



Les Risser Oral History Interview, March 24, 2014

Title

“Ambassador and First Lady”

Date

March 24, 2014

Location

Risser residence, Norman, Oklahoma.

Summary

In the interview, Risser provides a brief overview of her upbringing before recounting her arrival at OSU as First Lady in 1996. She discusses the process by which she became acclimated into the community and notes those who helped her along the way. She also shares her memories of the many activities in which she was engaged while at OSU, including her work with the Student Affairs Task Force on Greek Life, her efforts to improve student safety, and her leadership of the Valley Library Courtyard Quotations Project. Risser likewise reflects upon her association with the OSU Retirement Association, Women in Philanthropy, and other organizations active on campus and within the community. She speaks to her engagement with OSU athletics, including her stint as "guest coach" of the women's basketball team, and mentions her association with the Oklahoma Foundation for Excellence. The session concludes with Risser providing advice to OSU students of today.

Interviewee

Les Risser

Interviewer

Janice Dilg

Website

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

Transcript

Janice Dilg: So this is Janice Dilg with the Oregon State University Oral History Project. I'm here with Les Risser at her home in Norman, Oklahoma. Today is March 24th, 2014. Good afternoon, and thanks for having me to your home.

Les Risser: So this is Janice Dilg with the Oregon State University Oral History Project. I'm here with Les Risser at her home in Norman, Oklahoma. Today is March 24th, 2014. Good afternoon, and thanks for having me to your home.

JD: So, just to kind of get things going, just tell a little bit of your background—where you're from, and your family, and how you ended up getting connected to Oregon State University.

LR: Oh, my goodness. Okay. I'm originally from Cleveland, Ohio, and then made it down to Miami University in southern Ohio. Paul and I were there; Paul was president there for three years, and then from there we went to Oregon State, which was fabulous. We had so much fun there! Then, from Oregon State we came to Oklahoma, which was actually home for Paul.

JD: Mm-hm.

LR: He was born in Blackwell. And we have been here since. But our years in Corvallis will always just be right up there with the best times we can remember, so. It was just such a huge privilege to be part of that whole community.

JD: So, just to take one step back, in thinking about your experience as a student at Miami University, what about that experience do you think ended up translating into how you interacted with the Oregon State University community?

LR: I'm not sure I can remember back that far.

JD: [Laughs]

LR: I think more to answer that question would be I worked on the Miami University campus for years and years. I worked in the School of Business, and I worked as the special events coordinator for the entire university for a long time. And through that experience, I got to work with all of the university's constituent groups, including students. And I think that probably prepared me a lot for the role at Oregon State then.

JD: Mm-hm. So you and Paul arrived in Corvallis in 1996?

LR: Yes.

JD: Talk a little about just your first impressions of the campus and the area.

LR: Mm-hm. Gosh. We had a wonderful campus tour with, I think, Scott Spiegelberg or Erin Haynes, one of those two wonderful gentlemen who know everything there is about that campus. And we came in December, so it wasn't, you know, full of flowers at the time.

JD: Mm-hm.

LR: But we spent a lot of time—the first day I remember walking across campus. And the closer we got to Weatherford Hall, I had decided that was my favorite.

JD: [Laughs]

LR: And so, I was pleased that before we left, thanks to the wonderful Austins, that that facility became usable again. The people there, from day one, were astoundingly kind and welcoming, and generous, and it was such a unique experience to move into a university campus community where there were three former presidents and their spouses. And that was very fun for us, because you don't often find that.

JD: Mm-hm.

LR: And so they also went out of their way to be very welcoming to us, as many people did, and we kind of hit the ground running. Coming in the middle of the year like that, you didn't have summertime to gear up.

JD: Mm-hm.

LR: But went to lots of events right to start with. It was a little overwhelming at first, just meeting new people, learning a new university, which was, being a land grant university, different from the university where I worked for so many years, Miami. But that was also quite fun, especially learning things like the extension programs, and pear blight, and things like that [laughs] I didn't know existed! So, it was fun.

JD: [Laughs] And you mentioned the former university presidents and their wives. I know some people have referred to you all as first ladies. In an earlier conversation we had, you said you preferred "ambassador."

LR: I do.

JD: Was there any specific advice that they had to offer you about what a role like that could be, or had been for them?
[0:05:03]

LR: Pretty much to just kind of pick what I was most interested in, and I think that's what's so fabulous about being a first lady or first gentleman, in that, to the best of my knowledge, there's no real job description. And how often do you run across that? To get to join a community, to know that you have access to lots of different kinds of people just by virtue of your spouse is kind of weird. But it was wonderful!

JD: Mm-hm.

LR: And so I would say that was their advice, and just to get involved as soon as I could. And I did. And it was fun to know that I could also call any one of those wonderful women, and talk to them.

JD: Mm-hm. And I know that the Byrnes had been around the OSU community for a very long time, prior to even—

LR: I think he was President for fourteen years.

JD: Mm-hm.

LR: And then was there before that, so you're right.

JD: That's right; that's right. So, did it feel like there was more of a transition? How did you go about sort of establishing trust between the community and yourself?

LR: Oh, gosh, I don't know that I did that in an intentional way. I suppose we were pretty visible. I think maybe that kind of sent the message that we cared. We went to just about everything we could.

JD: Mm-hm.

LR: Which of course meant I never had to cook, so it was terrific. We were out every night, and we just really made an effort to support all aspects of the university, all of the different student organizations, as well as interact with as many alums as we could, because that's obviously a very, very important part of a university.

JD: Sure. Someone, a faculty member, commented on dinners that you hosted at your home.

LR: We did.

JD: With kind of an interesting mix of people from the university community. Can you talk a little about how those worked?

LR: Well, yes. I had the wonderful honor of having these fabulous women, Carol Mason and Gale Hazel, who just did everything for me. And the three of us would plan these events at the house. And we did try to diversify the group, so

it wouldn't be just one night all deans, and the next night all VPs, or something like that. And the community was so involved with the university, it was hard to draw a line.

JD: Mm-hm.

LR: And so it wasn't all that difficult to decide who would benefit from developing a relationship, perhaps, with this person, or that person. So we did do a lot of that. We also tried to mix students with our so-called adult groups.

JD: [Laughs]

LR: What's it about, except students? So we had a lot of scholarship dinners, and would try to bring the scholarship donor to our home when the scholarship recipient could be there. And I always thought that was pretty important for the donor to have a personal relationship with his or her student.

JD: Mm-hm. And developing relationships is a big part of your job, or Paul's, or?

LR: I would say that defined his, certainly. But I guess I would use that as one of the characteristics for the role that I really loved, and that was developing relationships. And it's kind of hard to pinpoint what that means, other than follow-up. You would see someone somewhere, and then try to remember what was important to that person, how it related to the university, and how you can connect the two again. And I did work hard on that. But when I look back on it, I don't call it work. I mean, it was just fun.

JD: Mm-hm.

LR: It really was such a privilege, and it isn't very often you get to play a role like that, and at the same time, love it.

JD: It does make it much easier when you love it.

LR: Oh, yes it does [Laughs] It was fun working with Paul, and we've always been able to work pretty closely together. And that's our style. I don't think that works for everybody.

JD: Mm-hm.

LR: But for us, we loved it, and I miss that now, because we're not doing that right now. So.

JD: Mm-hm. And as much as there's the community of OSU, there's also the community of Corvallis, and the two are fairly intertwined. So maybe talk about your early dealings with business leaders and civic leaders in Corvallis? [0:09:58]

LR: I got involved with the Good Samaritan Hospital Foundation board. That was really a nice way for me to meet some people who I didn't see every day on campus. I worked with Benton County Breast Cancer Coalition, I believe was the name of it, the Oregon Guard, and just different groups like that, that gave me those opportunities to meet people who in most cases weren't even OSU alums; they were from all over the state. And that I thought was an important perspective that I could gain, that, "Oh, OSU isn't the only university?"

JD: [Laughs]

LR: [Laughs] I had to remind myself of that from time to time. So that was great. I'm kind of going back away from the community now, so.

JD: Sure, sure.

LR: Let me back up. What else do you want to know about the community?

JD: No, that's fine. And, as much as you could pick and choose what you wanted to do, sometimes I'm sure people called upon you to engage in certain activities and projects. And one of those that came early on was you were asked to chair the Student Affairs Task Force on Greek Life.

LR: I was.

JD: And talk a little about how that task force came to be, and what your role was, and how that played out.

LR: Okay. Vice President of Student Affairs Larry Roper kind of felt that the Greek community had been under-served in some ways, that they, the Greek community, wasn't feeling recognized and appreciated enough. And so since I was fresh blood, he thought, "Well, let's see if she would get involved." And I had worked some with Greek communities elsewhere, so I said, "Sure." It was a very interesting process, getting alums involved right away, because it became obvious to me that they thought, perhaps this new president was trying to get rid of those Greeks, and so he was sending the little woman out to do the dirty work, or something! [Laughs]

But that couldn't be farther from the truth. So I spent, gosh, I want to say six or nine months. We put together, as usual, a task force, and met, had lots of student involvement. And I believe that culminated with the hiring of a new Greek Affairs chairman? I've lost the title of that position. But it gave me a wonderful opportunity, not only to meet alums who cared so passionately about the Greek community and its future, but I also got to meet all of the students involved. So I was very grateful that Larry entrusted that to me, kind of right off the bat.

JD: Mm-hm. And you have noted in other places that student safety is really an issue for you, and I'm not sure if this was related in any way to this, or if not, then—

LR: Yes.

JD: —kind of how you viewed, that or how you engaged with that on the OSU campus?

LR: Without doubt, when I think back to our years there, the worst year was the year that we actually lost fourteen students, and we lost one to cancer. We lost some on a mountain, in an avalanche. We lost some to substance abuse. And at that time, then, we kind of really got a little more focused on whole the issue of student safety issues. And obviously, some of those I just mentioned were beyond our control, but the things that were on our campus, that we had a responsibility for, were first and foremost. Substance abuse, as much as we would like to say, "If we make these students go to some program, then they'll understand and they'll never drink again." Obviously that's not reality.

I got to work on several student affairs committees led by Susan Longerbeam, I believe, who was just a fabulous leader, and really guided the university toward a social norming program, which was aimed at our freshman students, to kind of impress upon them that even though you think that all of the students are out partying every night, this really isn't reality, nor do you have to believe it, or become part of it. We also did some exercises in fire safety. It was kind of all-inclusive student safety. I found myself becoming quite overly protective [laughs] of my students. [0:15:00]

JD: [Laughs]

LR: And one time, at some student event, the students were kind of used to me worrying, and actually introduced me as the "campus worrier" once. [Laughs] I couldn't decide if it was a compliment or not!

JD: [Laughs]

LR: But I took it as such. My office was in the student center, and so I was with students all of the time, and because of that I did feel rather motherly toward them. [Laughs] I hope they didn't mind.

JD: And did I understand correctly, they actually created that office for you?

LR: They did. They did. Don Johnson, who was my Program Director of the center, one day called, and asked me if I'd like to take a walk around the building with him. I said, "Sure." So they took me to this room that looked like a big closet, and there were shelves of storage things, and boxes, and he asked me if I might like that to me my office, and I said I would! [Laughs]

JD: [Laughs]

LR: And in a number of months, then, bless his heart; he transformed it. It looked out over the back of the campus, and it was so nice to have a presence there, where people could get used to seeing me. I wasn't an employee, nor did I want to be.

JD: Mm-hm.

LR: But I wanted to be a presence, a visible presence, so people could call on me and know that that was okay. And they did. It was right outside the graduate student lounge, and so I got to interact with some wonderful students, including one woman from India who was getting her bachelor's at age 76. It was a wonderful story, yes.

JD: Oh, that's marvelous.

LR: So just little things like that I'll always remember, and I'll always treasure.

JD: Mm-hm. Well, and those little things can often be the ones that give you an insight, or help you realize something that perhaps going to a meeting or—

LR: That's right.

JD: Something doesn't.

LR: That's right.

JD: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. And there was also another early project that seems to me like it would just have been so interesting, and that was the Valley Library Courtyard Quotations Project.

LR: Oh, my goodness, that was very fun! Yes. You did do your homework. Yes, we had kind of a large, diverse group. Karyle Butcher probably formed it, and we solicited quotation ideas from everywhere. That was such a creative and fun project; I loved doing that! And I guess that's what I meant by having the privilege of being visible, so that people could ask me to do things like that.

JD: Mm-hm.

LR: And it wasn't all fun and games, but that sure was! [Laughs]

JD: Well, I was going to say, but even that project, you and the committee were narrowing—I believe I understood you had received 400 quotations?

LR: Yes. And everyone, of course, thought his or hers was the best, and we tried to have them representative of not only different age group contributors, but different themes, for example Native Americans—that type of thing.

JD: Mm-hm.

LR: Because that was important. But it turned out really, quite nicely.

JD: Mm-hm. And one of the projects that you did, that you were very involved with, was helping create the OSU Retirement Association. Talk a little about why that interested you, and your involvement in that project.

LR: I can't take credit for coming up with the idea. A great group of people had I think been stirring around with it for some time, and it was super fun to be on the development phase of an organization like that. When you look at the community of Corvallis, there were many people who for obvious reasons didn't want to leave Corvallis after they retired, and were looking for some way to stay involved. And not only did we provide, then, an organization to stay involved, but they could contribute to the university in ways they hadn't expected. For example, we used—I hate to say used, but we used some of them as tour guides during student orientation days, and things like that. So they could give back to the community in that way. Plus, they had an organization to belong to that could do activities together, and kind of a sidebar activity then was, oh gosh, help me with that.

JD: The Academy. [0:20:00]

LR: Thank you, for Lifelong Learning. [Laughs] And that also developed soon after that, which is your traditional course offerings for alums—I'm sorry, not alums, retirees. And these courses continue to be very popular. They're taught by faculty members.

JD: And so how does the organization function?

LR: It's an elected board. I do not remember their terms. It's an elected board. We had several kind of—what should I call them? Meetings to generate interest, and see if there were people who were willing to get involved in the planning stages. We had two or three of those, I believe, in LaSells Stewart, and people came, and had opinions on what this organization should and should not do. Nobody was looking for an organization with stringent bylaws and dues, and all of that. They had done that in their lives, but they were looking for a way to stay connected. And the enthusiasm was there, and still is. I still belong to that, still get their directory every year, and it's fun to read about it.

JD: You had the directory out on the table.

LR: I do, I do.

JD: Right before we began. [Laughs]

LR: Yes, yes.

JD: And so, did the activities in the organization change some as it developed while you were there?

LR: We got more involved with things like field trips. Now, when I say field trips, these were field trips relating to the university, such as the tsunami facility, places like that.

JD: Mm-hm.

LR: Different field stations throughout the state, just to make sure people could tell the story of OSU, and to tell the story of OSU, you have to know it. And obviously, things might have changed since your day as an employee-slash-faculty member on campus.

JD: Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

LR: And we just really wanted to make sure that our retirees still felt that they were knowledgeable, and more important, that they were valued, valuable members of our community family, still.

JD: Well, and I think by virtue of being both a land grant college, and because of the research that goes on at the institution, there are all of these varied locations throughout the state—

LR: Right. Mm-hm, mm-hm.

JD: —that are an integral part, even though they're not all physically on one campus, so.

LR: Mm-hm. Yes, they have a web presence now, and I mean, obviously it has grown and grown since I was there, just at the very beginning, but I was very proud and honored to be a part of it.

JD: Mm-hm.

LR: It was one more thing that was very fun! [Laughs] And that's because of the people involved.

JD: Mm-hm.

LR: And there are so many people who gave in so many ways as they were employees, and then to be willing to still give was a nice commentary, I thought.

JD: Mm-hm. And you were also involved with an organization of women philanthropists.

LR: Yes.

JD: And kind of just describe that group, and how that all evolved.

LR: Yes. When I look back on my years there, it was an exciting time that I could be a part of things that were starting. And again, that certainly wasn't my grand idea, but some people from Development came and asked if I might be involved with some preliminary discussions. We held a series of focus groups in Portland, Salem, and Corvallis, probably, with women who were becoming more and more of the decision makers in the giving process. So how could we afford as not only a university, but as a society, to be ignoring these women decision makers?

And so after these focus groups, which were led by a professional consultant, not by any of us, we determined that there was interest, that these women did, by golly, want to be the ones to decide where their dollars would be going. And so we started it with, again, a volunteer board, which still exists, although the names have changed. The whole concept is the giving circle concept, which is a pooling of charitable resources, but more than pooling, it's people on the university campus would submit their grant applications, and then the members of the women's philanthropy group, by virtue of paying their dues, then could vote who should receive these allocations.

So it was a sense of ownership from start to finish [0:25:00], and such a sense of pride to know that you, as a group, were not only reading reports and applications, but making site visits to feel really qualified to allocate these funds. And I am very proud of that organization, and it's going strong. And Beth Ray made many, many contributions to it over her years, and it's doing very, very well.

JD: So were you involved in helping pull in some of the women to think about becoming part of this group?

LR: Yes, yes. We had not only the focus groups, but when I was talking about relationship-building, part of that was just reaching out to women I knew throughout the state who might be involved, and also lots and lots of feedback from the Development Office in Portland, in terms of identifying people who might be the ones who would think this would be a great idea.

JD: Mm-hm. So, I actually hadn't realized that it was statewide in reach.

LR: Mm-hm.

JD: That makes sense. And you said now it's called the Women's Giving Circle Foundation?

LR: Well, no, it's Women in Philanthropy, I believe is what they call it now.

JD: Okay.

LR: But it's based on the giving circle concept.

JD: Okay, okay. As I've talked to people, I've also heard about your role in general fund raising. Certainly this would be one aspect of it. But talk a little about what you see as the role of fund raising, and what you saw as your role in that process at OSU.

LR: My role was never to make ask. My role—and I don't think I ever consciously thought of it that way, but going back to that term, ambassador? If an alum or non-alum doesn't feel good about his or her university, and/or its leadership, they're not going to be willing to make a gift. And so, I guess I would say I probably played a small role in making people feel good about the university, just because I love being with them, and that wasn't—I didn't think of that as a job, because I truly did love being with them!

JD: Mm-hm.

LR: And if I could then convey my sense of enthusiasm for the university, to make them feel better about their university, or to enhance their memories, I could say I contributed to the fund raising aspect. But no, that was Paul's job.

JD: [Laughs] You had talked earlier, too, about going to everything that was happening.

LR: I did.

JD: And I know that one of the big changes that happened in the Risser administration, and I mean that by both of you, was the change in athletics.

LR: Mm-hm.

JD: And I've heard about you and Paul being a presence at many, many games.

LR: [Laughs] We did.

JD: If not most games, including away games.

LR: Oh, yes!

JD: Talk about just kind of how you decided to do that, and kind of followed through.

LR: Well, you know, athletics can be kind of a controversial issue for a university, but it's a very strong part of a university that can't be ignored. And we determined early on that we certainly weren't going to concentrate on just football, so we did go to—well, we went to all of the sports. We did go to a lot of the away football games; that is true. What I learned from that was [laughs] I learned a basic thing about myself, that I'm very passionate about a football team when I know the players, when I know their families. And by having the opportunity to go to away games in particular, and spend time with those wonderful families who were everywhere to support their student players, it just made me look at athletics in a much different way, a way that I haven't experienced since.

When things were so personal, I could understand why it was so important, because these kids were invested in it! And when we didn't win, boy, that plane was quiet on the way home! It was heartbreaking, knowing there was nothing I could say or do to make a student athlete feel better after a loss. But we were very involved with that. We spent a lot of time before football games walking through all of the pre-game activities [0:30:00], and where all the RVs were. It was a fattening experience, though—

JD: [Laughs]

LR: —because everywhere we went, someone would want to feed us! But we spent a lot of time walking through that before each game, and it was fun. I wore orange and black every day for seven and a half years! [Laughs] I kind of miss that! [Laughs]

JD: I just, at the last minute, ran across some—a list of items that you both donated to the women's basketball auction, and there was a mention of your famous orange leather jacket.

LR: I know. It broke my heart to part with that! [Laughs] Yes, we decided that would be a good idea. I had really amassed lots of Beaver stuff, and as you see, I have this Beaver shrine up here, and that is still a great reminder for us every day. But I knew it wasn't realistic to bring all of that, plus I wanted to pass some of it along. So we did; we had this auction to benefit the women's basketball team, and that turned out, that was very fun.

JD: And it sounds like you had a particular connection with the women's basketball team?

LR: Oh, when I got to be guest coach? Yes, I did! Boy, did I feel out of it, but it was fun! Yes, several times. And what that meant was I'd go to the locker room beforehand and listen to the instructions, and then I would sit at the end of the bench and try to blend in, and act like I knew what was going on, which of course I never did. But it was fun. And the girls were so cute, because every time they would get in the huddle, they would make sure I got to be in the huddle too, so.

JD: [Laughs]

LR: Yes. That was fun, and so many unique experiences. I got to inaugurate the bowling alley. I don't even know if that's still there, in the basement of the student center. It was one of those jivey ones with lights.

JD: [Laughs]

LR: And so they wanted me to throw the first ball, which I did. It was the inaugural gutter ball that I—I still did it. So it's just, you know, funny little experiences that all come back to me with great fondness, actually. [Laughs]

JD: Well, I just want to get it on the record that Coach Judy Spoelstra said you had a winning record as the coach. [Laughs]

LR: [Laughs] That's great! She was fun.

JD: And as you were coming to the end of your time there—you had mentioned Larry Roper earlier—and you and he, and I'm sorry, I'm losing the name of the third person, who received the Frances Dancy Hooks Award in 2001, which sounded like a very special award.

LR: It was very, very touching to be recognized in that way. I found myself just humbled by all of the experiences, and that certainly being one of them. So, people were very kind.

JD: And perhaps expand just a little bit on what that award is, and what—?

LR: Just for contributions to the community, especially to students.

JD: And there were two mentions that I ran across of your specific work, which was with Crossroads International, and Leadership, Education and Partnership Initiative?

LR: Crossroads International was, oh, I just always regarded it as one of the hidden pockets of excellence! It was just a fabulous, is a fabulous program with international students. And yes, I got to attend many of their functions. And I was so proud to be part of a community that recognized, and valued, and honored, our international student community and their spouses, because a lot of them were not English-speaking when they came. Although their spouses could be enrolled in some graduate program, they weren't.

JD: Mm-hm.

LR: And they needed an outlet as well, and a sense of community, and that's what Crossroads provided for them. I had never run across a program quite like that before, really filled the need for those women, and for their adorable little children, who were always part of the program as well.

JD: And you have continued some interesting work, too, even as you have moved away from the OSU campus. You're involved with the Oklahoma Foundation for Excellence. You haven't moved too far from supporting schools.

LR: You have done your homework! Yes. I have the wonderful honor of being the president of that organization this year [0:35:00], and it is a statewide organization that supports public education, public teachers, programming, funding opportunities for teacher grants for summer institutes, that type of thing. We also provide scholarships to graduating high school seniors. That has been a wonderful opportunity for me, so. I have spent my life in education, and supporting especially public schools, and so it's really been nice to have found that niche for myself here.

JD: And I have one final question for you, but if there's other comments or topics that you've thought of, or wanted to make sure that you covered, I wanted to give you the opportunity to do that.

LR: Go ahead with your last topic, and I'll think.

JD: All right, I will. It's really kind of just a broad thinking back and both looking forward, any thoughts about Oregon State University today? And perhaps any advice you might give to current OSU students?

LR: The advice I would give to OSU students would be just to cherish your time there, get involved in as many things as you can that you're passionate about; just don't build a resume. Get to know students who are not like you. If you leave OSU with the same mindset you had when you came in as a freshman, then we as a university have failed you. Travel internationally with any of our international programs that you can. And get to know the university through its faculty and staff, not just the faculty members you might have that semester, but take advantage of on-campus lectures. There are so many things going on, on the campus like that. Don't ever look back on those years and think, "Oh, I wish I had done such-and-such."

JD: If you have any final thoughts, please share them. Or, I've concluded my questions for you.

LR: I would just say congratulations to Oregon State in celebrating its sesquicentennial, and I'm so proud to have been a small part of those years, and I just will always treasure them. So, thank you.

JD: And thank you for taking time to share your recollections. [0:37:43]