

Two Notable Pittsburg State University College of Technology Interviews: Victor Sullivan and Cathy Albright

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Victor Sullivan, Interviewed July 24, 2019

I was fortunate enough to sit in on a talk with Dr. Victor Sullivan, a retired Dean from our College of Technology (COT). Many, including Dr. John Iley (University Professor Emeritus, Special Assistant to the Dean, College of Technology) who helped with the interview, consider Dr. Sullivan to be the visionary behind the Kansas Technology Center. Interestingly, Dr. Sullivan's wife had a lot to do with getting the Memorial Auditorium in Pittsburg up and running. So, the inside joke between the two was that Mary Kate Sullivan was the Memorial Auditorium and Vic Sullivan was the Kansas Technology Center (KTC).

Mary Kate's and Victor's story began at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley, Colorado. Both were undergraduates there and, later, Vic went on to get his doctorate in Illinois. Then, in the late 1960s he came to Pittsburg State College, formerly Kansas State College as it was known when Dr. Sullivan came on board. Dr. Iley arrived in 1973 and had Dr. Sullivan for his drafting class.

Fast forward to the late '80s and early '90s when Dr. Sullivan was Dean and went in to then-President Dr. Donald Wilson to talk about the east campus. This was a fairly new concept because there was nothing east of the President's house. Dr. Sullivan wanted to convince Dr. Wilson that a big improvement, for the university, would be to build a technology center.

Dr. Sullivan remembered that in 1984 much discussion was occurring between the Architectural Woodworking

Institute (AWI) and a Vocational Technical Institute (VTI). The science department was housed in a temporary building, but once Packard Hall was finished they moved into it, leaving the temp building vacated. That's when Wood Tech and Automotive Tech moved. The Industrial Arts, as they were known back then, were located in Hartman Hall, Whitesitt Hall and three other buildings. All in all, five different buildings were being used. Dr. Sullivan pointed this out and stated that it was his goal to get them all under one roof. Thankfully, Dr. Sullivan said that Dr. Don Wilson was a visionary and could see the logic of his argument.

Once the idea of building a new College of Technology was accepted, the task of getting the funding began. Dr. Sullivan stated that it all came together. They received a grant of \$8 million from the Federal government and they "had a commitment from the State of Kansas for \$8 million, because we needed the space." Individuals involved in procuring the funding were, as Dr. Sullivan stated "courtesy of Bob Dylan, Bob Jones, and Senator Bob Dole." Originally, the plan was to build a separate building for each of the departments and to move them over as their building was finished. However, Dr. Sullivan and his faculty didn't want separate buildings; they wanted all the departments to be housed under one roof. They wanted to be able to share ideas and collaborate. Dr. Sullivan took several "architectural trips" as he said, to see as many different places as he could and gather ideas for the new building, totaling four trips. Thankfully, for all of here today, keeping us all under one roof was the direction taken and in 1996 the new Kansas Technology Center (KTC) or the College of Technology (COT) opened its doors, and has not looked back since.

I'd like to sincerely thank Dr. Vic Sullivan, his wife Mary Kate Sullivan, Dr. John Iley and Dr. Andrew Klenke for taking time for this interview. Thank you as well to my Graduate Assistant Rigo Brou for his transcription.

Cathy Albright, Interviewed December 20, 2019

Recently, I had the opportunity to visit with Cathy Duffin Albright, a 1981 Pittsburg State University (PSU) alumna and the first female Automotive Technology graduate. Needless to say, I am grateful for the opportunity and it was an honor listening to her story.

We began with the question; what brought you to PSU? Cathy replied that she was raised on a farm about 8 miles south of Pittsburg near Weir, Kansas. Her mother, Mary Frances Duffin, was a single mother of seven children and valued education. Mary Frances, Cathy's mother had received a nursing certificate from Mt. Carmel School of Nursing in Pittsburg in 1954, and it was this certificate that allowed her to practice as a registered nurse and provide for her family after losing her husband when her youngest was only 9 months old. Mary Frances' dream was to provide each of her children with a college education, which she was able to do through hard work and discipline. Cathy said she and her siblings were able to graduate from PSU debt free.

Cathy entered PSU in the Fall of 1977 as an accounting major, with aspirations of becoming a CPA. To help pay for school expenses, she worked on campus performing secretarial duties in the Industrial Arts department, then housed in Whitesitt Hall. She worked for Dr. Forest Penny during all four years. Just down the hall was the office of Dr. Eugene Gardner, chairman of the Technology department, and an acquaintance of Cathy's family. It was Dr. Gardner who encouraged Cathy to take some technology classes. Cathy mentioned that in the late 70s affirmative action was underway and there was a demand for women in technology. After many discussions with him and Mr. Ken Gordon, automotive technology professor, Cathy enrolled in the Introduction to Automotive Fundamentals class for the spring semester. After completing several more technology classes, she ended up switching her major to Automotive Technology with a Service Management emphasis and a

minor in Business Administration.

At the end of her sophomore year at PSU in 1979, Cathy was offered a summer internship with Ford Motor company in St. Louis, MO. She worked in the regional customer service department answering customer calls and providing technical advice. The following summer she took an internship with Midway Ford Truck in Kansas City, MO as a service department coordinator. Upon graduation, Cathy was offered a position with Ford Motor Company, but being a farm girl at heart, requested an interview with John Deere Company. She accepted a position with John Deere as their first Area Service Manager, also known as the "block man" or field representative. Her duties included traveling a specific region and visiting dealerships to address warranty issues, diagnostics of service problems and to conduct service trainings.

I asked her about the reception she received when advising dealership personnel and customers, who were predominantly male, and she laughed saying, "a few were receptive, but most were skeptical. Having a twenty-something girl diagnosing problems on combines and 4-wheel drive tractors was hard to accept. I had to work twice as hard to prove myself to my male counterparts. Having a farm background and experience working on the farm helped my credibility."

She pointed out a specific instance when she was assigned to a territory in southwest Kansas. One area of her territory was heavily Mennonite, and the service manager of the dealership was a Mennonite pastor. Before ever arriving, the service manager had already called her supervisor and said he could not accept a woman working with him in such a position. The supervisor responded by asking him to give her a chance. In the end, Cathy said they developed a great working relationship and he would often call for advice on service issues.

As part of the John Deere service training program, new service department employees spent time at each of

their eight factories learning the product line and equipment operating systems. One such training took place in Waterloo, Iowa, John Deere's tractor manufacturing facility. The service school, as it was called, was an intense, in-depth study of tractor hydraulic, electrical, engine and power train systems, and lasted 4 weeks. During this time, she became friends with one of the instructors, who one evening asked her out to dinner. That date turned into a relationship and the relationship turned into marriage. With the marriage, another "first" occurred, as she and her husband, Jay, became John Deere's first married couple traveling as a sales and service representative team, assigned to territories in southwest Kansas.

After traveling as a service representative for five years, she and her husband, Jay, left the corporate life and moved to Stillwater, Oklahoma, where they opened up a John Deere dealership of their own. Stillwater Equipment Co. opened its doors on June 1, 1986, after which they owned and operated it along with another location in Perry, Oklahoma for the next 20 years. Cathy mentioned that the first two years were rough. At the time, there was an economic and agricultural recession and farm equipment sales were slow. She and Jay decided to build their business focusing on lawn and garden products and the small tractor market for hobby farmers as well as commercial equipment. Later, in the '90s when John Deere went into the golf course maintenance business, they were awarded the sole distributorship for a two-state area for the golf course mowing and maintenance market.

The Albrights based their business on excellent customer service and taking care of their employees, and their business continued to grow. In 2006, the John Deere corporate business model began changing, and with that dealerships were encouraged to consolidate. Having two small children, aged five and eight, Cathy and Jay were not eager to expand their business outside of the Stillwater area, which would require travel and time away from their family.

They received an offer from a neighboring dealer so after 20 years in the business, they took the offer and retired from the John Deere business, which also allowed them more time to devote to other recently established business ventures along with volunteering in the community and raising their children.

When I asked Cathy about some concluding thoughts about her life experience, she said the following:

“Always be willing to try something new. If you don’t try, you’ll never know if you don’t take the risk. The greater the risk, the greater the potential reward. Be genuine and work hard.”

I couldn’t agree more. Again, thanks to Mrs. Cathy Albright for her time and contribution.

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