



Knute Buehler Oral History Interviews, August 5, 2015

Title

“From Baltimore to Oxford”

Date

August 5, 2015

Location

The Center: Orthopedic and Neurosurgical Care and Research, Bend, Oregon.

Summary

In his second interview, Buehler provides additional details on his experiences in medical school, as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, and as a legislator in the Oregon House.

He begins by describing the value that an OSU degree has brought to his life, and then moves on to a description of his medical training at Johns Hopkins University. In this, Buehler touches upon the poverty and social problems that gripped Baltimore during his time there and the impact that they made upon him as a doctor-in-training. He also discusses his contributions to various community outreach efforts during his tenure at Johns Hopkins, as well as his participation on the medical school's governing council.

The bulk of the session is devoted to Buehler's stint as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University. He describes the application process required of potential Rhodes Scholars, including the multiple interviews that he incurred along the way. He also details the significant differences between Oxford's approach to education as compared to his earlier experiences at OSU, and reflects on the far more formal social milieu at Oxford as well.

The interview concludes with Buehler's thoughts on successes that he was a part of during his first session in the Oregon House, his optimism for the development of OSU-Cascades, and his appreciation of OSU as it looks forward to its sesquicentennial.

Interviewee

Knute Buehler

Interviewer

Janice Dilg

Website

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

Transcript

Knute Buehler: Hi my name's Knute Buehler and we're in Bend, Oregon at the Center and it is August 5th, 2015.

Janice Dilg: And I'm Janice Dilg, oral historian for the OSU Sesquicentennial Oral History project. And this is actually our second interview so thanks for agreeing to share a few more recollections.

KB: Sure, happy to do so.

JD: So, in your previous interview, we'd been talking about your years at OSU and you had commented then that OSU opened doors – that a degree from OSU meant something. Could you provide a little more detail about what you meant?

KB: Yeah, I think what I meant by that is the value of that experience prepared me to do anything I've wanted to do. I've met no closed doors as a result of my experience at Oregon State and my degree, the relationships, the things I was able to participate in, and that ranges from medical school to running for political office. It's really well-prepared me for all those kinds of ventures.

JD: And would you say that you mean that sort of both academically as well as, perhaps, socially?

KB: I think success and being able to do things is dependent on a lot of things, just not academically but also relationships and preparing you to participate in a lot of different activities. And I think the varied experience, the different kinds of education I was able to participate in at Oregon State, not only academically, but socially and athletics all prepared me to do a variety of things and to meet no closed doors. So that's really a satisfying part of the experience.

JD: And you mentioned medical school, and you did go off to Johns Hopkins, to Baltimore, Maryland, slightly different culture and milieu than Corvallis, Oregon or Roseburg. Talk a little bit about what that difference meant and what that brought to your experience there.

KB: There are probably a lot of differences between Corvallis and Baltimore. It really is a cultural change going from small town Oregon to big inner city Baltimore and where I went to medical school, Johns Hopkins, is in inner Baltimore, in very poverty-stricken, struggling neighborhoods. So, not only was the experience of going to medical school very demanding but also just the living circumstances as we've seen recently, you know Baltimore is a city that continues to struggle, even twenty-five years later, for all those reasons that were so apparent to me when I drove my Toyota Corolla into Baltimore in 1986. Abject poverty over generations and difficulties with racism, loss of economic infrastructure, all those things have really hit Baltimore hard and during medical school I was living right in the middle of that. And that was a growing experience in itself, just not the medical school part of it, but also living in that kind of environment. And eye opening for me.

JD: Were there ways in which those changes that were happening, I think you had mentioned before HIV was really, and AIDS was at kind of the beginning of its role in changing our culture and the medical world. Were there others ways that you felt the context of Baltimore affected your medical studies and you as a person?

KB: Yeah, certainly I was there at a very historic time in medicine where HIV was really hitting hard, people were trying to understand what the disease was, how infectious was it, are there any treatments we can develop for these people. It was a very interesting time to be there as a medical student, but also just the cultural impact of that. It really hit the neighborhoods hard; all of a sudden you're losing a bunch of young people dying of a mysterious illness. And that's on top of all the other traditional challenges in those neighborhoods. Drug abuse was also really a big problem at that time. The crack epidemic hit at a similar time where very low cost but very powerful drugs were now on the street for the first time and you saw deterioration of the family structure. A lot of social ills and also AIDS were facilitated with the crack epidemics. All those things were kind of coming together at one time to make for an incredibly challenging but eye-opening set of circumstances. It forever changed who I was and it really spurred me to look inside myself and say how did this happen in this country, how did we get this extreme poverty combined with a horrible infectious disease and on top of that, this drug epidemic. How did we get to this point in our country? I never saw anything like that at Oregon State or Corvallis or growing up in Roseburg. That soul searching, the conclusion of that was that I needed a better education, I

needed a deeper education, than what I'd had to that point, and that's what spurred me to apply for the Rhodes scholarship, to try to understand all those moving parts.

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JD: And we'll get to that in just a moment, but I also wanted to ask you, as all-encompassing as I'm sure medical school is and was for you, you also made time for some other activities and your affiliation with sports came into play. Talk a little about some of your involvement outside of the hospital.

KB: Well traditionally at Hopkins, the first-year medical students would put on a youth sports clinic for the surrounding kids, mainly elementary, junior high kids and since I was a college athlete, I think I got drafted to be the chair of that process. And it's actually really fun. It really integrates the medical students into the community, get to know the students, get to spend time in the schools, which you know are eye-opening in themselves, in terms of the struggles there, in terms of the lack of opportunities in the schools in inner city Baltimore contribute to a lot of the problems there, but it's really good to meet the kids, to be able to work with them. So many of them just need role models. They're so hungry for adult attention, especially male adult attention in those communities so it was really satisfying to be able to bond to them over this common value of sports and that was one of the best parts of my experience in medical school.

JD: So was this teaching them a particular game or playing games?

KB: I think it was, you're stretching my memory here, I think it was six consecutive Saturdays where we would have sports clinics and we would have basketball, baseball, tennis. You have to remember a lot of these kids, they don't have the opportunity to participate in sports. They don't have the typical structure that we have in towns in Oregon. Some of them, this is their first experience with organized volleyball or basketball or swinging a golf club or a tennis racket so they were very enthused and very interested in it. And that common bond, even though there were big cultural differences sometimes, the common bond of the sports really brought people together. It was really a lot of fun.

JD: Whether it was medical school or these other outside activities, did people know, like, where's Oregon or your smaller town experience, how did people react to that? Or what did you think that you brought to these situations?

KB: To be honest, I think people in Baltimore, especially in the inner city don't really pay much attention to the west coast, know Oregon's out there somewhere on the left coast, but exactly where it is and what happens there is pretty limited. I think the concept is that it's a rainy, mossy, foggy type place and that's about the extent of the knowledge. So certainly you have that opportunity to explain, to describe your background, how you grew up, and the importance of sports to people like me growing up in a small town in Oregon. Anytime you have those common experiences where you can kind of share, I think it helps understanding.

JD: And you were also on the medical school council. What was that about?

KB: So that was the governing organization for the medical school, so as our class representative, I think the first couple of years. I think that's a typical governance of how the medical school is being run and operated. A big part of that council is the selection process for the next year's entering class, so that was a big duty of ours, which was interesting to see the first screening of those applications and exactly how people are selected for medical school.

JD: And you weren't too far away from that process yourself.

KB: That's right. And you know that process very well. And the other big issue we talked about during those years, we really tried to make a big push to make medical school free at Johns Hopkins during those years. We didn't quite get there, we were really on the verge of doing so because there's always this battle between Harvard and Hopkins to be rated the top medical school and we figured if we made it free, the game would be over! Forever, we'd get the best medical students for time memorial on us. So that was the push, and we were able to keep tuition low, but we were never able to get it quite free. Unfortunately, the economy had a little blip right when we thought we'd built up our reserves to do it. So that was another task that we were doing during those years.

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JD: And was that a student driven initiative or kind of institution-wide?

KB: That was institution driven. Actually that came down from top, that was the president of the medical school at that time, that was really his idea. I think it was, especially looking back now, that it was very forward thinking of him. If we had been successful, that would have been quite an accomplishment.

JD: Very cutting edge. That's just starting to happen right now, a little. So you mentioned the desire for more education and we had talked briefly about your Rhodes scholarship and your experience at Oxford, but we didn't really explore what the application process was, so maybe we could start there.

KB: The application process starts off very traditional. You have a multi-page application; you have an essay, and that kind of goes through the first screening. And they use a few criteria to accept people, of course academics, leadership abilities, dedication to service, and some athletic prowess. At least that's what they call it, so participating in college athletics is certainly an advantage. So those are the four lenses that they're viewing all the applications through.

Once they get through that, then it becomes a little bit less traditional in terms of the selection process. So there used to be a state interview, so everyone who makes the first pass has a state interview. Then two people are selected from the state, which goes on to a regional, and then four people are selected at that region. There are eight. The country is divided up into eight regions. Four then are awarded the scholarship for a total of thirty-two each year. The interview is where it's non-traditional. So the interview is not, oh this is a nice interviewer, get to know you, kind of have the small talk of a typical job interview. It's a very confrontational, Socratic type of interview where they want to see how you reason on your feet and will try to lead you down the path to confuse you and your own logic. It's a pretty aggressive interview.

On top of that, there's also a social interview, so the night before the interview there's always a reception and it's not really billed as part of the interview, but all the candidates are there, the whole interview panel is there, and that's part of the interview also. Cecil Rhodes was very specific that he didn't want just bookworms getting his scholarship; he wanted people who could actually relate to others and lead other people. And he thought an important part of that was the ability to conduct themselves in social atmospheres. And that's part of the interview also. And that whole process is repeated at the regional level.

JD: So clearly, you wouldn't know what they were going to ask you in the interview, but do you have a sense of what to expect and you can sort of prep for that?

KB: Not really. You set the context to a certain extent by your major, by what you want to study at Oxford, so they'll take you in ways that are completely not related. I remember at my regional interview I was asked back to back what's the difference between the Salk and Sabin polio vaccines and then what was President Eisenhower's last message when he left the presidency. So that's how varied it is. But I was open to that because I was a microbiology major and a history major so I was fair game either way. The interview panel was quite varied: a lot of people with scientific backgrounds, with political backgrounds. I think there was a microbiology professor on the committee and a sitting U.S. circuit court judge so there's quite a variety of expertise on the interview panels.

JD: So you clearly were successful in that application process.

KB: They do make mistakes every once in a while.

JD: You're accepted and then take it forward from there.

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KB: So from there then you actually, you get the Rhodes scholarship but then you have to apply to Oxford. So just because you get a Rhodes doesn't mean the college accepts you. It's very British. And Oxford, you actually don't apply to Oxford, you apply to one of the, I think there's thirty-two, thirty-three colleges that make up Oxford. So you have to then apply to a college, they actually ask you to apply to three and then you don't know exactly which college you're going to get to. So I was attending Merton College and accepted there to study politics, philosophy, and economics. And then, you know, there's some preparation; that's much improved. Back when I was going, there wasn't much preparation. It was more just word of mouth, some written material, and I think that's been a problem because there's a big cultural

shift, even though the language is the same, it pretty much stops there. A lot of cultural difference in so many aspects; they're doing a much better job now prepping the Rhodes before they get there. When they get there, there is certainly an adjustment period of six months, adjustment to the culture and especially adjustment to how you're educated because it's very different than how we're educated at Oregon State. It's very individual based, there's not formal lectures, all your testing is essay style, so there's a lot to learn just in terms of how to navigate the education system.

JD: And what kind of indications do you get, or direction do you get in figuring out what your independent study should be and how you approach that?

KB: So you only have two classes each term and you have three terms and your two classes and you meet with your professor individually once a week. So how it'd work is you'd go in, meet and he or she would give you a question. For example, one of my politics classes, maybe it would be what's more important freedom or justice? And they would give you a reading list, a long reading list, of primary sources, of books, of magazines and articles on the topic. You were expected to read through that list, write an essay, and come back the next week. And then you would read your essay and the professor would just pepper you with questions. So back to the Socratic method of learning and that's why the interview style is similar because they want to make sure you can succeed in that situation. So it would be very pointed questioning on what you wrote and you would have to defend yourself and again, not at a friendly way, you know a very aggressive way. I think my first couple of terms, I remember it was so brutal that I think I even started crying during one time. It's a really, really aggressive style of questioning. But ultimately a really great way to learn when you think about it, because not only do you passively learn by reading about it, you actively learn by having to write, and then you have to read it and then you have to answer questions. So that information is really being cemented in your mind through a lot of different ways. Very expensive way to educate someone but just an outstanding way to cover material and topics.

I didn't quite understand it for what it was when I was there, but like many things when you look back it's like, aah that's what they trying to do. The other interesting and challenging thing was, and they don't tell you this either but you figure it out, and this is a skill I still use, especially being in the legislature, is the amount of material they give you to cover in that week is impossible to cover. I mean there are three or four books and you could not possibly read all that material. And they do that on purpose. One of the most useful skills I got from that is the ability to scan a lot of information and distill the essential features without spending all that time, for example not reading the whole book but you're learning that you can read the first chapter, the last chapter, and a few specific paragraphs and get the essence of the argument. That's a skill that has been really valuable for me. But they don't tell you that! You have to find that out yourself. Those are the types of things. There are lectures at Oxford during that time but they don't necessarily correlate with the class you're taking that semester. They're more just an enhancement. So it's a lot of individual learning, which is good, but also bad in that you don't form that sense of camaraderie, it can be very lonely.

You have to remember Oxford was really based on a monastery model of education and so there's a lot of just alone time, studying, reading, writing, unlike at Oregon State where you have more activities, more lecture types of things. And then the exam system is very different. My whole time at Oxford I had one grade. So even though I'd take two classes each semester, you had a grade for your major and that's it. It's based on just one week of examination at the very end of your time there. So it's very stressful, as you can imagine, because your whole college grade is dependent on just one week of testing, so you don't want to have an off week during that time. And then, I always have to chuckle because my kids are now in college and you know it's very hard to get access to their grades unless they allow their parents. Well, very different in England, your grades are published right in the *London Times* for everyone to see. So there's a little bit of an incentive to do well.

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JD: And you alluded to cultural differences as well. Can you elaborate a bit on that aspect of it?

KB: It's just a much more formal culture, much more structure, much more based on respect and authority figures and tradition. For example, my college was a very traditional British college, founded in the 1500s so when you go up the brick stairs there would be footprints about that deep where you have the erosion of the steps, it's that kind of age. But for example, for dinner you would be expected to wear a jacket and tie and a little cape to dinner every night. So that kind of tradition. And then the faculty would come in and sit at the head table. If you've ever seen *Harry Potter*, that cafeteria scene was filmed in Oxford so that's very much how it is. The head table has the faculty; the students are lined up kind

of along tables that tee up. The faculty comes in and everyone stands until they sit and then everyone sits. You don't start eating until the faculty has all their food first. It wouldn't work in the MU at Oregon State, that's for sure. During the exams, that week of exams we wear a tuxedo, actually, full tuxedo, the cape, the mortarboard hat that you have to have. You don't have to wear it during the exams but you sit it. I remember when I was taking the exam, I had my black tuxedo on and my cape and I was sitting with my legs crossed and the proctor came by and whispers in my ear, "Master Buehler, if you wear those brown socks tomorrow you will not be able to sit for the exam." So that's the kind of tradition that you have.

JD: But if I understand correctly, you did graduate with honors so it was okay and was posted in the *London Times*.

KB: Their grading system is a little bit different. They have a one, two one, two two, a three, and a pass, roughly corresponds to A, B plus, B minus, C.

JD: And you were speaking of so much kind of independent study, working alone. Were there times when you interacted with not only the other Rhodes scholars that were there but the general Oxford population?

KB: Sure. It was easier to interact with students in your college because you're eating all together and it was mainly focused around mealtimes and actually, the bar after dinner. In each college they have their own bar, you know, drinking age there is a little different that the United States so a lot of the social engagement was at dinner and then followed by drinking beer in the bar afterwards so that's where you really get to know people. Getting together with Rhodes scholars outside of college is difficult. I think back to the difficulty in communication just in the late 80's and early 90's so when I was at Oxford we had no phone, certainly no cellphone, we didn't even have a landline phone, we had no cellphone, there was no email, certainly was no text messaging so if I wanted to get together with someone, I'd have to start out early on Monday, because I'd have send them a note through the internal college mail, "do you want to meet for pizza on Friday?" So they might get it on Tuesday, Wednesday and they'd have to get it and answer it right away to come back and say "no I can't meet at six on Friday, I can meet at seven-thirty on Friday", well there wouldn't be time even to respond to that. So it was very difficult just, a lot more spontaneous meetings because you couldn't really plan for them because of the difficulties in communication. I think that enhanced the sense of isolation there. You don't realize how lucky we have it.

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JD: And were you able to explore outside of the college at all? It sounds like you were quite busy.

KB: Yeah, a lot of exploration. One of the good parts of the scholarship is you do get a stipend also for travel. So Oxford you go, I think it's nine weeks and then have a six week break, nine weeks, six week break. And you're expected to travel and explore. That's really not officially time off, it's time to allow you to explore both academically and also just in terms of your surroundings. So I tried to travel within Europe during that time. And then on the weekends when I was at Oxford I'd always try to take a day or weekend trip to somewhere in England or Scotland or even Ireland. I'd usually go with two or three other Rhodes Scholar friends and we would explore. I think I've seen every museum in London, even the third tier museums which never come up in the tourist books and some of them are quite good, I don't know why they don't come up in the tourist books. So I explored a lot, a lot of small towns, hiking in the Lake District, in Wales, and those types of things. And that was really a great part of the experience.

JD: We're going to jump ahead a little bit in time here, quite a bit of time. You mentioned that some of your training actually was good for you as a legislator and the last time we did your interview you were a candidate for House District 54 here in Oregon. You successfully were elected and you've now been through your first legislative session. Talk about that process a little and what it was like and perhaps what you didn't expect or things you expected that worked out well.

KB: Well we could talk about that for a long time; that's a whole other topic. That was a wonderful experience. I actually enjoyed it more than I thought I would. I was concerned that I'd either, couldn't get anything done or be bored. And certainly that's not the case. We accomplished a fair amount, especially being a freshman legislator in the minority. And I certainly wasn't bored as a freshman legislator, it's like being a freshman in college; there's a lot to learn, new friends to make, process to learn, just the daily routine. But then on top of that there's the issue that you want, you can go deep into and try to figure out. Some of the issues are enormously complex so they will swallow as much time as you want to

devote to some of these issues. It was just the opposite problem; it's really just kind of prioritizing where I want to put my time because you couldn't possibly cover all the topics you encounter. So overall, it was a great experience.

JD: And are there one or two points that you considered real successes that you'd like to comment on?

KB: Yeah, I think a few things. We passed legislation to enhance women's access to birth control so we've made Oregon certainly by far the easiest state to access hormonal birth control. We passed a bill that would allow women to essentially have over the counter access to birth control. For example, they just don't need to go to a physician and have an exam and a prescription. They can just go into any corner pharmacy and come out after a very short period of time with the prescription. And the importance of that is that it's one of the most significant things you can do in the twenty-first century is enhance women's health. The health effects of unintended pregnancy are pretty substantial. And we'll see a marked decrease in the number of unintended pregnancies, I think in the state over the next ten years. I think that was probably one of the most significant things.

We worked hard on child care tax credit legislation, so enhanced that to make it more aligned with students' needs. Before, students going full time couldn't get access and that's one of the big barriers to actually going to college is childcare issues. Also, shifted a little bit so that people with lower incomes coordinated with other programs which were similar so that was a big accomplishment. And we have a legislation called Right to Try, which allows people with terminal illness to get access to protocol drugs in the experimental phase, so it gives them some hope when they have a terminal illness. Those were three of the highlights. And we still have more to come.

JD: Well you're in Bend, OSU has come to your area, the Cascades campus is in your district and there's lots going on around that. Do you have some involvement with that?

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KB: I've had involvement from the very beginning, so the first advisory board that was formed by President Risser back in early 2001 or 2. So I was on the advisory board for three or four years to get things going and I've paid close attention over time. It's very exciting that they're breaking ground now on the new campus. It's so sorely needed in Central Oregon. Access to a four year university is very limited here and it's one of the most limited of any metropolitan area in the country. So having a four year university in central Oregon, I think, is that last piece to really push into what I like to think is clearly the best place in the country to live. But I'm a little biased.

JD: That's okay. I'd like to just give you the opportunity to say any final thoughts about OSU and what it's been in your life and perhaps where you see it going and then we'll conclude.

KB: Well there probably has not been any more important period of time in my life than the four years I spent at Oregon State in terms of the experience, the education, and the ongoing relationships. And I owe nearly everything I have to those four years and I plan to hopefully build on that a little bit and accomplish even more in the next decade. I think, looking in the future, it's a very exciting time for Oregon State. Oregon State has been pretty much centered in Corvallis. There have been the Extension services but I think this next ten to twenty years, you'll see Oregon State really blossoming out to other areas. We see just the sparks starting in Newport and Bend and with the big regional campus. I think that's where Oregon State really needs to go to spread its wings and expertise. Oregon State will encounter new people, have new opportunities both in Newport and Bend while also building the core in Corvallis which is strong and dynamic. So I see great things for Oregon State. I think the last two presidents have been enormously successful and talented individuals, President Risser and President Ray. They've had a vision, it's been consistent, they've been strong leaders, and they've positioned the institution to be very successful for another 150 years.

JD: Thank you so much on behalf of the project for sharing your recollections.

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