

DU ORAL HISTORY – 1985 TO 2014**Interviewee: Donald (Don) Sturm, Part Two****Interviewer: James R. (Jim) Griesemer**

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Transcriber: Terry L. Zdrale

- Introduction: [00:00](#) Series introduction
- Jim Griesemer: [00:21](#) We're back with part two of the interview of Don Sturm, who's had a remarkable business career but has done so much for the University of Denver and many other organizations as, as we'll we'll discuss. Don we talked about your business career and your purchases of banks in Colorado and particularly Denver in the Cherry Creek area. So how did you get connected? Obviously you're a graduate of DU's law school, but how did you get connected with the University once you moved back to Colorado?
- Don Sturm: [00:56](#) The connection really came through a classmate of Dan Ritchie's who both of whom went to Harvard at the same time. I had met this fellow in the investment banking field. He was always trying to get Kiewit and me involved in transactions where he got some kind of commission. Sure. But it was nice follow. That's the way the world works and that's what I did. So I know a lot of people back in Wall Street. And so he alerted Dan Richie that I was moving to Denver. And it was almost the same day I moved into an office in Cherry Creek in the bank that I had acquired that Dan showed up and introduced himself to me. I didn't know who he was and I had nobody from DU had contacted me since I had left Denver and graduated from the law school.
- Don Sturm: [02:07](#) And when I went to NYU, since that time, nobody had contacted me and I wasn't offended and I what did I care. But he, he contacted me and invited me and I did go to his ranch for a weekend. And I established a relationship with him at that time. And then he said, I would I be interested in joining the board. Frankly, I had no understanding of what

the travails of DU were at that time. I soon found out, however. So I said, okay, I'll, I'll join the board. And virtually the first meeting that I attended, he announced a fundraising campaign and LaRue Boyd who was a nice fellow, I don't know what happened to him, but he was appointed in charge of that campaign and the campaign was for \$120 million which to me seemed light, but I, what did I know? So I just sure.

Don Sturm: [03:23](#)

The business school and I can't remember what the other one is for sure, but there was two buildings on the campus, which is now Sturm Hall by the way, but one of them used to be the business school, the other one was liberal, liberal arts, liberal arts. And those two buildings were combined. (Right). And LaRue Boyd and others came to my office in Cherry Creek it was Bill Coors. And I think Joy Burns. Yeah. And maybe be LaRue Boyd [inaudible] and asked me to give 3 million and they had no idea who I was and what I had. So I I said, I'll think about it and Dan got me involved in the actual design and the reconstruction of that. He, he's, he was a master in getting you involved before he asked you for money, so you, you're buying in to the campaign.

Don Sturm: [04:38](#)

So I agreed. They, they asked for three. I pledged five. And I worked with Dan for a year or two or more and planning the, the, the joint joining together of those two buildings which is now a Sturm Hall. By being involved in the design and construction and layout of the building. I wound up contributing seven and a half to Sturm Hall, but it was pleasant. It was really I had all kinds of other things going on in my life business wise. (Sure). But I spent time with him and, and the I can't remember the name of the architect that, (Cab Childears). That's it. That's his name. And he was a wonderful fellow as well. So I did that. And I was on the board, I think I started in 1992. I was on the finance and budget committee not only was I on it, but I was the chair, whatever the title was. I ran it. I was also on the buildings and grounds committee

where I spent a huge amount of time, by the way, and in dealing with others, including myself.

Jim Griesemer: [06:12](#)

Don, you and I worked together during your, your initial period as as a chair of the finance committee and then I went on and became Dean of the business school. But at that point you'd had a tremendous amount of business experience, dealt with difficult financial questions and problems. Could you talk a bit about, as you got involved with the finance committee, how did you see things? What was your perspective on the University, where it had been and where it might go?

Don Sturm: [06:44](#)

Well, we wanted to get away from where it had been and, and put some structures on its income and expense and make cash flow paramount and, and cash flow would include the donations. Then I, I was just one member of a grand team that he put together. Now some of us, we're not all equal, nobody's all the same. But some of us had more expertise and perhaps more financial abilities, but what, what I saw in the people that were on that board at that time either they were very responsible people or they represented very responsible people. For instance, Bill Daniels was not on the board, but he assigned somebody whose name I can't remember (Bell Hogue) was quite adept fellow. And I, it was everybody worked as a team. And, and the goal was to get DU back on its significant footings financially speaking and not spend more than you take in. In fact, take in more than your spend and then build up a reserve. And we built up reserves. And we, we got donations as well from people like myself and others. There was a, an extraordinary amount of, of Goodwill amongst the trustees for each other and for the school.

Jim Griesemer: [08:31](#)

And Dan was really the, in my view anyway, the, the one who orchestrated this, he, he had this great talent of drawing on individual's capabilities. And in addition to the finance committee though, which, which I know from experience you ran so well you were also very much involved in the buildings and grounds and this was during a period of huge

growth at the University. And I know you've been deeply involved. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Don Sturm: [09:02](#)

Well, I, I I obtained a real estate background by being involved in business and the Continental Group where they have all kinds of plants around the world and you had to be adept in some understand real estate. When I came when I left Kiewit and I came out here, I bought the Meadows. Meadows is the 4,000 acres in Castle Rock that we have developed and it's turned out to be wonderful and other real estate activities. So real estate wasn't in my blood by birth, but, but became a significant part of my activities. So when they asked me to go on the, the buildings and grounds committee, that was a natural for me. Frankly, by that time I was pretty damned experienced. (Right). And that's what, that's what I did. And that helped helped me and help to DU frankly when it came to this great investment that the University made on buildings and grounds and on the campus that it currently has.

Don Sturm: [10:22](#)

There you had to be very disciplined as to how you went about doing some of the things that we wound up doing and make sure as part of the buildings and grounds, I also was the finance. (Right.) So I had two hats on and I understood pretty well the, the capability of the University, frankly, to undertake some of the expansions that we did. I was also part with Ralph Nagel and, and one of the other, one or two other people. There was a subcommittee of the buildings and grounds committee that the three, four of us were on to look at what real estate the University had that they shouldn't own anymore or what real estate the University should own that it doesn't. And so we, we, we spend time, not a huge amount of money doing that. There, there was a proposal that was made during my service where we DU should consider building a medical school. And some of us thought that was too quick and we didn't have the resources to do it. And if we did embark on

something like that, what would it have done to the other colleges within the University system? So we beat that down. So there's sometimes when you don't do something is just as valuable as doing something.

Jim Griesemer: [12:01](#)

Don I, I should emphasize for our viewers that during the period of time that you were so deeply involved in this, the University invested almost a billion dollars in construction and the vast majority of that was raised, not borrowed. And so it was, it was remarkable time. I don't want to let time get away from us without talking at some length about what is today, the Sturm College of Law. You you got involved in that and have had a remarkable impact. Could you talk about how you got involved with the college initially and then the story of that college? Because it's really remarkable.

Don Sturm: [12:50](#)

I always considered my responsibility to be to the University and not to any of the colleges. You got to keep the main body healthy before you undertake anything else because if you take something on the take something else, it could adversely affect the main body and the main body is DU (right). And in 19, no, 2004, I think Dan came to me and asked me if I would make a contribution to the law school and have my name attached to it. It was probably before 2004 because I thought about it for awhile and I decided, and, and by the way, he said, we will build a school of excellence and Dan couldn't have used better language and excellence. But that was the goal. And I bought into that and I didn't realize at the time where the law school ranked. I just wanted to, yeah, let's, let's make it, make it better, much better.

Don Sturm: [14:03](#)

And, and so I bought into it and I made a pledge of 20 million. And then some months later, Dan resigned. Now he was entitled to resign because he was chancellor for 16 years. (right). But I didn't know that he was going to resign. And the, I didn't have anything in writing other than I made a pledge. But the, what the goal was of that pledge. And when he left the Dean of the law school also

left. So I was now with a pledge and two new people. And, and how do you build a school of excellence? And it was still in my, my soul. It is today. So the new chancellor for whatever reason and, in replacing the and I don't mean this to be critical by the way, but I, you're asking me, I'm gonna tell you. The new chancellor started a a search committee for the new Dean and I was on that committee.

- Don Sturm: [15:15](#) I wasn't in charge of it. John Lowe was, who was another good, good guy. (Terrific man). So long and short of that is that we didn't find anybody except there was one, one would-be recruit who's still on the staff by the way of the law school who was named Dean over my objection. (I see). But I went along with it and I said, well, okay, let's see how it works out. Well, it didn't work out. This fellow believed in no bar exam and, and open enrollment rather than a school of excellence. Which is you have certain criteria when you get to excellence.
- Jim Griesemer: [15:58](#) So Don, the law school was going through a, a real transition and as you suggested while enrollments might be going up, what was happening to things like bar passage rates and what was going on?
- Don Sturm: [16:13](#) The, the school, the law school was taken in 375 individuals each September. When you multiply that by three, that's a lot of people. When, when we started to look at what was going on in the law school because of Dan's retirement, I found that the bar passage rate, and I didn't have this information when I made the pledge, by the way, I just relied on, on Dan and I had every reason in the world to rely on him. He's a reliable guy to this day, but he was no longer there. I found out that only 60% of the first time takers of the bar exam passed.
- Jim Griesemer: [17:08](#) 60%
- Don Sturm: [17:09](#) six zero.
- Jim Griesemer: [17:11](#) How did that compare with other schools, Don?

- Don Sturm: [17:13](#) Awful. It was DU law school was at the bottom of the bar passes of, of, of colleges of law schools I should say that took the exam. What I mean by that is that with the help, great help of my wife Susan, who was a great analyst and, and a a firm that we had hired to help us with the analysis. We found out that 40% of the, of the people who we were taking in, you could predict they wouldn't pass the bar. And they, and here we were taking them in, taking their, their tuition dollars and taking three years out of their life where they didn't do, pursue some other field and make some money during that three year period. It was just immoral. And I, I kept bringing that up to the then chancellor. I, I have a whole file of this is a four year period by the way, for the first six months I figured out a little, so let's see what happens.
- Don Sturm: [18:30](#) Then the other three and a half years I was active in saying this is not right. We shouldn't be doing this. And I finally got to the point where I went to the board of trustees where I, which I was a member of to say that we shouldn't be doing this is, this is a moral and we're just taking money from people that shouldn't be allowed, shouldn't be admitted because to help them help themselves.
- Jim Griesemer: [18:59](#) Use their talents in other ways, but not...
- Don Sturm: [19:00](#) Exactly. They didn't belong in the law school. And after a while, I got, I went to the board of trustees of which I was member, and when you, when you open your mouth a lot of times you wind up with a responsibility. So I was appointed chairperson of a special committee of the board of trustees to look into the law school.
- Don Sturm: [19:29](#) And that's what we did. So we made substantial changes to the admissions. We reduced the admissions from 375. I can't remember if something like 275. Now is 250 and we want to go down to 230. And when you reduce the class size, you're eliminating the lower part of the class that you're looking at. We had the opportunity to do that. It comes at a burden by the way, upon the

University. So I was mindful that the cash flow, that the, and by the way, Daniels was part of this as well. And I think still going through some of the things that the law school did the law school and the Daniels school were cash cows, but they were taking in students that perhaps weren't qualified to be there, but they were, they had enough money to pay tuition and that wasn't fair.

Don Sturm: [20:30](#)

It wasn't fair to them. But still when, when you don't when, you will eliminate those students. You're eliminating a good part of the revenue that the overall University has. And I knew that being the chair of the, of the budget and finance committee. So you had, you had a balance it and right now, let's going back to law school because of the changes we made and bar preparation courses and, and reducing the size of the class that we admit. The bar passage rate now is in the mid eighties. That's a (dramatic change). Dramatic. 25 basis, you know, it's on basis points 25 percent. (yeah) It's, it's amazing. It is. And we are now dealing, by the way, in fact, this afternoon at lunch, Stephen and I are, are having lunch with Jeremy the new chancellor, talking about a, we'll see where it all goes, where we would commit substantial additional money if the University does and then go to the alumni. They come up with a sizeable scholarship fund for law students. (That's fantastic). If it happens. But meanwhile, what we have done, we've given out, we with the help of the University and some designated alumni and we have given out something like 47 full scholarships to law students. This class we did the over 30 and the prior class a year ago, 15. So whether we can keep that up as an issue,

Jim Griesemer: [22:16](#)

You know, it's a, it's, it's really a testimony to your commitment. You're no longer on a trustee, but you're still very much involved with the law school and very, very engaged.

Don Sturm: [22:29](#)

Well, I got involved on the basis that we were going to have a school of excellence. I have not deterred from that. (Right). And I'm not trying to pat myself

on the back or do anything like that. That's what I agreed to in 04. And I am still there wanting cooperation, if you will, from others to get us there. I can't do it all by myself.

Jim Griesemer: [22:53](#)

Of course not. Don, I know that your commitment to DU continues, it's very evident. But you're also doing an interesting project with our school of professional psychology. And, and could you just briefly talk about that? Cause it's very different than, than many of the things that go on at the University.

Don Sturm: [23:19](#)

I'm a veteran and I, I had a layup service. I didn't go to a war. I didn't do anything like that, but I've met a lot of people in the service and the people are coming out of the service having fought in Afghanistan and other places in the middle East with mental issues. And they need to be addressed. So mostly with my son Stephen and daughter Emily working with the school of professional psychology at the University, at Denver University, we established a fund. I think it was the three year fund that we contributed for 333,000 a year for three years plus a little bit more. It was over a million when we did this. To get the school of psychology, not to get, but to help the school of psychology develop curriculum so that they can train their students to deal with mental issues coming out of military service.

Don Sturm: [24:32](#)

So we, we did that also, not only is the establish curriculum, but immediately try and handle some limited number of veterans who needed help now, now being three, four years ago. And we did that. The other thing we, we we talked about and did in a very small way, which I always thought that we could do more of at the law school, the law students could help people, veterans who got less than honorable discharges to look into their cases. They, these law students would be supervised by a professor and then help the veteran deal with the VA, the veterans administration, in upgrading their discharge so they can get some more benefits. That was done in a more limited fashion than I had

intended. It wasn't my intention. It was more than the school law school undertook.

- Jim Griesemer: [25:40](#) Right. Don, you're, we've, we've gone through a number of things but by no means all of the things you've done for the University. But I want to close by talking about your and Susan's other philanthropic activities because the public is aware of certainly of your work with DU, your work with the law school. But I'm not, it's not clear to me that their really understand the range of activities that you and Susan have been involved in. So could you just talk about that a little bit and also is there a theme to your philanthropic activities?
- Don Sturm: [26:17](#) Education, (education), education, and make people help people help themselves.
- Jim Griesemer: [26:27](#) That's remarkable.
- Don Sturm: [26:29](#) We've, we've, we've done things for the Museum of Nature and Dcience. We've done things for the Denver Art Museum. We've done things for the Botanic Gardens and you name them, we've done them, we, we were there. But one of the things we've done lately, very lately in August of this year basically, is that we contributed a significant sum of money to the Arapaho Community College. It is a, a, a collaboration campus down in Castle Rock. Why castle rock? Well, I own castle rock. I made a fair amount of money down in Castle Rock. So we're putting money back into Castle Rock and, and so that the collaboration amongst the CSU and, and the Arapaho Community College and, and Douglas County Community College I think is the name of it. Where they work together to, this is a blue collar type start after high school and now you can look at somebody like me and say I was a blue collar college graduate from the City College in New York.
- Don Sturm: [27:39](#) So I'm trying to help people, we are trying to help people help themselves by getting an education, getting a trade. You can learn to be a nurse, you can learn how to be a carpenter or whatever. Those

are valuable occupations and they're right now wanting for for people, and you get somebody out of high school and give them some, give them a start. Not everybody is designed to go to a four year college (right). So help them help themselves, raise a good family, be a contributor to the community and, and not only their community, but to the State.

Jim Griesemer: [28:20](#)

Well, Don Sturm, thank you so much for contributing to DU's oral history and sharing insights from your extraordinary role in helping to transform the University. I hope you'll join us in the future as we continue the story of the University of Denver's remarkable Renaissance. I'm Jim Griesemer. Thank you for watching.