

**Oral Memoirs**  
**of**  
**James and Carol Whiteneck**

An Interview  
Conducted by  
Alyssa Peterson  
May 31, 2018

Development of the Tulsa Medical College:  
An Oral History Project

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### **Interview History**

The recording(s) took place at the Schusterman Library, University of Oklahoma, Tulsa, Oklahoma. The recording(s) and transcript(s) were processed at the Schusterman Library, University of Oklahoma, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

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### **Collection/Project Detail**

The Development of the Tulsa Medical College Project was conducted by the Schusterman Library at the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa from January 2016 to June 2018. The project focused on the development of the Tulsa Medical College, which is now the OU-TU School of Community Medicine. The project consisted of 28 interviews with former and current students and employees of the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa.

James Whiteneck, MD, attended the Tulsa Medical College for his third and fourth years of medical school. He later returned to the Tulsa area to practice as a cardiovascular surgeon.

Alyssa Peterson was a Reference and Instruction Librarian at the Schusterman Library.

James and Carol Whiteneck  
Oral History Memoir  
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Alyssa Peterson  
May 31, 2018  
Tulsa, Oklahoma

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PETERSON: This interview is part of the OU-Tulsa History Project and today is May 31, 2018. Would you like to introduce yourselves?

JAMES: Yes, I'm Dr. James Whiteneck and my wife Carol Whiteneck.

PETERSON: Very nice. Thank you both for being here today. If you could just give us a little bit of your education and career background—so where you went to school and what you did afterwards.

JAMES: Sure, yeah. I went to undergraduate school at Oklahoma State in Stillwater and my degree was in physiology. Went to the medical school in Oklahoma City in 1975 and went ahead and completed the first two years there. Then we heard about this opportunity to come to Tulsa and I was really intrigued by it because in Oklahoma City it seemed like there were several students, four, or five, or six students with each faculty member, but in Tulsa usually there were just one or two students per faculty member. And, of course, most of the faculty, almost all of them were volunteer faculty, but it was really a very interesting opportunity. So, we came here for that. After I graduated in '79 we moved to Nashville and I did a general surgery residency at Vanderbilt. And then was on the faculty at Vanderbilt briefly and then did a cardiovascular fellowship at Barnes Hospital at Washington University in St. Louis and finished there in '77. Came back to practice in Tulsa in—I'm sorry I said it was '77, it was '87—and we came to Tulsa in '87 and practiced here until 2012.

PETERSON: Wonderful.

JAMES: Yeah.

PETERSON: Yeah. Do you have any education or career background you want to share? You don't have to if you don't want to.

CAROL: Well, I kind of felt like I was part of the process.

PETERSON: Definitely.

CAROL: I actually attended his interview for medical school—

PETERSON: Okay.

CAROL: —before he graduated. So.

JAMES: Filling out Christmas cards.

CAROL: That's right, that's right. Just ordinary life.

PETERSON: That's wonderful.

JAMES: We had one of our, we had our second daughter that was born here during my sophomore year, sorry junior year.

CAROL: Yeah, that's right, yeah.

JAMES: First daughter was born in Oklahoma City.

CAROL: The night before his first test in school.

PETERSON: Oh, my goodness, the timing.

CAROL: Yeah, perfect timing.

JAMES: It was great.

PETERSON: Do you want to talk a little bit more about your days in med school here in Tulsa? Kind of what the differences maybe were—I know you mentioned size—between Oklahoma City and Tulsa, but I don't know, maybe some rotations that stand out in your head, people that you remember whether it be other students or faculty members.

JAMES: Oh, there were a lot of faculty members I remember. One of my very first rotations was on neurosurgery. It was a two-and-a-half-week sub-specialty rotation with a guy named Dr. Hester. And he was just a hilarious fellow. He just had a remarkable sense of humor. He

practiced at all of the hospitals. I think during those two and a half weeks I tried to catch up with him in all of the hospitals, which was really tricky.

PETERSON: I bet.

JAMES: But I got to see some interesting patients. The story I'm thinking about this one patient I don't know that we want to record that.

PETERSON: You don't have to mention anything if you don't want to. I'm sure you saw many interesting patients during your time.

JAMES: Yeah I saw many interesting patients, yes.

PETERSON: Yeah.

JAMES: So, after Dr. Hester I did a neurology rotation. And that was with Dr. Blumenthal and Mitchell and, gosh, I'm blocking on the third partner's name, but anyway that was at St. Francis Hospital. And that was the rotation where you went into labor with Jenny.

CAROL: Oh yeah, that's right.

JAMES: Anyway. Had an internal medicine rotation with Dr. Dan Duffy. One of the highlights of my medical school clinical years. And then had a general surgery rotation with C. T. Thompson and his partners, Tommy Thompson. That was outstanding as well. OB I had at Hillcrest and gosh, they just seemed to be delivering babies constantly. It was, it was interesting as well. That's where Carol delivered Jenny.

CAROL: That's where Jenny was born.

JAMES: Yeah. And let's see, what else did I have during those years? Rhea—

PETERSON: Rhea Sulzycki, I believe?

JAMES: Yeah. Rhea. She just kept us all pointed. We were just a bunch of lost puppies. She kept us pointed in the right direction and I just can't tell you how many times I had to call her to get pointed back to where I needed to go. She kept us coming in to the old medical school building, which was a rental property just off of 21<sup>st</sup> Street.

PETERSON: Yeah. How was the community with the other med students? Did you all get along? Do you remember hanging out with the other families?

CAROL: You know what I remember because this was a fairly new program—I think you were the second class maybe that participated over here. It was just a little more intimate. I think that was what was attractive to him to begin with as far as his training, but I remember it was not uncommon for us to be invited into the homes. Someone was thinking about us in other terms other than just training but our whole life, and that was a big treat. Because at that time even McDonald's would have been a big treat, and so to be invited into someone's home just because, that was a lovely thing to do.

JAMES: Pediatrics, Dr. Al Brownlee. That was a wonderful evening. I'll never forget that. And the, since Carol and I were married—I had been in the military for four years, so I was older than most of my classmates—and since we were married and she was a cook it seemed like we had several people that came. We entertained at our house.

CAROL: A lot of bachelors.

PETERSON: That sounds really fun though. Did you keep track of any other classmates? Do you know did any of them stay in the area to practice?

JAMES: Well, Glenn Baker went, I'm not sure where he trained in ophthalmology, and then he practiced I believe in this region in northeast Oklahoma, where he did a good job. He was a remarkable guy. Scott Ames got training in anesthesia at Scott and White in Texas and then was back at St. Francis as an anesthesiologist. I don't know if he's still working or not, but he might be. Let's see. Debbie—

CAROL: Oh, they went to our church, honey.

JAMES: Why am I blocking on his name?

CAROL: I don't know. Both of them.

JAMES: Bill was his name.

CAROL: We'll think of it in a little bit.

JAMES: Anyway, anesthesia folks and just real first-rate people. So, who else?

CAROL: I hadn't thought about thinking in this much detail. I was thinking in broader terms.

PETERSON: Oh, yeah, say whatever you—

CAROL: I was just thinking about this on the way over here, what, like all of life your experiences teach you something about yourself. And while he was attracted to the maybe more personal connection with the teaching staff and people that he would be learning and being trained under, it was also kind of, I think any time a new program is being launched you are attracting people that are really interested in building. And there's an enthusiasm that goes with that. And so I can remember kind of feeling that. And then, but now with this forty-some years of hindsight I see that it's something that he continues to be attracted to. It's not always in the form of medicine. It can be more personal like Sunday school classes or building the research forum at Vanderbilt or building a family, a bank, relationships in general. I think it's consistent with the way life has unfolded for us and that was a good start.

PETERSON: I'm glad to hear that. Yeah. I think thinking more broadly as well, what have you noticed in changes in medicine over the past forty years since you were in medical school and then practicing?

JAMES: Oh, gosh. Oh, it has changed so much. But I felt very fortunate with my background. I was prepared to do well at Vanderbilt and at Barnes Hospital by the education I got here. And I think they really, the environment was an environment that really encouraged individual responsibility and finding a way to learn the material yourself. Most of its kind of self-directed anyway, strongly influenced by great mentors, but just learning that skill of self-learning has really paid off over the years. We do heart surgery so many different ways than what we did when I first went into practice. Really a remarkable transition.

PETERSON: That's wonderful. Have you noticed any changes watching his career unfold?

CAROL: Well, just the changes from being a student to full practice made a big difference. You know, going from the traditional medical school academic scenario to the resident was a big leap. And we'd been prepared for that, and you know, that's kind of one of those things different people buy into differently, but I always felt like we were a team, and so what he was trying to do I was going to be supportive and the same way, you know, as we found ways to do that for each other I felt like we did that. And as far as the change, oh, I think just about anybody that's been in practice for the period of time that we've been in it has seen the big change from private practice to hospital-directed practices and that comes with an upside and a downside I guess for everyone. We tried to ride both sides as best we can.

JAMES: Change. That's the thing that is constantly changing. You know, I was just reflecting on one of the, one of my real challenges was to decide whether to do academic medicine and I think that was really strongly influenced by the relationship that we had with the faculty, mostly again, mostly volunteer faculty, but just tremendous faculty we had here. It was more of a, I don't want to say a family environment, but it was much more collegial, much more supportive, really

encouraged us to excel. And I'm thinking again about Dan Duffy and Bob Block in pediatrics. He was just a strong mentor for all of us. And Dr. Al Brownlee. And all these guys really played a big role. Really made me want to do academics, but at the same time this was very unique. As I went to Vanderbilt and to Wash U in St. Louis, those are academic environments, but of a little different flavor than what we enjoyed here.

PETERSON: Yeah, did you have any involvement with the school when you came back to Tulsa?

JAMES: Just a little bit. Mostly people would do cardiovascular rotations with us.

PETERSON: Okay.

JAMES: And over the years we've had a few of the residents that were doing general surgery residency that then did a CV rotation with us that went on to train in cardiovascular surgery. That's always fun. That's kind of exhilarating to see someone take that path. But that was most of it. I don't think I—there were just a couple of times on the old campus, I think it was on Sheridan.

PETERSON: Yes.

JAMES: Yeah, Sheridan. I gave a few lectures, but most of my time was one-on-one with primarily residents, surgical residents, and a few medical students that were interested.

PETERSON: I know you mentioned Rhea, but were there any other administrators that stood out to you. Leeland Alexander—did you interact with him when you were here?

JAMES: You know we really didn't. Not very much. I've come to know Leeland very closely in the last few years, but not then. We were just trying to show up on time and do our work.

PETERSON: Definitely. Had a bigger goal, you had to complete med school and raise a family. Yes. Definitely understandable.

JAMES: But obviously, you know the one interesting, well no, I won't go into that. Nevermind. Go ahead, you were going to ask another question.

PETERSON: Some of the other questions are just about your later career. Any research interests that you developed, any accomplishments that you wanted to share with us as one of our early med students, kind of seeing where everyone's careers went has been very interesting. As you

mentioned a lot of the people were kind of interested in building or in doing innovative things after they came to Tulsa, I think, so it's been kind of neat to see where everyone landed.

JAMES: Yeah. Research interests I spent about a year and a half doing surgical research while I was at Vanderbilt.

PETERSON: Okay.

JAMES: And we did a lot of studies on renovascular hypertension because that was, they had a huge hypertension center there, and I worked with a guy named Dick Dean who was a vascular surgeon. And anyway, we published some articles from that. Very interesting. Also spent some time in the lab looking at the effects of contrast on renal function and trying to sort out why occasionally contrast material that you get from arteriograms and stuff like that can damage the kidneys. But what really was amazing to me at Vanderbilt was I would talk to other people who were involved in research, how broad and intense and remarkable a group of projects they were working on. I was just astonished by it. So, it was fun to be with the other researchers and to see what they were doing.

CAROL: And that is kind of where you started with the research forum.

JAMES: Yeah, promoted a research forum at Vanderbilt for house staff and so it's still going on today.

PETERSON: Oh, wow.

JAMES: So it's really pretty neat.

PETERSON: Is that posters? Presentations? What all did that entail?

JAMES: Well, both. What we did was we got some, I guess, well, like Sam Wells from general surgery. He was the chair of surgery, I think at Duke at the time. No he wasn't the chair at Duke. He became the chair at Washington University. Anyway, we got Sam Wells one year to listen to the presentations. We picked I think ten or fifteen presentations and then we had poster presentations as well. And then he would judge them and ask questions and give comments and that sort of thing. And we brought up the chairman from the department of medicine at Methodist Hospital in Houston to run the next research forum. He did a great job as well.

PETERSON: Great. Is there anything else either of you want to share about your time here?

CAROL: Well, he also, I mean it's no longer going on, but he developed the transplant program at St. Francis.

JAMES: Well, yeah, we were, when I came from Barnes we were very interested in starting a transplant program, but it took a few years for that to take place. The cardiologists hired a great transplant cardiologist, Doug Ensley, and then we hired another surgeon that was knowledgeable in transplant, got that program off the ground. I would estimate that we probably ended up transplanting 170, 180 patients. Had really good results, but the volume wasn't quite high enough that we felt it was sustainable, but a great, great program.

PETERSON: Yeah. That's very nice.

JAMES: Yeah, it was fun.

PETERSON: Good, I'm glad to hear that. Anything else you want to share about either med school or your career? Or just the community of practice here in Tulsa?

CAROL: We loved being here in Tulsa.

JAMES: Oh, yeah. Got great friends here. No, I don't think so.

PETERSON: That's fine. Well, I appreciate both of you joining us today.

*End of interview.*