

Mary P. Sterling

Interviewee: Mary P. Sterling

Interviewer: Courtney Tollison

Date: November 23, 2004

Transcript

Dr. Tollison: Today is Tuesday, November 23rd, 2004 and my name is Courtney Tollison and I'm sitting here with Mary P. Sterling and we're going to have a conversation about Furman today. Mrs. Sterling is a Greenville native, a graduate of Randolph-Macon Woman's College. You have served as a member of the Furman Advisory Council and the board of trustees and Furman awarded you an honorary doctorate of humanities degree in 2002. You have served as vice president of the Junior League and as regional director of the Association of Junior Leagues of America. You are a member of the Altar Guild Christ Church and you serve on the board of visitors and the board of trustees at Christ – you have served on the board of visitors and currently serve as a trustee of Christ Church Episcopal School and on the board of the Historic Greenville Foundation. Is that correct?

Mrs. Sterling: And the Peace Center.

Dr. Tollison: And the Peace Center, of course. You have been on the YMCA board, the board of visitors at Clemson [Clemson University] and the board of the Community Foundation of Greenville and in 1997-1998 you chaired the YMCA Endowment Corporation and you recently – very recently, about a month ago – rededicated the James Buchanan Duke Library and especially the Charlie Peace wing of the Duke Library that Furman named after your father. Is that about it? Is there anything else?

Mrs. Sterling: That's about it.

Dr. Tollison: Okay, great. Well let's get started.

01:29

Dr. Tollison: Why don't you tell me about growing up in Greenville, specifically your impressions of Furman while you were growing up in Greenville?

Mrs. Sterling: It's really always been a part of my life. It's been there right in the middle of town, it was. And it was, Furman was like just an institution everybody praised. So many people that I knew went to school there. My husband's a graduate of Furman. And we came back to Greenville after having lived a year in Knoxville after we got married, right after World War II, and then he finished up at

Furman.

Dr. Tollison: What year did he graduate from Furman?

Mrs. Sterling: '48 or '49, I can't remember which but right after our daughter was born. And over the years through his influence we became interested in the Furman basketball program and there was never a Furman basketball game that we didn't – that took place that we didn't attend if we could possibly get there.

Dr. Tollison: So, of course [inaudible]

Mrs. Sterling: Yeah.

Dr. Tollison: Were you at the Frank Selvy, the big Frank Selvy game?

Mrs. Sterling: Oh absolutely I was. I really and truly was one of the people there [inaudible], as was our daughter. And, you know, I remember it quite well because at the end the Newberry team was feeding the ball to Frank Selvy so he could make his hundred points.

Dr. Tollison: Aww. They were assisting him.

Mrs. Sterling: They were, they really were because the game was lost so they might as well make an event out of it. That's pretty fun. But over the years we became very, very involved in [inaudible] such a sportsman. And, of course, he died in 1982. And after that I was invited by Gordon Blackwell to serve on the advisory council, in the very early years of that body. And I think it was established so that Furman would have some contact with people other than Baptists and that there would be some community involvement of people from other denominations, the Christian [inaudible]. But that was my first direct contact with [inaudible] because my family was involved, my father didn't go but my uncle did, he was a graduate of Furman.

Dr. Tollison: And tell me your uncle's name, please?

Mrs. Sterling: Roger, Roger.

Dr. Tollison: Roger C. Peace?

Mrs. Sterling: Roger C. Peace, yes.

Dr. Tollison: The one with the hospital.

Mrs. Sterling: My dad was the middle boy, there were six children in that family, and Roger was the oldest. My daddy was the middle and then the younger one was B.H. [Bony Hampton, Jr.]. My dad died quite early in his life, he wasn't but 54 – not quite 54 years old. So in his early years he was busy building up a newspaper

and television and radio.

Dr. Tollison: And, of course, we're talking specifically about the Greenville News Piedmont here in town.

Mrs. Sterling: Right. Because my grandfather was the one who bought it from the original owners and the three brothers were involved in building it up. So he didn't live long enough to do much philanthropic work. He did some philanthropy but didn't have a chance to a great deal in the community that he would have done past those peak earning years.

05:06

Dr. Tollison: Let's back up a little bit. Tell me about what local people – what Greenvillians thought of Furman in terms of what kind of a school was it.

Mrs. Sterling: Well it was just the local school and we knew everybody who taught there and the people who ran it. And I remember John Plyler [John Laney Plyler, Sr.] quite well and I remember, of course, precious Bea Plyler [Beatrice Plyler] on her horse on the women's campus. I can see her right now. But Furman was just part of Greenville and then went out – everybody thought they were absolutely nuts to move out in the country, you know. [inaudible] want to move way out there in the country. Of course it was the best thing they possibly could have done but the leaders back in those days were quite [inaudible] thinking and we absolutely was the best thing to do. It was a pretty wild campus.

Dr. Tollison: What kind of students went to Furman? Were they considered a very academic [inaudible]?

Mrs. Sterling: No, not particularly. I have to tell you, if you... You know, I remember hearing when I was getting ready to go to school, you know, if you can't get in anywhere else you can always come home and go to Furman.

Dr. Tollison: You mentioned a quote that you always remember about Furman grads.

Mrs. Sterling: Yeah, sure. [inaudible] who goes to Furman and what do they do. They educate preachers and teachers, turn out preachers and teachers. And that was about it. Did not have a terribly high rating.

Dr. Tollison: Right, academically.

Mrs. Sterling: Academically. Now it was a good school, but not top notch.

Dr. Tollison: Not like it is today?

Mrs. Sterling: Oh absolutely. It has gone so far beyond my daddy's wildest dream. It's wonderful and it will even go further.

07:04

Dr. Tollison: Tell me more about your father.

Mrs. Sterling: Oh, he was such a great person. He was a big man and he loved life. He loved a good joke. He loved people. He never met a stranger and he could talk just as well to the shoeshine boy as to the president of a corporation.

Dr. Tollison: And what did he think of Furman?

Mrs. Sterling: Well people didn't really ever talk about Furman a lot back in those days. It was just there.

Dr. Tollison: You know, school for the sports teams.

Mrs. Sterling: Yes, that's all. In fact, I went to mostly football back in those days. And I remember when they played football in a field just off Augusta Road called Manly Field. And then they had Sistine Stadium, you know. So it was just part of your life but you didn't talk about it a whole lot.

Dr. Tollison: Because it was so ingrained in what it meant to live in Greenville.

Mrs. Sterling: Exactly. People like John Plyler were good friends of my family and they were a little bit "blue nosed" back in those days.

Dr. Tollison: What do you mean by that?

Mrs. Sterling: Strict, kind of not fun loving. They were good people but they...

Dr. Tollison: They were straight and narrow.

Mrs. Sterling: Yes, straight and narrow.

Dr. Tollison: Straight laced.

Mrs. Sterling: Absolutely straight laced, that's the word for it. But my dad really was just a wonderful, wonderful [inaudible] man and very [inaudible]. And back in those days the family would – because of the newspaper business – participate in politics and they had political friends. And Roger Peace served for a short time in the U.S. Senate. We thought he'd never do that.

Dr. Tollison: Did he replace someone?

Mrs. Sterling: He replaced Burnet Maybank. And Jimmy Byrnes [James F. Byrnes], who was – do you know who he was?

Dr. Tollison: Mmm hmm.

Mrs. Sterling: Was a family friend. In fact I did a paper for my study club on Jimmy Byrnes just this past year.

Dr. Tollison: He's got a building named after himself in Columbia.

Mrs. Sterling: Right. There's been lots and lots of family pictures of him and with my family.

Dr. Tollison: Oh, that must have been very...

Mrs. Sterling: That was really fun. In fact, one of his writers was a gentleman in Washington whose name was Porter McKeever. And Porter was this adorable young Irishman or Scotsman – I guess he was Scottish. Anyway, had a beautiful tenor voice and sang at my wedding. He sang 'Oh Promise Me' at my wedding. I was married at home, private wedding. Anyway...

Dr. Tollison: Now where did you grow up in Greenville?

Mrs. Sterling: Well we lived on East Faris Road until I was about twelve and we were in the country. East Faris Road was not even paved. I think a week or so after we moved away they paved East Faris Road.

Dr. Tollison: Wow.

Mrs. Sterling: And it stopped not very far up that first hill. And then we moved to Park Avenue. The house is no longer there but it's where the Woman's Club is located now.

Dr. Tollison: Okay.

Mrs. Sterling: That's the location of our home.

Dr. Tollison: Well it's interesting to hear about this and just think about how Greenville has developed.

Mrs. Sterling: Oh my goodness.

Dr. Tollison: We think of Faris as being so centrally located.

Mrs. Sterling: And that was in the country, my goodness. I went to Augusta Circle School.

Dr. Tollison: Oh, so did I.

Mrs. Sterling: And there were four classrooms. Four grades and four classrooms. Then we went to Donaldson and then we went to Greenville High.

Dr. Tollison: Okay.

Mrs. Sterling: But, you know, I have seen many, many changes in my lifetime.

Dr. Tollison: It sounds like it.

Mrs. Sterling: I really have.

10:45

Dr. Tollison: Tell me about when you first became involved and first developed an institutional relationship with Furman. In 1982 you mentioned with the advisory board.

Mrs. Sterling: It was after '82. It was probably about '84 or '85, after my husband died. He died in '82.

Dr. Tollison: Okay. What do you remember about Furman, the priorities?

Mrs. Sterling: It kind of was trying to establish itself as a leader and to be academically better. And have a better reputation and attract brighter students and become a real "Princeton of the South."

Dr. Tollison: And how did Furman's relationship with the South Carolina Baptist Convention...

Mrs. Sterling: That happened all before I got on the board. Of course, Minor Mickel is a friend of mine so I was pulling real hard for them to separate because it was so restrictive. That nobody but a Southern Baptist could be a trustee.

Dr. Tollison: Was the advisory board... How privy were you all to the things that were going on?

Mrs. Sterling: In the beginning they were both feeling their way around. They were trying to seek out what kind of an organization they needed to be and to see how productive it could be. And I remember it was just a one-day affair – I don't know what it is now – but it was just a one-day affair. And I had the feeling then that they were trying to let people in the community know what was going on at Furman, that that is your closest contact. And I remember one of the first meetings that I attended the question in my little group was what – I think for all the groups and then we came together and presented the consensus – what would you like to see Furman become in the next ten years? And I remember thinking about it and thinking about it and I thought really and truly I would like to see the community of Greenville put its arms around Furman and claim it as its own and I think that's what happened. That Furman had been picked [inaudible] that the community feels some ownership and it's ever more supportive.

Dr. Tollison: Now this is interesting because when Furman was located downtown there was more of a symbiotic relationship.

Mrs. Sterling: It was just there. It was just part of life and part of [inaudible] but not a dynamic

part.

Dr. Tollison: And now Furman actually has to make a more of a conscientious effort.

Mrs. Sterling: That's right, that's right, because they're, they're not way out in the country, but they're out there. And, you know, a lot of people – since it's done so well in the academic, with an academic reputation – I think that some people feel like there's a glass bubble out. And I think that's not what Furman wants, or students either.

Dr. Tollison: And what in your opinion has David Shi done to sort of to close up the gap between Furman and Greenville? (laughs) Everything that humans can think about.

Mrs. Sterling: (laughs) Absolutely, he really has. He's gone way above and beyond what anybody in the world has the physical stamina to do. You know he serves on boards, he's active [inaudible] in the community. I don't know what in the world all he does do but he's [inaudible] in the community which is good. He's not sitting out there on the campus isolated.

14:38

Dr. Tollison: What about... What year did you become a trustee?

Mrs. Sterling: '95, [inaudible] five and a half years.

Dr. Tollison: Okay. So this was just two years or so, two or three years after Furman split from the Baptist Convention and a year after David Shi became president.

Mrs. Sterling: Right.

Dr. Tollison: So tell me about...

Mrs. Sterling: David and Susan [inaudible] the first trustee, new trustee that they were able to call and invite to be a trustee.

Dr. Tollison: Oh, terrific, okay. And tell me about how that evolved.

Mrs. Sterling: Well, I had met both of them and they invited me to come out and have lunch one day. And I thought, well I don't know why, but I'll go, I'd like to know these young people better. So I went and we had a very nice visit. And I had met David and Susan on other occasions and I can't even remember the first time I met him. But, anyway, it was not too long after that, that he called me one night and said that the trustees had elected me to be on the trustee and I said "David, do you know how old I am?" (laughs) And he said "Yes we do but that doesn't make a bit of difference." (laughs) That was so funny. I guess that was in the fall of '94 because I came on in January of '95 and they've changed the year but actually I

served five and a half years.

Dr. Tollison: Okay. What was the system that, I know now...

Mrs. Sterling: Well it was January to January.

Dr. Tollison: Okay.

Mrs. Sterling: And then they changed it they went to, you come on now in February but you were elected in, at the spring meeting.

Dr. Tollison: Okay, gotcha. Is there something about Furman in 1995, what was going on?

Mrs. Sterling: Oh my goodness, they had plans that were just magnificent – goodness if all of this ever happens it's going to be wonderful – but the idea was to establish... The first thing that took place was the chapel [Charles E. Daniel Memorial Chapel] and [inaudible] the chapel and I was on grounds and buildings [committee]. And we were having our meeting during a trustee meeting and I was the only one. I have to act up a little bit and tell you about that first year I was on the board. There were two women, there was Emilyn Sanders [Emilyn Childs Sanders] and me. And other [inaudible] we were all new and we were the only women, of any, we were the only women trustees and [inaudible] I'm sure. Emilyn and forged a very strong bond [inaudible]. But anyway we were having this meeting of the grounds and buildings committee and they wanted us to come and look at some of the bricks that they had, brick sample walls, that they had built, that they'd made. And so we went over there and we looked at this one and this one and this one and they're saying they couldn't make up their minds what they liked and I said "Well at what else is around the campus and, if you ask me, this one is the best match." Well by that time they were all so confused they said "That's fine, that's fine. We'll just call this Mary's brick." (laughs) So every time I see the chapel now I think "That's Mary's brick."

Dr. Tollison: (laughs) Oh, that's cute.

Mrs. Sterling: So anyway that was the first thing. And, you know, one by one all these wonderful buildings got built: Timmons Arena and Johns Hall, Hipp Hall and then the expansion of the [Trone] Student Center...

Dr. Tollison: And Plyler Hall.

Mrs. Sterling: It was the [James B. Duke] Library and then Plyler Hall.

18:27

Dr. Tollison: Tell me about how you got involved with the Library.

Mrs. Sterling: Well, since my dad died at such an early age he was almost, kind of the

forgotten brother because the others lived so much longer. So I just wanted him recognized because he was such a people person and he would have loved – he was a reader mainly, he really was a good guy and he loved young people. And I thought about it for a long time and thought about how I could make a contribution to Furman and honor him at the same time because he deserved that and so much more.

Dr. Tollison: So did you approach Furman?

Mrs. Sterling: I did. I knew about – I think I [inaudible] said maybe you better [inaudible] name that library wing after my daddy so we [inaudible] into an agreement and that's how it all happened. I just thought about it for a long time.

Dr. Tollison: Well, it's absolutely beautiful and a very fitting tribute it sounds like.

Mrs. Sterling: Well, he really was so much fun and all of my friends called him "Mr. Charlie." They couldn't call him Mr. Peace, he was too informal of a person and so they called him "Mr. Charlie" and they called my mother "Miss Frances." And he [inaudible] and he did a real smart thing when I was a teenager growing up. He loved automobiles and he always had – traded every two years – always had a really nice automobile and kept it. The yard man rinsed it off every morning before he went to work. And so when I was dating he would always offer his car to us for the evening – and I didn't drive – because he knew that my date was going to take better care of his car than he would of his own father's car. So I thought he was so generous but now I know how smart he was. So that was the kind of thing.

Dr. Tollison: So true, keep his daughter safe. [inaudible] good father.

Mrs. Sterling: He was a wonderful man, he really was. He would have been happy. He would have been so happy. I would be so thrilled if the kids would call that wing "Charlie's Place."

Dr. Tollison: Aww. Well I shall do what I can to promote that.

Mrs. Sterling: He was very informal and that kind of fun loving. He would make friends with everyone.

Dr. Tollison: That's a great thing to have.

Mrs. Sterling: Yes.

21:11

Dr. Tollison: Tell me about serving on the student services committee. You mentioned that...

Mrs. Sterling: There were all kinds of issues. Poor Harry. (laughs)

Dr. Tollison: Harry Shucker.

Mrs. Sterling: He had a tough job. He was really...

Dr. Tollison: He was a wonderful person.

Mrs. Sterling: Well he [inaudible] so empathetic and so understanding and I'm sure there must be a crisis everyday, at least once a week. So I think that it's come a long way. It bothers me that kids don't know how to handle life very well. And that's just not limited to Furman.

Dr. Tollison: All young people today.

Mrs. Sterling: Uh huh. And my granddaughter graduated from Duke about two or three years ago and I sat down one day and I said "Frannie, tell me about the drinking and why that happens and why it's important?" And we had a long conversation and I don't understand any better now than I did then, and I still don't understand.

Dr. Tollison: But it's definitely on the radar of student services at Furman...

Mrs. Sterling: Oh, absolutely.

Dr. Tollison: that there's a problem.

Mrs. Sterling: You know I think they're desperate to find answers and I think they're doing everything they possibly know how to do to help kids cope with it.

Dr. Tollison: What are some of the challenges that Furman students face today, social pressures, that kind of thing?

Mrs. Sterling: Oh I think peer pressure, pressure, pressure. I think the academic rigor, number one, and then just trying to have fun. So the balance of the two, it must be really, really tough because there's so much more to learn now.

Dr. Tollison: Have you seen a marked difference in Furman of 1995 with the students almost ten years later in terms of the pressure they put on themselves?

Mrs. Sterling: Not really because I don't have daily – you know, I don't have that much contact with the students anymore. Wish I had more. But there's bound to be a lot more pressure because the academic standards are higher. And so you don't want it to get so high that you get an elite, an elitist, atmosphere.

Dr. Tollison: What is Furman doing or is Furman doing anything – I assume that they are, well I know that they are – but I want to hear you tell me about what Furman is doing to combat – with rising tuition prices that's certainly going to attract a certain demographic – what is Furman doing to maintain that kind of...

Mrs. Sterling: Well, there's student aid, of course, it's one of the biggest items in the budget. And so I think they're trying to cover balancing that against what's available to run the university. And that's more pressure on donors, annual fund donors, and other [inaudible], endowments.

24:18

Dr. Tollison: Tell me about diversity. You mentioned that you were the first two women on the board.

Mrs. Sterling: Right, but it has certainly grown.

Dr. Tollison: The board has become more diverse.

Mrs. Sterling: Absolutely more diverse which I think is wonderful and I think if it had a wider variety of ethnic backgrounds it would be wonderful, but they'll come.

Dr. Tollison: The board has enlarged in size as well?

Mrs. Sterling: It has.

Dr. Tollison: Is that correct? Well how large was it when you joined?

Mrs. Sterling: I think it was 25 and they raised it to 30 as well as I remember. Any time that you do that then it's, the [inaudible] really wide. It's so hard

Dr. Tollison: Try to keep an eye on [inaudible]. Well, if you could spare just a few more minutes.

Mrs. Sterling: Oh sure, I'm fine. About ten more minutes.

25:17

Dr. Tollison: Okay great. And is that... Tell me about the process about how new members are – new board members – are appointed and how involved is the president...

Mrs. Sterling: They're elected.

Dr. Tollison: Or elected, excuse me, how involved is the president in that process?

Mrs. Sterling: Oh the president is a wonderful source of nominees. But I was chair of that committee one year. And you ask for one of the most important duties of any trustee is to suggest people [inaudible]. And you just search for suggestions from everybody and you get wonderful suggestions from other board members and that's where you – and of course people who've been on the advisory council, they're people who are interested in Furman. And you want a diverse group geographically and ethnically and gender-wise. And then you try and fill

the needs in various categories.

Dr. Tollison: Now what is the relationship today between the board of trustees and the advisory board?

Mrs. Sterling: Not much direct relationship. The advisory council is out there to form information to and to bring people closer to the university through getting to know it.

Dr. Tollison: So how in your opinion has the purpose of the advisory board changed since Furman is no longer associated with the Baptist Convention?

Mrs. Sterling: I think it has changed from being purely to get people other than Southern Baptists involved in the life of the university. And too, a way to – you can't have everybody on the board and many, many people out there who have a lot to give, a lot of advice and a lot of everything to give to a worthy institution – and I think that they're there to provide that. And lots [inaudible]. They don't all have to be local but it's just more people involved in the group, more people who know about Furman and know about its inner workings then the better relationship you'll have with the [inaudible].

27:48

Dr. Tollison: Tell me a little bit about – you were on the advisory board under President Johns [John E. Johns] – could do a little bit, are you comfortable with giving a little bit of a comparison in terms of President Johns and President Shi [David E. Shi] leadership styles...

Mrs. Sterling: Oh, every single president at Furman has had a different leadership style. I remember John Plyler who was very much like a Baptist preacher but much more tolerant and not as prejudicial as Baptist preachers. Then it kind of evolved and you know the body evolved. And then we had Gordon Blackwell and Gordon Blackwell was the one who kind of opened the door to outside people and kept Furman from being a closed to the South. I remember the first year I was on the advisory council we were invited to come to part of a trustees meeting up in the trustees room next to David's office. And I remember sitting there and looking around at this table – you've been there, you know – big old long table that's as wide as this room, and I looked and I thought that I never saw so many grumpy looking old men. And this was before we split and the change since then is just phenomenal, we've got young people, we've got people from all walks of life.

Dr. Tollison: And of course, before the split there were a lot of Baptist ministers

Mrs. Sterling: There were. (laughs) That's my fondest memory of seeing trustees at a Furman board meeting before I was ever on the board was all those grumpy old men. And their chairs are enormous. They're big enough for me and you both to sit in.

Anyway they were meant for those [inaudible] old fellows.

29:47

Dr. Tollison: Well tell me about being on the board today and how it's different and what it's meant to you?

Mrs. Sterling: Oh [inaudible] but it's very strenuous. The board meetings are very strenuous. There's something going on all the time.

Dr. Tollison: In what sense?

Mrs. Sterling: Well you start off with a plenary session in the morning. There's always something usually that goes on on Thursday night [inaudible] plenary session. And then you go from there to your committee meetings and that's something that goes on. Sometimes there are meetings with students, sometimes there are meetings with faculty, and then there's something that goes on on Friday night, and then you've got another session Saturday. I mean it's just non-stop. And I've loved every minute of it but it's exhausting, it really was.

Dr. Tollison: Now how often does this happen?

Mrs. Sterling: Three times a year.

Dr. Tollison: Three times a year.

Mrs. Sterling: October, February and May.

Dr. Tollison: Okay. So it's an appointment or an elected position that comes with a great deal of responsibility.

Mrs. Sterling: Oh it does, it really does. And they send you a board book before every meeting. It's a notebook that's this thick and has all the information in it that you will be needing.

Dr. Tollison: You have to prepare yourself.

Mrs. Sterling: You really do. But I feel it was a wonderful experience. I wouldn't take anything in the world for and I'm so happy now that they've given me the opportunity to come back as an emeritus member.

Dr. Tollison: As trustee emeritus you are a non-voting, you're technically non-voting.

Mrs. Sterling: I have a voice but not a vote.

Dr. Tollison: But not a vote.

Mrs. Sterling: And that's just fine. So it's much less responsibility. This past board meeting I had my family here so I was not able to attend all the things that I normally would. It had been such a wonderful time to have had my daughter and my granddaughter.

Dr. Tollison: So tell me about... Is it a congenial group? Tell me about...

Mrs. Sterling: The board itself? Oh, it's a wonderful group. Some of it's given me another family and I'm very proud to say that. And I have developed so many wonderful friendships that I wouldn't take anything in the world for. Not only within the Furman community itself, but all the trustees that I served with over the years. And I still feel a very strong closeness with them and I hope I always will. They're great people.

Dr. Tollison: That sounds like a good note to end on. Do you have anything else that you'd like to add?

Mrs. Sterling: I can't think of anything. If I do I'll just have to call you up.

Dr. Tollison: Sounds good.