy, the SCU is a bureaucracy, we’re our own
bureaucracy. I’ve often said we try to make things as complicated as we possibly
can, and we always overachieve, but in spite of all of that, if there’s something we
want to do, we can figure out a way to do it, and do it well—not just do it, but do
it well. That’s what I really love about San Diego State. And I love the way our
alums…. They began as our students, they end up as our alums, they have a life-
long relationship with us. They can’t undo that. They are alums. They always—
I’m sure there are some exceptions—but the vast majority of them think so fondly
of the university and of their time here and what it did for them: the experiences
that they had, the friends that they met, the people they married, all of that, it’s all
part of what the university is and does. I think we’re a great, great asset to the
citizens of San Diego—city, county, the inner region, state of California—and I
know a lot about our alums who are great contributors to the nation as well: Ellen
Ochoa, a remarkable person. And she got started on her pathway by first going to
one of our colleges that I won’t name, to see about switching her major to that, and they’re kind of like, “Eh, honey, it’s probably not for you.” And she went in to a faculty member in Physics and said, “What do you think if I become a physics professor?” And he’s like, “Are you good at math?” She said, “Yes.” He said, “I think that’d be great!” Well, that turns out to be Jeffrey Davis [phonetic]. I just found that out a year ago, because I sat beside him at a meeting and I’d been at a talk she gave the night before, and found out that Jeffrey Davis was the one who said to Ellen Ochoa, “I think you’d be a wonderful physicist!” So things like that happen here. I know they happen at other places too, but I care about how they happen here with such genuine…. I don’t know, it’s just a genuine commitment to be the best we can around other people. It’s one of my favorite stories of San Diego State, and I only learned it a year ago, year and a half maybe. I think she’s getting an honorary doctorate this year, too.

JM: Oh, wonderful!

SR: Maybe I’m not supposed to say that, so don’t…. 

JM: [This transcript] probably won’t be out before then.

SR: Yeah. Right. Exactly. I hope she tells that story, and I hope we invite him to her ceremony, because that would be wonderful.

JM: Well thank you so much, Sally. This has been a great experience for me too, to hear from you. You are an outstanding interviewee!

SR: Oh! Well, thank you!

JM: Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]