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MASTER TEACHER INTERVIEW
DR. JIMMIE DOWNING

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CHAPTER II: INTERVIEW WITH DR. JIMMIE DOWNING

Dr. Jimmie Downing, president of Barton County Community College, contends that he never planned to serve as president of the fourth largest community college in the state of Kansas. He simply stated that he was "in the right place at the right time." This belief has echoed throughout Dr. Downing's career as he has served as coach, teacher, and administrator. Dr. Downing, a self-made educator, realized early in his career that he had an interest in new challenges and serves today as president of BCCC due to his resilient character and his good fortune of being at "the right place at the right time."

Raised in the small Kansas towns of Harper and Maize, Jimmie Downing was a typical child. He recalled his family's limited income but smiles as he reminisces about the time his family spent at home listening to the radio. He remembered how the neighborhood kids shoveled snow in the winter for fifteen cents and later spent their income on movie tickets and boxes of popcorn. Business owners of the community understood the lack of funds during these times and helped whenever they could. A local drugstore owner allowed children to exchange labor for sodas. Jimmie Downing was brought up in an average family of these times and fondly remembers his childhood and his supportive family.

Jimmie enjoyed attending school as a young man. He remembered many good times and several role models; however, specific examples were difficult for him to recall. He remembered that his parents expected him to get an education and that they were very supportive of his choices. He believed that he was a typical student who had fun while getting into his share of trouble.

The support of Jimmie's parents sent him forward to college. Although both of his parents attended college, neither finished a degree; thus, it was expected that Jimmie would fulfill their dreams. Initially, Jimmie planned to become a doctor. Without any educators in his family to set an example, he pursued his goal and attended college to study pre-med. Two years later, though, Jimmie's major professor announced that Jimmie's involvement in athletics would have to end in order for Jimmie to concentrate more on his classroom activities. Firm in his love for athletics, Jimmie refused to stop his participation in the sports and ended his brief study of medicine.

Athletics had opened the college door for Jimmie Downing. Recruited to play football and basketball, he chose college as a means to continue that which he loved best--athletics. In Jimmie's opinion, his involvement in athletics is what drove him to do something with his college career. He understood that high grades would keep him in competition; therefore, he was motivated to study and complete a Bachelor of Arts degree from Friends University, Wichita, Kansas.

Jimmie Downing considered himself an above-average high school and college student although he laughed when he recalled that he was salutatorian of his high school class, a class of four students. Although athletics motivated him to maintain good grades, he was not consumed with earning high marks. He recalled acquaintances who were consumed with grades, but simply remarked that he got along all right academically. Outside of athletics, Jimmie was not involved in extracurricular activities. He did belong to a few organizations; however, fraternities were not among the list. Jimmie's temperament did not tolerate fraternity initiations, and during his own, he stopped the process, commented on the

childish nature of the activities, and ended his involvement in the organization.

In 1954, Jimmie Downing graduated from college and married his wife, Virginia. Shortly thereafter, he was drafted into the Army and served until 1957 when he returned to Clearwater, Kansas, as a coach and junior high mathematics teacher. Next, he went to Newton High School and taught math while serving as the assistant football coach and as the sophomore basketball coach. In the back of Jimmie's mind, he believed that he could earn more money doing something other than coaching. He began a masters program at Wichita State University (WSU) and completed a Master of Education degree from WSU in 1967. Jimmie decided that he wanted to be a high school principal and accepted a position at Esbon High School, a small school with fifty-four students. Again, Jimmie had the opportunity to be involved in athletics. He coached eight-man football while serving as principal. He made one more career move to Southwest Heights at Plains, Kansas, before interviewing for a position at Barton County Community College.

Reflecting on his career at the secondary level, Jimmie said that when he started in the business, education was much different than it is today. An immediate example of this difference is discipline. Years ago discipline was a lot easier to uphold; parents supported the discipline practices of the schools. Jimmie recalled the days of the "paddle" and noted that he kept one in the physical education room. He remembered that he would only pick up gym clothes so many times, and after that he would pile the clothes on the floor and swat the students as they bent over to retrieve their garments. In today's environment, Jimmie understands that discipline of this nature would not be accepted. Yet, years ago parents

would support and encourage this control mechanism.

Jimmie Downing knows that he was lucky early in his career. He recalled the variety of role models who served as advisors and mentors on various projects. He fondly mentioned Archie Pruiter, the first principal that he worked for at Clearwater. Jimmie admired Archie's dedication to education and to students and his ability to go "out of his way" to see that students succeeded. Clay Brown, superintendent at Esbon, also served as a role model for Jimmie. Both Archie and Clay helped shape Jimmie's educational philosophy and helped him discover what he wanted to do with his educational career.

Jimmie Downing taught twelve years at the secondary level and served as an administrator for three years. It was during this time that he started understanding the barriers that exist between teachers and administrators. He said that barriers exist because people create walls. Although administrators do not see themselves differently from teachers, faculty view administrators in a different manner. Yet, someone has to make decisions that ultimately affect faculty, and it is when this happens that teachers and administrators become adversaries. Jimmie said that teachers and administrators want the same thing, to help students, but they reach their goal in different ways. Teachers do not want administrators to make decisions that directly affect them. Administrators want the system to operate smoothly. Jimmie Downing sees this dilemma as the educational version of the parent-child relationship. As it is with parents and children, it is with teachers and administrators in education. Simply, people resent authority and this is when problems begin. Certainly, it is

the perception of authority that causes problems and generally not the reality of the situation.

It was after fifteen years of work at the secondary level that Jimmie Downing was enticed to pursue a career at the college level. While he was working at Plains, he received a call about a job at BCCC, a new college being built at Great Bend. Ray Wamsley, academic dean at BCCC, had recommended Jimmie to President Otis Robinson. The college was looking for a director of vocational/technical education. Jimmie traveled to Great Bend and interviewed for the position. The position was offered to him prior to his leaving the interview; Jimmie asked for the evening to reflect on his decision. Together with his wife, Virginia Downing, they decided that the Downing family would pull up stakes and move to Great Bend. The salary (\$10,000) was no higher than Jimmie's salary at Plains, but the challenge was worth the risk. Jimmie Downing, the third employee of the new college, started his career at BCCC in September 1968.

During his tenure with the college, Jimmie served the institution in various capacities. As Director of Vocational/Technical Education, he hired faculty, bought equipment, and supervised building construction. He served in this capacity for nearly two years. Afterwards, Jimmie accepted a position in student services. In this capacity, he supervised the development and implementation of financial aid offerings at the college.

Jimmie's involvement in student services concluded when President Otis Robinson left the college. Paul Hinds, academic dean, became the college's next president. Paul wanted Jimmie as his replacement for the academic dean position and Jimmie accepted. He served in this role until 1972 when he took a leave of absence to complete his doctorate degree in adult and

occupational education from Kansas State University. Upon his return, Jimmie was offered the additional responsibilities of vice-president. He served as academic dean and vice-president until 1975. At this time, Paul Hinds left the institution, and the BCCC Board of Trustees offered Jimmie Downing the presidency. Jimmie commented, "I can do that," and still serves as president today. Again, Jimmie insists that this sequence of events occurred because he was "in the right place at the right time."

Although Dr. Downing has served longer as president than in any other position, he reflected that the position he most enjoyed was that of academic dean. It was in this position that he was able to more closely interact with the students and to more directly affect their academic success. An intriguing position, the job of academic dean kept him abreast of new teaching methods and provided constant interaction with the faculty.

Again, role models played a vital part in Jimmie Downing's professional growth at the college level. The college's first president, Otis Robinson, provided Jimmie with examples of determination and vision. Jimmie explained that Otis was one of those people who was ahead of his time. He was an individual who knew what he wanted and knew how he would achieve his desires. Otis was a very persuasive person and Jimmie credits him for the current success of BCCC. Marshall Macy, special assistant to the president, and Ray Wamsley, the first academic dean, also served as role models for Jimmie. Together, all three taught Jimmie how to look beyond where he was and how to make something out of nothing.

Dr. Jimmie Downing does not see himself as a visionary, but he does believe that his knowledge and experience are attributed to learning from his own mistakes. He believes that this method of learning makes a better person and makes a better administrator. He reflected that today his style

of interacting with people is entirely different from when he first became president. In the early days, Jimmie served much like Otis Robinson and commanded his employees. He announced the ways things would be and was not impressed with the confusion of endless discussions.

As Dr. Downing reflected on the accomplishments of the college, he began with the the first enrollment. He was convinced that the success of this enrollment was a prelude to the future of the college. He attributes the success of the college to the people who have served and are serving the institution. He is insistent that the strength of the college has always been these people. He admitted that he is not always good at telling his employees that they are doing a good job. Jimmie Downing's roots are from the days when administrators or managers simply believed that employees had a job to do, so it was expected that they would complete the task. Dr. Downing also believes that the college's employees have a willing spirit, and it is this willingness to take chances that supports a successful institution.

Jimmie Downing also has a willing spirit. He is not content to do the same thing all the time and appreciates the excitement of a new challenge. It is this character trait that does not permit others around him to become stagnant. Dr. Downing admitted that he does not know if this is good or bad, but he feels that change prohibits complacency. It is with complacency that employees become owners of their functions and territorial about jobs. He contends that if there are any owners, it is the students who attend the college. Thus, he indicated that the institution is looking beyond its current way of doing business and is re-engineering departments and functions to meet the needs of its students. Unfortunately, during this process he noted that the college will be forced to lay off some

current employees. He understands that this will be a difficult process dictated by decreased enrollment and a lack of additional financial resources from the community. Jimmie noted that educators are not comfortable with these difficult decisions. He knows administrators will face turmoil as they lay off employees and guide remaining personnel through a new way of doing business.

Accomplishments are two-fold when it comes to Jimmie Downing. He speaks willingly about those accomplishments directly related to the college but exhibits little interest in those that have been awarded to him personally. He swells with pride with the mention of the Shafer Art Gallery, a facility recently completed on the BCCC campus. Jimmie, himself, was very instrumental in the implementation of this dream. He is also quick to speak of the professional accomplishments achieved by the people who work at the college. Dr. Downing has a fondness for watching people grow both personally and professionally. He believes the college gives its employees an opportunity to succeed. As for himself, Jimmie is proud of the award he received as Outstanding Alumni from Friends University and the NASPA Award for Innovation that was awarded to him for his work with the college's assessment program. Quite frankly though, President Downing is more proud of his love for Barton County Community College. He is deeply moved by his good fortune to be involved in the building of the college and the implementation of its mission. He found the experience of watching a 160 acre wheatfield transformed into a community college to be a unique opportunity that very few will experience. Jimmie Downing's ownership in BCCC is with the entire institution, and he is a loyal, hardworking member of the team.

As leader of a twenty-five year old institution, Dr. Downing has opinions on leadership and teamwork. He certainly admitted that a person can not be a leader without any followers. He also mentioned that there will not be any followers if people are not given credit for their performance. Simply, leaders must convey ideas and guide people in their preparation for the future. Admittedly, sometimes leaders must dictate changes that are necessary to react to a situation. It is at this time that leaders switch from the popular participative management style of today to the classical command management style of the past. Dr. Downing finds himself still rooted in the command management style but is proud of the significant gains he has made with empowerment and total quality management.

Leaders also eventually affect the employment of quality personnel who aspire to climb the career ladder. Dr. Downing has had the opportunity of working with seven employees who have left BCCC for presidencies at other institutions. He modestly accepts no responsibility for their good fortune but maintains that he knew all of them would be successful.

When asked to reflect on what it means to be president, Jimmie Downing began with these words, "It is the loneliest position on campus." He said that as president he cannot be as friendly as he would like to be with fellow employees. He discussed the blame that is placed on presidents for decisions that are made at different levels. Dr. Downing revealed that presidents cannot be themselves and commented on how this inability affects their relationships with people. On the positive side, he mentioned that as president a person gets the opportunity to work with many talented people at all levels and gets the chance to mold their opinions of the institution. Being a president is a very tough job, and it is impossible

to always please the public, the board of trustees, and the employees. Dr. Downing has had alot of rewarding days as president of BCCC. He has the distinct pleasure of visiting with students and employees who have recontacted him to express their appreciation to him and the institution. He also has the ability to watch people begin their lives, learn from experience, and succeed in their goals. Luckily, Jimmie Downing has had the support of a loving family throughout his career as president. Although he has put in extraordinary hours during his tenure, he always participated in the activities of his children and spent quality time with his wife.

As Dr. Downing looks ahead to retirement, he indicates that he and his wife have many plans for the future. An interest in antiques will certainly fill alot of their time and requests for consulting services will probably be considered. Jimmie looks forward to not coming to the campus every morning and to not worrying about board meetings and combative board members. He believes the change will be good for BCCC and for himself. He looks forward to a vacation, one that he has not taken during his entire presidency. President Downing does know that he will miss the encounters with the employees of the college, but he also knows that he will never really leave the college and that the college will never leave him.

Jimmie Downing is not sure if he would select the same career path if he was given an opportunity to repeat his life. He admitted that he did caution his children not to pursue a career in education. He believes that some of that advice was based on the challenges and hard work that lie ahead for education as educators are forced to prove that they can teach people how to learn and that they can deliver education through a customer driven model. Dr. Downing does contend that destiny plays a role in

individuals' lives. He believes that everything that happened to him throughout his life prepared him for his current position as president of one of the most highly regarded community colleges in the state. Although Jimmie Downing never planned on becoming a president, his knack for being "in the right place at the right time" enabled him to serve the educational profession as a true Master Teacher.