



Knute Buehler Oral History Interviews, August 4, 2014

Title

“OSU's First Rhodes Scholar”

Date

August 4, 2014

Location

Buehler campaign quarters, Bend, Oregon.

Summary

In interview 1, Buehler reflects upon his roots as an Oregonian and his undergraduate experience at Oregon State University. In particular, Buehler discusses his academic experience - including two influential professors - his participation on the OSU baseball team, his hangouts, and campus jobs that he held. From there he notes his time at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and his experiences as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University.

The remainder of the session is devoted to Buehler's career in medicine and in public service, his continuing connection with OSU, and advice that he would impart upon college students of today.

Interviewee

Knute Buehler

Interviewer

Janice Dilg

Website

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

Transcript

Janice Dilg: So, today is August 4th, 2014. I'm here with Dr. Knute Buehler at his campaign headquarters in Bend, Oregon. My name is Janice Dilg and this is part of the Oregon State University oral history project. Good afternoon.

Knute Buehler: Good afternoon.

JD: So, I think it seems always kind of fitting to begin a little at the beginning. If you would just talk briefly about where you're from and you're growing up, and perhaps what you were interested in and liked to do in your early years.

KB: Yeah, well I have deep, deep Oregon roots. I grew up in Roseburg, I graduated from Roseburg High, and then from there on to Oregon State, so I have that connection with the state, certainly. So, my decision to go to Oregon State certainly was easy based on that.

JD: And what was it about Oregon State University that attracted you? There are other universities within the borders.

KB: That's right. Well, I think it was that unique combination of a great location in Corvallis—I had a brother who went there, so I felt comfortable at Oregon State, spent quite a bit of time with him, which was really nice of him to show me around when I—because I'm eight years younger than him, so showing your little brother around college is not always the most, the first choice of a big brother, but he was good about that. And then I played baseball at Oregon State, so you know the top-rated baseball program certainly was an attraction, and then high quality academics in the subjects I was interested in, and that was mainly microbiology at that time.

JD: So, you had already developed some fairly specific interests, or just you knew microbiology broadly and would figure it out from there?

KB: Yeah, exactly. So, I knew I liked science, was interested in science, exactly which direction I didn't know, but I had an interest in microbiology from the very beginning, because of—then genetic engineering was just starting and that's really captivated me when I was a high school student.

JD: So, talk briefly about when you arrived in Corvallis on the OSU campus, kind of what was the campus like at that point in time and what were your interactions with some of the professors and the courses that you took?

KB: Well, I remember the first week I got there, because the baseball team actually shows up a couple of weeks before school starts, which is actually quite nice because no one else is around and you kind of have a free run of the place, which was nice to sort things out as a freshman. It also introduced you to upperclassmen on the baseball team who became good advisors and mentors of things to do and things not to do; classes to take and those types of things. And then we quickly transition from the baseball into the dorms, which is always a great experience, so I was on the fourth floor of McNary Hall, which I don't, not sure if McNary is still a dorm anymore, but—

JD: It's actually part of the Honors College.

KB: Is that right?

JD: Mhmm.

KB: Oh good, good. So, it's aged well. So, I was on fourth floor of McNary and it's always fun that first week of meeting all your new friends, which many of them from McNary fourth floor are still lifelong friends. In fact, just this week we're going to get together, four or five of us, in Portland and kind of celebrate.

JD: And what about—so you're taking a variety of classes, you're busy, I'm sure very busy with sports?

KB: Yeah.

JD: Because it was a high-caliber program, were there classes or professors that were memorable to you that still stand out?

KB: Yeah, absolutely. Two professors that really had broad impact on me. The first was Dr. Al Ferro who was a microbiology professor, and I remember taking biology from him and he taught the section on microbiology and genetic engineering and I knew I had an interest in that before I went, but after listening to his lectures, like a whole new world opened up. And he was just so bright and insightful and on the cutting edge, you know? I'll never forget, at the end of one of his lectures I went down—you know this is a big lecture hall, two hundred students, and you know very nervously went down and introduced myself to him and asked if I could work in his lab. And he said "well, come and talk to me next week," and so that was really the start to a two-year relationship of working in his lab, doing research projects and really allowing me to get my hands around that whole field that I had only really read about and dreamt about before coming to Oregon State. Then, kind of on the other extreme of things, away from science, because I also have—I have a science degree but I also have a liberal arts degree from Oregon State—I increasingly became interested in history and met a professor named William Appleman Williams, who taught international diplomacy and international relations and he kind of opened my eyes in a whole different way to kind of the international context of U.S. foreign policy. So, he had a real big impact on me and one of the reasons I continued on and got a graduate degree not only in science and medicine but also in politics and economics.

[0:05:32]

JD: And since baseball was one of the reasons that you went to Oregon State, talk a little about the team and the coach and what that experience was like.

KB: Yeah, a tremendous experience. Being part of a team is just such a valuable thing. It teaches you lessons that the classroom, you know, a lot of great experiences in the classroom, but playing baseball and being on a team brings you a whole other set of experiences and influences, and I think probably the biggest thing I learned, two big things I learned playing baseball, one: how to really compete at a high level and over and over again and under some trying circumstances. And back then Pac-10 baseball was a very competitive place to play. And the second thing, though, was I was able to play and travel and letter, but I wasn't one of the prominent members of the team, and that's a very big change from high school when essentially you're the star of the team. But that was a very important lesson, to learn how to also play a contributing role, but a minor role, and still be someone who is an integral part of the team. So, that's a big transition from being kind of the go-to person in high school to playing a minor role, but an important role. And that's good for all of us to understand.

JD: Sure. And any particular kind of campus traditions or hangout places in Corvallis that kind of made up part of the OSU experience for you?

KB: Yeah, definitely. You know I did microbiology and U.S. history as majors, a lot of late nights studying, and this was unfortunately before we had cappuccino and lattes and espressos, so in order to stay up late at night I had the habit of—I lived for several years at the College Inn, and there used to be right across the street a doughnut shop, so that would stay open very late. So, I'd go in there about midnight when I had to study late and get a big cup of regular coffee and an apple fritter. So, after that coffee and apple fritter, I could stay up for hours, so it was sugar and caffeine fueled.

JD: I know today, particularly, how to pay for college is a big issue for students and families, and what was that like for you and your family when you were going through?

KB: Yeah, I was very fortunate because the college tuition was less when I went through and I was able to obtain some scholarships, but also I had great jobs in the summer, so I grew up in Roseburg, so one summer I spent logging, which is a hard job, dangerous job, but it pays quite well. So, I was able to, with a combination of scholarships and a summer job like logging, pay for my own school through all four years. So, very fortunate.

JD: And did you have any jobs on campus? I know you mentioned the lab, but I don't know if that was a stipend or—

KB: Yeah, I got just a little bit of a stipend for doing the research, but I did work a little bit—one of the perks of being on the baseball team was there was some jobs working as security at football games, basketball games, volleyball games, so I would do that at that occasion too, which was really nice because you got paid to essentially watch the crowd and watch the game, so it was a great job to have. I'm not sure if I would have done much security if something really happened. In

fact, I can't remember, I can't remember anything very dangerous happening at the woman's volleyball match, but I was there in case it did.

JD: And so, you go through your undergrad, you graduated with honors, you won scholarships along the way, how did you decide what was next and how did OSU perhaps help prepare you for that?

KB: Yeah, well you know probably the second-best decision I ever made in my life was to attend Oregon State (the first being to marry my wife) and because no door was closed for me after I went to Oregon State, you know? I was able to go anywhere and reach as high as I wanted to with my OSU education. So, I went to medical school afterwards at Johns Hopkins and from there a Rhodes scholarship at Oxford University, and my OSU education prepared me superbly for both of those experiences.

[0:10:10]

JD: So, you've lived in Roseburg and then you've lived in Corvallis, and then you go off to Baltimore, to Johns Hopkins, east coast is just kind of different in general, but talk a little about just that whole different environment.

KB: It was a culture shock of tremendous proportions. You have to understand the context of that. Johns Hopkins medical school is in east Baltimore, which is, has a long history of pretty severe poverty and difficult circumstances and the time I was there it was particularly bad because it was the height of the crack epidemic, HIV was just starting to show itself and just really a neighborhood and a community under siege, and as a medical student, first-year medical student, you're living right in the midst of that. So, someone coming from Roseburg, growing up in Roseburg and going to school in Corvallis, it was quite an eye-opening experience.

JD: And so, it sounds like kind of your exposure there really helped shape some of your next decisions, including perhaps the Rhodes scholarship.

KB: Yeah, it was fundamental. You know, I encountered things there which I never thought were possible in this country. I remember one night as a first-year medical student being in the emergency room and a gang gunfight in the ER of Hopkins hospital, where three or four people were gunned-down right in the hospital waiting room. It was not unusual to be on the HIV floor, and back then we barely understood what was going on, and a whole different context: it was almost a death sentence. You know, a whole floor of young men essentially dying of incredibly rare infections and cancers that we really didn't have our handle on of how to treat it. It was almost like a society under siege, both from disease and also from just social ills and I felt like my education at Oregon State had prepared me enough to observe and be sensitive to those things, but to really understand the root causes of those things, I wasn't quite there yet. So that spurred me to apply for the Rhodes scholarship and study politics and economics so that I really felt and understood what was going on in those communities.

JD: So, speaking of culture shock, then you're off to Oxford to Merton College. Talk a little about that experience, both kind of just in another culture, as well as the college experience, and a different type of educational institution completely.

KB: Yeah, very different educational process there and a very different culture. I think I wasn't anticipating how different the culture is and I think naively I was assuming since we shared this common history and language that it wouldn't be that different from the United States and I couldn't have been farther from the truth. It was a real eye-opening, cultural experience, all the way from how people socialize to how they have meals to certainly how they educate people, so the educational system is vastly different than what I encountered at Oregon State, because at Oxford you have no lectures. You have only one final exam for your whole time there, so the whole year you're studying. You're studying for your final exam, which goes for a week, so you get one grade at the end of the whole time there. So, a lot of differences, but probably the most profound thing is you're taught individually. You have a tutor, a professor for each class and you're taught on an individual basis, which is a wonderful way to teach people. I feel very fortunate to have that experience. Of course, very expensive to teach people like that, but there are still a few places like Oxford that do teach that way.

JD: And so, what were the British questions and misperceptions about the guy from Oregon?

KB: Well, I think there was a certain amount of testing and kind of pushing the Americans a little bit, especially the Rhodes scholars, because supposedly you were some of the best college students, and I think the British students and the British professors want to kind of push us and see how good we really are, so I felt very challenged many times.

[0:15:06]

And it took me a little while to understand what exactly they were looking for. So, one of the big things is a lot of British education, and for that matter, society, is really focused on the argument, learning how to argue. See, that's just not really part of our society. In fact, it's not even polite for us to really argue, which I think is a problem for our society, and a typical British dinner party, you would argue about politics and religion, and in this country we're told never to broach those subjects, much less argue about them, so they're really trained in that kind of dialogue, and healthy dialogue, and it extends onto the educational system. So, it took me a while to understand what they wanted. The answer wasn't so important as actually making your case, making your argument. In fact, if you were really good you could argue both sides and win, right? The old Cicero approach; you could take both sides of the argument and win, so it took me a little while to kind of figure out that nuance. But once I did, wow, what a valuable, valuable skill.

JD: And did anyone know where Oregon or Roseburg or Corvallis was?

KB: Definitely not Roseburg, definitely not Corvallis, but very few people probably knew where Oregon was. I would always say I was from the state north of California, then they would get it. And so, you know at Oxford it's a very formal place. It's very formal, so your evening meals in my college, we had to wear a suit jacket, a tie, a cape and a hat. That was the typical, kind of like Harry Potter, it's just very—in fact some of those movies were filmed in our dining hall. So those, it was a very formal environment, so occasionally just to be rebellious, I would wear my red flannel shirt from Roseburg, and that used to get a little attention. It was my way of being a little bit of a rebel I guess.

JD: So, you earned your MA in politics and economics and then you come back and finish your medical degree and you ended up doing your residency at OHSU in Portland. And just briefly talk about being a resident, and I did notice that you won the Chief Resident Grace Under Pressure Award, and I was curious about that.

KB: Well, being a resident is a very trying experience. You are pushed mentally and physically and emotionally. Back when I was going through that, we'd work a hundred hours a week, many times thirty hours straight as orthopedic surgeons, seeing a lot of trauma, a lot of people hurt really bad, seeing kids hurt really bad, so you have the emotional aspect also and you're trying to learn, you know. I mean there's just such a large body of knowledge to learn for surgery before you have the confidence to really do it yourself. And so all those things coming together, it's a really intense experience, but a great one. It was nice to really be back in Oregon. I think at the end of my time at Oregon State I really felt like I needed to leave Oregon, I needed to grow and I needed to see other places, and I couldn't get back fast enough. So coming back to Portland in 1991 was really a blessing and I just felt like I was back home.

JD: And anything to the award?

KB: Oh, Grace Under Pressure, yes. Grace Under Pressure is, as a resident, and especially as a chief resident, so meaning your final year, you're responsible for all the other residents, all the junior residents, and so many times that can be challenging because you don't how people are going to respond when they first start becoming surgeons and as a chief resident your responsibility to mentor them, train them and also to bail them out of troublesome situations, so that's where the grace comes in, in trying to do that in a way that solves the problem, but also as a learning, positive experience for the junior residents.

JD: Sure. So, as you spoke, it sounds like you had already made the decision of which field you were going into that you were going to that you were going to—just a little light blink—that you were going to go in and be an orthopedic surgeon.

KB: Yes.

JD: And how did you make that decision?

KB: Well, a couple things. I was exposed to—because I have an older brother, and the same one who went to Oregon State, who is also an orthopedic surgeon, so I exp—I guess my brother just kind of led me down the course all the way, so

I had a lot of insider knowledge of what that's like. But as I was going through medical school, it really became apparent to me that what I really liked was fixing problems, and orthopedic surgery is one of those things where people come to you with a problem and you diagnose it and you fix it and they get on with their life and they're happy with it, so I was really attracted to that, to that aspect.

[0:20:36]

JD: And so then, at the end of your residency you had to decide where you were going to practice, and I'm not sure where in there you got married and started a family, which is also important.

KB: Yes, so I married, I met my wife at medical school and we got married after I returned from Oxford and right before we moved to Oregon. So, my wife is an eye surgeon so we had to balance careers and decisions of where to go and I always really liked Bend. I used to vacation here as a child and we were both very fortunate to find great jobs here. So, that made it very easy.

JD: So, overtime you've both built a successful medical practice but you've also clearly been very involved in your community and you have a very long list, and we won't, don't need to talk about all of them. I know that you were on the Board of Advisors for OSU of Central Oregon, the Ford Family Foundation—maybe those aren't ones you would pick, but perhaps talk a little about either those and/or the value of being engaged in one's community.

KB: Yeah. Well, I kind of live with the personal responsibility that a well-lived life ideally has three general stages. The first you learn and prepare yourself, the second you earn and take of your obligations and your family, and if you do those well then you should serve and give back in a public way, and so I've been very fortunate over the last five or ten years to kind of mix the earning and serving part and I've been fortunate to be involved in the Ford Family Foundation, I've been involved politically and also with our health system here.

JD: And you've also had political activities, both kind of being on boards and the Oregon League of Minority Voters, as well as recently starting to run for political office. What spurred the decision to move from perhaps working in political organizations to actually running for political office?

KB: Well, I made a promise. I made a promise when I accepted the Rhodes scholarship, so the deal there is that you're given a world class education with the expectation that someday you'll give back and serve in a public capacity, and as I started to look around at repaying my promise, my obligation, I thought where can I make the most impact, where does our society need the most help? And it kept on coming back to our political system and our government, and which I just think is just struggling mightily to make positive change and to help people, and so that's the direction I headed.

JD: And so, I mentioned briefly that we're in campaign headquarters, and—

KB: Yes, yes here we are.

JD: And so you're running for an Oregon House District; District 54 right now. And I don't know, when you think about like being on a team and competition and baseball and other experiences you've had, how would you compare that to a political campaign?

KB: I think it's very similar actually, in terms of it's a very competitive process, you have a team and everyone has to kind of find their roles and some games, some events someone steps up and hits a home run and in other someone else does, so very similar. And that training at Oregon State has helped me in so many ways with regards to this, you know, working as a team through my years of baseball, my years at studying history, understanding the political contexts, so all of those things have really helped tremendously.

JD: So, it sounds like at least being on the Board of Advisors you've stayed in touch with the university to some degree and there is the campus, the Cascades campus here in Bend now, for a number of years. When you think back about kind of the university as it was then and what you know about it now, any thoughts on kind of the direction it's going or where it might go?

KB: Yeah, I think it's on a great trajectory. The best thing is that we've had two tremendous presidents back to back. And I think anytime you have an organization that has two great leaders that follow each other in sequence, you really make a great leap forward, and I think President Risser really changed the culture, changed the direction, just set the expectations so much higher than what we saw before, and then that's just been carried on by President Ray, and so we see Oregon State achieving things I thought would never, never be possible. Last night talking about the football team, I was just talking about the academics, talking about the new programs, talking about the incredible infrastructure that's been produced, very, very impressive accomplishments.

[0:25:50]

JD: And as you have had many years since you were—not too many, but years since you were a student there, would you have any advice or particular thoughts that you might want to tell current OSU students?

KB: Let me think. I think it's a time that you have to challenge yourself. Challenge yourself academically, challenge yourself socially and challenge yourself physically, because it's one of those few times in your life where you can hopefully just concentrate on improving your own self, you know most people don't have a family or they don't have parents bothering them and putting demands on, it's a great time to really spread your wings and challenge yourself, and it's very—sometimes it's hard to challenge yourself, because if you're going to challenge yourself that means setting high goals, and that means sometimes not reaching those goals, but that's okay. It's not necessarily about reaching the goals; it's the journey to try to achieve it.

JD: So, would you have any other additional thoughts about OSU, your education or where it's led you that you'd like to leave us with?

KB: Well, I think I'd leave you with the thought that if someone from Roseburg, whose parents didn't even graduate from high school, was able to go to Oregon State, become educated, get challenged in incredible ways and find no door closed to them because of that experience, I mean and you—I cannot express my appreciation more for having that opportunity.

JD: Well, that seems like a perfect note to end our interview on, and thanks for sharing your thoughts.

KB: Thank you. Thank you very much.

[0:27:39]