

OREGON HEALTH SCIENCES UNIVERSITY HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW

WITH

Leonard and Ruth Ann Laster

Interview conducted March 5, 1999

by

Joan Ash

SUMMARY

Former OHSU President Dr. Leonard Laster and his wife, Ruth Ann, look back on their years at OHSU in this interview. Dr. Laster begins by describing his early life and education. At the age of fifteen, he matriculated at Harvard University, and he received his medical degree at the age of 21. He talks about his early career at the newly formed National Institutes of Health and his years as an advisor in the Nixon Administration. After that experience, he moved into academic life, accepting a position as Dean of the College of Medicine at Downstate Medical Center in New York. He talks about the difficulties he faced at Downstate, which he characterizes as a “have-not” institution, and about his failed effort to create a “center of excellence” there.

Dr. Laster came to what was then the University of Oregon Health Sciences Center to try again to apply the lessons he had learned at NIH in an academic health center setting. His arrival was marred by controversy over housing, a situation which had begun under his predecessor and first UOHSC President, Dr. Lewis Bluemle. Dr. Laster and Ruth Ann describe the negative media coverage surrounding those events, and the resulting “trench” of opinion out of which they struggled to climb.

Things began to turn around when Dr. Laster made the acquaintance of Howard Vollum, who ultimately contributed millions of dollars to OHSU. Laster talks about the building of the Vollum Institute, the role of Senator Mark Hatfield in that effort, and faculty reactions to it—both good and bad. The recruitment of Dr. Edward Herbert, a nationally recognized molecular biologist, capped Laster’s now successful effort to create a “center of excellence.”

Dr. Laster goes on to talk about two other centers begun before his departure: the CROET and the BICC. He focuses on his early interest in information technology, and his understanding that advanced information tools would revolutionize the practice of medicine and medical research. Looking back on the missions accomplished during his tenure, Dr. Laster and Ruth Ann talk about the difficulty of implementing change and creating momentum in an institution.

The Lasters go on to discuss their lives after OHSU when they returned to the East Coast to be closer to their children. Dr. Laster became Chancellor at the University of Massachusetts, and he talks about the political difficulties he faced there.

Finally, Ruth Ann talks about her experiences at OHSU as the wife of the President, and she gives advice to those who are about to take on a similar role.

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Interviewed by Joan Ash
March 5, 1999
Site: Woods Hole, Massachusetts
Begin Tape 1, Side 1

ASH: It's March 5, 1999, and this is Joan Ash interviewing Len and Ruth Ann Laster in their home in Woods Hole.

I'm going to start by asking you, Len, where you were born and raised.

L. LASTER: I was born in New York City and raised there except for two visits to Istanbul, Turkey, where I went to school for a while, I think for second grade or something like that. But mostly it was New York City.

ASH: You went to New York City public schools?

L. LASTER: I was in the third graduating class of the Bronx High School of Science.

ASH: And then what?

L. LASTER: Off to Harvard. Spent two years there taking an accelerated course at the college because it was—I was in the class of '48, so I went in in '44, and World War II was still going, and the plan was to get the premed work out of the way so that I could then go in the military and come back and go to medical school. But then the war ended, and so I entered medical school in '46 and went back summers to finish college. So my degrees read A.B. '49, M.D. '50. I did medical school in one year.

ASH: So you were age 21 or 22 when you graduated medical school?

L. LASTER: Twenty-one and a half.

ASH: That's why; there's some discrepancy in the documentation about that. But that's quite remarkable that you were that young and a physician.

R. LASTER: He entered Harvard when he was fifteen.

ASH: He entered Harvard at fifteen, which is a little remarkable, as well.

L. LASTER: Extraordinary. The extraordinary part is that I had done enough at the end of the first year of college to satisfy requirements for medical school, but I was turned down by Harvard because there's a law in Massachusetts that you have to be 21 or over to get an M.D. So I had to wait another year before I could get into medical school.

ASH: Did you think it was a detriment being so young as a medical student, in particular?

L. LASTER: It was interesting. I was the youngest in the class, and many people in the class were coming out of World War II: married, with kids and so on. So there was a dichotomy of the mature people—one guy came practically out of a Japanese prison camp into our class. It was a very different experience than I think students have today in terms of the admixture, the maturity and so on. It was a very valuable experience for me. The one who was always next to me in class, Arnold [Lear?], who was in the older group, became our family physician when we lived in Washington when we were at the NIH, and he was one of the finest doctors I've known in our career, and I think Ruth Ann would agree. And part of it was the maturity of outlook. And so my recommendation is that we take medical students who have had an exposure to life as it really is before they come into medical school, and that's based on my experience in my class.

ASH: But you as a much younger medical student benefited from having older students in the class, as well?

L. LASTER: Greatly. Everything's a mixture in life. By being that young, I've been fortunate enough to have a variegated and prolonged set of experiences that would not have been the case if I'd gone in, like some of them, they were in their thirties when they started. So I felt very fortunate in some ways, and in other ways I felt deprived. I didn't do the things in college that all those spoiled rotten lazy bums do now like finding themselves [laughs].

ASH: Speaking of finding yourself, it sounds like you very early on made the decision to become a physician.

L. LASTER: If you'll read my book, which is called *Life After Medical School*—

ASH: I have.

L. LASTER: —by Norton Press, you'll find that there are many reasons that people go into medicine. One of them—and there's someone in the book—is illness. And when I was very young, shortly after we had come back from the second stay in Turkey, I developed abdominal pain, and our family physician sent me back to school for a week with it until my appendix burst, and I had peritonitis, and that was before antibiotics—in fact before the germ theory was evolved—and I was desperately and critically ill and knew it. And it was during that period—I survived by sheer luck and surgical intervention, but it was then that becoming a physician became the predominant thought.

ASH: How old were you then?

L. LASTER: Eight or so. And then there were other factors. I had an uncle—and I don't know what age this was—with whom I used to play a game: he would be sitting in an

armchair and call for Dr. Spinach or Dr. Borscht because his right arm was stuck in the upright position. So I'd come and work on his arm and pull it down, and after with great labor I'd get it down, his left arm would go up. And so I early on knew what the responsibility of a doctor is to a patient [laughter]. I think I was called Dr. Spinach for a while.

ASH: [Laughing] I love it!

Yeah, there was sort of an assumption. In college, it was either becoming a writer, an actor or a doctor. There were many contemplative considerations on trivia like, what is life and why are we here, but in the end I ended up in medical school.

ASH: You graduated from medical school, then, and how did you make a decision about a residency?

L. LASTER: I never considered surgery. I'm moderately adept with my hands, but I never felt that skilled. I was never attracted to the tension and anxiety of being on the line with someone's life literally in your hands. And besides, I didn't think surgeons were very smart; they were just mechanics and plumbers. And so it was not a thought-out kind thing, it was just an assumption that it would internal medicine. And I went over to the Mass General and was fortunate to be admitted there and trained there for three years.

ASH: And then you started specializing at what point?

L. LASTER: During that time there was a visitor, a fellow intern from Geneva who had done some research, and I had a patient with an odd disease. It was a disorder of the blood that led to an overproduction of uric acid; and he proposed that together we study the patient and try to find out whether the increase of uric acid in the blood was due to excessive production of uric acid or insufficient elimination of it by the kidney. And so we did a study with a heavy isotope, and we got a paper published in the *American Journal of Medicine*, and that was an introduction to research.

I also took a month elective on something called Ward 4, which at Mass General was the precursor for the NIH Clinical Center, and there was exposed to Fuller Albright and other luminaries of the time. And so it became of interest to at least try my hand in research. And then the federal government came along: there was a doctor draft that was either re-instituted or still in effect, and it was possible, I learned, much to my surprise, that you could serve your time by joining the Public Health Service and becoming a researcher at the National Institutes of Health, which was just building a clinical research center like Ward 4, only instead of fourteen beds it had 500 beds, and there were laboratories to go with the beds. And wonder of wonders, the government would pay you to go down there and do research. And they came interviewing people before the Clinical Center opened, and we were fortunate enough, a couple of us, to be accepted in our second year of training. So they let us finish the third year while they were building the Clinical Center, and then in 1953 we went down to the Clinical Center, but it was still not ready yet. And so I spent a year with a guy named DeWitt Stetten in New York City, and then he came down to the NIH, and I came down with him.

One of my mentors at Harvard said to go down and spend two years there and get out, it's going to be a boondoggle, it's going to be government-run, it's going to be a waste of money. He said the government would have been wiser to have given the money to Harvard instead of building the Clinical Center.

So I went down planning to stay for two years and stayed for some 23 years. And in that time nine of the government bureaucrats there won Nobel prizes because the modern era of medicine was born there in that time. It was an extraordinarily exciting time, and it was a demonstration of the benefits to people that come from juxtaposing research, basic research, and clinical care, and it was a demonstration of how medical care for its own sake, not for profit, the way it is today, could produce some of the most caring and expert care imaginable. It was Camelot. Almost every chairman of medicine and every major [dude?] came through the place during those years, and it was just a privilege to be working there.

So that was an extraordinary time.

ASH: How would you describe your research interests during that time?

L. LASTER: Continuing from the uric acid story, I worked with a man named Jay Seegmiller on gout, which is a disease of uric acid metabolism. And at that time the big accomplishment was to show the nature of a chemical defect in a disease. Genes hadn't been discovered yet. Mendel hadn't done his work yet. It was a big thing to show which enzyme was missing. Today that's nothing; today you show which gene is defective, you isolate the gene, you clone it and so on. But in those days showing the genetic defect in an hereditary disease was big stuff.

So I got a patient in with a disease called alcaptonuria, and with Seegmiller and some others we showed the nature of the defect in that disease and then went on; and by the time we were done there were about eight or nine diseases in which we demonstrated the nature of the basic defect. So that made me a biochemical geneticist of sorts.

And then, wanting to carve out an area of my own, I became a gastroenterologist. We came back to Boston, and I spent a year with a guy named Franz Josef Ingelfinger and became a certified gastroenterologist. Ruth Ann got her M.Ed. at Harvard during that year, and Judy was conceived. She wasn't born yet; she was our first child.

And so I came back and became head of what I named the Branch of Genetic and Gastrointestinal Diseases, and I worked on inherited and other disorders of the absorption of food, malabsorption, and other bowel diseases.

ASH: Were you seeing patients and doing research?

L. LASTER: We had a fourteen-bed service. I was responsible for it, but I each year had two clinical associates who were passing through for their two-year stint, who one year

did lab research and the other year were the equivalent of residents, and I was the equivalent of the attending physician. And it's not just having patients, but having patients who had diseases that nobody understood or knew what to do about. And that's a tough one, because carrying people along when they know that no one knows what they have or what to do with them, can be a very difficult thing.

No, I've never been in practice, but I've taken care of people. I knew what good medicine was when I saw it.

ASH: And where was that?

L. LASTER: At the NIH in the Clinical Center.

ASH: Where did you two meet?

L. LASTER: We met because of a virologist. In the early days at NIH, Washington was a bit of wasteland for dating. It was hard to find people to date, and good names were at a premium. And one day a guy in the Division of Virology came up and said he had met someone at Goucher College, and he didn't think she was very interested in him, but good names are hard to find and it would be a waste to let it go. So he gave me the name, but there was no Baltimore Harbor Tunnel then, and so driving to Goucher was an hour and a half. So I held onto the name for about, what, six months and then called, and we made a date. And I got there fifteen minutes before closing time at Goucher College dorm. We had a hamburger and were married six months later [laughter].

[To Ruth:] Is that about it? Ruth Ann proposed to me.

R. LASTER: [Sarcastically] Oh, yeah.

ASH: And Ruth Ann was still a college student and you were...

L. LASTER: Seven years her senior.

R.LASTER: Seven years and some months.

ASH: But you had been out of medical school for some point at that point.

R. LASTER: This was my junior year of college.

L. LASTER: To this day Ruth Ann says I'm still on probation, and she says she married too young [laughter]. And I guess if our kids did something like this, we would think they were crazy.

R. LASTER: I always wondered what my parents were thinking.

L. LASTER: Well, it's a tribute to my good nature and even-tempered-ness that the marriage has thrived.

ASH: Well, we have you now still in Washington. Actually, I want to go back to Harvard because you graduated *magna cum laude* as a child from Harvard, which means you probably wrote a thesis, correct? Do you remember what the thesis was about?

L. LASTER: Yes. At that time we knew very little about proteins. Today we not only know the structure of proteins, but we can make them, tailor them, and engineer them. Finding out about how proteins undergo changes in the body was an important issue. One of my mentors, a guy named Mark Singer, was taking a protein called fibrin, which is a blood protein, and making films out of it; so that you could experiment with how fibrin binds dyes and how denaturing the fibrin, treating it with injurious agents, affects the capacity of the fibrin to bind dyes. And hopefully you could from that find out something about how proteins are injured in the body in health and disease. The thesis is upon the effect of fibrin denaturation on dye binding. And that was done spare time, evenings and so on. The best of part of it was done in summers between first and second year and second and third year of med school. I went back to college and took the courses I never got to take when I was rushing through. So I took Russian literature, Victorian poetry, Shakespeare, philosophy, and all those, and did the thesis. And in the summers when I stayed at the college, I'd have to go back to the medical school to do the work. I didn't own a car, and so I would hitchhike from Cambridge to Boston, and I met some weird and strange people [laughter], including a guy who picked me up one day and inquired about what I do, and he said, "Oh, you're planning to be a doctor?" He said, "You must be rich. Would you like to buy a briefcase?" I said no. He went through a list of things he had in his trunk, and he finally said, "You know, this is all hot stuff. In fact, this car is stolen, too. Do you want to buy a car cheap?" So I got out at the next red light [laughter].

ASH: Did you publish anything based on your thesis?

L. LASTER: No.

ASH: What was the first publication you had, then?

L. LASTER: This one about the gout, as an intern.

ASH: And that was the beginning of a long...

L. LASTER: And distinguished.

ASH: ...and distinguished career and development of your CV.

L. LASTER: In 1969—NIH was a smaller place then. We were talking earlier about how the OHSU must have grown in recent years. I have a deep concern that when organizations get past a certain size, although they gain by it, they lose something, and it's

always a tough decision—you can't control it, but it's a tough balance whether on the whole the growth is entirely good for it.

And in my day NIH was small enough—my measure is parking. When I came, you could find parking anywhere. When I left, parking was at the crisis level. And when it was small enough, you could talk to anyone. And so I had become friends with the head of NIH, a guy named Shannon. And I used to harangue him about, “Who's making the decisions about where all this is going?” It was clear that a new era of medicine was evolving, and it wasn't clear that it would go well if left to its own devices, without people encouraging it, directing it, planning for it. And I kept saying, “Well, who's making the decisions?”

And one day he called and said, “Here's your chance to put your time where your mouth is.” It was President Nixon's administration. His science advisor was Lee DuBridge, former president of Cal Tech, and DuBridge had given away all of his political appointments in the Office of Science and Technology. He was science advisor to Nixon. And he called Shannon to ask if Shannon could lend him a live body to fill the space because he had forgotten to hire anyone to cover medicine and medical research—which show you how high it ranked in the political scene then. So Shannon said that I was going to volunteer to go down and help DuBridge for a year. And I said I would do it, but that I would insist on being allowed to have my lab go on. So I was detailed by the Public Health Service to the President's Office of Science and Technology in 1969.

ASH: And what did you do in that capacity?

L. LASTER: Well, when I walked in—first of all, it's a very loose structure. No one really knows what they're supposed to do, including the science advisor; and it varies with science advisors. Jerome Wiesner was Kennedy's science advisor, and they started out as friends, and then when Kennedy wanted to do the moon shot and Wiesner advised against it, because he thought it was a mistake scientifically, they had a falling out, and Kennedy got rid of him. So it's not a stable situation.

When I got down there, I learned that even though every year NIH's budget had gone up progressively—especially in the Shannon years; he was a master politician—that the Nixon gang was planning on cutting the NIH budget. The Bureau of the Budget, as it was called at that time, was trying to show its muscle, and so I realized that it was up to me single-handedly to save biomedical research for the country. So that was my first assignment that I took on.

And I used to push myself—and the political appointees had no regard for the Office of Science and Technology; they were a bunch of fuzzy-headed pains in the neck—but I pushed myself into these budget meetings, and there I heard something that has stayed with me ever since. They were discussing cutting a medical program in half, and I was arguing with the economist who was suggesting it, and with a straight face he looked me in the eye and said, “Len, you must realize that the only cost effective outcome is death.” And I was shocked. I said, “You must be joking.” He said, “No, if you think about it, that's the case.”

So that's when I realized with a vengeance that there are two worlds floating around.

I was responsible at one time for federal R & D to do research on technology to keep narcotics out of the country: can you devise better radar to keep planes from flying in from Mexico? Can you make a mechanical sniffer of baggage?

I was responsible for a federal program to use technology to help the handicapped—you know, make an eye that would see, a better arm for people who have lost a limb. The NIH budget—we went through the moratorium on DNA research, recombinant DNA. There was a year when scientists agreed not to do research on it because people were afraid that it would produce DNA that would be harmful to humanity.

So the issues varied all over the place. We were also asked to look over things like, Nixon gave the first health talk that a President had ever given, and they sent it down, and the opening paragraph said, "We must realize that we can't stand pat," and I'm a joker, so I wrote in the margin, "Does the President really want to say that about Mrs. Nixon?" And I almost got fired for that.

At the end of a year, Ehrlichman and Haldeman fired DuBridge. They gave him one day to clear his desk and get out. I never knew what the fight was about. And then a new man came in named Ed David, and I told him, "I'm going back to my lab at NIH." And he persuaded me that the ship was sinking, that it would be unfair to desert now.

So I stayed on for another two years, and at that point I realized that I was really giving up research, and I turned my lab over to someone else. But at the end of those two years they closed the whole Office of Science and Technology and abolished the position of Science Advisor. I was asked to come over to the National Academy of Sciences to become head of the Assembly of Life Sciences in the Division of Medical Science. But after a year I found that that was a big bureaucracy that really spent its time having meetings. Now, they were talking about important things, but it wasn't very stimulating.

And so I met a guy named Calvin Hastings Perkin, who asked me to come and be Dean of Downstate. And so reluctantly we gave up life in Bethesda, which is where our three kids were born, and where Ruth Ann was just about to be—she had finished a course in educational administration.

R. LASTER: I had been tapped to go to [indiscernible], which I had wanted to do.

ASH: In Bethesda?

R. LASTER: In Montgomery County.

L. LASTER: We had to walk out on that. We went up to New York.

R. LASTER: Not much choice.

L. LASTER: But that meant giving that up.

ASH: What did you learn about leadership in those years that you could advise future readers about? You had been a researcher in a lab. I picture you being a researcher in a lab, and then in this more public and political role.

L. LASTER: Yeah, but if you're a Renaissance person you can do anything [laughter].

ASH: You had had no leadership experience, however, until this point, and this is a big leap into the public domain like this.

L. LASTER: [Laughing] Let me tell you, I would not have picked me for any of the jobs that I was given!

One, I had a model of an outstanding leader in biomedicine in Jim Shannon. He had been a researcher. True, he had organized during World War II a comprehensive program on fighting malaria for the military, using science and clinical evaluation and the like.

And so secondhand I could see models of what he did. Out of his program came a whole program in cancer chemotherapy, evaluating new drugs for cancer. Out of his program came people who did basic research and found out about serotonin in the brain before people knew about it. And there were lessons there that the value of excellence is not just talk; excellence pays. Crime doesn't pay, but excellence pays. That giving bright and brilliant people the resources and freedom to create is one of the most effective investments you can make. That excitement generates more excellence; it's sort of a circular, self-catalyzing system.

[End Tape 1, Side 1/Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

ASH: I think this is important in leading up to OHSU.

L. LASTER: Critical.

ASH: So let's keep going with it. And I'm interested in leadership and how it develops, and I hear you say you had a mentor and a role model here.

L. LASTER: From a distance. It's not that he had me come into his office and said, "Len, this is how you do it."

At OSC in the Nixon administration I saw the opposite: the tension between political goals and scientific goals. Those are two worlds, and there are differences between people who have different objectives, the objectives of the political people were to get their man reelected and to maintain control over the system; the scientific community in theory is more concerned with intellectual inquiry and human good and all those wonderful things. And I

could see them batting their heads against each other to the point of closing down the office.

At the National Academy, I just saw the advisory process and how it worked, and it's just me, I found it boring. It's more stimulating to see something done than to sit around talking about it.

ASH: Was there a lack of leadership there?

L. LASTER: No, but it was a different purpose. It was leadership for a different purpose. I'm not denigrating it, but I'm just saying different people fit into different activities, and so one of the things is to find out what works for you and what do you work for. And so it was there that I realized that you don't have to be ashamed or feel that you're a failure if you decide that this or that is not for me. And young people do that more freely today than they used to in the past. If your father wants you to be a doctor, and your mother, and you don't want to be a doctor, that's okay. Find out what you really want.

I guess I'm saying that you need passion to enjoy what you're doing and do it well.

ASH: What brought you, then, to Downstate of the possibilities you might have had?

L. LASTER: To try out an administrative role in an academic center. I had not come up through the ranks at an academic institution. I had never been a professor—well, I had been teaching in Washington; while I was at NIH I was at George Washington University, but that was really an in-and-out type thing. And I'd never been through faculty governance and faculty mores. So I thought it would be interesting to see what a medical school was like, and it was sort of a shortcut to come in as a dean rather than working your way up as a department chair and so on.

The other part is that Downstate was a have-not institution. New York State has four academic health centers; Downstate got less money per square head than any of the others. The hospital where they could work was a municipal hospital, and they were at the low end of the budget totem pole, and Brooklyn was a dying city. Medically, the physicians were moving out to Long Island. Crime was on the upgrade.

I joined the Bed-Stuy Restoration Corporation, which Bobby Kennedy had started and tried to help there. But it was sort of urban cancer: we would take a block, rehabilitate it, build new houses and get people in, and then someone would set fire to one of the houses, and that house would be abandoned, and then drug dealers and others would take over that house, and then the house on either side would go, and pretty soon the blight would spread again.

So it was a challenge to see if you could bring some of what the NIH had into a setting—the institution was largely clinical. It had some research, though, and there was one person there working away in pharmacology who now, thirty years later, just won the Nobel prize, Bob Furchgott. But it wasn't a powerhouse of research.

After four years it became clear that it was an uphill battle. At least I wasn't going to make a difference, enough of a difference to feel that it was worth your whole professional life.

ASH: Did you have a vision when you went into that job?

L. LASTER: Just carrying the lessons from the golden days of NIH: create excellence. I did start a program; I got a small grant to start a research program and recruited someone to leave Columbia Medical School and come and be our chairman of Anatomy and to try to start a research center in molecular biology. He stayed for two years and left. And I wasn't president of the place, so I wasn't in a position to wheel and deal with the people who could have made a difference there financially. But on the other hand, neither was the president, because there was no one much who would give money to the place. We were in the shadow of four or five other medical schools in New York City that were the "Gold Coast," so it was a bit of a dream, but it became clear that it wasn't going to happen there.

ASH: Then, what brought you to Oregon, of all places?

L. LASTER: I will never know how it came about, but you can blame Bob Neerhout for that. He was chairman of Pediatrics. He was the chairman of the search committee to find a replacement for Dr. Bluemle. And I never found out from him how they got my name or why or how, but out of the blue he called and asked if I'd be interested in looking at it.

The first thing I had to do was go to the map and see where Oregon was. No, that's not true. You remember I said I became a gastroenterologist? When I took my board exams in gastroenterology, I took them at what was then the University of Oregon Medical School. And I remember, I think it was the one sunny day that Oregon had in the last fifty years, but I remember standing on the steps of Baird Hall looking out over the city and the mountains, and thinking, "How do people get so lucky as to work here?"

Not that I always thought that a beautiful setting was that much of an asset. I forget when, but when I was at NIH, I was asked to look at, I think a vice presidency for research, at Santa Barbara. And I spent three days there, and that was so beautiful I couldn't believe anyone could get any work done in that setting; it was like the lotus-land.

But I had remembered Portland from that day; so I had been there once. So I went out, and it happened.

ASH: I'm understanding a lot more now, because although OHSU was poverty-stricken and not a center of excellence at the time, after Downstate it definitely had its up sides.

L. LASTER: I thought it did [laughter]. I thought it did. But let me preface it by saying for me, and I think for Ruth Ann, those were ten wonderful years. It was an opportunity that

doesn't come along for many people.

But it looked as though it ought to be possible to do here what I couldn't do at Downstate. My vision of it was an institution that had a long history, with some achievements: the first roto-rooter for blood vessels, a balloon, was done there by Charlie Dotter; the Starr-Edwards heart valve was born there. There were scientists there, Howard Mason, Jim Metcalfe, John Kendall, and others, of achievement.

But it was still a have-not institution. I didn't realize how much it was a have-not. I thought it ought to be possible to recapitulate there what happened in the NIH days as I knew it, and that was the assumption. I was wrong in my estimate of things.

ASH: Only in the timing.

L. LASTER: No...

ASH: It just took longer than expected.

L. LASTER: After—it's getting there. One, the institution had a bad self-image. They had offered their jobs in Medicine and Surgery to people from outside and been rejected, and so they had to go inside. Not that the people they picked were terrible, but when you offer your best jobs to people and they turn you down, it makes you wonder.

Two, Bluemle had been there only a short time, relatively speaking, and left. And I never—I didn't know the story, but some people said he walked out on them for a better job, so it was like a child being dumped by a parent. After I'd been there a while, one of the old-timers took me aside and said, "You know, nobody good comes here," based on Medicine and Surgery and so on. "Why did you come?" So with a self-image like that, a place has a way to go.

Secondly, the private sector in Oregon has no respect for government institutions. There was great enmity between OHSU and the local hospitals. At...

ASH: Emanuel.

L. LASTER: ...St. Vincent—well, Emanuel was another one. But, the one you mentioned, where the neurologist Dow was—Good Samaritan. The hatred was palpable.

Then I hadn't even known about the VA issue. It was incomprehensible to me that here was the VA wanting to rebuild a hospital, and every decent medical school thrives by the symbiosis between the medical school and the VA hospital. And here the leadership of the city was fighting to the death to move it over to Emanuel to use the VA as a lifesaver for Emanuel, which needed a financial—it needed a new boiler or something, and they were going to sacrifice the VA.

Third, the attitude of the private sector: somewhere along the line I went to see the CEO of one of the biggest industries there to ask for help to rejuvenate OHSU. And the answer was, “You’re a state institution. I wouldn’t go near state government with a 10-foot pole. You get dirty just thinking about it.” I put him down as doubtful [laughter].

In the System of Higher Education, we were not the favored child—partly because we didn’t have a varsity football team, partly because there was an attitude that really never went away that we were training fat cats, high-income high rollers. And these were not the dirt-under-the-fingernails farmers that are the real people of Oregon.

The Legislature, in my time there tried to close us down every time it convened; there was always a bill to close OHSU as being too expensive. And it wasn’t even OHSU.

R. LASTER: I remember when you named it OHSU.

ASH: It was UOHSC...

L. LASTER: It was the University of Oregon Health Sciences Center. And—first of all, I never understood that, but there’s history to it and there was a reason for it. But I knew it had to go when the then-president of the U of O called and said, “A check came to me, a gift, and I think it was intended for your place, not mine.” Well, that did it.

ASH: And you wondered how many other checks had gone...

L. LASTER: [Laughter] Right. This was a small one.

R. LASTER: Well, and people always thought it was an arm of the University of Oregon, which it wasn’t.

L. LASTER: Right, right. So those are some of the challenges that became clear. And it needed a strategy. And again, it was taking the NIH strategy: let us build in one segment of the future medicine of the day an area of such excellence—

Oh, the other part was the country. When I’d say I was at the medical school in Portland, Oregon: “Oregon? Oh, that’s the space between Washington and California.”

ASH: The image from outside.

L. LASTER: Yeah. So I thought, let’s build something that is really of genuine excellence here that will excite the people within; draw more excellence from the outside, as the NIH did; start a Renaissance and get us known around the country as a center of excellence.

How do you do it? Well, a discipline was being born then—someone once accused me of naming it, and I don’t know whether that’s true, but I call it molecular medicine. I said,

“Let’s get into a part of molecular medicine.” How do you do that? Well, my model was NIH: build a research institute.

The other part that came along in time was the campus is in a beautiful setting, had a few beautiful architectural remnants, but it had been uglified up by that big, massive medical school building. And I didn’t know it at the time, but I gradually realized that architecture can have a profound influence on the self-image of an institution.

So I said, “We have to build a research institute and bring people here, and we’re on our way.” And that’s when I started approaching people and got into this, “You’re a state institution; if you need something, go down to the State Legislature and they’ll take care of you.”

The State Legislature was giving us maybe twelve percent of our annual budget for the whole campus. The rest we had to earn. And by the time I left it was down to eight percent. And so they weren’t taking care of us. Private giving was almost nonexistent. And on top of that there were—and this is where history comes in—old enmities. The Medical Research Foundation of Oregon began as the group, as I understood it, to raise money and help the Medical School. And somebody had a fight with Dean Baird, and they went off on their own, they took the Primate Center with them. And when I came, although it was civil, it was civil hatred between them and the Medical School. And this was crazy: the Medical Research Foundation of Oregon is against its own medical school [laughs]. And they had a lot of the wealth there. But a lot of the wealth didn’t contribute much to medical research. They were really penny-ante in their giving.

I don’t know where it came from, but the confidence was there that somehow it will get done, and this is where a belief in fate and destiny comes in. I had been invited to be on the board of Tektronix in Oregon for a while. One thing we did—Ruth Ann did—

Oh, one other thing: We came in at an extraordinary disadvantage. Bluemle had run into a fight over housing. Somebody had given a house to the University; Bluemle didn’t want to live in, his wife didn’t like it—I don’t know the whole story. They turned it down but sold it and wanted to buy another house. And then they left, and I come in, and Lieuellen had told me that the job came with a house. Well, that was really the only way I could have come. We had not become multimillionaires during our time in academic life. We’re still working on it. The notion of free housing was part of the capacity to take it: because we were committing ourselves to traveling back and forth across the country; the children were going to stay—one was in college back here. Ruth Ann looked at the schools there and felt that private school was...

R. LASTER: [Too quiet to transcribe.]

ASH: So was that before you moved, that you knew that that was the situation?

R. LASTER; Oh, yeah. I couldn’t move where there was no school for our children to

attend. And I thought I knew a lot about the world of education.

ASH: And you had been promised a house, and then as I understand it the Legislature said it couldn't happen and...

R. LASTER: There we were.

ASH: There you were. The timing was pretty bad.

R. LASTER: And that summer I had already left my job. And that summer we found out we would have no housing. And Len had already resigned. We had taken the job and expected to be moving. And I thought, "This is terrible."

ASH: Because you thought there would be a house and you wouldn't have to look for a house.

R. LASTER: Well, and we had already seen the house. It was called the Miller house, I remember now.

ASH: And so you even had the image on the brain, then, of what the house looked like.

R. LASTER: And I remember that we had been shown the house, and I had been told to look at it and see what kinds of changes I wanted to make. Mary Ann Lockwood took us to see the house, so it was all sealed as far as I was concerned. And then there was all this brouhaha that was in the paper.

ASH: And then what happened with housing?

R. LASTER: Well, they had housing rented for us is what happened. I think we were in the Miller house in the beginning. And while we were there, they found the other house. It was kind of horrible because the conditions were very make-do, and we felt very lost. Then somebody came along and said they had a house they'd like to rent to OHSU. And so that house was rented for us.

ASH: So, things settled down. There was another instance that got in the paper about—was it a washing machine?

R. LASTER: It was in that house. It was in that rented house before. I don't remember what it was. Or maybe you can tell me; I'm drawing a blank.

ASH: I'm trying to remember it. Mary Ann remembered it, and the newspaper picked it up again. It was an appliance, when yours had broken down you borrowed one from the University.

R. LASTER: See, I would love to correct that record. For one thing, we never asked for any of that. And Mary Ann took care of those things. And it was, “Don’t worry, we’ll have the washing machine”—because that appliance didn’t belong to us. This was a rented house. So it was not something that we owned. And so the story that it was *our* appliance, and that *we* had asked for it was completely untrue. We were really caught between...

L. LASTER: You’re into that story, but I want to go back to the beginning of it, if I may.

We were packed and ready to move on July 1, and everything was on the truck. We were taking two weeks off here in this house, here [Woods Hole], before going, and we get a call from Lieuallen: The housing that they were going to supply someone in the Legislature objected to, and they couldn’t put us up. Would we wait a month?

During that month we tried to get this thing worked out. I think Vera Katz was involved in this. She was a legislator and was on the budget committee.

ASH: She was involved in a positive or a negative way?

L. LASTER: Negative. Negative. And in the month of July they called and said that the housing was not going to work out. “We can’t get a house for you.” Even though every other university president has a house. And he said, “I’m going to have to back out on my commitment. If you decide you don’t want to come, I’ll understand.”

I had quit a job, and our stuff was in storage. We had sold our house. And that was my introduction to the community.

When we got there, I don’t know, they still owned...

R. LASTER: ...the Miller house. The Miller house is what we moved into. But the Bluemles had been in another rented house.

L. LASTER: The lease hadn’t run out on the Bluemle house. Well, they put us up there in beds that Mary Ann rented from some company, and we and the kids were camping out.

And *then* began the newspaper relationship, with the editorials, and I think it was there that there was a cartoon showing a dollar bill with me in George Washington’s place, implying that I was holding up the State for money. And much of the anger that had been floating around from the Bluemle thing was dumped on us.

R. LASTER: Mrs. Bluemle didn’t like the other house, and that’s what stirred it all up.

L. LASTER: That’s the story we heard. And that did not do us any good with the people of Portland.

Well, what I'm building up to is the media didn't help, the housing story didn't help, didn't help with the Legislature. It looked like this Eastern arrogant twerp was coming in holding up the poor State of Oregon for a fortune with imperial designs and so on. And if the plan was to get the people to reverse their attitude toward a public institution and open up their hearts and purses, it was uphill.

Well, what I was about to say is: that it happened was part miracle and part Ruth Ann, who worked like a dog by turning that around, by making friends, having people for dinner, becoming part of the community. At one point Ruth Ann was on the board of the Youth Philharmonic, the Oregon Arts and Crafts Center, chairman of the board of Catlin Gabel.

R. LASTER: And a chair of the Marquam Hill Society.

L. LASTER: Well, you weren't chair; Betty Gray was always chair. But a member.

ASH: Entertaining a lot.

L. LASTER: They eventually solved the trench that Bluemle built by renting a house, but even that was looked upon askance by the Legislature.

R. LASTER: The [MacArthur?] house.

L. LASTER: And then later on through a bequest the current house became the president's house.

R. LASTER: Have you been in it?

ASH: No. I was in the house that you were in, when you were there.

L. LASTER: Now, at least that was a solution. But that is a 15,000-square-foot mausoleum, with seven bedrooms, each with a fireplace. And we used to have to yell at each other to find out where we were [laughter]. The other thing is the upkeep of that would take a staff of twenty, and they had one poor woman trying to keep the place. So you know, it was different. But it was work to turn the city around.

ASH: And you were on a number of different boards, and you made yourself available outside OHSU in your own time, as I understand it.

L. LASTER: My main objective was OHSU, but it was also—we envisioned becoming part of that community for the long haul.

As part of this effort, I went on the board of Tektronix and met Howard Vollum. Now, a major part of this story is, to me, through unanticipated and unlikely convergence of a number of different lives in that time that led to the renaissance at OHSU. The first, by the

way, was Mark Hatfield. When I came he had been embroiled in the VA fight before I arrived, and it was an act of courage...

[End Tape 1, Side 2/Begin Tape 2, Side 1]

ASH: This is Joan Ash interviewing the Lasters on March 5th, 1999, tape two.

L. LASTER: It took great political courage on Hatfield's part to be standing up for keeping the VA on the Hill when so many influential individuals and, probably, members of his party were really pushing to move it off the Hill, both for the sake of Emanuel Hospital and as a knee-jerk anti-government reaction. The prediction was you'll build it on the Hill, the government will walk away from it, abandon it, and we will have wasted ten million dollars, or whatever the cost was.

And that's when I met Mark Hatfield, and we'll come back to him. But that was a really mean, vicious fight.

Then I met Howard Vollum. Now, the story there was that when he started out he was friends with someone in neuroscience at the Medical School, and that person needed an oscilloscope for his work, and Howard built one in his garage, and that was the beginning of Tektronix.

ASH: I didn't know that.

L. LASTER: This is the legend.

ASH: I'll have to try and track that down.

L. LASTER: If it's true, let me know. But I like the story, so I tell it. And he became a friend.

As time went on the Vollum family had a pediatrician who saw them through a difficult time, and that pediatrician had a falling-out with Dean Baird. I think it was that the school's person at the Primate Center was fired or something, but that set Howard against the Medical School. And I was advised not to think about his doing anything for the Medical School.

The lawyer for Tektronix was Jim Castles. Jim Castles had been with Howard from the very beginning. He liked to call himself a cowboy from Montana. He used to go back and ride horses in Montana on his vacations. And I sought him out; and he came in and was sizing me up because he hadn't heard good things about me, what with the housing and the thing against Emanuel, and we became friends. And he was on the board of the Murdock Foundation. And I told him what I hoped to do, and I said, "You know, we don't have any free money in this setup to do anything creative. And if we're going to do something, we're going to need an architect, we're going to need—" So, I'm trying to raise the money. With

his guidance, we ended up getting our first gift of half a million from the Murdock Trust, for free and clear money, for creative money. And with his help I became better friends with Howard Vollum.

This is my recollection of it; Howard can't defend himself, sadly enough.

R. LASTER: Nor can Jim.

L. LASTER: Nor can Jim. But I used to harangue him about the future of medicine, and he was one of the most brilliant people I've ever known. His understanding of people and his goodness and his modesty—just unbelievable. I think he got tired of being pestered, and one day he walked in and said, "Jean and I are going to start out by giving you \$5 million to start an institute," and it would be more than that.

And to this day, I can still see—you may not believe it, but until then I had never held a check in my hand for \$5 million [laughter], and I ran to the bank.

ASH: He actually handed you a check?

L. LASTER: Yeah. Not many people have that happen to them, for five million bucks. It hasn't happened again, either.

There were two or three things I said. The only instruction he ever gave me—and they ended up making it \$30 million for the building. He wanted me to start the institute and just spend the money. He said, "If you're any good, more money will come." And it took a while to persuade him to let us hold it as an endowment so that the Institute would have a guaranteed base income for its entire existence, and then get more money on top of that.

In giving the \$30 million, he gave me only one instruction, ever. "Bring seven-foot jumpers to the campus." Now, there was someone, and I don't remember who it is, so if I'm insulting someone, I apologize, who gave us \$5,000 once. That person called me weekly to tell me how to spend the money, and the instructions were not in the league of Vollum. So he was not only a class act in what he did for Oregon and for us, but in his manner and style.

Well, we had access to eventually \$30 million, and that was—and I persuaded him to make an endowment for this nonexistent institute. When Hatfield had won the fight over the VA, he had said, "One day you're going to need me again. Call me." Well, I called.

He said, "What is it this time?" I said, "We need a building to go with this endowment." He said, "Write a summary of what you have in mind." And what I wrote was the NIH all over again. He said, "How much do you need?"

So I needed an architectural beginning, and I had no idea how much space, this, that and the other thing. So first we came East and went to visit David Baltimore at MIT. I called him—I don't know how I knew him, but I knew him from before. I said, first, very

condescendingly, “David—“ He had won the Nobel prize. He was a professor of biology at MIT, and he was nationally distinguished. Very condescendingly I said, “David, I’m calling to offer you the chance of a lifetime.” He said, “What’s that?” I said, “You can come to Oregon and work here, and we’ll build an institute for you.” He said, “Really? How much do you have?” I said, “Five million dollars and potentially thirty.” He said, “I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but Whitehead just gave us \$130 million to build a Whitehead Institute at MIT, so I think I’ll stay put. But,” he said, “I’ll help you.”

And so he came, and he talked, and he sent us out to look at the institute at Brandeis University, which was in a building there, and a guy named Harlyn Halvorson showed us through the place. And we decided building that Brandeis building on Marquam Hill would be the thing to do. It gave us some dimension.

With the money that Castles had given us, it was possible to hire an architect to give us preliminary plans. And it was a guy in town whose name, I’m embarrassed to say, I don’t remember, who was with Skidmore—S.O.N. at the time. We had met him socially thanks to Ruth Ann, and he came up with 25 million.

And so with that and with what I got from the trips and so on, I wrote something for Hatfield, and three months later we had 25 million bucks.

ASH: Now, Senator Hatfield when we interviewed him said that he had been off in Washington and—this was his impression—you knocked on his door and you reminded him that our institution was there, because you felt that he had been too distant for a while. And you brought OHSU into his consciousness again. Do you recall—maybe he wasn’t speaking literally, but he used the term “knocked on his door.” You reminded him that places like the University of Washington had benefited—does that sound familiar?

L. LASTER: Well, Senator Magnusen had put \$300 million into the University of Washington Medical School.

ASH: But he said you raised his consciousness.

L. LASTER: But he was there before because he’d been through the VA fight. But I think then he walked away. But I think when that was done he had other fish to fry. And I don’t remember whether it was a knock on the door or a telephone call. I like to tell it as a telephone call [laughter]. But yeah, I went begging. But it didn’t take much persuasion, either.

You know, each thing was unlikely. That the Murdock Trust should have given us that money is very unlikely. I don’t remember if they ever gave us another penny. But they were not—the trustees were not that sympathetic toward a state-owned institution.

That Howard should have given us five million...

ASH: Was Pickering the pediatrician?

L. LASTER: Yes. That Hatfield not only was interested, but somewhere along the line became Chairman of the Appropriations Committee. For ten minutes the Republicans owned the Senate, so that his word was law.

I also caught hell for it nationally. So I'll give you a digression there.

One of the severest critics was a gentleman who said I was destroying the peer review system, that getting money this way was abominable. He gave a talk here in Wood's Hole attacking me personally.

ASH: While you were president?

L. LASTER: Yes.

ASH: Well, some years later that person [Donald Kennedy] was fired from his job because he had been using overhead money from the federal government to buy silk sheets and a yacht at Stanford, and he set back the entire research establishment infinitely more than I. And my favorite statement was, "I was merely piggy-backing on pork" [laughter].

Well, anyway, Hatfield comes along with the money. Okay. Here's an opportunity, but just building another building isn't enough. It's got to be the beginning of a recreation physically of the campus. So we need not just an architect; we need an artist. It is most unlikely that living in Oregon is one of the great architects of our time, Pietro Belluschi, former dean at MIT of architecture, god to many architects, who becomes a partner and advisor.

ASH: And how did that happen?

L. LASTER: Someone told me about him, and I went to see him.

ASH: See, you did knock on his door.

R. LASTER: Definitely.

L. LASTER: And we became great friends.

Digression: we were walking the campus one day, and I pointed to the medical school building, and I said, "I wish you would have been there when they built this monstrosity." I said, "They couldn't afford an architect, so they built this."

He said, "Before you go further, one of my good friends designed that building. It is actually a school of architecture called Brutalism." And I said, "Well, we have one of the classic examples of Brutalism in the world."

Well, with his help we talked around it, we had a competition, and we picked Bob Frasca to build the building. Now, he had never done a lab before. To him I said, “I want the most functional, beautiful, awe-inspiring building known to God and man, or I’m going to want my money back.” And we shook hands, and I never asked for the money back.

As it began to evolve, Jean Vollum—I’m sure it was Jean—insisted that the landscaping be an integral part of the effort. Usually the building is built, and then they landscape. And she said, “That’s a mistake.” So they gave us another one or two million to build the courtyard. And we hired a guy named Pete Walker at Frasca’s suggestion, who was Harvard, San Francisco, and apparently a god in the landscape architecture world. And he did the design for the courtyard, with that trellis on it, which for a while was called “Laster’s chicken coop,” or “Laster’s folly.” And after it was built I think someone had a wedding there once.

ASH: Oh, there are parties there all the time now.

L. LASTER: Okay, so it’s beginning to come together, and I’m really walking on air. Well, it turns out that although I’m creative here and doing well, I really have not managed the politics of academic life all that well.

I had to be out front because early on when I asked someone for help they said, “Look, there are a lot of people that have been there for years and are sort of settled into their ways. I’m not going to give money just to keep them doing what they’ve always been doing.” There was general agreement the place needed a shot in the arm. “And I’m not going to invest in those people who have rode it to where it is.”

They said, two, “People come and go here. I’m not going to invest, and then have you walk off and then the money gets diverted away. I want you to be personally responsible to see to it that something’s done that’s really a jump forward.”

And it became clear that I had to be the one whose neck was on line and who was responsible for what was going on if you’re going to start people giving money. The most important thing was when people heard Howard Vollum had given five million bucks. That caught people’s attention. But still, the money wasn’t flowing in.

But I was out front there, Mr. OHSU. By then I think we had changed the name, and that raised hackles. There were faculty who didn’t want the name changed, destroying tradition and so on. But as Ruth Ann told you earlier, to achieve some identity for the institution, it was important. But I hadn’t done it by a plebiscite, a poll or a vote on the name and so on. I hadn’t done it by academic democracy. I was also regarded as high-handed, and whatever other sins there are. And suddenly there is a groundswell of opposition to the new Institute that was really vehement. “It’s a waste of money; we’re not a research center, we’re a clinical place. You’re going to build this thing, and nobody good comes here, so you’re not going to get anyone good to head it. Give us the money. We’ve been waiting for it all these years. We know what to do with it.”

And I don't say this bitterly because it changed afterwards; but one of the most severe opponents was Dick Jones. And it became a faculty revolt. And somewhere in there I had my five-year review, and Lieuallen told me that the faculty wanted me to go. And so this was a big to-do. And everything that happens gets put in the newspaper: all the supposedly confidential comments and so on, front page headlines in the newspapers. And that was a very, very difficult time—and a shock because I thought I was doing something that would get people starry-eyed. Now, in fairness there was a segment of the faculty that was all for it. Some of the outstanding scientists: Metcalfe, Howard Mason, Kendall, others, backed it completely.

The most gratifying comment was the former chairman of Medicine, my good friend whose name I can't remember—he had been chairman of Medicine for many years [Dr. Howard Lewis]. He was one of the most distinguished doctors in the country, and I'll think of his name after we're finished here. He's long gone.

He was one of the giants that you had at OHSU in the old days. He came to my office and said, "Len, one, I'm sorry you didn't come while I was still chairman. Two, what you're doing is critical for this place"—here was a guy in his eighties. "And three, you're going to run into the worst opposition imaginable. People don't take change comfortably here. Don't let them run you down or run you out; they will try. And you have my support completely." Now, that meant an awful lot to me. And many of the other faculty came and said, "By God, we were ready to leave until this started happening. This gives us hope for the future."

So, that was some of the positive—and I went to Hatfield and said, "Look, you don't need this politically. If you want to back out..." You know, the opposition had sent delegations to Washington to try to talk him into redirecting the money to another project, into their area, the Vollum money.

Incidentally, at first the Vollums wouldn't allow me to put their name on it. By and large, they did what they did anonymously. But in the end I persuaded them that by allowing us to put their name on it, it would say to the world that this is a place to which you can give private gifts, and that it is as worthy of private donations as any other university. And so that's how it became the Vollum. But they really didn't want us to do that at first.

ASH: But Hatfield supported you.

L. LASTER: I told Hatfield, "You don't need this; you can walk out." And I told Vollum, "I'm sure you've never had this kind of grief before. If you want to take back the money, because we haven't spent it yet, I'll understand."

Hatfield said, "Finish this, because we have to plan the next one." And Howard said, "I never intended anything but to see this through."

Later on when the building was part way up and you could see Portland from the top

floor—there were no walls yet; it was a little dangerous. He came up to the top there and looked out, and he said, “Of all the things I’ve done, this is the one that gives me the greatest gratification.”

But neither of them walked away from it. But there wasn’t a day that went by without something truly derogatory in the newspaper that hurt Ruth Ann, it hurt the kids, and it was a very rocky time.

So that’s when I learned about making change within institutions. Some of it was the fact that people had learned for years how to adapt to an unhappy situation. They never really got enough of a budget. Their physical resources hadn’t been replenished in I don’t know how many years. Their existence was hand-to-mouth, juggling, grants, what-have-you, and it was tough to make it in that environment. But those that had made it had an equilibrium going, and here was this outsider coming in and upsetting things, and that’s scary.

The other was that if I did succeed in bringing someone in, that person would be the fatted calf, the favored child, and they would be also-ran’s.

To some who would talk I said, “Look, this is only the beginning. After we show people that we can take resources and do something of excellence, there’s more to come. There’s a new medical school building; there’s a bridge to the VA; there’s a library.” As part of that, the auditorium was in shambles, an embarrassment. So they persuaded Betty Gray to give us a new auditorium. And I don’t know if I’m revealing secrets, and if I am—she didn’t allow me to make it public.

ASH: I didn’t know how that happened.

L. LASTER: Yeah. And it was Frasca that designed the auditorium. But that again is an uplifting feeling: instead of going into a place that’s broken down with torn curtains and so on, stuffing out of the chairs, we had—and it was beautiful.

But it was a very difficult area. They didn’t believe that there was more to come and that it would benefit them. If you have someone of excellence coming in nationally to be head of the Institute, other people will come. When you go to recruit a new chairman of Medicine or a new professor of Medicine, people will come because they’re going to be there. Didn’t sell. And it was tough.

I appointed a search committee for a director. And then the next unlikely—I call these little mini-miracles. I get a call from a guy at U of O who had started a center for molecular biology there, Aaron Novick. And he said, “I have a guy to head your Institute.” I said, “Oh, sure.”

Well, he told me about a guy named Ed Herbert. I had never heard of him. I began looking, and he was really a top notch molecular biologist. But Ed Herbert was signed up to go to Harvard and be at the Mass General, in one of their molecular biology research centers.

So I presented his name to the committee, and they agreed that if we could get him, it would be good. And I went to see him, and I said, “Ed, here is a blank canvas, a new building, an endowment of \$30 million, and the freedom to do anything that your creativity with allow.” The NIH all over again.

And so Ed Herbert turns down Harvard and takes the job. That was the beginning of the turnaround.

Dick Jones, who tried to run me out of town on a rail and kill the Institute, comes in and demands that we build a bridge from his lab [laughter]—no, no—first he offers—Ed Herbert couldn’t have space immediately, so Dick invites him into his lab with his people. And after they worked together for a while, he comes in and demands a bridge from his lab to the building, which we built. And so they become friends.

Ed Herbert breathed a soul into the Institute. Hatfield and Vollum—I gave it a dream, they gave it life, Ed Herbert gave it a soul. He was an outgoing person, reached out. He helped clinicians as well as basic scientists. He was a seven-foot jumper. And in all due immodesty, I handed it to him. And maybe I was copying Vollum, who when he gave me the millions never told me what to do with it: I gave it to Ed, and it was his.

That also got rid—you know, the faculty felt that I was on an ego trip, building a monument to my own ego for so long. But at that point it became Ed’s, and it became more accepted.

ASH: Was the building finished when he came?

L. LASTER: No, that’s why he had to go into Dick Jones’ place.

Parenthetically, two weeks ago I met with the new dean of Harvard Medical School, who had come from U.C. San Francisco to be dean here. And he began chuckling about how he had just stolen someone from U.C. San Francisco to come to Harvard Medical School. And so I had chuckled about how I had done that with Ed Herbert. He said, “You!” He had chaired the search committee that had brought Ed Herbert to the Mass General [laughing], and he never knew what had happened.

Well, we chuckled together, but he chuckled less than I did.

But people of excellence are the answer in many ways; and that really breathed life into a lot of people who had become dispirited at OHSU.

The building is beautiful, and the courtyard is beautiful. I wanted something more, and Ruth Ann, through her painting, had made friends with Carl Morris. And we kept talking about the new building, and one day he came in and said he had nine paintings that he had done years ago that he had intended for a church or something, that he’d be willing to give

them to the Institute.

[End Tape 2, Side 1/Begin Tape 2,Side 2]

L. LASTER: ...as you come into the laboratory, to give you a sense of arrival. Digressing for a minute, when the building was near its completion and we were hanging the paintings, they started putting one in, and the niche was vertical and the painting was horizontal. Someone had screwed up. And I was desperate; you couldn't tear down the wall and so on. I called Carl Morris. He came up, he looked at it and looked at it and said, "Not to worry. Hang it in the vertical." And he signed it a second time [laughter].

ASH: I like that story! Flexibility.

L. LASTER: So that was the art work that went with it.

Ed brought good people with him. He recruited good people. And in the spirit of "build it and they will come:" on one trip back from Washington in those days, a young man sat next to me reading a book about neuroscience. I said, "Where are you?" He was finishing his Ph.D. at Rockefeller University. I said, "What are you doing next?" He said, "Well, somebody told me that I ought to go out and try to get a job in Portland, Oregon at the new Institute because that's where the action's going to be."

ASH: [Laughs] He didn't know who you were?

L. LASTER: No. So that was the turnaround. That was the goal, and it began to work.

Then people began asking Ed to help them recruit other people to the different segments of the institution. Hank Van Hassel asked Ed to train one of his people to do research in dental work. The chairman of Neurology came from Columbia because of Ed Herbert being there. Dick Jones recruited people thanks to the tie to Ed Herbert. So it began to feed on itself.

Hatfield says, "What next?" And you know, the whole cascade of things came. We got money for the medical school building. We got money for, eventually, the nursing school. We got money for the library, the bridge to the VA, and I forget what all else. Oh, we got an Alzheimer grant that was based at the other hospital but which eventually became part of OHSU.

ASH: In what's now called the Hatfield Building?

L. LASTER: That's where his friend [Jack] Vernon worked on ear and so on. Since Ed's work is molecular neurobiology, we now have sensory neurobiology, and that building—is that the one they named for Hatfield?

ASH: Yes.

L. LASTER: Okay. Since then I understand that the Primate Center has come into our orbit, and the head of it does molecular neuroendocrinology. The whole thing cascaded from then, and so it worked.

Years later one of the people who had been a chairman for the department and had been—some nasty things happened in those days, and I won't go into them, but the behavior was really...

R. LASTER: I think other people have gone into it.

L. LASTER: Well, I'm not going to. But one of them who had been as enthusiastic as anyone about seeing me disappear came up years later and said, "Len, I was wrong, and you were right." And we shook hands, and then he added, "But the sad thing is if we had it to do over again, I probably would have behaved the same way." So that's the intriguing part of academic life.

ASH: Can we talk about the BICC a little bit? You had the vision for the BICC and talked to Hatfield about it.

L. LASTER: Why are you so interested in the BICC [laughter]?

I remember now: Hod Lewis was the chairman of the board. Great man.

I'll tell you how the BICC began. One, when I came it was one of you who pointed out that we had such a terrible library facility that we had to store books in boxes off campus. It was a shame—if we were going to build a great institution, the library is the heart and soul of it, and ours was an embarrassment.

Two, one of the people in town who became a friend was the guy who went to Colorado—the older guy [Doug Strain]. He had a company; his wife ran a bookstore. I'll think of his name eventually. But he was the owner and founder of a company that did etchings on computer chips.

ASH: Yes. I remember meeting with him, also.

L. LASTER: Okay. He invited me to become part of a group called the Western Behavioral Sciences Institute. They were a group that studied management philosophy, and their technique was unusual. They would meet every six months for a week in La Jolla, invite six geniuses in different aspects of management and discuss what they were going to do in the coming six months. And then we would each go home and by something that didn't exist anywhere else then, computer teleconferencing, we would talk from around the world. There were people from Paris and New York and England, and we would have an ongoing symposium led by one of these geniuses. And that was my introduction to computer teleconferencing.

And I evolved a dream that, wouldn't it be fantastic, and I wrote—when Hatfield needed something for the money, I wrote a piece about it.

ASH: It became legislation.

L. LASTER: I don't know if they included everything or not, but my vision was that a doctor puts into this—everything would be on computers, all the medical literature. And a doctor puts in, "I have a patient with purple spots," and the articles about purple spots appear immediately. But as the doctor reads—this is a doctor in Western Oregon or so on—the machine says, "You're the fifteenth doctor to ask about purple spots, and So-and-so on the faculty is an expert on that. Would you like to form a little discussion group about it?" And so you have a class forming about diseases with purple spots, and these come and go. It could be a diagnostic help: you put in the patient's story, and it gives you information.

But that's what evolved out of that. In that course I met a guy named Elliott Jaques, who was a world leader in organizational psychology, and I invited him to come spend a week with me at OHSU because I was in the height of this struggle, and I thought maybe he could give me some pointers. When he asked why and I told him some things, he said, "I wouldn't go near you with a ten-foot pole." I said, "Why?"

He said, "You don't have an organization. You have anarchy. Medical centers are a bunch of prima donnas, each of whom thinks they're running the place, and each of whom thinks that you are a stranger to their lives and you get in their way. And there is no system or organization there."

Well, in a way he was right because when I came there, the hospital was a virtually independent entity. The chairs of the departments each had their own empire. The president had—now, Baird had had power, but I don't remember what was the basis for it. But when I came, the president had no power because he had nothing to give: no money, no nothing. And it was really an anarchic organization. So he was right.

Even when I left, it was still not a coherent organization. One thing that had happened was that they had seen that they couldn't, if they disagreed with a CEO, throw them out. They had been unsuccessful in getting rid of me. But they still really saw themselves as able to go off on their own tangents. Stanley Jacob, others. One guy got \$5 million, I think, from the [Gary?] Foundation of America that set up a laboratory without any of us ever knowing it. And they came and told me that it was my job to make him a full professor, even though the faculty had never agreed to vote him that, and that if I didn't agree to all this, hell would break loose and so on. That was still going on. Since then I think it's been made into a more coherent organization, and Kohler has been able to bring it into the modern era and exert some authority over the institution, go at things head-to-head. But in those days, it was pretty loose and free-wheeling.

ASH: The physical facility is undergoing integration now, too, which I think was part

of the plan?

L. LASTER: Well, we developed a long-term physical plan for the institution. Now, it wasn't easy because the terrain is as difficult as I've ever seen, doing it on mountains and so on. One other facility that came into being, I think it was—no, it wasn't Jim McGill's idea. There was another guy who passed through briefly after McGill left, whose name I can't remember. But the Legislature had set up some workers' comp system where they had a facility for workers' comp injuries that hadn't worked out; you were going to go there and get your back pain cured. And they were going to close it down, and there was money available from it. And we talked them into putting two million a year in perpetuity into us to do research and make it workers' comp related.

ASH: The CROET. Oh, that's how that happened.

L. LASTER: We said, "Here we have the neuroscience institute, molecular neurobiology, why don't we do research on neurological damage done to workers in the work place? And that's how the CROET came into being. And I don't know whether that has prospered in size or not. The idea was excellence begetting excellence. You get neuroendocrinology; you get neurosensory with the Vernon facility. You get the CROET. You get...

ASH: The BICC.

L. LASTER: Well, underlying all of it is the obvious fact that information is going to be the foundation for this, and the transfer of information. And also, I was intrigued with the notion of long-distance teaching, a la Carol Lindeman, who was teaching nurses in Western Oregon by telephone conferencing. And the BICC was going to house that, as well, both the computerized version and when television was attached through telephones, television conferencing came in to its own, and the like; so that you could not only teach students around the state but physicians and patients as well. And that was part of it.

ASH: Did you have particular fun with that one, with that concept? I remember you calling together the advisory committee from around the country.

L. LASTER: Yeah. I was looking for the next world to come, and they came and talked, but no one really believed in it. People don't believe in something till they can see, taste, feel and touch it. And the building hadn't gone up yet, and they also hadn't seen whether we would recruit an Ed Herbert to be the godperson for this. So that advisory committee never took wing.

Talking about it, it was terribly exciting. This course down in La Jolla was fun, not just to go down to La Jolla but for the substance of it. But there are a number of seeds that began that I never stayed to enjoy, and the BICC would have been a primary one. The CROET could have been one too. They were all terribly exciting.

Some of the other fights: you know, Carol wanted a Ph.D. for nurses, and that raised hackles, including from some of our own people. I forget who was the most antagonistic to it. I think it was Koler, Bob Koler, or someone—that nursing is not an intellectual discipline and giving a Ph.D. in it is dishonest. So that was a fight, but we got that through. And the whole issue of needing people other than physicians to be well trained in providing care was way ahead of its time.

I wanted to get into—and the BICC would have been an integral part of it—the epidemiology and the evaluation of medicine, of care, around the state. That could have been a major area, and I think that Pete Kohler is into that.

ASH: My department's called the Division of Medical Informatics and Outcomes Research, and we're one of the twelve evidence-based practice centers in the United States funded by the AHCPR. And that's ongoing.

L. LASTER: The other part was to get private money flowing regularly into the institution. Thanks to Betty Gray and others who established the Marquam Hill Society, money started coming in. I think we got \$70 million the first year. But it was a struggle with the Medical Research Foundation being a competing factor in medical—people were confused. They said, “Why shouldn't I give money to the Medical Research Foundation instead of to your organization?” And that is a long way from being resolved. And again, it takes time to see old enmities through to their end and get a turnover of personnel in the organization. The goals had to change.

ASH: Can I go back to the BICC again? I interviewed someone at the National Library of Medicine who had worked with Hatfield; and it was about the same time you were working with Hatfield on the legislation for the BICC building and then the program and all. And it ended up being called IAIMS for Integrated Advanced Information Management System program. But you talked to Hatfield; Hatfield worked with this person at the National Library of Medicine and this all sort of happened at once. Were you aware of any of that?

L. LASTER: I was aware of that, but I had the feeling they were keeping us at arm's distance because they did not want to appear as though they were favoring one institution. There was a particular deal of emphasis on whether you could compete.

ASH: But you had convinced Hatfield, and then Hatfield went and worked for legislation for more than OHSU.

L. LASTER: In all of what he did his strategy was to create something larger than OHSU and squeeze OHSU in as part of it, because it was getting harder and harder to do an OHSU-specific thing.

I was so fortunate in that I never had to—I was spoiled rotten. I recall Hatfield and his office did the work. I never had to struggle and fight and claw...

ASH: You wrote things for him, too?

L. LASTER: But I didn't have to go arguing with the Library of Medicine chief and so on. But watching him, there was a statesman of enormous range, talent, and respect for biomedicine, and—you know, by the time he retired, he and Porter were the two people for NIH in the national Legislature. His strategy as I saw it was to develop a program that would give other people their share of the pie, but make sure that this pie won't be baked until OHSU has its slice of it. And that's how the IAIMS story came about. But in doing the other parts of it, I was not an integral part of it because I think it would have been a bit unseemly for one of the piglets to be...

ASH: But someone had to teach Hatfield what this idea was all about. And that's what I'm getting at, is are you the person who did it?

L. LASTER: I'm not going to look for credit or who did what. I can only tell you that from my point of view the concept of just asking for another library building is not only tacky and unlikely to succeed, but not very visionary, that we ought to build the library of the twenty-first century; and what is that going to be? And that's where this computer teleconferencing experience began it; where meeting with these people that I brought in from Hewlett Packard and Xerox and other places continued it; and where my own thinking added to it. And what it really added up to was a tool, a technology coming into existence that had potential ramifications in various directions. Again, we couldn't do it all, but my hope was that we would become the leader in a few areas that would put us at the heart of the new revolution in information systems.

Hatfield and I used to talk about that at great length, but he had access to many other people, as well.

R. LASTER: [Very quiet] I think one of the characteristics is that—you were very influential, you're being too modest. I agree that Hatfield was good for OHSU, but that Len was the visionary. And that that gave Hatfield a goal that I don't think he wouldn't have had otherwise. And suddenly medical research coupled with—I don't think that would have been his focus, coming from Willamette. And I think from that he did become a person who was very much involved in research nationally. And I think Len was very influential in that. And I am not Len's cheerleader; I'm really his toughest critic.

L. LASTER: Oh boy! [laughter]

ASH: Well, his interest in clinical research, too. I wonder if, because of your interest, if there was a relationship there.

L. LASTER: Yeah, I think so.

R. LASTER: [Very quiet] Absolutely, absolutely. I think what happened was when the University of Oregon Medical School—as it was called, and had been very local—became

much more national [too quiet to transcribe]. It became more than a place where just local people came, with their conventions of continuing practices in Portland. And it wasn't even Oregon; it called the University of Oregon but it was really just Portland. And when we changed the name to Oregon Health Sciences University, it made an enormous difference.

L. LASTER: I think the two of us left a significant imprint on that institution.

R. LASTER: I don't know what it's like now; I'm sure it's bigger and it's better. What I think is that the leap from where it was when we came and the leap nine years later were probably greater than the leap that will have been made nine years from now, because that's just a progression. But this was really a *leap*.

ASH: A new paradigm.

R. LASTER: It really was. It was almost unbelievable.

ASH: We're not done, though, unless you're getting really tired.

L. LASTER: What's left? I really like that ending.

ASH: [Laughing] You'd like to leave it there. Were your aspirations for OHSU fulfilled?

L. LASTER: Aspirations never end; aspirations go on until you're finished. I would have loved to have seen it through to where I could have enjoyed the BICC in all its blossoming. I would love to have seen—well, before we left, the tragedy struck Ed Herbert, and I would have loved to have been able to have been part of the recruitment of the next person—not for the power and authority to pick the person, but to transmit what I had learned from working with Ed Herbert to the next person to ensure the continuity. Now, there was a hiatus of several years before recruitment began, and I was very worried about that because the institution was in its infancy and it could lose momentum very easily.

ASH: And people.

L. LASTER: And people, right. But I think it was an excellent choice, and I think he's going to continue adding to it.

I don't know, so what I say is in pure ignorance, particularly the degree to which it has become irreversibly embedded in the life of the institution. Research centers are fragile institutions. In Worcester only last year, a forty-year-old center, the Worcester Foundation for Experimental Biology, closed its doors and was taken over by the medical school there. It closed its doors because people weren't giving money to support it and the like. Institutions can thrive, and they can die.

And with all the concerns that beset the head of the Health Sciences University, the

financial, the competition with the other hospitals and everything else, I don't know whether there's a danger to the viability of any of these distinctive projects, even the BICC. They need nurturing, loving. They're like children. So I would like to have seen each one of them on their feet, planted firmly for life.

On the other hand, as Ruth Ann said, I think the place did get turned around, and the seeds that were planted ought to grow. I think—again, I haven't had the privilege of sitting and chatting with him, but I gather that Peter Kohler has run with it well, and it's moving along. Things that we talked about as just ridiculous ideas, like making the hospital private, have come to pass. It couldn't have been done in my time—I *really* would have been run out of town. I don't know if the private giving has gone on or not, but I hope that has continued because state institutions thrive only when the private sector makes it a partnership.

So we started that, and really turned it around. And the Marquam Hill Society that Ruth Ann played a key role in. The activities at that time were an invaluable beginning. And the arts program, the giving of art to the institution.

ASH: Who were the people who helped you?

L. LASTER: Doug Strain, that was the name.

ASH: Doug Strain. Electro Scientific Industries.

L. LASTER: Mark Hatfield, Howard Vollum, Jean Vollum, Betty Gray, Doug Strain, Pietro Belluschi. The friends of the Grays who stayed on with the Foundation, Charlie Allis. You may want to talk to him. I'm sure I'm leaving out—oh, Jim Castles.

You see, it's easy to come along...

[End Tape 2, Side 2/Begin Tape 3, Side 1]

L. LASTER: ...started the foundation. I didn't call it that. Oh, I called it the Overseers of the OHSU, and that raised the hackles of the Board of Higher Education. They said, "We're the overseers."

I don't know how—oh, just by sheer coincidence, I learned that the CEO and chairman of the Ford Motor Company used to come to Portland because his mother-in-law was in the nursing home there. So I asked him—I went to see him, and I asked him to be on our board, and he joined. He also said, "Len, you're not going to get any money out of me because I give my money to some art museum in Detroit, near Detroit, and other things." He said, "But I think that having me sit on your board will get you other people." And he was right. And so just that was a very helpful thing, and he had no reason to get involved.

But he brought other people into it. People would come to the board meetings because of that.

ASH: Was the board helpful in other ways? Did they advise in other ways besides fundraising? Like a board of directors would, giving direction, vision?

L. LASTER: They did not know enough about the internal workings of an academic institution. So that when it was a struggle to survive there, they were positive and sympathetic. Oh, Loretta Keller is another one who really—is really a good friend. Her husband...

R. LASTER: You know the fountain, downtown?

ASH: Oh, Ira...

L. LASTER: Ira Keller's wife. We met him when we came, but he died shortly thereafter. She had given money for reproductive research or something and so was involved with the institution, but she was an extraordinarily good friend and appreciated what we went through when things were really at their most active ferment.

There's a whole host of people: there were all the members of the Marquam Hill Society. I can't remember all the names, but you if you were interested you could get the list of all the membership. They cared a great deal, and they tried to help. I have since learned that other CEOs of academic health centers from the start many of them have a consultant come in to advise them on how to keep from having faculty insurrections and deal with the management issues.

I had never heard of that, and even if I had, there was no way in Oregon we could have spent money to employ someone for that purpose. But that would have perhaps made a difference. And CEOs of corporations have such consultants. Whether or not someone like that would have been of help, I don't know.

R. LASTER: [Very quiet] I would just like to say that there were quite a number of people who were [state people?]. And I think that Len was very creative and in fact, he would have been the wrong person to go to OHSU to be the keeper of the institution. He was always thinking of new things to do, new ways to think of things. And the state people and the political people and everyone who attacked him for doing it, really weren't that creative; I've never known anyone who was the state keeper of an institution who did more than make small advances, maybe by incremental steps, but that would be over a twenty-five-year period. You know, they're different types.

If Len had faith, without the politics; if he'd controlled it—but the state had been driving the politics of that place, where people were so turf-building that nothing really could happen; it would have been little more than what it was. And I hope that it hasn't gone back to what it was when we came.

ASH: Now, let me ask you again about leadership. What did you learn about

leadership when you were at OHSU that you were then able to take to the University of Massachusetts?

L. LASTER: University of Massachusetts was a different story. We came back because our three children are in Boston.

R. LASTER: We came back—we looked at each other and said, because I remember it very clearly—at that point, either we spend the rest of our lives in Portland, which we love very much, or we will go back East. But being in Portland for us meant—and it was so nice, I have to tell you—we celebrated every holiday with other people and their families, but only occasionally with our own children. I had the very strong feeling that if we didn't go back East, that we would always be at home in Portland but celebrating with other people. And I didn't want to do that, and I don't think Len did either.

We're really family people. And it was hard to be in Portland, but it was probably one of the best things we ever did to go there, and one of the best things we ever did to leave there. You know, there are different times in your life, and at that time in our lives, our kids were getting older—here we are now with one grandchild and another one on its way, and we never would have had this. We came back to casual family convention. And everything's stable. And if somebody's in a bad mood one day, alright, you can see them next week. What a difference that makes.

L. LASTER: And in my workshop, as we speak—not at this very moment—our son, having heard that Ruth Ann's desk was not working for her, too small, is building a huge desk out of cherry wood. And he can come down for a day every other weekend and do a drawer, and then—and so on.

R. LASTER: It's really nice. And our daughters come down, although our older daughter [indistinguishable].

ASH: But they're all here.

L. LASTER: And as Ruth Ann began by saying, and I agree with you, our three kids are in Boston, and we realized that if we didn't do something then, we were on the West Coast for the rest of our lives.

R. LASTER: We didn't think that they were going to—your children may be moving west, but our children are not going to. We knew that if we were here, on the East Coast, we would always be able to see them. And they are an enormous part of our lives. These are really our roots.

L. LASTER: Acquired roots.

ASH: I can certainly understand that. But I still want to know about leadership.

L. LASTER: Well, there are different times in an institution, and they have different needs. Ruth Ann touched on it. When we came there, OHSU needed vision, change, and leaping forward. Ruth Ann's right: I'm a restless person, I'm not a caretaker. And, indeed, I forget whether it was Dave Witter or someone who begged me to stop coming up with new projects, because they couldn't keep up with the change. And at one time, there was the VA bridge—we had so much going on...

R. LASTER: It may have been Jim McGill.

L. LASTER: It may have been Jim McGill. Poor Jim. He bore the brunt of managing the place through all this turmoil, and he did a superb job. I was depressed to be left, but I think it was really the right thing for him in his career to go on to the next job; and in an academic health center, I don't think he would have gone much further. But after you have a period of ferment, you need some digestion and letting things settle in and, yes, incremental change.

And not only does an institution need a different kind of leadership, but the person has to know whether they're the right person for that. I would not have enjoyed ten years—suppose Bluemle had left all the things that we have been talking about, and then I came there to see them through: I think that would have been miserable.

So, in that sense, although maybe staying another five years would have been acceptable, and so on, I think Ruth Ann is right, it was time for a change. And then there is the whole personal aspect, which was the smartest thing I ever did. Coming back East—place is important in people's lives, and this place is important to us. I was offered a job with McGraw-Hill, as director of medical education, by McGraw. And we didn't know what that meant, but we were going to create it. It would have meant living in New York City or thereabouts...

R. LASTER: Been there, done that.

L. LASTER: ...which we had done. We're not Manhattanites. And so I turned that down. This job at U. Mass came along, and I knew nothing about politics in Massachusetts, but it's a heavy part of life here. And the institution—I may have known it deep down, but didn't know it until I really settled in to the job—was in the midst of the worst turmoil an institution could have.

R. LASTER: I think people tried to tell you that.

L. LASTER: I didn't listen. The job there is as Chancellor of the campus and President of the University. The Chancellor had left, and the President of the University over these campuses, and the faculty were at each other's throats. And the faculty wanted to name the Chancellor, and the President was going to name his own person. The fight became so intense that it became newspaper headlines. The bishop of Worcester got into it, advocating

that the Chairman of Medicine be named the Chancellor. Faculty wanted to oust the President of the University.

And all that was going on, and I come bouncing—and the President picks me. So the old guard regarded me as the Chancellor-stooge, stuffed down their throats. And I come bouncing in, with all this vision about this, that, and the other thing. That institution is in the stage of needing a transitional leader: someone to take it from the fight to the next leader, because no one could survive the transitional period.

So that was an entirely different challenge—although I didn't know it. Well, looking at the job that way, with all due immodesty, I think I did a fine job. I did start a center for molecular medicine, a new laboratory that I took over; and again, got a fight from the clinicians on that one—but I'd been through that. And a few other things. But, I decided that I did not want another decade of this kind of struggle. And two, Massachusetts was going into a recession, and I'd lived through the recession in Oregon, and a recession is one hell of a time to try to find a Howard Vollum; they move to the next Camelot.

ASH: You're not the only game in town.

L. LASTER: Not only are we not the only game in town, but we're the second team because Harvard Med School has it all over everyone else. Someone from Oregon got me in touch with one of the elite of Boston, and I went to visit this woman to ask about starting a cancer center at U. Mass. And the answer was, "You must be kidding. I'm on the board of the Mass General Hospital. We're building a cancer center. And if I find that you've ever diverted money to your place, I'll have you hung." So, I had to put her down as doubtful [laughter].

So, it was tough. And I've ended up with the next place in one of the best jobs I could ever imagine. First, I have a title that assured me that I'm distinctive: "Distinguished University Professor of Medicine and Health Policy," and then I add "and Janitorial Services." And it really is a university professorship. I did my first book, which would not have occurred otherwise. I had a consulting assignment, where I helped some people in another part of the country build a research institute, so I got to do another one—like Johnny Appleseed.

ASH: Oh really? Can you tell us where?

L. LASTER: It's a private business. And I've been consulted for some other activities, research on a couple of boards. So, I'm keeping busy. I write op-ed pieces that have been in the *Washington Post* many times, the *Boston Globe*; I write a column for *Hospital Practice* magazine, some essays; and I'm pursuing a writing and consulting career. And this would not have happened if I had stayed at OHSU or in the chancellorship at U. Mass.

R. LASTER: You're a believer in fate.

L. LASTER: I'm a believer, yeah—there's a destiny that shapes our ends, roughen them how we may. Also, it's time to be thinking about all these questions we've been talking about. As I told you when we started, I'm writing my own book. We use the material from my own life. And that document that you made me sign, that says you own my life lock, stock, and barrel [laughter]—that I'm trying to think over the meaning of all these things. People have written about change; I think I have something to contribute about that. Change not only in the institution, but in the individual. Not only, how did we affect OHSU but how did OHSU affect us? What it did in our lives. These are fascinating things to think about. I agree with Ruth Ann fully; I don't think either of us would trade those ten years for anything in the world.

R. LASTER: They were growth years.

L. LASTER: Growth, wonderful, difficult.

ASH: Is there anything I should have asked you that I haven't asked you?

L. LASTER: Oh sure, but that's your problem. [laughter]

ASH: [Laughing] Well, you'll have an opportunity to write an addendum when you get the transcript, if you think of anything else that you definitely want added.

L. LASTER: [Laughing] Oh no, you're on your own.

R. LASTER: When it's over, I'd like to write something, add to a copy of the oral history. I would really like that. I think our children and our grandchildren would really like to know, because we're leaving out a lot.

L. LASTER: Oh, that's a lovely thought. I'll tell you what you've left out: your side of it, of being in the position you were in, in a situation like this, with the positives, and the stress; living through stress that you didn't create, that was all my doing, but that you had to—

R. LASTER: And I *stayed* with you!

L. LASTER: So, I think it's time for you to torture Ruth Ann.

ASH: [Laughing] Well, we talked a little about the house, and I asked you just briefly about the entertaining that you had to do as part of your role. That's a huge effort on your part, in addition to the public eye. What would be your advice for someone going into that sort of position?

R. LASTER: Actually, at that time, there were four of us, the four presidents' wives, and we used to meet once a month. I orchestrated it. At the University Club.

ASH: The four presidents' wives were PSU...

R. LASTER: Lewis and Clark, Reed, and us.

ASH: Ah, the Portland presidents' club.

R. LASTER: [Very quiet] The Portland presidents. And I remember myself saying to them you can't take it personally. It's very ephemeral. You can take the rest of your life and what you've spent to become Mrs.-whatever-institution you are and you have made an enormous mistake. And I think that helped the women who believed it. Nancy Bragdon was "Mrs. Reed College," and she held on to that role a *long* time, I think even after Paul had left Reed; she really felt a sense of ownership of that community. I imagine she approached it in her own way, and I imagine I did too. But I really did feel that that couldn't be; that that wasn't what I was there for.

And I would tell anyone going into that job—well, I notice now two things. One, I notice that women are getting paid, which I always thought was the way it should be. Presidents' wives when they entertain or in whatever they're doing, they end up being a staff person in development. And there's something like maybe \$10,000—some amount of private money that they get—meaning, privately available, for assuming that role. Which I don't know if it's a plus or a minus, because that just reinforces the idea that you are only the institution.

But I would tell anyone going into it that you are *more* than the institution. On the other hand, I don't think that you can be the wife of somebody in an institution or in some social service and be a very private person, and say "I'm just too shy for this," and, "That's my husband's job and I'll do my own little thing." It maybe it works, and maybe it works in different kinds of institutions; I don't think it would have worked at OHSU. You could not have come in from out of Portland and become [indistinguishable]. First of all, I don't think it would have worked for the institution, and two, I think you'd miss a lot.

ASH: Was it a full-time job?

R. LASTER: [Very quiet] Oh, of course; of course it was a full-time job. But I was also working, because I really do believe what I said: I was an adjunct at Portland State, I was a consultant to Portland [indistinguishable]. I did try to maintain my own individualism. It might be easier today, in my daughter's generation—because I have a daughter who is a physician and one who's a lawyer, and I see how they lead their lives. And I do think I was a professional person, but I can't see either of them saying, "Oh, that's alright"—because I gave up a doctorate, from the University of Oregon. But I can't—they would never do that. And I don't know whether, today, I would do that.

ASH: Give up the doctorate.

R. LASTER: Well, I wouldn't give up my painting, any more. I came back and said—I began as an artist before I married Len; I was an art history major in college. I really expected a life of art. I decided to get in order to get the education, which I really loved. But I when I came back, I sort of thought I could fool around with art. [Too quiet to transcribe].

ASH: Would it be possible for a university president's wife to have a career, like a physician or a lawyer?

R. LASTER: Today it would be.

ASH: Who would do the entertaining?

L. LASTER: Let me jump in here. The President of Yale, Benno Schmidt, his wife stayed in New York as a practicing lawyer, and he used to go down to New York. And he didn't last long as President of Yale.

R. LASTER: And that's because of the fact that his wife wasn't there?

L. LASTER: So, that's an example of where it didn't work out too well.

R. LASTER: But I think that today it would be more possible. Just today Hillary Clinton was saying—where was that—that it's not so easy. But it's still easier today. I think what's happened in a lot of institutions is that the president goes in, and then they find a job for his wife.

ASH: Which must be a difficult thing to do as well.

L. LASTER: You asked if there was something we left out. One thing that I recall was the business of being an outsider. The leadership of OHSU had always been from within Portland.

ASH: Until Bill Bluemle.

L. LASTER: Bluemle left a sour note. After he left and I came in, I did hear from time to time—and they didn't realize they were saying it to me as well—“He was an Easterner; he didn't understand us; and he really didn't fit in.”

R. LASTER: Well, I don't think that Joe Bloom [indistinguishable].

L. LASTER: No, but during the course of things, I encountered that. “We're an institute; you're an outsider, you don't understand the ethos”—they didn't use that word, but the ethos of this medical school, and you're trying to impose something on it, because you're bringing in an outsider's view.

Now, I think that one of the things that we did for the place was to establish the fact that someone could come from out of Portland and be an appropriate part of that institution. But it involved an uphill struggle, and again, a large part of it fell on Ruth Ann's back.

R. LASTER: I think my involvement with Catlin Gabel turned out to be good. I loved being part of Catlin Gabel, but it turned out to be good for OHSU as an institution. A lot of Portland people who would have been at OHSU had been through Catlin Gabel. That made me a part of the inside group in Portland, and no longer an Easterner. I mean, we were educating our children there; and we began to understand Portland, and they began to understand us.

ASH: And hope you stayed long enough.

R. LASTER: Right, because you could stay long enough, and not do much. But with Gabel, we understood Portland institutions.

L. LASTER: And it wasn't always peaches and cream for Ruth Ann. She was chair, president, whatever, of the board of Catlin Gabel—chairman of the Board of Trustees; and in her time it went through an upheaval in terms of the management problems there that she had to see through. And this may come as a surprise to you, but people in Portland can be contentious and take opposite sides from time to time, and she had to carry that board through a...

R. LASTER: Bad time.

L. LASTER: ...a very difficult time of her own [laughing], while I was in the middle...

R. LASTER: [Laughing] It was so incredible, I was on the other side, really.

ASH: You should jointly coauthor a book on leadership and management.

L. LASTER: We will after Ruth Ann finishes her painting.

R. LASTER: I'm still doing it [laughter].

L. LASTER: [To Ash:] Well, you better take off and make your way before the snow comes.

ASH: Yeah. Thank you so much not only for lunch, but for what I consider a great interview.

[End of interview]

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