



## Ken Austin Oral History Interview, March 24, 2015

### Title

“From Cows to Cars to Cavities: The Legacy of an Influential Beaver”

### Date

March 24, 2015

### Location

Austin Industries, Newberg, Oregon.

### Summary

In the interview, Austin discusses his family background and upbringing in Newberg, Oregon, community life during World War II, his early interest in machinery, and his memories of opening a small business, "The Rod Shop," while in high school.

From there Austin details his undergraduate experience at Oregon State College. He recounts his decision to attend OSC, campus traditions of the time, pledging a fraternity and various fraternity pranks, including "kidnapping" the Sweethearts of Sigma Chi. Austin also discusses his academic ups and downs, and recalls an influential professor who helped him to find direction while in college.

Austin next shares his memories of becoming the first Benny Beaver mascot, noting the process by which it came to pass, his construction of the first Benny costume, and his various antics as OSC's mascot, which included climbing football goalposts and shooting blanks out of a starter's pistol. Austin likewise details his activities as a member of Air Force ROTC.

Life after college is the next theme of the interview, with Austin describing his meeting and courting Joan Zemke, his years of service in the Air Force, and his and Joan's experience of starting a family. Austin then reflects on his military discharge and the period of holding eight jobs in eight years that followed. He also describes how the last of these jobs, at Densco dental supply company, spurred in him the idea of founding his own competing company, A-dec.

The growth of A-dec is a major topic of the session, with primary attention paid to important innovations and product lines that enabled the practice of sit-down dentistry and that fueled the rapid success of A-dec. Austin then recounts the roots of his family's philanthropic outreach, including early support for Head Start and the Newberg Fire Department.

As it nears its conclusion, the interview focuses on the Austins' financial support for numerous endeavors at OSU, including in athletics and the College of Business. In this, Austin describes the founding of the Austin Family Business Program, the Austin Entrepreneurship Program, and the renovation of Weatherford Hall. He likewise discusses the funding, design and construction of a new facility for the College of Business, Austin Hall.

The session ends with Austin's thoughts on the impact that Oregon State has made on his life and his words of advice to students of today.

### Interviewee

Ken Austin

**Interviewers**

Mike Dicianna, Chris Petersen

**Website**

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh150/austin/>

## Transcript

**Mike Dicianna:** Okay, well today is March 24th, 2015 and we're here to conduct a very important interview with George Kenneth—Ken—Austin, class of 1953, receiving his BS in June of 1954. My name is Mike Dicianna; I'm oral historian with the OSU Special Collections and Archives Research Center. And also present today is Chris Petersen, the OH 150 project director and oral historian. What we kind of like to do is get a whole life story of a person for this project and what I like to do is start with a little bit of kind of a biographical sketch, some of your early years. We understand that you were born in Missoula, Montana in 1931 but then soon after your family moved back to the family farm, which has got quite a history to it. What's some of the information about the farm in Newberg that your family moved back to?

**Ken Austin:** Well, we came back in 1934 and my grandmother was one of five children and she took care of my grandpa, my great-grandpa Eberhard who came out as a pioneer and settled with Eberhard, settled across the river. He had five children; one daughter and four boys. Because she took care of him during his last part of his life, he gave her the farm place with the buildings and the other boys just got land. So, in 19—and I'm not sure that was that, that took place, but Barbara Eberhard had never married and Henry Austin lived here in Newberg and he lost his wife at age—when she was thirty-seven years old, with tuberculosis. So, he thought she was quite successful at having a hundred and fifty acres of land and buildings and she thought he was quite successful because he ran the meat market and the blacksmith shop for his father-in-law, and I can't think of his name. Instantly I'm thinking a blank...Henry Hobson—or excuse me, William Hobson was a founder of the Quaker church in Newberg. And so our roots go way, way back. I say that my great-grandfather-in-law, which was William Hobson was a founder of the Quaker church here in town.

So, during the depression Grandma was living in Albany and had moved down there and I'm not sure when she moved to Albany with her spinster sister—spinster daughter, my dad's sister, and convinced Dad that it could be a good thing to come back to the farm in 1934 and take it over, because the renters weren't paying the rent. And so he left Shell Oil Company after about eleven years with Shell and became a farmer.

**MD:** Now, you were a young teenager during the years of World War II and you were—so you were here on the homefront in Oregon. What's some of the life like in Newberg during the war years and on the homefront?

**KA:** Well that was really interesting because the first thing, I was nine years old when the war took place, when the break out in Pearl Harbor and I think we, within hours, we were blacking out windows because we were concerned that the Japanese would land on the coast. And Mother was a nurse and we still have Red Cross bandages in the house from that period of time that she was given to take care as a civil defense person. A thing that I enjoyed most was we went on air watch down in Butteville to an air watch shack and we would report any airplane if it flew over and try to describe it from the silhouette or what we could recognize. And I have a spotter chart over here on the wall that we had in that Butteville spotter shack. So anyway, I think the things we collected, Wings cigarettes put out a little picture of an airplane, so we had—I was collecting pictures of airplanes. I was fascinated by flying. I had an uncle that was a mechanic over in England with the B-17s and I have some of his service manuals that—when I say service, about the service of the engines and things. And I would say I was a gearhead from day one. And the military just brought another level of sophistication to engineering and what we were doing.

**MD:** Yeah, because it was kind of a different time to be a young child, because of the war. Now, I've been able to ask a few of our oral history subjects, you know, this real special question, and you were young, naturally, but do you remember where you were and what your reaction was when you first heard about the Pearl Harbor attack?

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**KA:** Well, I was out in the yard probably playing or messing around with that little shop that I showed you the picture of, but we got a phone call from my mother's sister in Portland who heard the news on the radio, and the news was broken to the family out in the yard that Pearl Harbor had been—and Elizabeth had called and...it was scary. You know, I think at nine years old I was wondering what was going to happen. And those war years are very memorable, everything from the rationing to the saving of everything you can save to helping the neighbors out and just every way you could. Also, I was a gun nut so I've been working, playing with guns, and of course people got their guns out and armed them. And we even had a militia here in Newberg that stood guard on each end of the town.

**MD:** Now, so you've been basically a self-proclaimed tinkerer since early in your childhood. Now, did this proclivity have an influence on your chosen career path or where you are today?

**KA:** Well, it's either I was born with it or I learned it from that childhood experience, because there was a lot of old farm machinery just in piles and then the boneyard, as we would call it today, you'd see a bunch of old machinery rusting away. And I had no brothers and sisters and I would just go out and pretend I was a farmer sitting on an old binder, a grain binder. And of course there's more gears and chains on a grain binder than you can imagine. And this was so rusty nothing even moved but I started wanting to take things apart and my folks would let me, would buy wrenches for me and screwdrivers. And if it didn't—I couldn't unscrew it or loosen it up, I would beat it up. I regret of all those engines I busted up the spark plugs and headlights on them that were in the boneyard. But—and I was trying to make things out of car parts. For example, the timer cup on a Model T was a teacup and so I had a little, pretend I was going to make tea or make coffee and—so there were a lot of things that were on the farm that you'd use as toys or make believe toys.

So, and I was quite young when—it was before Pearl Harbor that I started working on my first engines. And my dad got an old Maytag washing machine motor for me and of course I think every kid wants a go-kart and something that he doesn't—he can ride to the barn instead of walking to the barn. My folks didn't, we never had enough money to have a bicycle so I never had a bicycle growing up, but I learned to ride other kid's bikes and—but I made a lot of stuff. I was always making things and I remember making, my dad made a wooden boat and then I wanted an anchor and Dad says "well, how do you know about anchors?" and I said "well, Popeye's got one on his tattoo." And so we melted up jar lids from mason jars, which were, the lids were made of zinc, melted them in the fireplace and poured the zinc into a wooden bowl. So you can say I started my casting as maybe a six year old. I started working on engines as a seven year old and then we had a machinery class for farmers so they can keep their own machinery running and I went to class with Dad and took an outboard motor that wouldn't run and the, mostly seniors and the dads and the older sons of people that were up at St. Paul at the, where we went to school there at the McCormick-Deering dealer, or International Harvester, as they're known also, and I remember the thrill of getting that engine running. Another thrill was a little later I got an engine, a big engine running that was out in one of the buildings. And I have—I don't have the engines from that thing but I have them in my collection because they all mean something to me.

[0:10:04]

And so, whether it was growing up on the farm, playing with that stuff—and had I not been an only child I probably would have been cops and robbers with the neighborhood kids. There was no, the nearest neighborhood—the nearest neighbor child was a mile away. So, I don't know whether I was born with it or whether I acquired it. And I do know that I got compliments for "look at what little sonny has done, he's figured out how to prop the door open with a chip of wood out of the wood pile." And so that just was encouragement to come up with the next solution to something.

And I was always innovating. I remember in those early war years we were knitting afghan squares for the military. Well actually, for the Red Cross when the Red Cross was making Afghans for the veterans returning. And they'd take these six inch squares and knit them together, the women would, and I said "could I change the needle size to a larger needle?" and they said "why?" and I said "well, it would be less stitches and less rows," and "well, why do you want to do that?" I said "I could make them faster." So, the teacher let me do that and I knitted more afghan squares than anybody else at the Butteville grade school and as a result I got to go to—in 1945—I got to go to Oregon—excuse me, 1942—I got to Oregon State to 4-H summer school.

**MD:** So you've been on—you were on campus even during the war years, yeah. Now, at age fourteen you opened, for all intents and purposes, a shade tree machine shop called the Rod Shop. And so here you are just beginning to drive, opening your first business. Tell us a little bit about that whole—

**KA:** Well, my grandmother gave me a calf when I was probably nine years old. I don't know the exact age, may have been younger, but she gave me a calf. And when I was down at Oregon State, my dad sent me a post card and I still have it; it says "your heifer had a fine heifer calf." So, now I have two cows. And by the time I got to high school I had over ten cows and I had a monthly income from the milk, because Dad was milking the cows and paying me for the milk. So, at age fourteen I could drive to school but I didn't have any money, I had saved that monthly income but I don't know where I spent, probably on clothes, so I thought if I sell my cows I'll have enough money to buy a car. So, I sold the cows to my dad, bought a car for eighty dollars and had money left over and I bought a welder and an air compressor. Actually, I built

an air compressor from an old refrigerator compressor and I was just working on my own car and there was kids—a few kids at school had cars, especially the farm boys that had, would drive in from their farm home.

So, I wanted to know if I could help them with their busted up fenders and stuff. So, I started welding on cracked fenders for guys at school and I had the compressor and I learned to paint and so I was—and I did it for a dollar an hour. And I think the 4-H experience with the afghan knitting, which led into a chicken project and a diary project, that the record keeping that we learned in 4-H is a very effective way to teach us business skills as well as the skills of taking care of the animals. And my dad was an accountant and he encouraged me to keep track of my costs, so like on the—you had to keep records of your chickens and you needed to make more money on the eggs than you did spending money for the feed. That's kind of a funny little thing to learn but it's really important in business. Make more than you spend.

**MD:** So, as you were attending Newberg High School, that's basically towards the end of the war as the war was coming to an end, the world was changing, any special memories, reflections about your high school days?

[0:14:34]

**KA:** well, I was really surprised as a freshman I, when school started, I had a flu bug or something that I didn't make the first couple weeks of school and they had elections for the student council and because I had gone to Butteville school during the war years instead of the Newberg schools that I had been going to—and the reason for that was the gas shortage; there was no school bus so all of our parents drove us to school and we couldn't get gas due to gas rationing, so the school board got together, bought an old Model A truck—a van—and we rode in this old van with no windows in it to school, to Butteville. And so when high school came I was, had been, away for three years and didn't really know my classmates that well, but they elected me to the student council. So, that was a very memorable moment. And I was on the student council for all four years in school, so I was involved in political—the school politics. I was active in a lot of things in school. Very diversified, from thespians to sports to—I think another thing I remember in high school, when I say sports, is the fact that I set the class high school sprint records in one hundred and two-twenty. And then as a member of the student council senior year I was in charge of what we call the Secretary of Commerce. It was the cabinet for the council and I was in charge of the Coca-Cola machine, and putting the Coca-Cola machine on casters so I could sell more Coke at basketball games is another memorable moment.

And then the fact that we got real poor refereeing at a basketball game and it was snowing that night and we went out and I started throwing snowballs at the referees and the police came and we took off and a bunch of us got together and went up to the mayor's house chanting "we want a youth center, we want a youth center, we want a youth center," and this was chanting to the man who was running to council and I believe we, he was, excuse me, running for mayor. He was mayor, Homer Hester, and then he said "why don't you go chant to my opponent?" So, we went down the street a ways and chanted to him and a bunch of us got together and raised money to start a youth center here in Newberg and the mayor condemned the building that we rented because the Quakers didn't want any dancing. So, that money lie in the bank for years and years and years and I was able to write a check to the new park and recreation district here in Newberg and that was the money that put the park and rec on the ballot for Newberg. So, all of those fun things shaped your life and I don't know if there's anything I—well I was an instigator of a lot of beer parties. And we probably shouldn't talk about that.

**MD:** Well, let's shift gears a little bit to why we're here. You're an Oregon State College alumni; you started in the fall of 1949, what influenced your decision to go to Oregon State? Did you consider any other schools at all?

**KA:** Well absolutely, I had considered Oregon, and the reason there was we went down to Eugene for the state basketball tournament, so I had seen the campus as a high school student and thought "this is really a cool campus." I remembered a little bit of the campus of Oregon State from going to summer school, 4-H summer school. I would say that the curriculum had more impact than anything else. My father was a college graduate from Albany College, which preceded Lewis and Clark, and Mother was a graduate nurse from Northwestern in Illinois. And they both said "you know, when you finish high school you need to go on to college." And I was one of—only out of a class of about a hundred and five or so, I think seven of us went on to advanced degrees or on to college.

And I had a copy of the college catalog and industrial administration was just an ideal curriculum. It was learning a lot of hands-on skills with a little bit of business. And I remember one of my mother's sisters who said—it was a math teacher

up in Ballard High in Seattle—saying "you'll never amount to anything with that class. You need to go in to take the full engineering class," and I said "well, why?" And she said "well, how would you ever measure the volume of an air tank?" And I said "well, fill it with water and weight it" and she said "well, what if it's too big?" I said "I'll hire somebody." And those were my answers to Aunt Edith's question on how you're going to get the volume of an air tank."

So, I didn't do well when I got to the higher mathematics, I—because I was on the track team of Oregon State and a number of other things so I just really didn't, I worked, I loved working with my hands better than I did studying. And for that we'll talk more about how grateful I am to Oregon State for letting me do that.

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**MD:** Well, your time at Oregon State was, you know, rich with traditions and customs that are sadly lacking today and I'd just like to kind of visit some of the classics. I mean, as a freshman you were a rook and the rook follows the rules they had, were rook caps. Did you have the little green beanie?

**KA:** I had the little green beanie.

**MD:** And what were some of the ramifications of any infractions that the rook would come across that you had?

**KA:** I don't remember the infractions. I remember when we got to the burning of the green which is the spring term when you finish up your freshman year and you all got to go toss your green beanie on a fire.

**MD:** And there—it's one of these traditions that we see, you know, we have very few rook caps in our collections at the archives because of the fact that they were burned. As a freshman, you were also involved with the rook bonfire. Now, that's at homecoming.

**KA:** Yes.

**MD:** We have some images of those in our collections. These things are huge, they're stories high. What was your rook bonfire like, how big was it?

**KA:** Well, it was a pretty good size. One of the things that I became what they call the Equipment Chairman for the rook bonfire because I had a pickup truck and it was a Model A and I would go around gathering wood and stuff and haul the—and use the pickup to haul the stuff for the bonfire. And the best part about it: we'd also haul a keg of beer. So, I was involved with the rook bonfire and I was also involved with the noise parade that was done by the fraternities or the living houses, or living organizations. And I always wanted to do bigger and better. I think we were driving hard or working hard to build the biggest bonfire but when we entered the noise parade I wanted us to win the noise parade so I got the air raid siren from the local pulp and paper mill here in Newberg, which was steam powered, got a big air compressor and drove the siren with the air compressor. And we did win the noise parade.

**MD:** Yeah, 'cause that was, you know, that was a tradition that would never fly today. There'd be too many people complaining. But yeah, I've seen images of the noise parade. Now, you were originally, you weren't a Delta Tau. What was your first—

**KA:** I was in Delta Chi the freshman year.

**MD:** And there's a story about why you left that one and went to—

**KA:** Well, I was, I hadn't made my grades completely. I was within one grade, one-hundredth of a grade point of making grades and they said "we'll initiate you anyway." So, I moved into the house at the beginning of my sophomore year with the idea that I would be initiated. And the house had also been broken into and people had taken money and every time money had been taken, I had lost money. So, some members of the ones that were members of the fraternity thought that maybe I was covering up for coming in, you know, it was an inside—I was stealing money from my fellow fraternity brothers. And so I learned later that who it was, and it was several people got together and blackballed me from being initiated. And so you can't, I couldn't stay any longer because I'd been there three terms as a pledge. And I had never stole money; I was actually devastated by the fact of being accused wrongly.

And they did catch the man who was stealing money, it was an—it was a former student who had dropped out of school and was living in Newport. And they caught him red-handed and they told me that I could come back. And in the meantime I had been spending a lot of time with—which was a fraternity house right next door, with the Delts, Delta Tau Delta, but we referred to it as Delts, and I just felt that I had a lot more, well they were just, the Delts were just treating me a whole lot better than the Delta Chis were. And because of all those experiences in school, I had the opportunity probably to pick any house I wanted to because other than I didn't have good grades but I had a track record, no pun intended. I had lettered as a freshman on the track team.

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**MD:** And so you spent the rest of your time as a Delta Tau.

**KA:** Right. And the—this is little known, but I have been honored by Delt in the year 2000. I was one of the One Hundred Delts, outstanding Delts in the nation. I also received the Outstanding Del annual award. So, I'm very grateful for that experience.

**MD:** Yeah, so fraternity life during the early fifties, it was different—

**KA:** Oh, a lot.

**MD:** --than it is today, I'm sure, but what are some of your memories of your fraternity brothers and life in the house, a housemother, that type of thing?

**KA:** Well first of all, when you went down from high school you were really hoping, at least my friends and myself were going down to college hoping that we would be asked to rush. In other words, you went down and lived someplace and then you hoped that other fraternities would ask you to come over for dinner and meet the people. And then the ultimate is that one of those fraternities would offer you to pledge. I think almost every one of us who went down to school were trying to either be into—the girls were trying to get in, be in a sorority, and the boys in the fraternity, which is just totally opposite of today. You just can't find people who want to join.

I think after you're in the house it's quite a shock because you're going to maintain the house. You do the housework, you do the cleaning, you do the—you really keep up the house. There's nobody hired other than the cook. And so the peeling of potatoes and the washing of the dishes is also, was an assignment of the members in the house. I think the learning of discipline, for example, if you didn't answer the telephone by the third ring and they caught you anywhere in the fraternity, you would get hacked for not answering the phone. And it wasn't a severe physical, it just stung when they hit you with the paddle and you didn't—a little more so than a flyswatter but it was enough to say "I better answer the phone." And to this day, I just can't stand a phone ringing. I just gotta answer it. The white glove inspection, walking, you know, you thought you dusted the house perfectly and then a senior goes along and runs their finger across the top of the door and you didn't do very well.

So, there was discipline, there were manners. Four days out of five you wore a jacket and a tie to dinner and you could be wearing shorts but a jacket and tie, and you had to learn Emily Post's *Rules of Etiquette* and if you violated that, somebody would call out that violation and you had to drop a nickel in a little pig and that money was paid for our records for our forty-five RPM records or for magazines and newspapers. And if you didn't pay it then they would, you would go up for bid and somebody would bid on hacking you. And if you crossed a member the wrong way, you know, they might bid as much as a dollar just to get to whack you on the rear. And so I think I got more hacks than most people because I was too stingy to put the nickel in.

**MD:** Well you know, there's all sorts of stories about fraternities and fraternity pranks, but I understand there's a story about you and your cohorts were involved in kidnapping the homecoming queen?

**KA:** No, it was the sweetheart of Sigma Chi. And yes, my junior year I went to ROTC summer camp in McChord Air Force Base and we had schools participate, I think four or five universities sent their students to McChord and some kids from Montana talked about kidnapping the rose of Phi Kappa Phi and that's another fraternity and the Phi Kaps had a—instead of a sweetheart at Sigma Chi they had a rose at Phi Kappa Phi. And I thought that's pretty cool, you know, "how'd you do it?" And so, they just got the girls and loaded them in a car and each one of the princesses or the court.

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So, it was, I was after a meeting, what we call a house meeting, every Monday the fraternity would have a meeting and we went out for a beer and a guy said "well, the house dances are next week" and I said "when's the Sigma Chi dance?" He said "oh, that's next week." I said "let's kidnap the sweethearts of Sigma Chi," and he said "to do what?" So, we called the Dean of Men, I called the Dean of Women, told them that we'd like to have this prank and they said "okay." And so we found out who the girls were and who their boyfriends were and got ahold of the boyfriends and said we wanted to do this with—did they think it was alright, they said "sure," said "would you go with us?" So, we got the girls' true boyfriends to go with us and be in the car and then we got, for the drivers of the car, we had Tony Van Vliet who is one of our noted alums. Tony was, I think, president of Blue Key at that time. And we got the student body president, we got Jim Fisher who was the editor, sports editor for the *Barometer*: and Bill Sundstrom who was Yell King when I was also Benny Beaver at that time.

So, we've got this whole crew of us. So, then we told the girls that they would be picked up by one of these dignitaries. So, the car drives up, they go to the door, the girl comes out and when they open—she opens the door, there's her boyfriend squatted down behind the seat in the back of an old '34—well probably like a '39—Plymouth or something and he stands up and says "surprise!" And we told the girls and we didn't tell the housemothers, is where we screwed up. But we told the girls and we needed to get the girls picked up to go have their picture taken in five different poses so we'd be ready for the *Barometer*: on, I think the *Barometer*: came out on Tuesdays in those days, so we'd be ready for the *Barometer*: to have the picture of the queen, because if we take the picture after the dance it would be too late to get it processed to be in the paper. It was a corny story but they bought it.

And so, I have pictures in my scrapbook of the blast we had, because we went off campus, fed the girls and danced, played music, no liquor, none of the—and we called the police department to tell the police, the Corvallis police, that the girls were safe, told them where they were and this old sergeant's laughing and we learned later that the Sigma Chis were there talking to him when the phone call came in and after he hung up from it, he said to the boys "well boys, I think the girls will probably be back about ten o'clock," because that's what we told this old sergeant, we were going to return the girls to the dance. And so there was a lot of fun back in those days of doing stuff like that.

**MD:** Well, there's, you know, a lot of fun, a lot of campus life, but you were there for an education. I understand that you kind of tailored your studies in educa—in engineering and industrial engineering to kind of work on your cars and develop ideas for automotive technology?

**KA:** Well, when I got—the first term, because of, I would say because of planning—well first girls, beer and bonfire. The rook bonfire took a lot of time and it was one of those things that I thought that was more important than classes because that was part of everybody's college life. I think it was, I was—either that or I thought I was big man on the campus, one of the two. And then I got a 1.29 first term and my life changed that night when I picked up my grades, right at the first of January, 1950. We went back right after the first, went back and got our grade cards. And I, because of having my own shop and doing these things, I've already built one hot rod as a kid, I was painting cars, I thought I was really quite skilled for an eighteen year old and I thought "I've got to go, I got to show these guys in the fraternity house that I'm better than my grades."

And I laid in bed, I remember we got, specifically, we went out, we bought—the guys went out to celebrate their grades and I remember buying a six pack of Miller's High Life and drinking that that night. I don't know if I drink all of it but I remember drinking that beer and when we got back to the sleeping porch I laid awake thinking how can I prove or what can I do to look better than my grades? I wanted to be accepted. And it came to me because I was reading *Hot Rod Magazine* all through high school, it came to me: I could build a car. But I didn't have the money to build the car and I started thinking "what could I use for an axle, what could I use for brakes?" That whole night that I lay there and I had no paper or pencil but I had it in my head of what I could do. And I think that's a blessing from God, it's not something that we're just automatically given to be the greatest creators on earth, because God's the greatest creator.

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And it's truly a blessing to be able to, what I call a dream, then be able to design. In other words, I could figure what I was—how I was going to build this car and then I could draw it. Those are three D's: dream, design and then I'd draw it and



then I could do it, because I knew how to weld, I knew how to do this, but I didn't know how to make castings and I didn't have the money to buy intake manifolds and so my first thing is I went to this—after coming up with this car—I wanted a four-carburetor manifold and I went to the pattern making teacher that I'd taken pattern making from and said "could I make a pattern for a manifold?" And you're not permitted to make personal projects in the classes in those days and they said "well, you can take a reading and conference class in pattern making, a two hour class or a three hour class and it'd be just like a normal three hour credit class, come into the shop." Well, I wanted this manifold now and I wanted to work on it like I was, you know, twenty-four seven. And as a result, I didn't study, my grades never got better, never got better. It took me five years to get to a 2.02 so I could graduate. And I'm not supposed to tell my grandchildren this.

But had that professor—if my grades had been better, maybe that would have happened. Number two, if that professor said "you could take a reading and conference class"—because he saw something in me as a student, because I was always asking, I was always getting done with my class assignments and then be asking if there was anything else I could do. So, I was doing extra credit things, thinking productivity was more important than anything else in one's life. So, if I can produce more widgets in class, I can produce more widgets on a job. But I didn't realize they're trying to teach us processes and not productions. They weren't trying to teach us productivity. Even though I was the major—I was taking classes in time and motion study and all of the things that talk about increasing productivity. So, I—and I lived and breathed productivity, because if you're going to make a car in the summer, you only got so much time, what is the easiest way to do it?

So, I have to credit Professor Meyers who was the one that let me do the pattern making and had it not been for him I don't know whether I would have got—I'd probably been kicked out of school or I'd gone into the military. I once thought of dropping out of school and going into the Air Force because I wanted to get into pilot training right away.

**MD:** So, we'll talk about the elephant, you know, the beaver in the room. I mean I've been beside myself for two weeks being able to actually talk with you about the original, first Benny the Beaver here at Oregon State College. What influenced this whole process of you becoming Benny the Beaver? I know that you were trying to be a Yell King.

**KA:** Right, there was, I think, maybe five to seven guys turned out and we went to Spec Keene and made a presentation about why they thought that they would make the best Yell King for Oregon State. And I think I brought up the fact that I'd been on the track team and I'd been on the rook bonfire and the noise parade and I bled orange and I think he probably said "thank you, Ken" and I went out in the room and a fraternity brother also turned out for Yell King. And so I waited for him to get done so we would walk across campus back to the fraternity house. And we had, we were told that night who he selected. We didn't have to wait until the next day or anything, so he was called in and—or he called there and he said "I have chosen Bill Sundstrom as Yell King."

[0:39:38]

So, I'm kind of devastated my fraternity brother kicked my butt and got the position and he said "do you know why I got selected?" and I said "no" and he said "I proposed that we have a student mascot and I'd love to have you be the student mascot." And I said "what the heck is a student mascot?" Because in those days we had two mascots, two student mascots in the Pac-8: Oski the Bear and whatever the Indian was called at Stanford, but the Indian, that Native American dressed in loincloth and a headband. The Huskies had a dog on a leash, the Ducks had a dog—a duck on a string, around his neck or around his foot, the Cougars had a cougar in a cage, the Trojans had a horse, but that's true that they rode the horse, so maybe you can say there was a third one there, and the Bruins had a bear in a cage.

So, Oregon State was going to have—join that rank of Oski the Bear. And I had never seen a football game where Oski the Bear had been in it and my—Bill Sundstrom grew up in the Bay area and had seen Oski the bear. So, I think that's what prompted Bill into saying it. So, all I knew about this was, well I said to Bill, I didn't have faculty advisors or anything, I said "what would we do?" and he said "we'll just do something during time-outs and during time when there was spare time to just kind of hype up the, hop up net or hype up the crowd. And I thought of how much fun it was for the rodeo clowns, because I watched every rodeo show at St. Paul growing up. I never wanted to ride rough stock but I rode my Shetland pony when I was—in 1938—when I was seven years old and went to the rodeo selling programs in high school and just hung around a rodeo. So, I thought I'd be like a rodeo clown and do funny little things. And they carried a .38 revolver, a lot of them, carried plumber's friends, a lot of toilet paper, he would go out and be taking pictures with—

the film supposedly was toilet paper, you know, he would reel that stuff. I never took any toilet paper to the games but I took a plumber's friend and pistol.

**MD:** Now, you came up with the first—this costume. I understand that you kind of built it yourself. We have very, very few images of you in your original costume, but—so what's the story about actually your head and how was it to wear, was it comfortable, or?

**KA:** It was heavy. I went into a costume shop in Portland. I probably visited several but I remember going in this costume shop and seeing this nice big round head and it was just paper mache and painted with nothing that—had no fabric or anything on it and I thought I could cover that with a brown shag rug so that it looked hairy. And so the tail and that head was covered with shag rug.

**MD:** Could you see out of it?

**KA:** Yeah.

**MD:** Oh, okay.

**KA:** Because it was designed as—but it sat on your shoulders, not much of a, not like we have today. And it was hot because there was no ventilation.

**MD:** And you were on—

**KA:** Heavy, hot and hideous.

**MD:** Yeah [laughs], you were on the field with that. And you were named Benny the Beaver?

**KA:** I was Benny Beaver.

**MD:** Just Benny Beaver. Now he's been, yeah he's Benny Beaver.

**KA:** Still, Benny Beaver.

**MD:** Yeah, and so you made—I find in the *Barometer*: that you made kind of a debut during your freshman convocation in September of '52, but nobody knew it was you in the costume. Was it designed around you being secret?

**KA:** Not particularly. The fraternity house all knew it, all my fraternity brothers. And my wife to be—we were dating—knew who it was and I'd go up and talk to her. And of course she wouldn't disclose anybody that knew who she was dating, but I remember at Multnomah Stadium when I went up and talked to her and she said people asked "who is that?" and she said "I don't know."

**MD:** So, apparently your antics on the field are legendary. You related a number of these stories in previous interviews but, so what did you do with that revolver? I understood you would shoot the...

**KA:** Well, I got a big revolver, I mean a fairly long barrel and I didn't think anything about somebody questioning packing a revolver around and I shot blank, just like starter pistol shells and I found, actually I found five, as I was moving to my new house last week I found five of those shells in my stuff from that day of, those days of having it. Because I probably bought a box of twenty or so, maybe fifty. And when you shoot a black powder out of a regular pistol, your powder goes right straight down the barrel. On a starter's gun the barrel was plugged and everything goes out the sides. So, I think one of the funniest thing I did is I crept up on the field after a referee threw his hankie for a penalty and I shot the hankie, this yellow hankie.

[0:45:16]

I shot it about three or four times and the referee came over laughing and he picked it up and the powder from that gun, red, it was like sparks had burned little wholes in his hankie and he's shaking it out and laughing about this whole thing.

And there's a picture of that and you can see the smoke and the hankie, but not only did it hit the hankie, it moved the hankie.

**MD:** Yeah, because they're trying to throw it to the smartest spot on the field.

**KA:** It didn't move far, but—and I have, somebody caught a picture of that. I don't know whether it was the *Oregonian*: or—but I have a big eight by ten picture of that.

**MD:** Now, I've seen a picture of you sitting on the goalpost trying to distract the other team or distract somebody?

**KA:** Yes. And I don't know how on the earth, because today I'm like "how would I ever climb up a goalpost?" I did that; the first time I did it was down at Stanford. I was going to just, I don't know what I was doing other than—and I wasn't drinking or smoking pot, I just thought it would be fun to climb up on the goalpost like don't come down here, wave your arms at them. It was a Stanford game and at half time I was walking through the Stanford, in amongst the Stanford marching band with my plumber's friend, beating on the bass drum. And that just really was upsetting the Indian because he was chasing me around the field like the beaver and the duck chase. And I ended up going past the Stanford rooting section and they said "hey turkey, hey turkey!" and all the sudden I saw this [holds up middle finger]. I had never seen that other than a bunch of guys having too much to drink or something. The whole rooting section flipped me off. So, I flipped off my fraternity brothers in Portland because they started chanting "hey turkey" right at the same time that they were introducing the Secretary of Interior, Mor—

**MD:** Douglas McKay.

**KA:** Douglas McKay. And in the *Barometer*: is written "who is the student that is dressed like a beaver that acts like a jackass?" Just read your *Barometer*: and you will see.

**MD:** Uh-huh, I have a copy of it, yeah. So, you, even as Benny you were not without controversy.

**KA:** Right.

**MD:** Now, this was, you were only involved with this for the one season, correct?

**KA:** Yes.

**MD:** And now, did somebody take over for you?

**KA:** Well, I left it, I left the gear with the athletic department, with Spec Keene, and I went off to the Air Force. So, I had no idea.

**MD:** Because it's been an unbroken chain of Bennys and you were first, for a whole season.

**KA:** Right, I should have seen it, and I probably did, because I was back at school the fall of '53 during football season but I was, why and I was dating Joan, so I might have not even gone to the football games and—because I was coming back to Newberg to see her.

**MD:** Well, you've definitely created a legacy at Oregon State and having a beloved mascot at all the sporting events. Now, you also mentioned that you only did the football games because it just didn't translate into the basketball stadium?

**KA:** Well, there wasn't as much space for Benny to run around because I was just, you know, I always had the whole sideline and I could be on both sides, you got all the track around, you could be just anywhere. And in basketball you got the players, you got—it's pretty crowded to do much around. And there isn't that same amount of time outs, there's not penalty flags, there's—it just, I went to one game, I did carry—I had a different pistol than the first one, I got a smaller one so it was easier to carry and I shot it a couple times and the noise in Gill was just too much noise. I think probably somebody said "don't do that again" or something. So, I don't think I probably maybe fired a couple shots and that was enough of that.

**MD:** Basketball referees weren't quite as forgiving?

**KA:** Well, I never got scolded by anybody but I guess you could say it wasn't as rewarding. There was no goal post to climb.

**MD:** Well, one of the things as a male student at Oregon State, you were required to at least go through a little bit of military training, but you chose to be in Air Force ROTC. Now, originally you were in Navy?

[0:50:10]

**KA:** Yes.

**MD:** And what caused the change?

**KA:** Well, in high school you can apply for a Navy scholarship and a regular gets a full tuition. An alternate gets the right to be in the program but no tuition. And I had managed to be an alternate from Newberg High to the Navy ROTC program. And maybe it was more than—but on a statewide basis, I got the alternate. And I told you about I was interested in guns and I was shooting on a rifle team, the Navy rifle team, and I came, I got a, I believe it was a 2.49 or a 2.47 GP, or grade in Navy ROTC and you needed a 2.5 to be a passing grade. The Air Force gave merits for shooting and the Army gave merits, so if we shot on the rifle team, they gave you a couple merits, which was like a couple of hundredths of a grade point. And so I went to the Navy and said, you know, you—they told me I'd have to go, my freshman year had to be done over, so that means I'd automatically be five years in the program. I wouldn't have to—I would still have to be in ROTC but I had to start all over and I said "the heck with it" and it was, I think I interviewed, I went and talked to both the Army—because I had an Army National Guard serial number because I was in high school and I had a Navy serial number and an Air Force serial number by the time I was in college. So, I went to all three, I took my choice and we were still wearing, just phasing out the old brown khakis and going to the Air Force with those.

I shot on a rifle team and was very successful. I did, I was High Point nationwide on one of the postal matches we had, which—and that was in the Navy, Navy ROTC. And I don't think I—I was thinking more of submarine duty than any, than carrier flying when I was in the Navy program. I think it was something pretty glamorous about having this insignia of a submarine officer.

**MD:** So, you continued throughout college in the ROTC program for Air Force and so how is that part of your OSC experience, being part of ROTC?

**KA:** Well, all of this may sound like it's just a fairytale, and it is a fairytale, but it's a true story, is that when I mentioned about my uncle that was in the Air Force in England and having those manuals, I studied those manuals religiously, because I thought that air craft engines were about as good a engines as you could build. And so, I had taken a class in air craft engineering, one of the terms at ROTC is air craft engineering, and I did very well and the next year they asked me if I would teach the class as a senior, teach it to the juniors and I thought "this is better than taking military law." They said "you can skip military law." So that—I mean all of these opportunities.

**MD:** Yeah.

**KA:** It's crazy. And of course I got an A in ROTC that term but I never took the military law and I would have gotten a D if I would have taken, because it was dry, boy.

**MD:** Yeah.

**KA:** So, that even got me in trouble in the Air Force because I was very knowledgeable of air craft and maintenance, air craft engineering, and I really wanted to be an aircraft maintenance officer. By the time I graduated school, I was, I wanted to be a pilot and get—and be a flight test officer and be in maintenance. And that's another whole complete story of going to the Pentagon and telling them I'm mal-assigned and they said "what?" But I did come out as an aircraft maintenance officer.

**MD:** Now, you received, now you were recognized with the Convair Award for Outstanding ROTC Cadet while you were, was that your senior year?

**KA:** Yes.

**MD:** And what was that recognition of? Just your overall—

**KA:** Well, the—there was the officers of the squadron or their group of the teachers and the professional military people select a student.

**MD:** Oh, okay.

**KA:** So, it's a pretty big honor, very big.

**MD:** Yeah, because—so, and you also actually expedited your schooling towards the end of your time at OSC and received your commission and there was something about being, having to commit to extra years in the Air Force or something?

[0:55:18]

**KA:** You had to have your commission by, I believe, by the first of May, 1954, or you would have a five-year assignment in pilot training. And so, they wanted people to really commit to go through pilot training and I didn't want that. I had a three year commitment if I got my commission before April first.

**MD:** Oh, so you pushed—

**KA:** Or May first.

**MD:** Yeah, so you pushed to be able to be able to get your direction, yeah.

**KA:** Well, actually I only needed one class to graduate and that was industrial costs accounting and I took that by correspondence from the time that winter term ended and that deadline date. And it's interesting right there is that I got D's in accounting and I had an F and I—Professor Boyd who wrote the textbook—I went to him and I said "I got to have a D, I can't, I'll have to come back to school. Well, he said "Austin, you'll never get through industrial cost accounting." I got an A in industrial costs accounting. And it was simply because I didn't do—it was sixteen lessons, I was married, I was committed to take a lesson a day and I studied at the library or at Chehalem Park out here, where I was just going to go study.

**MD:** And so you became a Second Lieutenant in the U.S. Air Force and then there's another story there, but let's kind of backtrack a little bit and let's talk about a woman named Joan Zemke and you met her and there's a story about how you met Joan.

**KA:** Well, we ought to start with Jane Roberts. Jane Roberts was a girl that I met my senior year. In the spring term I'd had an auto accident and busted up my chin and so some guys said "there's a girl that would really like to meet you" and we went out and had some beers and I started dating Jane Roberts. And when race time came and I went to my first drag race of the season in 1952 and she said "Ken, you can have your fraternity pin back if you're going to fly in the Air Force and race cars." So, we start with Jane Roberts. And I said "thank you very much; I'll take my pin back." And poor lady just was devastated and she said "I didn't mean it" and I said "well, then why did you say it?" and "this will never work," just that quick. I'm like "too complicated." So, on the way back from the drag races I had my buddy who was home on leave from the Air Force and he was saying could I loan him my car so that he could take his date out. His date, his girlfriend was with us. And here I am just, just left this other woman and I said "if you can get me a date with Joan, we can double date."

So, it was an arranged date on a Monday, which I think was like June 5th, 1952 and I go to the house and she was a very well-dressed business lady, she had been working for four years after high school and managed an insurance office in Newberg and here she was in a pair of jeans and hair up in curlers and looked like heck and I'm dumbfounded and I said "you want to go to the movies?" "Well, if you ask me." I said "well, will you go to the movies tonight?" And she went like she was and then she told me that if I wanted to, if I wanted any more dates I had to ask her, she didn't want somebody to make an arranged date. And she never dressed like that again. I think maybe she dressed that way intentionally. So, the

next night I picked her up in a car that had no floorboards in it and no place for her feet and people ask about, you know, tell us about your first—actually, it was the second date, the next night, and we never saw another person, either one of us, for the rest of our lives.

**MD:** So, you began a family at the same time you began your career in the Air Force. What were some of the highlights of your early years of married life and how it mixed with pilot training in the Air Force?

**KA:** Well, being an officer is a whole lot difference than being a cadet, because your wife travels with you and so we left Newberg together with a six week old baby, maybe five weeks old, wanted to see the United States because we may never see that again, so we went down the west coast to Yosemite and Grand Canyon and Bryce and went and saw the national parks on the way to Texas, to training.

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And then the first class in June of pilot's training, or first class of officers, of graduates, was massive because that was the year that the Air Force was massive because that was the year that the Air Force, four years after they started a full-fledged Air Force program. And so, we had almost four hundred kids arrive at Lackland Air Force Base and they'd never had—I say kids, young men—and they'd never had that many people come through there at one time and so, I remember standing there and go countdown line: one, two, the twos shoot rifles and the ones shoot pistols where everybody else that went through on a two-week training program shot pistols and rifles and bazookas and the whole, whatever. So, our whole training program was different than the norm for the Air Force, which was kind of chaotic.

And then we all arrived, a whole bunch of officers all arrived at—in fact all officers arrived at Columbus Air Force Base and no cadets. And there was, I think, fourteen of us. We're married and there were—nobody left Columbus, Mississippi to have housing, so we hunted and hunted and hunted as a married couple. We were saying "I hope we can find a place to live." And so I remember talking—or we got there early in the morning, just about daylight, we talked to the milk man and we talked to the garbage man "do you know of any houses that are empty?" And we found one where an instructor had quit working for Columbia Aviation, who was doing, was not tra—we weren't trained with him in primary by the Air Force, we were trained by the private contractors, with is California Aviation. So, we had a wonderful older couple we lived in a big house with, a big southern house and we had the downstairs and they had the upstairs and so they'd babysit for us.

**MD:** Now, you were trained as a pilot and you flew a number of different air craft, I'm an Air Force, aviation historian, so I'm interested in that but we won't get into that. But, one of your first assignments you were transferred to South Korea, overseas, right off the bat.

**KA:** Well, because of this love of students and the war is being over flying assignments were limited and so fourteen out of my class that we either had to sign for extra time, that five years if you want to get advanced training, or you took whatever assignment you got. So, fourteen of my classmates all went to Tyndall Air Force Base for radar, ground control, intercept. And while I was in training one of the officers, who was a First Lieutenant, one of my fellow classmates had a Navy commission and the Air Force was offering him an Air Force commission as a regular in the Air Force, because all the rest of us were reserve officers. We didn't have the Air Force Academy yet and we didn't have what they call the regular commission. We were all reserve commission and he busted his physical for flying because one of the questions are "have you ever been unconscious for more than twelve minutes?" and he'd been unconscious for an undetermined length of time from a Shetland pony kicking him when he was a little kid. Nobody knew how long it had been. Well, he gave up his Navy Annapolis and gave up his Navy commission to be in the Air Force and now he can't fly. And he went to Pentagon.

So, he encouraged me to go to the Pentagon after getting a radar assignment and saying "can you"—or "you should be in maintenance, you shouldn't be looking at a dumb radar scope." Well, I didn't have the military knowhow to know that I should be in my best clean, sharpest looking uniform. I went with my military pants on and a sport shirt. And I remember going into the officer classification section at the Pentagon and talking to this sergeant and said "my wife and baby are out in the car, how long do you think I'll be here?" And he looked at me and he said "not very long, Lieutenant." It was almost three hours before I left there and the man that I interviewed with was a Colonel Scott who wrote the *God is My Co-Pilot* and he was the same man that Bubba McCauley had spent time with and he said "I can't give you a maintenance

assignment because of your—you've got a frozen AFC as a radar controller, there's a shortage, but don't stop telling your story wherever you go and you will come back as an aircraft maintenance officer when you finish your tour in Korea."

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So, I kept that story going all the way and I got to Korea and they said "do you know anything about diesel engines?" and I said "sure" and he said "well, we need a, you got a ground power maintenance officer and there's a bunch of diesel engines running the generator sets for the radar and for a radio station and all this stuff." And then I became not only the ground power maintenance officer but the motor pool maintenance officer. And then when my assignments came back to go to the states, they held up my orders because no one goes back other than a controller and I was going back and they thought there was a mistake. So, I got to go to Myrtle Beach Air Force Base. I was excited as all get-out: brand new base. But no airplanes. What a wonderful way to start out.

**MD:** An Air Force career, yeah.

**KA:** But it was, again, an incredible experience because I got to set up the hangers for the shops and everything and then I became cash buyer for the base. I went off as a purchaser and did—because we didn't have airplanes yet, we were still in the process of getting going, and travelled all over South Carolina and North Carolina looking for stuff that we could buy to build this brand new base. Colonel Emmons from Medford, Oregon, who was one of Doolittle—on the Doolittle Raiders, was the commander that started the construction there, and Colonel Gabreski.

**MD:** Gabby Gabreski, the double ace.

**KA:** Yeah. So, and Gabby, when I got my orders to get out, he said—they came to me and said "if I can get you a flying assignment, will you stay?" Because I'd never really had a flying assignment. And we had our household goods packed and I went and talked to Joan and she said "let's just go home." So, my dream coming home from the Air Force was I could have a little lawnmower repair shop, and I actually tried to buy a guy that had a service station—a couple of gas pumps, it wasn't a service station, literally a gas pump. They had fishing reels, fishing tackle and lawnmower repair and he wasn't ready to retire, so I had to get a real job. And that began my career of a number of jobs but I truly was a gearhead.

**MD:** So, beginning in 1958, we're talking a series of eight jobs in seven years in your beginning of your engineering—

**KA:** Well nineteen to—

**MD:** Well, right after you get back from the Air Force.

**KA:** Air Force's job, got back in '57. That was the first job.

**MD:** So, what's the story with this whole idea of eight jobs in seven years?

**KA:** Well, they're right there on the wall, all of them. Air Force, after the Air Force there was Tektronix, I worked at Tektronix as this hotshot First Lieutenant jet pilot, been around the world, knew everything and didn't really have the qualifications to be a true electronics engineer but I was supporting that and I was called a mechanical engineer, which was really a machinist. And I didn't see having coffee or having lunch with the fellow machinists, I thought I would go with you engineers and so my fellow workers that worked on the lathes and milling machines thought I—thought Ken Austin thinks he's a cut above, which I did think I was pretty damn smart. And after three months I asked my boss, I said—and then my words were simply "what do you think my future's going to be here, working at Tech?" and he said "funny you should ask, maybe you should look for work elsewhere." What a nice way to say "you're fired."

And so I went right straight to Jack Murdock, the head of Tektronix, who just bought Aero Air and had one airplane and Swede Ralston was his partner and pilot and Jack told me to go out and talk to Swede, and that didn't work out. So, I went down to Oregon State and talked to Bill Paul, an automotive engineering prof who I took several reading conference classes from and he said "well Kenny, you ought to try to get a job that's automotive" and he put me in touch with P&G Supply, which was doing work on surplus GMC engines that were off of PT boats and things that—not PT boats but off of landing craft and stuff. General Motors made a six-cylinder engine, which is the little model engine up there. And P&G you can see on the boxes and stuff.

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And I was there three months and Tektronix paid me three hundred and thirty dollars a month, gross. In the Air Force I was getting five hundred and seventy dollars after taxes with my flight time, my time in the National Guard counted the extra duty, the added pack—I was getting a lot of money, money and then hazardous duty pay for flying, another hundred dollars a month, and now I'm at three hundred thirty, just about half. And so when I went to P&G Supply I said "I need to have three hundred and thirty net." In other words, after tax. Well, I didn't explain it after tax real thorough, I said "after net." Well, I got my first paycheck it was three thirty and then less the tax and he said "well, that three thirty is net, less tax." So, from that first paycheck on, it was like I'm not going to make it here either.

And I got a job of selling a bunch of surplus goods, because he bought freight from the—damaged freight from the railroad and various places and was kind of peddling that. He had a lot of stuff in a warehouse and I went out selling it and I thought "this is really cool" and at the same time I went to Oregon City Foundry to get a casting made because I made a pattern for P&G to make an oil filter adapter that they didn't have to use military oil filters on those engines. This is getting complicated. And I went to Oregon City Foundry because that was the man that helped me with my castings as a college student. And once—Ray Simmons says "if you're ever looking for a job, you ought to come see us." Well, three months down the road I'm looking for a job, I thought "I need to have my dad go with me and meet these people and see what Dad thinks," because Dad was an accountant and he would look over things and I would be emotional with this whole thing.

So, they offered me a job at Oregon City Foundry in sales and service. So, I went out in the company car and I'm trying to sell foundry goods and machine shop goods because the Oregon City Foundry had a shop as well, a machine shop as well as foundry. And two weeks later payday came along and he says "Ken, do you mind if you wait a week or two for pay? because we don't have enough money to pay you." And my poor dad says "that's one thing I forgot to ask," or looked into, is how financially stable this was. So, he said "I can't afford to have you out on the road selling; I got to have you making stuff that I can get income from." So, they put me in the shop and I was like, I was very unhappy. I didn't, I thought I was better than just running a lathe with this other guys, or welding, because I could do all that but I was better than that.

And while I was there, a fellow that I met in high school that I bought my—bought a car from, which is the white car sitting out here, got me my first job with Tektronix, was starting off with making a seat for the Dyna-Soar, the first space vehicle, and he said "Kenny, there's five of us getting together, there's three of us so far, would you like to join us as a junior engineer and draftsman, designing a seat for a space vehicle? You've got Air Force experience, we're going to do a lot of research, there's three months that we're going to study and make a feasibility study" and I was like "wow, this is really great." So, the armrest that you see there with the—is the armrest that I designed for this man in space that would be restrained as well as—well, as just primarily as a restraint. And above it is a picture of the seat that we designed and I used all my skills and I built that seat for Boeing in the second contract. And so we had six months of engineering and the engineers all left for other jobs and I stayed with the company as a machinist and I didn't want to leave and I thought it wasn't that bad of a job and I was flying C-119s in the reserve and I was getting a lot of flying time supplementing my—and by that time I had gotten up to five hundred and fifty dollars a month. So, that's less than a couple years. And then with Air Force it was like more than two thousand dollars a year before taxes on top of that.

So that was pretty good and I went into a company that made air brake components like this big, those air brake components there. And the man there said, when I—he was going down the hall and he saw me, he walked through the parts department, he said "are you the kid that went to Oregon State that was trying to build his own disc brakes?" The first car to have disc brakes was Jaguar and I thought I could put disc brakes on a hot rod. And so I wanted to—I went to Portland to Ott's Friction Products and talk to the Harry Everett, this man that saw me and said "are you the kid that went to Oregon State?"

[1:15:20]

And he just simply said, at that moment, he said "if you're ever looking for a job, you ought to apply here." So, let's go back to the place that did seat design and I'm a machinist. I went on a trip with the C-119s on a Saturday and he wanted me to work on a Saturday and it ticked him off because I didn't work and went flying and just told me that I could come pick my stuff up, "you're through." And the next day I went to work, applied at Williams, I was hired, started right after Labor Day, they wouldn't hire me during it, you know. I wonder why A-dec hired somebody who—on the end of



December and starts them in that calendar year, why don't you wait until the first of January? Because I'd learned that from my jobs. Well anyway, that's another story.

So, I came to work and it was on the meantime with that period of time, I asked if I could see any literature or catalogs on air brakes and I studied it, and not the theory but studied the product, what they had and—I didn't know what these things did. I knew nothing about compressed air. And it was just an absolutely incredible opportunity, because there were things that Mr. Williams wanted to do that he hadn't accomplished and he turned me loose on them and I'd come up with solutions and I was kind of his bright, shining star. And three months into the job he said "I'd like you to head up dental." And so, I worked two years at the place and in the arm design. And then I worked three years for Williams' Air Controls. And—but I got fired from Tektronix, I got fired from the arm design people and I got fired from Williams' Air Control. I told him I was going to resign, he said "resign, heck, you're fired." And—but he asked me to stay and work for another month. So I did that and the lady that was mixed up with cheating him off financially, and that's the reason I was going to resign, is because I discovered that her cheating and she said "don't you say a word" and I didn't know—I couldn't work under those conditions.

And so she got me a job with a company in Denver and so by this time I'm going to get a sealed deal: I got a two year contract, I got a ten year—I mean a ten percent commission for any product idea I took to them, I got twenty-some products that I proposed that they could enter the dental industry with. The company was Densco, they're still in business there in Denver. Nine months—I had a two year contract that first year at, I think it was seventeen thousand, the second year eighteen thousand, and the contract was for thirty-three thousand. And nine months they said "you're through, I want you out of here, we're through with you, you're out of here in two hours." And I was devastated and you know, that's a whole experience that we could talk about in business more than alumni at Oregon State, but I really believe that God has a strange way of working in our lives and that this was all—today I believe this was all God's plan, it was a journey that I was on.

And so I was going to build a vacuum system like we see on the wall and I started sketching and just that quick, it that—there's a better way. And where did that quick kind of idea, hadn't—I hadn't thought about it, I hadn't doodled about it, I'd never even thought about it and so I came up with a way to build an oral evacuator that started the company. And so, from the time of college to starting A-dec as the eighth job and, well actually in five years, if you count—seventh job in five years, because you take the Air Force career out and—

**MD:** Yeah, so your first product for A-dec was this evacuator, because back in the old days, prior to that, you'd have to, you know, had a dental chair, you'd have to lean forward and spit. And now was this the first of those evacuate—little suction things, or was it just better?

**KA:** Well, do you want a live demonstration? Because it's right here by it.

**MD:** We're looking at it right here.

**KA:** You going to chase me to the camera or do you want—

**MD:** Well, let's talk about it and then I'll cut some things in, yeah.

[1:20:10]

**KA:** Perfect. So, oral evacuation had been created in about 1958 and Dr. Elbert—that's not Albert, but Elbert, E-L—Thompson in Salt Lake City took his family vacuum cleaner, we'll say his wife's Electrolux, hooked it to a five gallon container, could have been a gas can or a metal can or a vessel, knowing that if you could suck the air out, you could put the water into the container and it wouldn't get in to the vacuum cleaner, it would be separated. That's what a wet vac does today. If you buy a shop vac, actually you buy a wet-dry or a shop vac, you can suck up water and not ruin the vacuum cleaner. So, they're quite noisy and we'll demonstrate that in a little bit here later, because there's one sitting in that bottom box. And so, the company in Denver sold those for a company in Salt Lake City that Dr. Thompson, Elbert Thompson started.

So, that was called Vacudent and—but they had no sales organization, so they manufactured it and Vacudent sold to Densco. Densco was trying to come up with a quieter system, because this was very noisy, and it was big and it had to be

emptied. It would be like dumping a shop vac out after you suck up debris all day; blood and saliva and just yuck. And my job was to figure out how to put two hoses on a simple air vacuum container, canister, and it was just almost impossible. And that was partially the reason I got let go, but big attitude, egotistical jerk, because I was talking about the ten percent royalty I would be getting to my fellow workers and...So, I got hired as a Kelly boy, as a Kelly, temporary services as a draftsman and went out with the kids and Joan and saying, you know, the job hunting's over, I'm going to get a call as a temp.

And on that—within minutes after telling her that or talking about it in the car, because we went on a picnic, I said "you know, we could go back to Oregon and build a vacuum system like Densco's building, because there's two guys who worked at Densco that got fired before me that just knocked off the product and were selling them out of their garages. And so, we could do this very thing up in Portland, because there's nobody building this little vacuum that no other—there was only one place that this little air vacuum system was being made by individuals was Denver.

And I maintain this to business people that want to start a business: if you can find something being done in a town that's not done in the town next door, you've got an opportunity to go next door and do it. And basically, that's how J.C. Penney and his men's clothing went from a town that didn't have a men's clothing store to opening up a men's clothing store, opening up a mercantile, dry good store. And interesting stories of J.C. Penney way back then. And that was what we saw and so we started out. Well then, the vacuum system was all we were going to build. We thought we'd build two thousand a year out of contract to build two thousand a year and pre-payments to start the company with.

And within six weeks after getting started, a local dentist wanted to buy the vacuum system but he didn't have a way to mount it and so he asked if we could build something to mount his vacuum system to, and the thing is right behind me here, is the vacuum system that was on there. And so, taking all those skills from the Air Force to—I mean all those skills from the cars and stuff, I was able to build this post without any help and I thought it was so good I built fourteen, because he wanted seven. And the second batch of seven were sold before his office was done. So, he took seven, there was already seven out in the field and then it just kept snowballing. And we hoped to have, really, I thought ten employees in five years. We had ten employees in nine months. And it's never stopped.

And I would—all the things that—and I'll use the word "I," all the things I did was based on somebody's needs, not on something that I thought was going to change the industry. It was the doctor, a school or an institution that said "could you do this?" And it was like "well, we'll try." And that led into a commercialized product.

[1:24:59]

**MD:** Well, that's that whole idea of stand-up dentistry and then you, and then moving into the sit down, where the dentists can sit next to you, like they are today. And the tray that you developed, it was all based on filling these needs.

**KA:** Mhmm. Well, the first thing that happened that, what—when I was a kid in the thirties, the dental drill was rotating about two thousand RPM and you felt every revolution and it hurt, it was painful. And the dentist knew that if you could speed that up, that would reduce the trauma and so they used, they were using a steel bur, just a carbon steel bur and the burs wouldn't take that speed, they would get dull real quick. So, they came up with the idea of diamond dust and we called it diamond drill and that worked great but then it got hot, didn't deteriorate but it got hot, so if we put water on the tooth while it's cutting, it won't get hot. Once we got water on the tooth we got spit. If we can suck the water out of the mouth, we don't have to spit, but the problem was we needed three hands, a mirror in one hand a drill on the other hand and who's going to hold the sucker?

So, I'll hire somebody to hold the suction device. So, that became the dental assistant came into the picture to hold the suction device and she had one hand free and says "I could help you by handing you things if you gave me a work surface and a place to store things." So, the thing that's behind you is the dental assistant's tray that had all of her needs and the doctor's needs right at her fingertips. They weren't off in a cabinet someplace.

So, the whole process is speeding up but he's still standing up. And sit down dentistry started by pure accident of a doctor saying "I wish my patients could lay down" and he said that to a Niagara chair manufacturer, which was a lounge chair that had a vibrator to relax you, and they sold these at dental meetings so you—in your own private office you can go in between patients and turn the vibrator on and loosen up the tense back and this doctor said "couldn't you build a chair like

that Niagara lounge you're selling?" So, John Naughton from Des Moines Iowa started the DentaleZ company making a sit-down chair and he just, all he had was the top part from here on up and not the bottom part, because he'd mount it on to any kind of chair base. And then came the idea that they could build a chair base.

So this is, this whole thing, A-dec was—the period of time of change started when—I would say the late 1950s and I got started in the industry in 1960. So—and A-dec started in '64. So, we were right at the beginning of this whole revolution, this whole change, and nobody was filling the needs because of the major companies, there was three companies making big things like this stand-up unit, pedestal unit, and did not want to build a unit like these little compact units that are behind me because it would be just like the car manufacturers didn't want to build Volkswagens because they couldn't sell them for what they were selling the big cars for, even though that's what the customer wanted. So, we really hit the jackpot by just filling a need. And "find a need and fill it," that's a very simple, basic business philosophy.

**MD:** Yeah, oh yeah, basic business, yeah. Well, I'd like to go back to—back to OSU a little bit and you and Joan's philanthropy. After the A-dec took off and became what it is today, you've given back quite a bit. Do you have some philosophy about, you know, why give back to your alma mater, why give to your community?

**KA:** Well, I was—Joan and I were receiving recognition from Head Start for donating some land and I was trying to understand—to answer your question why do you give back—I was trying to understand why we gave back and it dawned on me just minutes before to receive this recognition that I could share something with them that was very powerful to me and to them and it was telling them the story of my father taking milk to the neighbors, two cows just providing family milk and whatever was leftover he'd take it to the creamery and sell to the creamery, but he always had a two-gallon milk can that he would take to the neighbors full of milk. And I asked Dad "why are you taking the milk to the neighbors when you could sell it?" And he says "we have more milk than we need, our business is raising oats and wheat and grain, so we can give this milk to the neighbor because they have no cow. We have more milk than we can drink and they have no cow." We have more money than we can use, you have no money. Head Start had—we had five hundred acres of land around here. Head Start wanted an acre. We have more land than we need.

[1:30:19]

So, this dental business and the building to be created has made it possible to have large margins of profit. For example, this little device right here has got seven moving parts in it and this device sitting over here, or sitting right over there has got thirty-some moving parts in it and they both do the same thing. This in a box with tubing and ready to send to the doctor costs seventeen dollars. So, I thought seventy-five dollars is a lot to charge for it. Fifty percent—excuse me, forty percent discount, that isn't bad, we'll—seventy-five dollars we'll have, and I haven't done the mathematics, but something...you do the mathematics. Very profitable. Our dental dealers wouldn't sell them, and we sold everything through dental dealers, because he got a hundred and eighty-five for that. Now, it's very simple business: if you have a business or you are a salesman, which of the two would you want to sell? This for seventy-five and get a commission of seven dollars and fifty cents or that one and get eighteen dollars commission? Never thought of that. So, the dental supply house said "well, the only way we'll sell this if you put a retail price of a hundred and fifty or more." It still costs seventeen dollars to make. So, our margins of profit, because of the simplicity in design, made it possible to have more than we need and give back. And we started; our first giving probably was to the Newberg Fire Department.

**MD:** I know Chris, you had some issues that you wanted to talk about with this, along this line?

**Chris Petersen:** Yeah, well I guess we need to just move to the decision to start giving to Oregon State. Was the Austin Family Business Program the beginning of that or was it something before then?

**MD:** Oh yes, the first was athletics. I had a track—I got a grant made on the track team, so I got two hundred dollars I think a term, for working in the bask—or in the gymnasium passing out men's baskets with socks and jocks and if Oregon State was—if I hadn't got that, would I have been able to stay in school? And I was asked if I'd like to join the president, being a member of the President's Club and take out an insurance policy and I said "well, just let us give you the ten thousand dollars." And they said "what?" I said "yeah, we'll just give you the ten thousand dollars instead of insurance." And we've never had to borrow money, you know, the business world says "how do you finance this?" we've never had to borrow money.

**CP:** So the initial gift was then to athletics—

**KA:** Athletics. Because of that. And then Joan was active on the foundation and active on the government, governor's education mission and all the presidents of the colleges, Dave Frohnmayer, John Byrne and Portland State and on, but they went on a mission of traveling around the state talking about the needs with lay people. And it was during that time that Joan said "why doesn't Oregon State have a family business program? Because there's a market for that, businesses are hungry for information?" Because it was before it's time. There were few private consultants. And so she said "we can have the family business program" and I'd like to think it was called the Oregon State Family Business Program and instead they called it the Austin Family Business Program because we gave them a million dollars to start it.

**CP:** And was she active in kind of the details of getting it started?

**KA:** Well, we both were but not the nitty-gritties, it was how you reach—it was very simple that the family business program should be exactly like an extension service. How can Oregon State help the family business people? Because the extension service helped Dad, you remember I talked about coming out and taking pictures of the making hay there on the farm and you could ask the extension service about irrigation, you could ask them about muck mill production or fertilizers or whatever, sprays for fruit trees, so why can't you have this resource of the nitty-gritties of transition and succession and sale and estate planning.

[1:34:57]

And then there's all the issues within the family business, of how do you bring the kids in and how do you deal with the in-laws and, that become outlaws and it's a very—been a very successful program. It drifted away from that extension service idea but it's really back to it at this point, so it's great.

**MD:** The—you know, one of the most beautiful buildings on campus is Weatherford Hall and it now houses the, you know, part of the entrepreneurship program. Did you have a kind of connection with Weatherford when you were on campus, is that one of the reasons why the, it's there or was that a college decisions?

**KA:** The college wanted to resurrect Weatherford, it was a in a state of disrepair and they talked about having it being a joint program between engineering and business and forestry and ag and all of the different—so it's kind of an integrated center, hub, and—but before that, ask for that, for—they were asking money for the engineering school and I maintain I'm an imagineer or a blacksmith but I am not an engineer. And they lay it on me that "you're one of the few graduates that's a member of the National Academy of Engineering. You're one of the few members." And I think that's one of the highest honors, because it's not something you buy or you don't—it isn't because you're giving or you're—a popularity contest, you're nominated for your works. And a fellow classmate and a fraternity brother nominated Jim Piro, who was a help with the alumni center, CH2M Hill. Jim was huge on that project. But Jim nominated me, I didn't even—it was all in secret and it was just like "wow."

And so, they came with this idea of giving to the engineering school and I said "I'm a blacksmith, you don't understand." And so they came back again and told about Weatherford and Joan and I said "that sounds like something we could help" and so we gave them four million dollars to start the program to get the state to help fund it. And I think it's really become what I dreamt of it being: a safe haven to follow your passion. I got to follow my passion at Oregon State. How can other people get to follow their passion, regardless of what your passion is, can you do it within the confines of the, of all of the entrepreneurship program or the program at Weatherford? And you know, I would, early on there was a young boy that—young man—that the University of Oregon kicked out of school that was writing a magazine called *Brass*, it was a magazine for students investing and he wanted to follow that passion and Oregon said "out" and here he got to follow it. I don't know how he's doing or where that is today but those kids are doing—those young people are doing such great things, it brings out; I think it really brings out the human potential. And Oregon State let me bring out my potential.

**MD:** And now with the new Austin school, you know, the business center for the College of Business that has just been completed, your name's attached to that as well but it's more with the College of Business.

**KA:** Well, I didn't realize that my nice retirement fund was going to get to our kids at twenty-five cents on the dollar. When I die my children will have twenty-five cents of my retirement. Oregon State has a hundred percent on that retirement. That simple.

**CP:** What was your involvement with the, sort of the design of the building?

**KA:** None.

**CP:** None. It's a striking facility though; it must be something else for you to visit now.

**KA:** Well, it's—I'm so conservative, you don't need to have big ceilings, the big white halls and the fireplace, but it is truly a beautiful, beautiful facility. And to see the students interacting and all, and the same thing is true up at the dental school, so you have that same ambience and the spaciousness and—but when you grow up in the depression and save a chewing gum wrapper because it's got foil in it, it's just hard to think "how much is it going to cost to heat that extra space that's not doing anything?" But don't—you're going to have to delete this from the tape, in your recording.

[1:40:14]

But, you know, what a blessing. You know, why are some of us more blessed or more fortunate than others? But, it's just hard to realize.

**CP:** Yeah.

**MD:** Well you, you've said that your, basically your career and your life has gone from cows to cars to cavities and I think we want to add to that that you've gone from cavities to a legacy. You're—you have such a connection with Oregon State in so many ways and this legacy has been, it's a big part of Oregon State and I'm sure a big part of your life now.

**KA:** Well, thank you. It's hard to fathom. It, I know that people in the dental industry, the new kids, they all think I'm a legend. I never set out to do any of these things for those purposes but—and it's hard to see myself from your side. I wish I could sit there and look at me and say "oh wow," you know, but inside you think of all the trials and tribulations and you know, the battle with alcohol was devastating and the battle with self-confidence. If you go back to that, why was I trying—I lacked self-confidence down at school, that's why I was trying to build a car to prove to the guys that I was something.

You know, why do we have that low self-confidence? Why did I feel I wasn't good enough on the track team? These other kids could run—I said that in high school. The day I set the sprint records I tried to get the coach to put somebody else in the hundred and two-twenty because we were down at Grand Ronde and I just knew those Indian kids in Grand Ronde could run faster than I could. No, coach says "well, run like they're going to scalp you" and I says—and I got down on the starting blocks and I remember thinking "I'm not going to let those guys get close to me." And how that drove me to running faster than I'd ever ran before, I don't know. But I was not going to get scalped. But that lack of self-esteem, and in high school, I didn't think, you know, I talk about that being led to the student council. I didn't think I was good enough because I went to a country school.

And so, we just do what we need to do and do the best, you know. I think that's a wonderful slogan the 4-H has: "make the best better." Make the best better. And another wonderful slogan is just "is this the best way to do things," and just constantly do the best and that gets you—that's part of the reason I got let go from that last job, was I didn't get the two hoses on the vacuum system because I kept thinking the next day, what I'd discovered the day before, there was a way to make an improvement even more. And they just said "that's good enough" and I've never been one to say "that's good enough." You know, if I got a car all buttoned-up and ready to go to the races and I think "I could do something more to make it go a little faster" I'll stay up all night working on it, to get it to go a little faster. That's just one more wrench, just one more tweak and it'll go, you know.

And that's, and I think that's what I really believe in, constant improvement. I will come away from—I know I'll come away from this, I hope I don't agonize over it, but how could I improve what I did today? I've been doing these enough that, you know, but my first book signing I thought that this is going to be, I don't know how to sign books and I asked Lisa to go with me to just help me. Now it's a blast.

**MD:** Well, this interview has really only scratched the surface of you and Joan's story. I know there are so many little idiosyncrasies that we haven't touched, but do you have any special word or special thought for the Beaver Nation that's going to be seeing our interviews that you'd like to leave us with?

[1:45:10]

**KA:** Well, I think those slogans like, you know, from my fellow alums is "make the best better." Share with what you don't need, you got extra of. Constantly improve and, for gosh sakes, follow your passion. The, you know, I see these people that are so good in the world and we admire, you think they don't practice much. And I was listening to the radio years ago and they were talking to Michael Jordan. He was just getting ready for the National Championships and he'd been down at the gym shooting his fade-away jumpshot and was like "well why? You've got that perfected," and he says "no, I have to practice it every day." And about the same time I met George Shearing, a great piano player who played down in Salishan and internationally known, and I said "Mr. Shearing, how often do you play the piano?" and he says "every day. I love playing piano." So, the greatest thing in life is finding something you love doing and you'll never regret having to work at.

And so, what I was doing in school instead of studying, I look at it today, I was practicing my career. Believe it or not, I was act—I mean if I hadn't been hands-on in the shop, you know, and making the fuel injection system and making the quick change gear boxes and doing these things, I would have been like most of the students, I'd have been working at a drafting table and be just—but because of having that own—well like I say, you learn from your failures and the more you do the more likely you are to have failures. And so, don't be afraid to fail. Try and try again. And when you're wrong, promptly admit it. Don't make excuses. I made excuses when I was in pilot training. For every mistake I made I had an excuse and I was threatened with the idea that "they're going to wash me out if I made one more excuse." And I had to learn to say "yes sir, no sir, maybe so, sir." And, I mean everybody should learn something every day. If I'm—what you're asking me to do is talk about, you know, just philosophies and—learn something new every day and, you know, there's some, been great men who would write down what they learned every day. And I've learned through my program of recovery is thank God, as you understand God, but thank God for each day and each breath. And be thankful, be grateful.

And it's hard for me to believe that you can graduate from an undergraduate school and not be grateful for the education you got, thinking that all your successes go to your advanced degrees, if you want to be a masters or a doctorate. I know many successful people say "well I don't owe Oregon State a thing; I owe it all to Harvard where I went to—got my doctorate." Well, how did you get there? And I have started just thinking about what about that teacher that let me build the casters under the Coca-Cola machine, or what about the teacher that said "why don't you try knitting bigger loops and then knit less rows and see what it looks like," if that teacher hadn't let me. So—or what about being thankful for my mom and dad who said "here's a wrench, try taking it apart" or "here's something broke, try to fix it"?

It's—I think the human being is so complex that it's hard to see all of those things that have made great people great. They don't really, I don't think they have the answer but the answer's there somewhere and as we say, we don't know whether that—don't know whether being an only child or living on the farm or was it all God's plan? Or is it all of the above or the genetics? My great—my grandfather on my mother's side had polio and he was very inventive. He built things, he built a riding plough and he—so that he could plow fields and ride, because he couldn't walk. And the family talks about it was one of the early riding ploughs and he probably was like myself where you could buy a riding plough but he didn't have the money but he knew how to build it.

[1:50:19]

And that's how I got started making parts at schools. I didn't have the money but I could make it. And that has carried clear up into today, is that instead of buying a bookshelf that I'm faced with, as we speak, I need a couple bookshelves, I'm thinking well, I could use one of these ex-you know, shelves out of the shops and patch it up. And you know, if you got the means, go ahead and buy it but when you don't have it, well necessity—the mother of invention is necessity.

**MD:** Yeah.

**KA:** So, what are these kids growing up today have a necessity? You got all the toys in the world and you go to the developing countries and kids are playing with a bicycle wheel and a rim with no spokes and they're rolling it down the

street having a blast. Our kid—my great-grandkids have got to have something out of—off of the internet delivered by UPS that's in a big box that's full of color and makes a lot of noise and it'll last a few weeks and they want something else. I bet you those kids are still rolling around that bicycle rim I saw in China five years ago by another bunch of kids. So...

**MD:** Well, on behalf of the Oregon State University Special Collections and Archives Research Center and the Sesquicentennial Oral History Project, it's been an honor speaking with you and we thank you for your participation in this project and you're going to be part of the legacy once more for our hundred and fiftieth anniversary coming up in 2018. Thank you very much.

**KA:** You're sure welcome.

[1:52:03]