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Robert Denzer

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KENYON COLLEGE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Stories of Knox County

Robert Denzer
Interviewed by
Maria Brescia-Weiler and Jordan Guy-Mozenter
On
April 5, 2017

Kenyon College

Oral History Project
Stories of Knox County

Interviewee: Robert Denzer
Interviewer: Maria Brescia-Weiler and Jordan Guy-Mozenter
April 5, 2017

Maria Brescia-Weiler: Okay, so this is Maria Brescia-Weiler and Jordan Guy-Mozenter with the Stories of Knox County Project interviewing Robert Denzer on his experiences with life in Knox County. Today is April 5, 2017 and we're speaking at the Wright center. Thank you so much for participating. Can you please say your full name and birthdate?

Robert Denzer: My full name is Robert A. Denzer. 5/22/29.

MBW: Cool. So how long have you lived in Knox County?

RD: I've been here since 1954.

MBW: Why'd you come here?

RD: I came here because I was employed by the local YMCA as a program director.

MBW: So what sort of stuff did you do at the YMCA?

RD: That's everything when you're working at a Y. I did everything, like all the programming for both boys and girls, men and women. When I say programming, it's physical programming.

MBW: So like what does that mean?

RD: Physical programming? Well, I tell people when they ask you what's your profession, I said I used to play with boys and girls. So it's games, any kind, basketball, volleyball, gymnastics, all those sorts of things. Swimming, a big part was swimming.

MBW: Where did you move here from?

RD: I moved here from Bucyrus, Ohio.

MBW: How did you, or why did you start working at the Y?

RD: Well my major was in physical education and with a minor also in sociology, so the two fit together naturally. So I graduated from Otterbein College in '52 and I finished schooling on

deferment from being drafted. Then as soon as I graduated, Uncle Sam wanted me, so I went into the service in the following September. and then when I was discharged the following June I went right to my employer office at Otterbein College and they gave me some leads and then one of them was the YMCA and it led me to Mount Vernon.

MBW: So what do you think is the importance of the YMCA in Mount Vernon?

RD: Oh my gosh. There was a time, it was the place for youth when I came to Mount Vernon. And we built a new building four years after I came here, started the construction of a new building, and it just grew leaps and bounds. It was the entertainment center, you might say, the place for all activities for youth. That has changed considerably, because change is inevitable, and a lot of other things have come into the community and filled voids that the Y was trying to fill. So their programming concept changed considerably.

MBW: What kind of things did people use the Y for when you worked there?

RD: Well, like I said, the biggest program they had was in the aquatics, teaching swimming and competitive swim team. And basketball league, volleyball league. Meeting rooms, a lot of groups met there because we had a large banquet room. We provided a food service, so that complimented the meetings that were there. It was just something almost for everybody. We had a large game room for youth, and we had dances, several dances a week. Teen dances. So you cover the whole gamut, all ages.

Jordan Guy-Mozenter: Did you know a lot of people in the community from working at the Y?

RD: Well, you meet, literally I was in the people business, so yes, you meet people all the time. I like to say I had an open door policy, people coming in all the time for various reasons. But YMCA is run by volunteers, and I had a board of trustees--actually board of directors, not trustees, there's a difference--a board of directors that really ran the YMCA, and I was hired by them then in turn to carry out the function of the Y, with the staff of course.

MBW: Can you think of like a particular moment or story from your time at the Y that was very meaningful to you?

RD: Oh my gosh. I was there thirty-seven years (laughing) Oh my gosh. Well I think probably the biggest thing that ever happened in my career was the building of the new building and that was back, when I say new, it isn't new now, that was back in 1964. We built a building that at that time cost nine hundred and sixty thousand dollars. We raised the money within two months and, course, the building today, to rebuild it would be in the millions. But that's just a different

value of dollar in 1958, '59, '60, when we were raising the money to what it is today. But that was probably the biggest, one of the biggest accomplishments in my career.

Clara Roman-Odio: How did the YMCA change across thirty-four years? What deep changes?

RD: Well, I say it's in a constant change because, first of all, it's a building first of all that's designed to do certain things. But then it can be adapted and now their focus is on different activity than what it was when I was there. The fact that today, how many workout places are there in town where they have equipment? Probably at least a dozen. Well, in 1964 the YMCA was it. And they were just coming into the whole idea of exercise equipment, but then it got to the point where people could buy their own, and they created their own little fitness centers in their homes and so on. But that's been a big change. But that's okay because YMCA basically is so versatile that if the needs are being met by somebody else then that opens the door for them to venture into new activities. And their big activities today is pre-school. I didn't have that at all in the sixties and early seventies.

CRO: How about from the point of view of the clientele? How did that clientele change, you know, the population?

RD: Well, it changed because it was, the YMCA was noted for its youth activities. Today it's not for the kids, because, I gotta rephrase that, the kids, what they want isn't youth activities that we had. And the school systems now provide so many different sports than what they did in the fifties and sixties. I mean the girls have the same privileges, the same activities as the boys, whether basketball or volleyball or golf or softball for girls, and so on. They didn't have that back in those early, when I say early days I'm talking fifties and sixties and seventies.

MBW: So what was your favorite thing about working at the Y?

RD: Oh, I just love to be with people. Relate with them, and the younger children especially are a joy to work with.

MBW: What was the hardest part of job?

RD: Hmm. The bottom line on your financial statement, raising money to be able to function. Because even though the YMCA is supported partially by United Way, we had to raise money to meet the expenses and of course, so many of the children in the Y were sponsored, so you would have to raise monies to offset the expenses of the youth activities for the children.

MBW: Do you have children of your own?

RD: I have two sons, grown sons.

MBW: And did they grow up in Knox County?

RD: Well, they went through the local school system.

MBW: What do you think are the main values that you tried to instill in them growing up?

RD: Oh, golly. That's their question. (Laughs) I don't know. I have to say that, I should say our sons, my wife and I sons have a high regard of us. And they often speak of the examples that we set has helped them in their adult life. They're both of course grown, married, each one has two daughters that are older--all my granddaughters have gone through college or are in college. Right now one's finishing her PhD, one's a lawyer, one is a psychologist, school psychologist, another one is a school guidance counselor, and another is a pharmacist. So I think we did well with our family, set good examples.

MBW: Do your sons still live around here?

RD: No, one's, well one lives here in Mount Vernon, the oldest, and the other is in San Antonio.

MBW: Cool. So I guess we've talked about the Y more specifically, but how do you think the county in general has changed over your time here?

RD: Well if you blink your eyes you miss something in change in this county. Just going up and down Main Street and seeing all the difference, from retail to academics on Main Street today, with Kenyon and the Naz and COTC. I mean, that's all new, within, I say new, within what the last twenty years or so probably.

MBW: I don't know if you would remember this, cause it's been a while, but do you remember your first impression moving here, as someone who lived somewhere else first?

RD: Well, see I came for Bucyrus as I said earlier and that's a small town. I would say the population is very comparable. But, Mount Vernon is very arty, and it's alright to say that, art meaning theater, the Knox County Symphony, the community concerts, all the theater groups that we have in our area. It has so much to offer in that regard. I think more so than the average town this size. So of course when I came to Mount Vernon I didn't know anything about it, the only draw was my job, it wasn't downtown Mount Vernon, it wasn't the merchants, it wasn't, wouldn't be the churches and all that, but all that became a part of my life, of course, as each day went by and I became active in a church. But the biggest change downtown of course is the lack of retail merchants, and I don't think that's ever gonna change back.

MBW: Why not?

RD: Well, first of all, the locations are being occupied by other things other than retail merchants, for one. But there's still a few spots maybe that'll be filled.

MBW: So you mentioned briefly that you got involved in a church. Can you talk a little bit about the role that the church...

RD: What I do at the church?

MBW: Yeah, that'd be great.

RD: Well, I started out as a deacon, served deacon several terms, I was an elder several terms...

MBW: What church is this?

RD: First Presbyterian. And my wife and I have sung in the choir over fifty years. Now you see if I came here in '54 understand I've been here more than fifty years. (laughing)

MBW: So what are, I guess maybe church is one of them, but what do you think are the most meaningful ways you interact with your community?

RD: Oh my gosh, in so many different groups and organizations. I'm active in Kiwanis, past president of Kiwanis, which is a service club. Belong to the Historical Society, which is an interesting group cause I like history of the local community. Red Cross, I'm a thirty gallon donor for Red Cross, which I'm proud of. Course when the boys were in school I was active with youth groups for them and there was, you keep very busy. But you see my work was almost like a volunteer, because the Y operates with volunteer committees. And I'd be at committee meetings every night practically, worked during the day with the program and at night I'd be at meetings with the volunteers. So I say this because I spent my time at the Y and there wasn't much time left to do other things. And raising two boys who were very active (laughing).

JGM: Did you ever feel burnt out, Robert?

RD: Burnt out? No. Matter of fact right now I miss my job and I've been retired for 25 years, so (laughing) No, I miss the work. The part I say I miss is being with, working with people.

MBW: So how do you think your relationship with the community has changed since you retired?

RD: Repeat that please.

MBW: Sorry, how have the ways that you interact with the community changed since you retired?

RD: No, I don't think there's been that much change. It's basically, I think, a pretty conservative town. If you want action, you can go fifty miles down the road to Columbus. (laughing)

MBW: So what do you think it means to be part of this community?

RD: Well, I'm proud to have served the community. I never was able to be in public office, I would have liked to have been, but it's the kind of thing where you run out of time, I mean, my job took all my time. But, no, I'm proud to say I'm from Mount Vernon, because it has a good image. You talk to people from other communities and you say you're from Mount Vernon and they say, "Oh, yes, I know Mount Vernon!" And they make reference to this place or that place, and so on. So it's not your average town, a lot of people know about Mount Vernon. See, there's an interesting story, when I-71, before that was here or in the area, you have to picture, all the traffic went through Mount Vernon going from Cleveland to Columbus to Cincinnati, it was called the three C highway, and a lot of people went through here to get to other towns. Of course, then they became acquainted with it by virtue of going through and stopping at local restaurants, and they say, "Well is the Alcove still there?" I say, "Well, yes it is," having just reopened. And it's noted for things like that.

CRO: What image comes to mind, or what image do you think comes to people's mind when you hear Mount Vernon? What kind of emotions or images does that place evoke for you?

RD: Well, I say I'm proud of the community, but there's a reason I'm so proud of it is because of the people who are here and the benefactors in this community, unbelievable. Course Karen Wright has done such great things, and there were people before Karen that were philanthropists. I mean to raise nine hundred and sixty thousand dollars for a YMCA in a top population of fifteen thousand, unbelievable. Unbelievable. And not only that, we wanted to go on the campaign and Memorial Hospital wanted to have a campaign, and so our board decided we'll let the hospital go first because medical needs are more important than YMCA needs. And so they went on a campaign and they raised their money, they had a successful campaign, and then we hired the same fundraising firm and we hitchhiked on their campaign, and ours was just as successful but it did it in two months time.

CRO: The generosity.

RD: It's unbelievable.

CRO: It's unbelievable.

RD: Our people in our national headquarters said it'll never be done, they said we're crazy. Well, maybe we are, people call it Crazy Knox,(laughing) but we did it. But you see there were those philanthropists back then, like we have today.

MBW: Why do you think that there are so many people in this community that are so generous?

RD: That's a good question. That is a good question. I know that when we had our campaign I talked to the fundraiser, I said "I don't know how we're gonna do this." I said, "There aren't very many wealthy people in this town, are there?" And he said, "You can't believe how many millionaires there are." Well, back in those days, a millionaire, that was quite a thing. And course, there are. There were then and there of course are now. But not only are they wealthy, but they're generous. You can tell by the community. Everything that's been done, all these things that have been done have been a result of capital campaigns that have been successful.

JGM: Why do you think that you chose to live a life of generosity and service to this community?

RD: Repeat that again, I wanna make sure I heard you right.

JGM: Why do you think you chose to live a life of generosity for this community?

RD: Oh, you think I'm generous? (laughing)

JGM: Well, just what I'm hearing is that you were really involved.

RD: Well, I was involved with my time, but I don't know you just, you get caught up in it. All these things are important and you wanna support it, however whether it be by time or talent or money. And again, it's part of your pride in the community. I wish everybody were that way, you know, there are exceptions but I think Mount Vernon has it's share of people that are proud of it, and they wanna support it.

MBW: Why are there so many millionaires here?

RD: Well, if you go back into the early history there was a lot of industry here, local industry, locally owned industry. That's not true today, the industries here today you see are big corporations with headquarters elsewhere. But a lot of local industry that was owned by local families.

MBW: Cool. So what do you think is the best thing about living here?

RD: The best thing about?

MBW: Living here.

RD: Living here. Oh, the beauty of the town, tree lined streets, active churches. Just the people that make it up.

MBW: How do you think people who live in Mount Vernon or in the rest of Knox County perceive Kenyon?

RD: How do they perceive it?

MBW: Yeah.

RD: I hope the same way I do. (Laughing)

MBW: How do you perceive it?

RD: Well, as a friendly community and, just like I was away, of course you meet a lot of people, but you can't wait to get home because you're back with your neighbors and friends. It's a friendly town.

CRO: Do you see it as two different communities, or do you see Kenyon belonging to this community?

RD: Say that again.

CRO: Do you see Kenyon and Mount Vernon as two communities or do you see Kenyon belonging?

RD: Well, I like to think of it as a community and as it, I feel a big part of it, you know, you belong to it. You pay your taxes here, but then we live here and we do everything we can here. We're not one to go to Columbus, for example, to do our shopping if we can do it locally. And my wife brags about getting all of our gifts for the kids when we need to, we can do that locally. She loves North Main Street, those little shops up there. They're all, you know, they're all unique shops.

MBW: So what do you think is the biggest problem here that needs to be addressed?

RD: Oh, you know what it is. The drug situation. And that's just come about really big time in the last few years. Well, see when I was running these teen dances for example, that was not an issue. If it was certainly nobody knew about it, nobody, if it was. I didn't know about drugs then, and I was working with the kids. Now there was some alcohol involved but minimal, minimal compared to what it is today. These drug activities, it's just completely out of control.

MBW: When do you think that became a big issue?

RD: Well, all you do is pick up the paper today in Columbus, the Columbus Dispatch, the governor finally, you know, they're after him to allocate more money to treat drug addiction. It's just, it's getting out of control. When you read the deaths as a result of drug abuse, and you pick the obituaries and the first thing you do is you look at the age, that's what I do, and what are they, twenty and thirty year olds. Well, that tells you a lot right there. They don't say how they died but, oh, it's so sad. And I don't know how they're gonna control that.

MBW: Why do you think so many people have started using drugs?

RD: Depression. I think they're out of work, and to feed their habit they have to find a source. My wife was robbed, so I relate to that real closely. A guy broke into our house when she was still in the house and, yeah.

MBW: How long ago was that?

RD: Two years ago.

MBW: That's scary. So can you think of any ways that would help decrease the drug problem?

RD: I guess it starts with education, with the young people. Of course, parents have to be educated too, since the fact that there's a change maybe in the person's personality, or whatever it is, some clues. Cause there's a lot of, you know, a child changes when they get involved. And parents need to be aware of that. They can't put their head in the sand and think, "Oh, it's not me," or, "It's not us."

MBW: So why do you think so many more people are struggling with like you said depression and things like that? Why do you think that that's so much more common now than it was thirty or fifty years ago?

RD: Well, I think maybe some of it is lack of employment for young people. I think some of it is caused from people going into the service and coming back into civilian life and it's difficult to

adapt. I don't know, what else causes depression? It's hard to say. Children being bullied in school, maybe, you hear a lot about that. And that's another thing that I never heard about bullying when we were working with our young people. It was probably there but we didn't know it, you know, that's why my oldest daughter is a school psychologist, she's dealing with that very thing, bullying in schools.

MBW: So are you optimistic or hopeful about the future?

RD: Of course, I'm optimistic, absolutely. I'm a positive thinker.

MBW: What makes you hopeful about the future of this area?

RD: Well, you see the young people coming out of school, getting all this recognition and award and what their plans are, college bound, and you think, you know, these kids are great. It's just a few that don't go that direction, but there's always hope. And you expect the young generation to, you know, take our place and do our thing and even do it better. You see, I grew up without any of these electronics and things and I see, that's a whole new world. And for kids to go to school and have their own computer and, that's just mind boggling. But they have so much information out there for them, if they just take advantage of it and use it in a positive way.

MBW: Do you think most people who live here are hopeful about the future of the county?

RD: I hope so, I don't know, I would hope they think the way I do.

MBW: So Jen kept saying you were such a great storyteller, and I was wondering if you could share any stories that you think really capture life in Knox County, or your work at the Y?

RD: Well, my job was very rewarding because, to see these people starting seven, eight, nine years old and go out into the world and become very successful, whatever their profession might be. And to see those people when they come back to Mount Vernon, or even a lot of them are still in Mount Vernon, they chose to remain here. When they see you on the street, or wherever I might be, and acknowledge, you know, that they know me and sometimes I don't know them because from being a small child to a mature adult they change considerably, but to acknowledge my presence and acknowledge having been at the Y and experiences they had at the Y, that's a great reward to me.

MBW: Do you get the sense that most of the young people you worked with have stayed here?

RD: Stayed here?

MBW: Like have a lot of them moved away?

RD: Well, you know, I can make reference to a good example. My oldest son's graduating class, I don't know the year now, I'd say '78 maybe, I don't know, I'm probably wrong, but anyway, out of his graduating class was a local dentist, a local optometrist, a, I don't know her title but she's at Eastern Star Home as a manager or administrative position. There's another that works with Marty(?), what's her name? You've probably had a chance to work with her, she does a lot of promotion in town. But anyway, there's all these kids came out of his class. So to answer your question, they just stayed here in Mount Vernon, and to me that's a definite plus for our community. So the old idea, you know, you graduate from high school and go on some place else, bigger and better things, well, they went on and got an education and came back to establish a business or a profession here.

MBW: So what do you think keeps people here? Like why do you think they all came back?

RD: Well, probably the same reason I'm still here. It's cause you like the community, you like the people.

MBW: Do you have any other questions?

JGM: What do you think the importance is of placing yourself in a community?

RD: The importance of placing myself to a community?

JGM: And belonging.

RD: And belonging to it? When you say belonging to a community, I mean, that's how you can contribute to the community as well as be a recipient of what the community has to offer, you know, it's a two way street, give and take. So that's just part of being an adult and active in the community.

MBW: So I think we kind of talked about this a little bit, but do you think this community is one united community, or do you think there are any divides within it?

RD: Well, I think there's more and more unification all the time. I think they're working at that all the time, yes. Because I think there was a time when a lot of the things were Mount Vernon, now it's Knox County, or it's the area, area development, or Area Foundation, it used to be Mount Vernon foundation, things like that. You know, it's how the terminology you use in reference to groups. And they're trying to make them so that they're all inclusive.

MBW: So do you think there's anything else that we really need to know or do you have any big thoughts of things that we should know about the county or your time here?

RD: Well, all I can say is that life is constant change. People, older people, don't like change and that's sad, because change is inevitable, and change is good if it's for betterment. If it's change just for the sake of change, it isn't necessarily good, but as long as it's making things better it should be, it's okay.

MBW: Do you think most of the change since you got here has been for betterment?

RD: Oh, yes. Of course.

CRO: Well thank you so very much for sharing your thoughts and this time with us.

MBW: Yeah, thank you so much.

RD: Well, whether it was worth...

CRO: It was!