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## **Richard (Dick) L. Adorjan Memoir**

### **Adorjan, Richard (Dick) L.**

Interview and memoir

Digital Audio File, 30 min., 11 pp.

UIS Alumni Sage Society

Adorjan, Director of Public Affairs for the Illinois Department of Transportation for 34 years discusses his decision to complete a Management degree in 1988 at Sangamon State University. He describes prior work experience as a photojournalist for United Press International and identifies Chris Vlahoplus (former SSU Director of University Relations) as one person who inspired him to attend the newly created local college in Springfield.

Interview by Karen Hasara, 2008

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Narrator: Richard R. Adorjan  
Interviewer: Karen Hasara  
Date: July 4, 2008

A. Oh, now your red light is on.

Q. This is Karen Hasara and I am interviewing Dick Adorjan. Dick, thank you for offering to do this. Let me ask you what brought you to Sangamon State?

A. Well, I think there were a lot of students my age that wanted to go back to school to complete their education and in my case it was that, I wanted to see that my kids' educations were taken care of first. And so my son graduated in 1987 and he was getting close to his, and graduated in 1988. So that was one of the reasons. The other reason is that I knew some of the people associated with the University and one of them was Chris Vlahoplus. And Chris was a really interesting guy that by that time he was no longer that much involved in the University. But he had talked so much about what he thought was the University and how interesting of a place it was and going to be a different kind of school. But I thought that that would be a good opportunity to go since it was here and it looked interesting.

Q. And what were you doing at that time, work-wise?

A. At that time I was working for United Press International. At the time I was there, going to school and the latter part of my time at school I was the bureau manager for United Press International, I was the state house bureau chief for the wire service there.

Q. And what had you done before you became involved with the Bureau?

A. I had worked as a photojournalist. I'd started with UPI in St. Louis. I was transferred here I believe in 1960. And I worked as a photojournalist here at – covering the Midwest. And so I did a fair amount of traveling over the Midwest for different stories and things and on occasion out of the area. And then I was actually one of the few people who moved from the news picture side to the news side or crossed over and started into the writing side of it.

Q. And where had you gotten some of your college education because you obviously, you know, had gone somewhere else to be able to get in here.

A. I worked, I worked – I was in the Navy and I was going to school at the same time I was in the Navy out in San Diego. And I took course work out in San Diego at the community college. Of course they called them junior colleges then.

Q. What was your degree in from Sangamon State?

A. My degree was in management. The management program at that time I think is different, much different than it was now. It was patterned after the program that was done at Yale and

it had a lot of, a lot, I think a lot of specific requirements that you have to take statistics that you had to take a number of courses. There was Production Operations Management, they had just a lot of other courses that you had – accounting, economics. So those were some of the requirements at the time.

Q. What was your initial impression when you first started at Sangamon State, especially as an adult?

A. Well, it was different than what I had encountered at my other attempts at going to school. The course catalog descriptions and things and some of the early catalogues were you know, I thought, not as direct as they could be, to be more explanatory. It was just a little bit different. Once you got the idea of how it worked it was fine. The other thing I can still remember is when they were doing registration – and I can't remember which building it was in, but you used to just go to the tables where they had the different courses to sign up just like you did at the U of I or you used to do that in the big gym. And of course that was before they had all of this stuff computerized.

Q. What did you do then after you got your degree? Did that change the course of your employment?

A. It actually, one of the reasons I took the management program – people get to be technically competent in an area and they keep getting promoted. However, that doesn't mean that you're a good manager and what I realized is that I really need to learn more about managing, which is why I took the course work I took. And I ended up doing much more management work when I left UPI. I went to work for the Illinois Department of Transportation. And I was – I got to do a lot more management work there under numerous Secretaries of Transportation there.

Q. And did you feel that the degree and the course work that you had at Sangamon State prepared you for that job?

A. Yeah I really did. It gave me you know, a much different outlook on how to deal with things, and how to be an effective manager because among other things, I started dealing with some very large budgets. I had a staff, at one point, of eighteen people. And I guess I could say this now but one of the happiest days of my life was when I no longer was responsible for managing anybody. And you probably understand that as mayor better than a lot of people do! [Laughter]

Q. [Laughter] Yes, yes I do! How long then, did you stay at the Department of Transportation? Did you – you didn't have the same job the whole time, right?

A. Almost the same job the whole time. I worked there for thirty four years.

Q. Oh my heavens.

A. Through various Republican and Democrat administrations. People used to ask me, “Well how did you survive all these people?” And I said, “Well you have to make the assumption I’m either pretty good at what I do or I keep very good records.” [Laughter]

Q. [Laughter] What actually was your job title?

A. My job title there was the Director of Public Affairs. I reported directly to the Secretary of Transportation. But because I did have the management training I got put on a lot of little task force and things for management, which was really a lot of fun because I got to work in areas of the Department that you normally would not get a chance to do in my job.

Q. What are some of the classes at Sangamon State that you thought were particularly helpful or were memorable to you?

A. One of them was the Productions Operations Management class, which is a much more rigorous, empirical class than a lot of the other classes that I thought was very helpful because, combined with statistics a lot of times, it was very helpful in analyzing something engineers were doing. And surprising enough, some of the engineers really didn’t have much training in statistics. So that class was really helpful.

Q. Do you remember who taught, who the teacher was?

A. I’m going to have to think about that one. Sorry.

Q. That’s okay. If you think about it just break in and let me know.

A. Joe Wilkins.

Q. Joe Wilkins? Yes.

A. Was teaching at the time because he also ended up I remember teaching the Capstone class, too. And there was a class taught by a professor by the name of Ed Cell, who – this was not a requirement but I took it – was Business Ethics, which you had to, can’t remember what the pre requirement was. I thought, I always wanted to take some philosophy and they had the Ethics class which had some philosophy in it and ethics. The interesting thing was that, you know, okay, I’ll sign up for this. And it showed that, pick one book and signed up for it. And that turned out to be one of the most challenging classes that I had ever taken. His midterm was a two week take-home. And by that time – I’m not a particularly slow writer – but I would tell you, that I actually struggled to get this midterm done in two weeks because it was, so much of it was essay work. And it was very mentally challenging. I mean, he would really make sure that you know, OK if you’re taking this position let’s hear you make the argument consistently.

Q. And do you think that what you learned in that class had a bearing on your performance in the workplace?

A. It did because it made me think a lot about you know, what was the impact of my decision making? And you know, was I trying to make these decisions in an appropriate way?

Q. That's good.

A. Actually one of the places I applied it was, we were building the Bob Michael Bridge in Peoria. And they discovered that there was contaminated soil that they were going to have to remove, and it was so contaminated that they were going to have to have people in bio-suits although there was no real danger, but to be on the safe side. And I thought that we ought to be going out and explaining to people what was going on. And they said, "Well there was really no danger there." Which is good and I said, "Well, do you think people won't notice that these people are out there in these white moon suits?" And you know, we had an obligation to tell people what was going on there and give people a chance to find out. So that kind of thing, it really makes you think about, okay.

Q. Well that's – and so I assume that the Department did follow up on that?

A. Oh yes! They decided [laughter] yeah, the Secretary – I've been so fortunate, I worked for so many Secretaries of Transportation and they've been really very good. All but one I thought were, are exceptional people and I won't name that person.

Q. Yeah. That's probably a good idea. So how did you carry out this informing people of what was going on?

A. Well what we did was we, first we had a news conference and then we met with the people who lived near the area. We had people go out and actually meet with the people who lived near the area to explain what the process would be and why they were wearing these suits and what would happen to the material because that was the things people were interested in.

Q. Sure. Are there any other things like that that you recall that...

A. Well, the other thing I thought that the course work prepared me for was managing large scale projects. We did, we started doing expressway rehabilitation projects and we would use public information programs to help manage the traffic. And the engineers have a term for it; it's called "demand management." And it's – you're trying to divert a certain percentage of the traffic to other routes. And so those are very large scale projects, involve a lot of money and a lot of time.

Q. And you feel your being in some of those classes helped you?

A. Oh absolutely.

Q. And of course the experience plays a big role, too I think once you get out of school.

A. It, it does. And for one of those projects – I can't remember which one, the Stevenson – we had it entered in the Public Relations Society of America, and we won a top award for that particular project. So it was very satisfying.

Q. Yeah, well that's wonderful. Are there any other classes or professors that you specifically recall?

A. Yeah there's a, there was a professor by the name of George Gruendel who was a wonderful person. And he taught a lot of the areas for human resources and the social side to the management program through Organizational Behavior and a couple of other things. He was, he was a guy who really cared about his students and...

Q. And what did he teach?

A. I've got to remember specifically, as I said he did teach a course in Organizational Behavior, and I can't remember the other one because I took two courses from him.

Q. But in the management program.

A. In the management program. Yeah, George was in the management program.

Q. Anyone else that you specifically remember?

A. There was also an instructor there, Anna May Smith, who was a – and I can't remember what I had taken from her but – one of the things that struck me was I had turned in a, it was an essay-type paper and she says, "Well this is good," but she says, "the next one I expect it to be better. You can do better. I expect better from you." And when somebody sits down and tells you that you go, "Oh boy! Now what do I do?"

Q. So was that a motivational thing she did?

A. Oh yeah! It was motivational all right!

Q. And then in the future, after that, did things get better?

A. Oh sure, but she, she really was another one who was a very interesting person and she was – a number of them. And of course one of the other ones was not for a requirement but I took several courses from Professor Judy Everson. And I have never met a literature teacher who was as good as she is. I mean, she's just brilliant.

Q. Right. Fortunately for us she's still around here.

A. Yes she is.

Q. Still working on things. So, I'd like to switch just a minute and talk about your involvement with the University since you graduated. I know that you've done quite a bit out there and, can you tell us, you know, why and name some of the things that you've been real involved in?

A. I felt I was given such an opportunity that I think that, I think – I don't mean to sound like an old fogey but I don't think a lot of young people appreciate the fact that they're really standing on somebody else's shoulders when they graduate from the university that people have paid for and worked to keep the institution as a good institution. And I thought that I had an obligation to give back. And I looked for different ways to do it, and one of the first ways was because I had a background in journalism was that I started doing things with the radio station and eventually became chairman of the Citizen Advisory Board for Public Radio here. And the station went through so many different name changes, which you could probably remember.

Q. Right [laughter].

A. It was oh, WSSU, what did we have, like three name changes?

Q. I think so, yeah.

A. And so I was involved in helping them with fundraising and one of the projects that I worked on that I was particularly proud of was – there were eighty thousand people in west central Illinois that didn't have access to public radio. And I really pushed hard for us to develop a repeater station that is now over in Pittsfield so that we have public radio in that whole area over there. That was something I really felt very strongly about and was happy to see the station accomplish. And I still go out and answer phones or do whatever they need to do during fundraising, too.

And then I got involved in the – I like libraries and paid for them, the Friends of Brookens Library and I served as a board member there and eventually served two terms as the president of the Friends of Brookens to help them with fundraising and some of the foundation work that they're trying to do at the Library there. And then I'm a member of SAGE, which you are too. So we've done various activities through the SAGE group so I just try to you know, I do try to pick things I'd like to do as well as things that, "OK, I don't like that so much but I'll do it." [Laughter]

Q. [Laughter] You might just mention who members of SAGE are.

A. Oh, these are people who had attended the University who are over fifty-five and who provide service to the University in various forms. And we've done everything from serving, to aid during graduation, to sponsoring programs of our own, that are also open to the general public.

Q. And this program of recording oral histories is actually a project of SAGE.

A. Oh that's right! I forgot that she had mentioned that. That's right.

Q. Right, yeah. Since you were an adult when you went to Sangamon State as a student, where you involved at the time in any campus activities?

A. No because my job was rather rigorous. I was working almost a full six days a week for the wire service because I was the bureau chief. And that's always a joke at UPI because that means all the overtime that nobody else – that you can't pay for, you have to work the hours that nobody else works. And again, you're more familiar than I am with what are the hours in the General Assembly. So my hours were many times as long as members of the General Assembly.

Q. Were there any special acquaintances that you had when you were a student that have carried over. Or because of your work life...

A. Not with fellow students but with some of the professors. I became very good friends with Dr. Gruendel. And the reason for it was he had a son who had died from cancer, and it was Hodgkin's and my son had Hodgkin's. And when he'd found out about that inadvertently through somebody else he actually called me and said, "Look, you know, I have a pretty good idea what you're going through. And if you ever need to just sit down and talk you know, just call me." And he gave me his phone number and everything and we became very good friends.

Q. Well that's...

A. And we still talk on occasion today. They live in Salem, Missouri.

Q. Did – were all of your classes out on the campus or did you have any classes downtown?

A. I had one class downtown, a Public Budgeting class that was downtown in the old Leland Building.

Q. Were there quite a few classes in the building at that time?

A. At the Leland? I don't know. Because most of my classes were all out in the campus and of course they were in the metal buildings because they didn't have the other building at that time.

Q. OK. And you have retired now?

A. Yes.

Q. Which gives you more time to volunteer [laughter] on a lot of the projects. What other things are you doing since you retired?

A. I still remain with the University. I don't do as much with the Library because I think the support that they have – new people come in all the time and if they do need help I will certainly always help out at the library. And of course through the Sage Society I have done several activities including one where we did one for SAGE members where – most of them remember Lincoln Memorial Gardens where we did a little tour for SAGE members out at Lincoln Memorial Gardens as well as some of the other programs we were involved in. There was the one where the three-part series on the Mississippi River, but I didn't do very much on that one but I worked with Judy Everson a little bit on that. But the other thing I did since I retired is, I went back and – all the big ag [agricultural] states have strong extension, agricultural extension programs. And through the University of Illinois extension program there's one of the programs called the Master Gardner program. And I took the Master Gardner program and I do that now, and I do volunteer service as a result of that out at Saint Joseph's every Thursday from spring through the end of October. And we run a little program there that's using gardening as a bit of a therapy for the patients over there.

Q. Wonderful. Looking back on your days at Sangamon State, I mean, were there campus practices that you thought were unusual. The grading or were they doing regular grading by then, the dress of the students, the unstructured part of the classes? Can you comment a little bit about those, what was a surprise and maybe what wasn't.

A. Some of the surprises were that we – I think at that time we still had a number of professors who – I didn't think that what I'd call a peculiar professor would look like but, the really long-haired guys who were sort of your classic hippie kind of guys. And the grading, they did still at one point have an option of a pass/fail instead of a grade and I thought that was unusual. Excuse me, I'm going to sneeze [sneezes]. Oh pardon me. So, I'd never seen that before at a University. And you know, student dress was student dress for the time.

Q. Yes, and actually by '88, I think things were somewhat different then they were in the '70s.

A. Yeah by the time I graduated that's really true. Yeah, instead of the '70s, right. Actually one of the things I did with because Chris Vlahoplus, he didn't have much of a budget when the University first opened, I actually helped him put together the first course catalogue. If you look though the back you'll see credits and my name back there. I did a lot of the photographs. And the funny thing about that because there's no campus these professors were meeting in motel rooms in different places all over the place.

Q. Well that's interesting.

A. So I would go there and you know, try to do photographs that didn't indicate it was in a motel room or some of these little strange places that they were meeting. And it was really funny. Actually one of the professors who of course I've come to know and we know as well is Cullom Davis. And I did a picture of him and it's in that catalogue, first catalogue.

Q. And what year was that?

A. Oh my gosh, can't remember.

Q. Was that before you were a student?

A. Oh, long before, long, long before I was a student.

Q. How interesting. So you were really involved before you became a student.

A. Actually I was. We also donated money to help purchase land for the University too, because my wife and I both thought it was important to have a University here in town.

Q. Well that's wonderful. Well, is there anything else that you think would be valuable for the purpose of our Oral Histories?

A. You know I think, one of the things to me that was interesting— when they first built those, the L buildings, the metal buildings, they were talking about other buildings that they were going to build. And there was a very long gap in there. And I always still find it kind of amusing that the L buildings are still in use because they talked about how soon they were going to have the other facilities built. Well, it just took forever – to me it seemed to take forever. And so I always have fond memories of some of those L buildings.

And a couple of things that always struck me: one, there was that little mini-quad area that the L buildings had. When you had severe thunderstorms that place would fill up like a lake and the students were out there tromping through the water and enjoying that. But the other thing was that with severe thunderstorms was the darn noise that the heavy rain made on the side of those metal buildings [laughter]. Those kinds of odd things stick with you.

Q. And of course there was the wind.

A. Oh yes!

Q. Comment on that.

A. [Laughter] That's absolutely right. I don't care which direction you're coming from, particularly in the fall, it always seems like it's very windy. And particularly in the winter months, windy and it's just cold.

Q. What kind of a feeling do you get now when you go back on the campus which is so different from those days when we were in those L buildings?

A. Oh yeah. Well the first thing is, is that if I'm not out there like, three or four weeks at a time – I don't get on campus maybe sometimes for a little longer – and I go back, the word that strikes

me is amazement. And you know first, it's turned into a lovely campus. They have done I think, a very good job with the landscaping which is something I'm sensitive to for that campus. And then the other thing that strikes me of course is those residential halls. And to see this campus that's sort of risen out of the prairie...

Q. Uh-huh. And you particularly having helped get it started it must be quite rewarding to you to go out there now and see what you helped start.

A. It is, it really is. The other thing about that, while I mentioned about Chris Vlahoplus, a lot of the problems they had was that he didn't have much of a budget for things like photography and some of the other marketing tools that he needed. And he used to call a lot of different friends, and not just me, but a lot of different friends to contribute time and any kind of services sometimes to the University. And it was funny because he would call and he would start the conversation by saying, "Hey pal!" And I would just say, "OK, what is it you want?" [Laughter]

Q. [Laughter] That's good. Well, I certainly thank you Dick, for your insights. It's going to be very, very helpful in recalling years to come what it was like early on. And actually, you were so involved before you ever became a student, that makes it even better.

A. It was really satisfying here. My wife went to the University of Illinois where she got her bachelor's degree; she got her master's at SSU. And she was in the first graduating class, master's class. And so we both have a lot of involvement with the University and it's...

Q. Do you go to the auditorium?

A. Actually we do. We go to the auditorium. We also go to those films that they show in the auditorium; enjoy some of the films that are done in the – can't think of the name of the small auditorium where the films are shown, but we really like that. And we've gone to a number of— we go to actually quite a few functions that are sponsored by the Alumni Association too since she's a Champaign alumni as well as here.

Q. Great. Well, thank you very much.

[Recording ends]

29 minutes 19 seconds.