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Michael J. Conaton

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Fr. Thomas Kennealy S.J.

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**Interview with Mr. Michael J. Conaton**

**By Thomas P. Kennealy, S.J.**

**September 17, 2009**

**Unedited Transcription [Only Version]**

Note: This transcription represents the best effort of the Xavier University Archives staff to faithfully transcribe the interview as represented on the recorded program. Spelling of proper names is as accurate as possible, but some errors may occur. The transcript makes note of those instances where dialogue is inaudible and cannot be properly understood. Editorial comments are found in square brackets.

TK: Good morning. My name is Fr. Tom Kennealy and I am the Archivist at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio. Today is Thursday September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2009, and I am seated here in the Conaton Board Room in Schmidt Hall of Xavier campus. With me is Mr. Michael J. Conaton who has graciously agreed to be interviewed this morning for Xavier's archival collection of oral histories. Let me give you a little bit of background on Mr. Conaton. Mr. Conaton graduated from Xavier in 1955 with a Bachelor of Science degree. He's a past president of Xavier Alumni Association, a long-time member of Xavier's Board of Trustees, a past chair of the Board of Trustees, and during the 1990-91 Academic Year he served as Xavier's interim president. First of all Mike -- welcome and thank you for your willingness to share with us your reminiscences of Xavier and your many years of association with the school.

MC: Thank you Father.

TK: And let me begin at the beginning, if I may, by asking you something about your life prior to Xavier. Where were you born and raised?

MC: I was born in Detroit. Only lived there for a year, so I don't remember all that. Dad was transferred to

Indianapolis, and I grew up in Indianapolis through high school. And in 1951 I came to Xavier University right out of high school.

TK: Tell us about your parents and siblings.

MC: Parents were terrific people, wonderful Irish people. Both their parents came from Ireland. I had two siblings, two sisters—both younger than I. I had a great time growing up. Had a great education at Cathedral. We lived on the near east side of Indianapolis, kind of an Irish-Italian ghetto. And I knew that early on because the wakes were held in the parlor of the living room.

TK: Yes, that's right—in the Irish tradition.

MC: That's right.

TK: Where did you go to grade school?

MC: I went to Little Flower Grade School

TK: In Indianapolis, on the East side

MC: in Indianapolis.

TK: And then to Cathedral High School. Does that still exist today?

MC: It does. It was downtown. It was an all male school when I went. Holy Cross Brothers and Priests owned it and ran it obviously. They, after I graduated, couldn't support it any more, so a group of lay Catholics took it over. At the same time there was a girl's high school, Ladywood by name, that was just outside of Indianapolis, actually in the environs. They merged and Cathedral was moved to their campus. It is still Cathedral High School but now co-ed as a result.

TK: As a result of the merger...

MC: Right.

TK: Where and when did you meet your first wife?

MC: I met my first wife, Marge, here in Cincinnati. She was a student at University of Cincinnati.

TK: She was a Bearcat.

MC: She was a Bearcat. I will describe how this marriage was made in Heaven. A dear friend that I played football with, Dutch Schwartz, his wife, Paula-- Marge and Paula were good friends at U.C. I wasn't dating anybody, so they arranged a blind date. The blind date was in the evening after the UC- XU football game.

TK: Unbelievable! So you were playing a football game against U.C. that afternoon.

MC: I did that. It was more of a war than a football game.

TK: Who won?

MC: We did. So we meet that evening and of course I knew she was a U.C. student, but I didn't know she was a U.C. football cheerleader. Thus when we were married, it was a marriage made in heaven

TK: It had to be!

MC: ...and I converted her.

TK: And you lost Marge?

MC: I lost Marge fifteen years ago. We were married forty years.

TK: How many children do you have?

MC: Five -- four girls and a boy. I lost a daughter after Marge died -- almost a year to the day-- which was a real shocker. We had a wonderful life, terrific time growing up. I traveled a lot initially with the Midland Company, and so Marge, we had three in diapers at the same time...

TK: Oh boy—she had her hands full!

MC: ...so she had her hands full, and again did a tremendous job.

TK: And the three girls are married and live here in Cincinnati?

MC: Yes.

TK: But young Mike is in New York.

MC: Mike is in New York. Mike went to St. X High, was a swimmer, won scholarship to Stanford, and swam for Stanford, won a national championship...

TK: ...in swimming.

MC: ... in swimming. He was ranked 10<sup>th</sup> in the world in back stroke at one time. I'm not bragging, but is a fact.

TK: That's all right! That's what this is for!

MC: My daughters, my four daughters at the time ....I'm a lousy salesperson -- only one of them came here to XU...

TK Betsy.

MC: Betsy. The other three went to U.C.. I have forgiven them but...

TK: But it was hard. How many grandchildren do you have?

MC: I have eight. Eight from my children, and when I remarried, Nancy, she had three children. She lost a daughter as well. She lost her husband as well. They were married thirty years. Her daughter was killed in an accident, and at the funeral her husband had a heart attack. He survived for another year and a half. We did not know each other, and for three years, as a matter of fact, I was even considering -- I had some paper work-- going to the seminary.

TK: That right? Study for the Diaconate? Priesthood?

MC: Diaconate and then hopefully the Priesthood. That got cancelled when I met Nance. God works in wonderful ways.

TK: That's right-- God had his own plans here. How did you meet Nancy? How did that come about?

MC: Again, that's a blind date situation, with a dear friend. Joe Rippe, Sr. was her uncle by marriage, and I had known him forever. I had done business with him. He was president of a bank here in town, and so he insisted that we had dinner. So the four of us had dinner, and it worked! Very nicely!

TK: And God took over from there. Wonderful! And you were married how many years ago then was that?

MC: Just over eleven years. We've been married eighty-one years. I was married forty. She was married thirty-nine, and now we've married eleven.

TK: Who performed the ceremony?

MC: Father Jim Hoff, my dear brother.

TK: Your dear brother and very close friend.

MC: Yes.

TK: Where did the wedding take place? Was it here on campus?

MC: In my parish, Christ the King.

TK: And I understand that both you and Father Hoff wept through the whole ceremony. That's an exaggeration?

MC: Yeah. We were very concerned because Father Hoff --Jim-- was not Irish but boy he sure acted like he was Irish. He had the same weepy eyes that I did and so he was concerned, and I was concerned there'd be some tears shed, and so was Nancy. So before the wedding, Nancy gave us each a gift and we opened them and we each got a linen handkerchief...

TK: From Nancy?

MC: ..from Nancy, with our initials on it, and she said she'd rather give us that than carry a box of Kleenix through the ceremony.

TK: That would look a little tacky!

MC: So his approach to that situation was to kind of roast us in the homily, which was just wonderful.

TK: It fit the occasion. You also served in the military at one point?

MC: I was commissioned in the Marine Corps after graduation. Spent my time at Quantico. I played football for Quantico.

TK: Played football for Quantico against Xavier?

MC: Against Xavier. We played, I played here at Xavier for four years. And we played Quantico every year and I think that was part of the recruiting effort by the Marine Corps to find college football players to go through the program.

TK: Is it true you got yourself in trouble with the dean, Father Paul O'Connor over...?

MC: Yes, dear Father O'Connor. And back when I was here initially ROTC was mandatory for two years. You could opt to sign for the next two years and then commissioned in the Army after that. My dear friend from Indianapolis who went from kindergarten through the Marine Corps with really, we played ball together, Indianapolis and here -- if we had not gotten football scholarships, we were going to join the Marine Corps. So we find out that the Corps has this PLC program, Platoon Leaders Corps. We go downtown to check it out, and this is what we always wanted to do anyway.

TK: You were already Xavier students at this time.

MC: We were Xavier students, and we had already signed for the next two years of ROTC here at Xavier. So we get a call from Father O'Connor one day, and he asked us to come to his office, and we went in his office. The Colonel in charge of ROTC here was sitting there, and Father O'Connor proceeds to tell us we were in violation of some military code because we had signed for two commissions. And then the Colonel wanted to say something to us, so he gave us a little shot. And Father says, "I talked to the Colonel, and he's not going to make an issue of this. He'll give you a choice." So Charlie and I looked at each other and said "You know, we'd prefer the Marine Corps." And the Colonel gave us another shot and he left. And we were leaving Father's office and he said "I want to talk to you." So we walked back in front of his desk and he says, "Look fellows, you made the right choice." That's because he was a Navy chaplain, and he was on the Missouri when the Japanese peace treaty was signed.

TK: Yes, he witnessed the signing of the ...

MC: He had a pen in his office.

TK: And so he was siding with the Marine Corps over the Army.

MC: Yes, he was.

TK: Tell us about your professional career, the jobs that you've held.

MC: When I got out of the Marine Corps, was in '56. I was in for three years. I got out about a year early because I suffered the cruciate ligaments in the knee, and so I was discharged early. I obviously came back to Cincinnati. My major was political science, and I wanted to pursue that career—law-- but I really wanted to get involved in business. So I talked to a neighbor who happened to be treasurer for Kroger, and he suggested that one way to really get your feet wet is to go to work for a CPA firm if you could. Which I did, Stan Hettler and Company, which was a regional firm, sold since. Recognized that I didn't have the formal education, accounting and finance courses -- so I too went to UC. I went to UC at night to pick up some courses, businesses courses. From there I had an opportunity to become the comptroller, Financial Officer for aluminum products manufacturer out in Iowa. I did that, we were out there for about three years. I was going to law school at the same time I was working for the CPA firm. This opportunity in Iowa, after two years of law school, I made that move and so I didn't pursue it after that.

TK: Wasn't Father Patrick Ratterman involved in that some way?

MC: Father Ratterman – the gentleman that owned the company – that I went to work for in Iowa, it was Aluminum Extrusion Company that made doors and windows for Sears really, biggest customer. But Paul Maloney-- it was a Maloney company -- lived in Cleveland, and operated it auditly when it actually was in Ohio initially. The union wanted organizing. He said “if they organize me, I am moving.” He's a great Irishman too. And so they did, and he did. And so he moved it to Iowa. Moved a lot of the manufacturing people out there and management -- couldn't find a financial guy. Father Ratterman's brother, George, was quarterback for the Cleveland Browns at the time. Paul Maloney knew Paul Brown very well, and through conversation, I guess George talked to Father Pat and said they were looking for a financial guy. And he called me and said “would you be interested?” That's how I got out there.

TK: And Father Ratterman was Dean of Men at that time.

MC: He was.

TK: And then after that you came back to Cincinnati ... after a few years?

MC: Sears bought the company out, and I opted to leave at that time. I came back to Cincinnati. This was 1961, and I joined what was Midland Guardian at the time, which is now the Midland Company. It was a good-sized finance company but it was privately held, and they decided in '61 to take it public, which gave me the opportunity to join them. I joined them as controller, and then treasurer and chief financial officer, and then I was president for ten years, vice-chairman before I retired.

TK: When did you retire then, Mike?

MC: I'm still not retired.

TK: Still not retired—Oh! Because I know you go to work everyday.

MC: At seventy-six I'm still going strong. We sold, Midland sold, and I was the director of the company. We sold the company two plus years ago to a company, Munich RIE, out of Germany, which is the largest re-insurance in the world, and the board was dissolved at that time. I had been retired maybe three years. They invited me to stay on as a consultant, so that's why I say I'm still involved. I still have my office. I go out there everyday.



TK: Good. You're keeping yourself busy.

MC: Absolutely! If I'm not out there, I'm here.

TK: That's probably right, either on the Xavier campus or at Midland's campus. Tell us now about your association with Xavier. First of all, how was it that you came to Xavier? I presume it was the football scholarship, but how did that come about?

MC: It was the football scholarship. Well we had, back in those days, when you were recruited you went to the various campuses and spent three, four days suited up, practiced -- you know.

TK: Actually practiced with the team? Wouldn't be able to do that today.

MC: Yes, and so we had, we had a number of opportunities. Holy Cross Priests and Brothers had taught me from Notre Dame. Had an opportunity at Notre Dame. That scholarship was for a year at a time. I didn't want to take my chances. My dad did not want me to take my chances but I had Indiana of Purdue, Miami Florida, and my dad was Jesuit-educated, Ignatius High School in Cleveland and then John Carroll after that.

TK: And so your dad was a Carroll graduate?

MC: Yes, and he let me make the choice, and I came over here and just loved the place. Ed Kluska was the football coach.

TK: Who was the Dean of Admissions at that time?

MC: Father Nieporte as I recall.

TK: Father Victor Nieporte, yes, who you got to know very well and worked with, and worked with over the years as well.

MC: Yes, my dad really liked and appreciated him.

TK: Now you majored, you said, in Political Science, with a minor maybe in ....?

MC: Philosophy.

TK: Where did you live on campus in those days?

MC: Wonderful place, the barracks. The old Army barracks were located where Alter Hall and the Library and now it was Herald Avenue that ran through there.

TK: Herald Avenue which is now the Academic Mall. How many of them were there along that stretch?

MC: Probably-- I lived in barracks 10-- but I don't think there were ten of them. And there were two of them-- were for families at the time, for married people-- that were converted into suites. In my senior year there was six of us that played ball, lived in one of those.

TK: How was life in that barracks?

MC: Fantastic!

TK: You loved it.

MC: Absolutely!

TK: What did your family think about it?

MC: Well, my mom and dad always went to football games. And I played basketball and baseball and all that good stuff in high school—boxed in Golden Gloves-- so when I came here and I was fortunate enough to play varsity in my freshman year. So they came to the first game and my mom after the game said, "You know, I'd like to see where you live." And I said "Aw, no."

TK: You don't want to see that.

MC: No.

MC: She said "Aw, come on." So I took her over to the barracks. Well when she saw that she said "you're not staying here." Of course I did. I had a wonderful time.

TK: If I'm not mistaken, in those days you lived over here—of course, as you said, but meals were served on the other side of the campus. I guess that would have been the old Avondale Athletic Building, which is where the Joseph Building is today.

MC: It was. It was the clubhouse.

TK: That means three times a day. You went down in the valley and up the other hill...if you wanted to eat.

MC: Kept you in shape.

TK: If the football didn't, that walk back and forth surely did. Who were some of the memorable people that you remember from your days at Xavier, apart from football now?

MC: Yeah, certainly Father O'Connor.

TK: Father Paul O'Connor.

MC: Father Maguire was president while I was in school. Father O'Connor succeeded him, but, oh gosh, Father O'Connor, Father John Wenzel. He was a close friend. In fact, he officiated at my marriage to Marge.

TK: He was also in charge of the Sodality at that time.

MC: He was, and I was a Sodality member. And it was very strong I think on all Jesuit campuses.

TK: That's right and it was very, very strong and we developed that and emphasized it a great deal. The growth in personal holiness, as well as apostolic outreach at the same time.

MC: Even beyond, after Marge and I were married, we stayed in touch with Father Wenzel. He became director of the Milford Retreat Center. He was a great cook. And so we would go out with Father Lipps...

TK: Father Louis Lipps

MC: ...and Father Wenzel, and Marge and I would play bridge. And Father Wenzel -John- would cook us dinner. And so we were in touch right up until his passing.

TK: Any teachers stood out?

MC: I remember Father McCummiskey well.

TK: James McCummiskey.

MC: Right.

TK: Wasn't he in the Philosophy Department?

MC: Yes, in fact my Freshman year, being fortunate enough to play varsity football, I had to have my classes arranged differently than the typical freshman. So I took Logic my Freshman year. It probably should have been a

Junior class, maybe a Sophomore class. So I'm in Father McCummiskey's class, Logic, and you know, I'm seventeen to eighteen, and he calls on me in class one day. And he says, "Astute, Conaton." And I thought "well you son-of-a-gun, you called..." And so I go back to the barracks afterwards. I get a dictionary. I look it up. "Astute' Whew! It ain't bad at all!"

TK: That's a real compliment.

MC: So I use the word often now.

TK: It's part of your active vocabulary, thanks to Father McCummiskey. Were your grades uniformly good?

MC: I got good grades, yes. I had four years of Latin in high school, and I required two years of foreign language here. When I arrived on campus I chose Spanish, and I had a dear Jesuit, Father Usher.

TK: Father John Usher, yes.

MC: ...was our Spanish teacher.

TK: Taught Spanish for years.

MC: Yes, and he loved football. And he'd stand in the turret of the building when we were playing at home. He'd wave at us, after we'd go to the grotto, first before we went over, and coming back he'd...

TK: The turret in Hinkle Hall?

MC: Right, right outside here, outside of Alumni.

TK: Outside of Alumni, he was up there in that turret.

MC: Right.

TK: As you were down in the shrine just below.

MC: Right, and I said "Alumni," but it's now "Edgecliff." Yes, it was "Alumni" back then. Anyway, I had Father Usher for Spanish. He was inclined towards football players I think, so I got two B's first two semesters. Second year I come back and I had a gentleman by the name of Senor de Guzman. While we walk in the class and Senor de Guzman starts speaking Spanish. And I wasn't quite up to that-- my buddy Charlie Kirkoff and I. So he gave us a high school Spanish workbook, and we sat up in front while he was doing the class work. We were

filling out the book, and every once in a while he'd say, "El football players," and everyone would laugh. And so I said to Charlie, "He's referring to the two of us." The only D's I ever got in my life. I almost had to threaten to get them. I got two D's those two semesters, but I succeeded.

TK: The only blots on the escutcheon...those two D's. Let's talk about the football. You played for four years, played as a Freshman. That was rather unusual in those days, wasn't it, for a Freshman to play?

MC: Yeah, I think there're four of us, that qualified, if you will.

TK: In your four years, how did the team do?

MC: We did very well. Early on we did quite well. As I recall, we were undefeated one year - had one tie.

TK: Yes, I think that, if my memory serves correctly, the year, it would have been '50, and January '51 we played in the Salad Bowl. That would have been before you came.

MC: '50, we played in the Salad Bowl. '51, I came.

TK: And then you came in '51. Well, we were undefeated in '51, weren't we?

MC: Yes, we had that one tie.

TK: The one tie and you played with that team.

MC: I did.

TK: Who tied us? Who was the one?

MC: It was Camp Lejune Marines. And we played there and we were ahead 7-0. And the clock was running out. And all of a sudden the clock malfunctioned. And of course they controlled the clock, so we continued to play until they scored and tied us. So I think we were really totally undefeated.

TK: Really totally undefeated. Is that the only year the football team went undefeated? I think it is but I'm not...

MC: I think so. Going way back they used to play the Haskell Indians. Those folks, and I don't know off the top what their records were back then.

TK: Where did Xavier play its home games?

MC: Corcoran Field, which is now a soccer field. It was a stadium.

TK: It was quite a large stadium.

MC: It was --press box -- the whole thing.

TK: It was one of the largest stadiums in the state of Ohio. It was built in the 20's, and it's where the soccer field presently is along Victory Parkway there.

MC: And the stadium itself was demolished.

TK: Yes, it was torn down during Father DiUlio's presidency. I think, around that time. What teams did you play?

MC: Well, we always played the Quantico Marines, like the opening game. But we played the wonderful traditional games with UC, Miami, Dayton. Some of the away, a couple of the away games, we played Boston College and Villanova in Philadelphia. We had good teams.

TK: What position did you play?

MC: I played a tackle.

TK: Offense or defense?

MC: Well, back in those days, we didn't start platooning yet. So I went both ways.

TK: And so you played both ways. I've heard that Miami would never come down here to play us. Is that true?

MC: Yes, there was something to do with the league that they were in and UC. So, as I understood it, they weren't permitted to do so. So we went to Miami. Ah, a kind of a funny story: we'd go in the morning, Saturday morning, drive out and make a visit at Little Flower Parish, and there was a restaurant right across --the Venetian Inn or whatever. We'd take school buses back in those days. So as we were driving out and as you approached Oxford there's a hill. And this particular school bus couldn't make it up the hill. It was still moving, but it wasn't going to be successful.

TK: You were not going to get into Oxford.

MC: So they got us all off the bus. And the bus got to the top of the hill. And we walked up and got back on.

TK: Was football as big a deal then at Xavier as basketball is today?

MC: Yeah, it was -- obviously different times. Basketball nationally has really gained a lot of prominence. The NIT was the tournament for basketball back in those days. We won the NIT in 1958. Then the NCAA's took over March Madness, and all that good stuff.

TK: And in those days NIT was a more prestigious tournament than the NCAA.

MC: It was, but football did not have that structure back then. They have the BCS now. It's so different, it's unbelievable, but in this area football was very popular, very strong. UC was an excellent team, preempted their basketball program, until Oscar Robertson arrived. Basketball took over for UC.

TK: In the early '60's.

MC: Right! But the student body and the alumni, and I'm speaking for Xavier now, were *really* into football. Really followed it strongly. So I say comparably, "yes," in those days, it was strength. And our wonderful basketball program today is.

TK: I want to talk about Xavier's dropping football, Mike, but before I get to that, I know that in 1972, you became a member of the Board of Trustees of the university at that point. I want to talk about that a bit. Because it was a rather important year in the history of the Board of Trustees.

MC: The trustees, up to that point, were all Jesuits, and so we were the first lay Board members. I was in fast company.

TK: There about six of you who came on the Board, six laymen at that time.

MC: Tremendous people, tremendous people.

TK: Do you know who they were? Can you name some?

MC: Bill Williams.

TK: William Williams, who just died.

MC: Who just passed away at ninety-three.

TK: He was in his 90's.

MC: Yeah, Bill Rowe who is a CEO of Fifth Third Bank then.

TK: Was Harry Gilligan one, the father of John Gilligan? And, of course yourself. And if I remember Fletcher Nyce was in that group.

MC: Yes.

TK: Which was interesting because Fletcher Nyce was not only *not Jesuit*, he was *not Catholic*.

MC: Right.

TK: He always boasted the fact he was Huguenot French -- a very, very fine man.

MC: Yes, he was.

TK: I think Chairman of the Board. And then the following year the Board confronted this issue of dropping football.

MC: Right.

TK: You were on the Board at the time.

MC: I was on the Board

TK: Would you tell us that story?

MC: And I chaired... We had lost \$250,000 the year prior in that year, the football program had, and so I chaired a committee that studied the situation, determined that a \$250,000 loss was the amount of scholarships given. The conclusion that I reported at that Board meeting was that we should retain football but drop it down to the Division II or III level, non-scholarship. That wasn't accepted.

TK: Where did that meeting take place?

MC: It was the only meeting since 1972 that was not on campus, and it was down in WLW boardroom.

TK: It happened at WLW boardroom.

MC: A gentleman by the name of Murphy was on the Board. He volunteered that. Now this is my suspicion, and I'll take full responsibility for this. But it was the only meeting away from the campus. The issue of football was being discussed. And I made the report, and there wasn't much discussion on that. Father O'Callaghan was on the Board, and he made a motion to drop football.



And immediately Father Reinke seconded the motion. There wasn't much discussion after that, except for me frankly saying, "Oh, wait a minute. Let's rethink this." The vote was taken. And there were three that voted to retain it and the rest voted to drop it.

TK: To drop it completely.

MC: Yes. Father O'Connor, Father Mulligan, and myself voted to retain it. After the meeting was over, the doors opened and the TV cameras came in. That's why I think this was a set-up. It was very disappointing.

TK: Were there repercussions?

MC: There were. You know-- monetarily-- substantially, initially. Time heals all, and we're pretty much over that. We started a new program here, this will be the fourth year we have Club Football, and that's been very successful.

TK: Yes, the team has done rather well.

MC: We formed a conference two years ago and won the conference both years now. We have eight teams we play, and it's the real thing. And they have better uniforms than I had when I played. The only thing different about it is that they play fifteen minute quarters instead of twenty.

TK: So, your feelings on the issue really haven't changed over the years...the proposal you made to maintain football at the non-scholarship level would have been the right decision? Going back to '72?

MC: I sure do.

TK: When did you become Chair of the Board of Trustees? Know off hand?

MC: Not off hand. I was Chair for eighteen years.

TK: Chair for eighteen years.

MC: When I left that position-- I'm still on the Board-- Joe Pichler, terrific guy, was CEO at Kroger at the time.

TK: And presently Chairman of the Board.

MC: ...until next week. So if we work backwards, he's been chairman of the Board for five years, so subtract five from nine. It would have been 2004 that I

was no longer Chair. Bob Kohlhepp is going to become Chair now, next week. Bob's a terrific guy.

TK: The Board meeting next Friday, I guess.

MC: Thursday-- Thursday and Friday.

TK: How has the function, the size, the make-up, and the procedures of the Board of Trustees changed in your years? Obviously it's much larger, now predominately lay. There are some Jesuits on the Board. But over and above that, how has it changed?

MC: The structure of meetings certainly has changed. We have committees of the Board which are very effective and work very hard. Early on, those committees would report at the Board meeting. Each Board meeting, each committee would report. That took up most of the time. We recognized as we grew the Board in numbers -- there's so much talent there-- we had to have more input at the meetings. So it's been restructured over time. Father Mike Graham initiated this when he arrived, and I think he has been president for eight years. And now we have committee reports once a year, or more if necessary. And they report particular to the time of the school year finance reports. When the budget time is there, for example. And now we have really interactive opportunity at Board meetings.

TK: For more discussion, more input.

MC: Right, and we'll feature some part of the university in a presentation at Board meetings.

TK: I think there probably some people who don't realize the Board of Trustees really runs the university. There are those who think the Jesuits do, but in fact, the power is really with the Board of Trustees.

MC: Yes, technically, legally, the Board of Trustees owns the university. The Jesuits, God love 'em -- they make it all happen.

TK: And certainly very influential too, especially in Xavier's arrangement of things.

MC: And we, by numbers, it's entirely different now. Certainly there's not as many Jesuits as when I attended. But we formed a committee of the Board

which was terribly important, and it was under Father Jim Hoff's watch: a Jesuit Identity Committee.

TK: There's a committee just on Jesuit Identity?

MC: Just on Jesuit Identity. When we bring new Board members on, part of that obligation, they have coming on, is to serve two years on the Jesuit Identity Committee.

TK: Every new member of the Board.

MC: That's terribly important because, you know, all of our Board members are not Catholic.

TK: But during your many years on the Board, of course, many important decisions were made. What would you select or pick out as a couple of the most important decisions? Surely the dropping of football would have been right up there as among the most significant.

MC: That was major.

TK: Anything else that stands out in your mind?

MC: I think laymen on the Board was terribly important.

TK: Yes, that was very significant. And the restructuring of the Board itself over the years, I'm sure that has been very important.

MC: Yes, that's right -- and the development effort, the fund raising effort. You know it's easy to remember this, but in 1983 our endowment was 8.3 million. It exceeded 100 million until the market problem dropped below, but it's about back there now.

TK: In your long tenure I'm sure you sat on the Board with some distinguished people, both Jesuits and lay. Would you want to single out a few people that really stood out for their contributions to Xavier?

MC: Well, from the present Board—it's hard to single anyone out because they're all terrific people -- but Joe Pichler, Bob Kohlhepp—going back, John Pepper, who was CEO of Procter & Gamble. He was my vice-chair for a period of time—very helpful. A.G. Laffley who was on the Board; he is not now. He is presently—I think he is-- in the process of stepping down, but he was Procter & Gamble's CEO.

TK: And I know that Ralph Corbett, the Cincinnati philanthropist, was on the Board. And I know he was very, very helpful to Father Mulligan on several occasions.

MC: Yes, he was.

TK: Harry Gilligan was on the Board. Was his son John Gilligan ever on the Board?

MC: No, he was not. John Gilligan had a distinguished career in the Navy, and when he came out one of his first jobs was a professor here at Xavier. He taught Freshman English. Freshman English was taught on Saturday morning.

TK: That's interesting.

MC: Well, it was a discipline. I had to get out of bed on Saturday mornings as a Freshman to get use to it.

TK: Diagramming sentences and everything else involved in English composition, yes.

MC: So, and I had him, and as I mentioned I was fortunate to play varsity football. And so, there were times on Saturday mornings when I was elsewhere. And one of those times he had a test, a quiz. And I obviously wasn't there to take it. Came back and asked if I could make it up and he said, "No, you got a zero." It was very upsetting. And so I had a few conversations with him. I got a C in that class. I could have gotten a B, but he wouldn't let me take the test. He's a very bright guy, ended up Governor of the State of Ohio.

TK: And was on Cincinnati Council for a number of years, was Governor. His daughter Kathleen Sebelius is now in the Obama administration.

MC: She is the head of Health, Education, and Welfare.

TK: And John is still active in Cincinnati affairs really.

MC: He is. He, you know, is no "spring chicken," and as I am not either. He, a few years ago, thought the public school board, the public school system wasn't being run exactly right. And it wasn't. So he ran for the school board and was elected.

TK: As a man in his 70's, maybe even early 80's.

MC: In his early 80's, yes, and did really wonderful things. I think he served two terms and opted not to repeat.

TK: And from everything I've heard, an excellent teacher.

MC: Very much so.

TK: He was, could have pursued an academic career and been a first class teacher from everything.... [inaudible section here].

MC: ...after his governorship, and I think right after he went to Notre Dame as a chair he occupied and taught. He also taught at UC for a while.

TK: One year he gave the principal address at the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick Banquet. And it's the finest after dinner speech I've ever heard. And afterwards I wrote to him. He was at at Notre Dame. And I asked for a copy of it. He wrote back and said, "I'm sorry. I ad-libbed the whole thing."

MC: Oh, is that right?

TK: I thought, my, it was just perfectly delivered and just very clever. It was an excellent address..... In 1990, Mike, you became interim president of Xavier for about maybe ten months or so there? Would that be about right?

MC: Right!

TK: How did that come about?

MC: Father DiUlio had an opportunity to go...

TK: He was president at the time.

MC: ...to Marquette (he was president at the time), to go to Marquette as president, and it was quick. It was sudden. Thus we had not had a search committee, hadn't pursued anybody. So they asked, the Board asked if I would serve as the interim president, which I did. I'll tell you this story, but you can probably cut it. I said, "let me talk to Marge." And so I went home and Marge said to me, "Well, you know, the Jesuits take the vow of poverty, chastity and obedience." I said, "Yes." She said, "Are you going to take the vow of chastity?" And I said, "Only if you take the vow of poverty." There were no vows taken. [laughs]

TK: [laughing] No vows were taken.

MC: So I did serve during that period of time. It was very exciting. I was president of Midland at the time.

TK: ...during the same time. What is the function of an interim president? How did you conceive the roll?

MC: To keep the church in the middle of the town...

TK: ...until we could find a new permanent president.

MC: Right, and at the same time, search for a new president, and it was Father Hoff that we finally engaged.

TK: How did it go, those months? Did things go pretty smoothly?

MC: It went very well. I immediately met with each of the vice-presidents. This all wouldn't have happened if we didn't have tremendous vice-presidents. John Kucia was fantastic. Richard Hirte, [meaning] John Kucia, is to this day an administrative vice-president. And Richard Hirte was another who's now a professor, but was the financial vice-president. They were all terrific people. My office was downtown, my corporate office, and it was '90 in the Fall. Classes were back under way, and John Kucia called me one day and said, "Mike, the BASF chemical factory, which is up here at the corner, blew up."

TK: Right at the corner of Dana and Montgomery. Literally blew up.

MC: It blew up and he said there's smoke all over. Black smoke and burning embers were on Husman Hall. And it blew windows out of the library, and the back of the library. So I made a presidential decision. I said, "John, evacuate the campus." You know what John said to me?

TK: What?

MC: "I already have." Blew my whole big decision...

TK: And that was the one decision you had to make. It had already been made.

MC: That's right. But I come out at noon and sometimes during the day, a few weekends, but it really went very well.

TK: And of course your big task was finding a new president.

MC: Absolutely. I put a letter out to the other twenty-seven Jesuit, university presidents, and nine other provinces, asking for recommendations. And we got

a few, and a number recommending Father Jim Hoff who was at Creighton University -- had been there seventeen years before he came.

TK: And he was President of Development there, or Vice-President of Development at Creighton in Omaha, Nebraska?

MC: President of Development, President of Creighton Foundation. He also was two or three years in charge of the hospital, was president of the hospital at Creighton. They had a big med school, still have. So, with those recommendations, strong recommendations from Father LaVelle, who was president of John Carroll.

TK: Father Michael LaVelle.

MC: Yes.

TK: Who was on our Board at the time.

MC: ... who was on our Board. So I contacted Father Hoff and said "I'm getting a lot of recommends for you. Can we come visit?" And he said, "No, I'm not interested." I said "you know, we could do it on campus." He said "no." So, that was that. Father Mike LaVelle kept telling me "try him again." So I called him again and said "How about coming to Cincinnati? You don't have to come to campus." He didn't want to go through all the interviews and all that.

TK: He had just been candidate for the position at Marquette. Wasn't that part of the complication?

MC: He and Father DiUlio were the two finalists.

TK: At Marquette.

MC: And DiUlio got it and he didn't want any part of that....but when I asked him, "Come on to Cincinnati and we can do it away from campus." I got the same answer, "No." He wasn't interested. Long story short, I tried him one more time and said, "How about if we meet in Chicago at the hotel at the O'Hare Airport? And I'll get a room, conference room?" And he said "Alright, I'll do that." So, there were five of us, I believe, that flew to Chicago and met with him. In the first half hour, you know, we're meeting and we broke, took a little break, and he left the room. I said to the folks I was with, I said "We're here to interview him and do you realize that he spent a half an hour interviewing us? But I mean, right off the bat, he was perfect.

TK: You knew you had the right man.

MC: Gosh yes, gosh yes. So he finally said yeah, he will talk to his provincial. He was the Wisconsin Province, not the Chicago Province, and, long story short, he agreed to come, which was, that's when Xavier really took off big, big time.

TK: I'd like to talk about Father Jim Hoff a bit because he was more than just a colleague. He was a close personal friend of yours.

MC: Very much so.

TK: And what was he like? What kind of a person was he?

MC: Warm, I mean the kind of person that even in a crowd, when he's talking to you, whoever that might be, that person felt they were the only one in the room with him. He just had that charisma, terrific with the students. Really, building grounds-wise, he really put this place up.

TK: He was a skilled administrator.

MC: He was, very.

TK: When you think of the buildings he put up: the Cintas Center, the Gallagher Center, I think the Buenger.....

MC: The Commons, Buenger dorm, and then the Commons.

TK: That's right, the Commons. Renovated these buildings along the west side of the mall, this building included.

TK: And quite a fund raiser.

MC: That's right. And I was just going to say, this was the library when I was in school-- became a learning lab at one time-- and he was the one who put this together. We had fifty chapters, alumni chapters around the country. In the Far East there are a couple. They have an annual meeting where the presidents of all the chapters come and it was with him. We were in here, and a couple of them were talking to him and they said, "Holy crammidy. What was this room when I was in school?" And he says, "It was the library, and I want your diplomas back." He said, "That proves you were never in the library."

TK: You just indicted yourself. [laughter] That's true. His work at organizing the National Alumni Association was extensive. He spent a fair amount of time doing that.



MC: Yes, and the reason, one of the main reasons, that we were able to build all these new buildings, and form the malls, and the whole works, was the development effort. And he was an expert at that -- really very good. Wasn't bashful but made the "asks" in a very personal way. And we were very successful, which was one of the reasons we extended the Board. We have thirty-nine members on the Board now. We just don't want people that can give. We're very careful about the diversity of the Board and we need help in identifying those others that can give. And that's one of the obligations of the Board now.

TK: Sure, not only can give but will [audio inaudible here] and solicit other gifts as well. He was an extraordinary fund raiser.

MC: Very much so. I have a little example of that. When Nance and I were to be married, and we sent invitations out, and on the invitation it said, "Please no gifts." And a good friend of mine, Jack Brown -- I served on his board for twenty some years, Burke International Research, and he knew Father Hoff well. Well, Jack Brown called Jim-- Father Hoff -- and said "You know, I've known Mike for a long time. He was verbose in complimenting me, and I was a mentor to him and all that good stuff. And Jack said to Father Hoff, "I want to give Xavier University twenty-five thousand dollars in his honor." Do you know what Jim said to him? He said, "You just told me what a wonderful person he was, and how he's helped you. Isn't he worth *more* than that?"

TK: He wanted him to up that gift.

MC: That's right. ...double it!

TK: They said that he had the nerve of a burglar when it came to asking for money.

MC: Subliminally so.

KF: Yes, yes, but very clever.

MC: He didn't have a bayonet or carry a gun, but he could pick your pocket!

TK: You mentioned Father James Hoff, and certainly he would be one example of it. But as you look back over your years at Xavier, who were the people who in your opinion had the greatest influence on Xavier's growth and success over the years? I guess we already mentioned a number of them.

MC: Yeah, I go immediately back to Father O'Connor, and Father Mulligan was really good. He served, he was president for ten years. Father Currie, a shorter period of time.

TK: And Father Nieporte whom you mentioned earlier. He was Father O'Connor's right-hand man.

MC: Yes, he was.

TK: ...and really got involved in construction of the buildings around campus. And Father J. Peter Buschmann -- I'm sure you remember him very well -- ran Admissions very, very well for many years. Those indeed ... some people.

MC: Father Nieporte and I served on the Athletic Board. And Father Mulligan called me, and he would appoint the Athletic Board each year. And he called me at the end of the year and said, "Mike, I don't think it's a good idea, that you, as a Trustee, serve on the Athletic Board. There might be a conflict of interest or whatever." And I said, "You know, I really don't see that, and I don't agree with that." And he said, "Well, I think it's going to be best that you... that I don't reappoint you to the Athletic Board." And I said, "What about Father Nieporte?" There was dead silence. A couple of weeks later, I run into Father Nieporte. He said, "What did you do?" I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "Father Mulligan is not going to appoint me to the Board, to the Athletic Board again." Fair is fair.

TK: Fair is fair -- that's right-- and being consistent. And so off he went, off he went [audio unclear here]. As you look back, what are your fondest memories of Xavier?

MC: The Jesuits, and what they stand for, and Xavier itself. It's just absolutely fantastic. They were a tremendous influence on my life.

TK: "Men for others?"

MC: Absolutely. And, you know, I got out of the Marine Corps, I thought "I need a mission statement in my life." And I thought about it. And so I put a very simple statement on paper which I typed. I have it in my office, and I have it at home. And you'll recognize part of it anyway. My mission statement has been "To be a person for others, who doesn't give in to himself."

TK: Does not give in to himself.

MC: Right! The first part isn't as difficult as the second part, but they really go together and, you know, an example of my influence ---your order's influence on me.

TK: That's a high compliment. We appreciate that. How has Xavier's commitment to its Catholic, Jesuit ideals changed over the years, and in what way has remained the same?

MC: It's been strong. It's been very strong. I am on the board of the Athenaeum seminary here and the Archbishop chairs that board. So I got to know the Archbishop very well. It's been Dan Pilarczyk the whole time until now-- he's retiring. And every time we change our president, we go down and call on Archbishop Pilarczyk. We go down and meet him, and so there's a real strong relationship with this Archdiocese, you know, with the Catholic Church. At one point, I forget who -- it was Father Mike, Father Graham -- we went down to see Archbishop Pilarczyk, and gave an introduction, and pledged support, and all those good things. The Archbishop says, "You know, I read all your material and you talk about the 'Jesuit University.'" He said, "You seldom mention 'Catholic' in that." And if you notice now, we always talk about the "Jesuit, Catholic University." That, you know, as far as influences concern, that is the only influence that I've experienced from downtown, from the Archbishop. And it was done kind of in a joking way, but the message was clear.

TK: Clear... it's probably something we should be conscious of, too.

MC: Absolutely!

FK: You, of course, came to Xavier at a time when the core curriculum and the emphasis on the liberal arts was very, very strong. How has that served you in your career? As you look back on your undergraduate education, are you satisfied with what you got?

MC: Absolutely! The core curriculum is key. We still have the core curriculum. It's been nuanced a bit but it's absolutely necessary, you know. The business world is interested in hiring liberal arts grads that have that kind of core background. I'm an Executive-in-Residence in the Business College, and we meet with the Freshmen business students one-on-one each year, the second semester.

TK: Is this that mentoring program, Mike, that they talk about? Or is this something different?

MC: No, the mentoring program is -- goes beyond that. There are six or seven of us who are Executives-in-Residence, and we split up the, the Freshmen class. We spend half an hour, forty-five minutes, one-on-one. And I tell them, I absolutely believe this, that core curriculum is *so* important. I mean it teaches you to think, read, write. And I tell them -- I said "you know, you graduate from Xavier University, you can do anything you want in life except brain surgery because it really prepares you so well."

TK: ...and for the business world, just like any other possible career.

MC: Anything...yeah. Yes, so it's a very, very strong presence.

TK: As you look back, are there any regrets? Any unfulfilled dreams as far as Xavier is concerned? Things that you might do differently, or wish had been done differently, maybe football is one.

MC: I would like to see that still here. No, there really isn't. It's just a very solid educational institution that provides all kinds of wonderful extracurricular things for our students. And from Father O'Connor, Father Maguire, when I was here, on, and it's the Jesuit philosophy threaded throughout, that really serves it so well. As I mentioned, it really took off when Jim -- Father Hoff -- became president, and it's even a step-up from there with Father Mike Graham. He is doing a magnificent job.

TK: Yes, we are very fortunate to have both of them.

MC: Absolutely!

TK: Is there anything else you would like to add, Mike, that we haven't covered? Any story you'd like to tell, or have we covered most of the topics pretty well?

MC: I think we have. Father Hoff -- Jim -- when I was elected president of the Friendly Sons of Saint Patrick -- you're president for one year. The banquet is the big focal point: even hundred men there in tuxes. But when you're president, you appoint the chaplain and the speaker for the banquet. Well, chaplain for the year. So I called Jim -- Father Hoff -- and I said "I just got elected president of the Friendly Sons." He and I would go back and forth about the Irish and the Germans, and all that all the time. So I said "I was just elected president of the Friendly Sons, and I'd like for you to be my chaplain." And he gives me a shot and said, "All right, what does it entail?" And I said "You know, you know you say something at the dinner and that type of thing but you're

chaplain for the year.” And I said “Now you’ll have to put that on your letterhead, you know, ”President,” and “Chaplain...”

TK: Xavier University President...Chaplain of the Friendly Sons...

MC: You know what he said to me? “What order would you like that in?” I said “You’re an Irishman.”

TK: [Laughter] That’s a good story. Any thing else you want to add?

MC: Not really. I thank you for this opportunity. I thank the Jesuits and this university for providing me the opportunity to be part of the process.

TK: That’s wonderful. Well, I think I have one thing I’d like to add, if I may, and this is just for the record. Right now, the year 2009, we’re putting up a new building here on campus -- the Learning Commons. And in about a year it will be finished, and it will be dedicated. And I understand the Board has decided to name it the “Conaton Learning Commons,” and I think that’s neat, a fitting tribute to a man who’s done an awful lot for Xavier University and about as good a friend as Xavier University’s ever had.

MC: Well, it’s fantastic and very humbling.

TK: Especially deserved, however.

MC: Thank you for that.

TK: Good. I think this concludes our interview then, and I want to thank Mike Conaton once again for coming today. This has been a interesting discussion. I’ve enjoyed it and hope you have as well. God bless you! Thanks!

MC: God bless you, Father! Thanks!

[END]

Running Time 1:05:16 approximately