

Oral History Interview
with
Cindy Ross

Interview Conducted by
Juliana Nykolaiszyn
May 16, 2011

Inductees of the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame
Oral History Project

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Inductees of the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame Oral History Project

Interview History

Interviewer: Juliana Nykolaiszyn
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The recording and transcript of this interview were processed at the Oklahoma State University Library in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

Project Detail

The oral histories collected as a result of the *Inductees of the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame Oral History Project* preserves the voices and experiences of extraordinary Oklahoma women who serve as pioneers in their fields, made significant contributions to the State of Oklahoma, or have championed other women, women's issues, or served as public policy advocates for the issues important to women.

This project was approved by the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board on June 18, 2007.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with Cindy Ross is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on May 16, 2011.

Inductees of the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame Oral History Project

About Cindy Ross...

Dr. Cindy Ross, a fifth-generation Oklahoman, grew up in Wakita and moved to Medford where she graduated high school. She earned her baccalaureate, master's and doctoral degrees from Oklahoma State University while also a mother of two children, and held administrative and academic positions there until 1990. While at OSU, she developed a sexual harassment policy as well as family-friendly policies in dependent care leave and child care for working parents.

Dr. Ross became the first female to serve as President of Cameron University in 2002, and only the third female to lead an institution of higher education in Oklahoma. At Cameron, she has led the school in a significant capital campaign that has led to many improvements on campus, and student scholarships are up 180 percent. Additionally, she is the first and only woman thus far to serve as Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs with the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education (OSRHE), a position she held from 1994 to 2002. Prior to this she served as Associate Vice Chancellor at OSRHE.

In 2011, Dr. Ross was inducted in the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame. She was also inducted in the Oklahoma State University College of Education Hall of Fame in 2005, and was named Stillwater Business and Professional Women of the Year in 1983, among many other honors. She participated in the Joint Civilian Orientation Conference put on by the U.S. Secretary of Defense, and has made great effort to foster the relationship between Cameron and Fort Sill. She was inducted in The Order of Saint Barbara for her support of the Army and Marine Corps. She is an active leader in the Lawton and Southwestern Oklahoma communities and has a strong commitment to the students at Cameron.

Dr. Ross has two children, Garrett and Jordan, and one granddaughter, Cadence.

Inductees of the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame

Oral History Project

Cindy Ross

Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Juliana Nykolaiszyn
May 16, 2011
Lawton, Oklahoma



Nykolaiszyn *My name is Juliana Nykolaiszyn with the Oklahoma State University Library. Today is Monday, May 16, 2011. I am in Lawton, Oklahoma, interviewing Dr. Cindy Ross, President of Cameron University. This interview is being conducted as part of the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame Oral History Project. Dr. Ross was inducted into the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame in 2011. Thank you for joining us today.*

Ross Thank you.

Nykolaiszyn *Let's begin by learning a little bit more about you. Could you tell us about where you grew up and give us a little insight into your early life?*

Ross I am a fifth generation Oklahoman. I am very proud of that. My family came to Oklahoma with the Cherokee Strip Land Run, settled in north central Oklahoma in a little town called Wakita. I went to elementary school in Wakita and then I went to junior high and high school in Medford, a town about eleven miles away. Wakita has a population of less than five hundred when I was there. Medford had a booming population of about 1,100 when I was there. Medford was the Grant County seat. That is where I am from. I am very proud of my roots there.

Nykolaiszyn *Well growing up, tell me about the schools you attended. Were they big, were they small?*

Ross The schools were tiny. The towns were tiny. I love rural Oklahoma. I love the rural Oklahoma environment I grew up in. You knew everyone in town. When I was in elementary school at Wakita, the school was literally about a half block from my house, so my sister and I would walk to school every day. For lunch we actually would walk to my grandma's house which was across town about another six, seven blocks. We went to church every Sunday sitting next to Grandma in the pew. Went with her frequently on Wednesday nights as well and certainly Sunday mornings and Sunday nights. Even when we moved to

Medford, being from a small town with a small school, you not only know everyone, you get to participate in everything. I played basketball. I played softball. You literally get to do everything. It's a wonderful environment.

Nykolaiszyn *Were your parents very encouraging about education?*

Ross Neither one of my parents had a college degree. I was raised in a very traditional household. My dad was very hard-working. He worked with my grandpa and they had the local service station and he worked hard, worked seven days a week, long hours. I developed a strong work ethic from my dad. A college education was not something that was strongly encouraged, and it wasn't something that was regularly discussed.

Nykolaiszyn *So you are growing up. You are little girl running around the streets of Wakita, from school to Grandma's and back home. What were you thinking about? What were you dreaming about? What did you want to be when you grew up?*

Ross I don't know that I gave a lot of thought to it at that particular point in time. Life was just so good. We rode horses. My older sister was a tomboy and she would play football and I would alternate between playing football with her and wearing my mother's high heels. It was just a wonderful, carefree time. I can remember that when it snowed my dad would build a long sled and of course, too, in a little girl's eyes it appeared to be twenty-five or thirty feet long. But he would chain it to the back of his pickup and we literally would go around town and pick up every child and we would all ride on the sled behind the back of the pickup. The nights were starry. There were lots of school activities, church activities. It was a wonderful carefree time. I was raised in a traditional household. I have two sisters, an older sister and a younger sister. I don't recall ever really aspiring to be anything or have a particular profession. I just assumed I would graduate from high school and marry soon and have children.

Nykolaiszyn *Favorite subjects in school?*

Ross Science, reading.

Nykolaiszyn *You go on to high school. How did you get to college?*

Ross I went to college directly out of high school and the primary reason that I chose Oklahoma State University was that was where my boyfriend-to-be-husband was attending. I attended one year, my freshman year, and then I dropped out of college and got married, which again was not atypical during that point in time. Certainly that is something I

discourage all college students from doing now at every opportunity, but it was something that was very typical then. I went to work, my husband at that time had a year of school to finish and I didn't really aspire to go back to college. I was so fortunate because I initially went to work at a nursing home because I had worked at a nursing home as an aid during my years in high school. That is very hard work but probably the most important job I have ever had. Then once I got married, I tried to find other jobs and as I found other jobs I realized that I enjoyed working a great deal. There was a lot of satisfaction. The harder I worked the more opportunities I was given, promotions I received, and then after seven years it occurred to me, hey, I would like to have a college education. I went back to school and I worked full-time, attended college part-time, had two children during this period of time and completed a bachelor's, master's and doctorate working full-time.

Nykolaiszyn *Well that's hard.*

Ross It is worth doing. I was firmly convinced that I would be ninety-two years old and still be going to school. That it would absolutely never end, but it was worth doing. I don't recommend it, as I indicated. I strongly encourage students, the last thing you do is drop out of college, but I recognize the value of a college education. The transformational powers of a college education, the doors that it opens. Certainly that's been true for me.

Nykolaiszyn *Now your area of study was?*

Ross My master's and doctorate are higher education administration.

Nykolaiszyn *What steered you in that direction?*

Ross That just evolved. I would like to tell you I had this great plan and all these goals and achieved them with a steady path, but that is not how it happened. Things just evolved. When I initially went back to school I thought I would be a nurse. Then as it turned out, we moved back to Stillwater and a nursing program isn't available at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater. I went to work for the Academic Vice President and started going to school there and taking classes as I could. I discovered I really enjoyed the work that I did, academic administration, working with faculty, working on student academic issues, working with programs for at-risk students. I was fortunate to have a great boss who gave me extraordinary opportunities, saw something in me I didn't see and just provided opportunity, opportunity after opportunity. At that time I completed my bachelor's, master's and doctorate. The more education and the more degrees I received, the higher I went on the administrative ladder. I enjoy higher education but it was something, if

you will, I fell into but it quickly became my passion. I see higher education changing students' lives. That is what I love about Cameron University. I literally see the magic of higher education every single day.

Nykolaiszyn *In those early years was it tough juggling family, schoolwork?*

Ross Yes. I have tremendous respect for students who try and balance it all. It is very, very difficult to hold a full time job, to be a parent and go to school. It is tough. It is worth doing, but it is difficult.

Nykolaiszyn *So you kind of had a nontraditional student experience.*

Ross I had a very non-traditional student experience.

Nykolaiszyn *You were not partying every night. (Laughter)*

Ross No.

Nykolaiszyn *When you were in school did you ever think, higher education—that is where you want to be? Did you think you wanted to be a college professor or just remain in those administrative ranks?*

Ross I love academic administration because you have the opportunity to really impact the quality of education that a student receives and after all, that is the most important part about going to college. I have had the opportunity to teach courses. I have had the opportunity to be a faculty member, but academic administration was really where my passion was. Of course now I am fortunate to be President of the university, so I'm not so actively engaged on the academic side but that is still where my top priority is.

Nykolaiszyn *When you were working at Oklahoma State, you were known for many things, one of which was centered around the sexual harassment cause. Can you talk a little bit of how that evolved?*

Ross Again, I was raised in a traditional family. I was not raised with an awareness of issues related to women, but as I worked in a variety of environments, I could see inequities. I could see salary inequities. I could see workplace and environmental issues that impacted women in a negative way. In many ways I was fortunate to grow up in a time when those issues were coming to surface and I had the opportunity to work on those issues. Now mind you, not everyone was receptive to hearing about those issues. Not everyone was receptive to addressing those issues, but the inequities were real and sometimes are still real. It was important to try and raise the awareness and to surface those issues and to address them. Sexual harassment was one of them. Quality childcare

is another and quality childcare is still a struggle. My daughter has my first grandchild, a granddaughter, she is sixteen months and finding quality affordable childcare is as difficult now as it was when my children were small. I don't see that that has improved. It is so imperative that we give all children the opportunity to grow and to flourish in a nurturing educational environment. It is just very difficult to find quality affordable childcare.

Nykolaiszyn *When you were bringing these issues to the forefront in the '80s and not many women had many seats around the table, was it hard for you?*

Ross You're right. I again was so fortunate to have a boss who was instrumental in providing me forums and platforms and opportunities to do those kinds of things. In addition to that, during that period of time, Dr. Larry Boger was president of Oklahoma State University, and he equally provided those opportunities. I would meet regularly with the Dean's Council and the academic vice president, my boss Dr. Boggs. Of course, the only member of the Dean's Council who was female was the dean of Home Economics and me. So throughout my professional life, even to this day in most of the meetings I attend, it is predominantly male.

Nykolaiszyn *Is it a little easier to get those ideas across today? I mean, there are still issues. We have made a lot of headway, but I just feel we still have a long way to go.*

Ross I agree. I think we do have a long way to go and I would suggest to you that sometimes our greatest education with today's college age students, there are so many young female students who really don't recognize how different it was for their mothers and their grandmothers. They take some of the equality that has been achieved for granted and don't recognize some of the more subtle inequalities that still exist. So sometimes I think our biggest awareness issue may be with today's traditional aged college students.

Nykolaiszyn *It is a whole new ball of wax today.*

Ross It is.

Nykolaiszyn *If you could, just take me through some of the stops along your career. You are at OSU working. What is the position you held and approximate dates?*

Ross I started at OSU as an administrative assistant, so really more of a clerical position in Academic Vice President Dr. Boggs's office. That was about 1978 and I left there in 1990 with two children and three

degrees and a wealth of experience that has just proven invaluable to me; wonderful, wonderful memories. In 1990, I went to the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, the coordinating board in Oklahoma City. I started out as Associate Vice Chancellor again on the academic side, and after I was there about four years I was promoted to Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, which is the chief academic officer for the state system. My primary responsibilities were the development of academic policies and standards at the state system level. That was a wonderful position. Again, I had wonderful opportunities and wonderful bosses in the State Regents. It gave me the opportunity to really see all twenty-five public colleges and universities, the differences, the uniqueness and the value of all of them.

I had grown up, if you will, at Oklahoma State University; all three degrees are from Oklahoma State University. I knew about the comprehensive research university and frankly thought that was all that existed. So when I went to the State Regents' office, I got to see what the community colleges do and how they really touch so many students who are first generation college students with their own unique challenges and the regional universities, as well. My heart really found its home at the regional university level, because we are smaller, teaching is our primary mission, student learning is what we are focused on; you have the opportunity to know the students; not only know their names, know their challenges, know their goals. There is an intimacy at the regional universities that doesn't exist other places. Then I was at the State Regents for twelve years. In 2002 I became the president of Cameron University, so I just completed my ninth year.

Nykolaiszyn *Wow.*

Ross I am old. (Laughter)

Nykolaiszyn *Don't say that, now. Wise.*

Ross Someday, maybe. (Laughter)

Nykolaiszyn *Working for the Regents, what were some things that you considered highlight moments for you?*

Ross The State Regents really had a commitment to increasing academic standards, and there was some resistance to that. There were those in the public, in the legislature, on the university campuses in some cases who felt like if you increased the academic standards more students would be excluded, that students couldn't rise to the occasion. Based on my experience, I found if you increase the expectations, if you increase the standards and if you provide the students the way to get there, to achieve

those standards, it will always work. Even the most financially disadvantaged students will be successful. That was probably the biggest challenge as we try to increase academic standards.

One of the programs I am so fond of that I think is transforming the state of Oklahoma is OHLAP, Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program. I can remember when that was first being discussed at the state level and then the legislature. There was the thought that it would be throwing money away because it essentially provides a free college education, or at least a tuition-free college education, to those students who are most financially disadvantaged. I can remember the naysayers would say, “You are investing in students who won’t be successful.” But standards were set. Students have to meet a seventeen unit high school core curriculum. They have to meet it with good grades and they have to stay out of trouble. If they do those things, they can get a tuition-free college education and those students are the most financially disadvantaged students in the state of Oklahoma and are succeeding in college at higher rates than in general population. I don’t think there is any better example of proving a point than OHLAP.

Nykolaiszyn *What a great program. I am sure it was a battle in the legislature, but education helps move us forward.*

Ross Education is an investment. Every dollar spent on education is an investment. It is an investment in the individual. It’s an investment in the state.

Nykolaiszyn *So, you are working for the State Regents, the Cameron position becomes available. Did someone say ‘Dr. Ross, you should do this?’*

Ross Interestingly I had been approached about other college and university presidencies and I didn’t have a burning desire to be president. It wasn’t something I was negative about but it just wasn’t a great passion. When I had been approached previously, I had not applied. When the Cameron position became open I thought, that is a university I would like to be president of. I could see long distance from Oklahoma City that it had a rich history and I believed it had a lot of potential. One of the things that strongly attracted me to Cameron was the diversity of the students. Cameron has a very diverse student population and that was very appealing to me, so it was the first presidency that I applied for.

Nykolaiszyn *Was the hiring process a tough one?*

Ross Yes. They had a number of strong candidates. As I recall they interviewed five. Cameron University reports to the OU Board of Regents—a great board. In fact, that was another thing that was

appealing to me about working at Cameron University was working for the OU Board of Regents. They had a tough decision to make and I was just so fortunate they chose me.

Nykolaiszyn *Now, looking at the history of the state of Oklahoma, you have become the third woman president hired to such a post and nationwide, women aren't always tapped for these positions. Going in, what was going through your mind?*

Ross Well, you are right, third woman president in Oklahoma; the first woman president at Cameron University. I didn't really think about being a woman. I don't really think of myself as a woman president. I think of myself as a president. So I didn't really think of myself as a woman candidate. Now that said, I know from personal experience and observation that being a woman can make a difference, but I had every confidence that the OU board would try and choose whom they believed to be the best qualified and best fit irrespective of gender.

Nykolaiszyn *So going in, what were some of your early goals for the University?*

Ross One of the things I noticed prior to the interview was Cameron University's centennial was approaching its hundredth birthday. I knew that would provide a great opportunity for the university, an opportunity to raise money which is so critical in this day and time, an opportunity to focus attention on the university. So that was one of the things that I talked about during the interview process, and that was an early goal. Another goal was to be very inclusive; inclusive on campus with faculty, staff and students; inclusive with the community to make sure that Cameron University was an integral part of this community, was a leader in economic development, was a great partner with Fort Sill, with the high schools in the area; just generally a leader in the community.

Nykolaiszyn *So evaluating your presidency after the first year, what were you thinking?*

Ross I was glad to drive by and see the University was still here. (Laughter) It was a whirlwind. It was an absolute whirlwind.

Nykolaiszyn *Do you work a lot of hours?*

Ross I work a lot of hours, but I like to work.

Nykolaiszyn *Dealing with the partnership with the military being so close, tell me a little bit about that. Obviously the Fort Sill community is a big part of Lawton and also Cameron.*

- Ross** It is, and I didn't realize how very much I would enjoy and value the opportunity to work with Fort Sill and the soldiers and their families. Now, about 11 percent of our student population is soldiers or their families. When I came, it was actually about 31 percent. The reason in the drop was, I came in August 1, 2002. Of course, September 1, 2001 was a little less than a year old, so during the subsequent time I have been here there have been multiple deployments. As a result of the deployments, soldiers are gone and family members have often moved back home. So that has certainly, dramatically impacted Cameron's enrollment. Now we have replaced those students with traditional age students directly out of high school and our enrollment has grown at record levels. But I share that with you in terms of the university's relationship with Fort Sill.
- I am a frequent visitor on post. I enjoy the opportunity to go out there and visit with soldiers and visit with the leadership. We have multiple partnerships. One of the most recent partnerships is what we call Freedom to Learn, where Cameron University provides a computer to any soldier deploying and that soldier can take six or more hours of online courses and they get to keep the computer. We have had computers in Iraq, Afghanistan, literally all over the world, so we are doing whatever we can to be helpful to the soldiers and their families. I don't think the general public recognizes the sacrifices our soldiers and their families have made; the multiple deployments, the missed family reunions, missed birthdays, missed graduations, missed christenings, on and on and on and on, in addition to the emotional wear and tear of war on the family and on the soldier. I have a tremendous respect for our soldiers and their families as well as all branches of the service, but of course the Army is what's located primarily in Lawton.
- Nykolaiszyn** *We are going to talk about the [Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame] induction ceremony in a little bit, but I thought it was very nice that you had representation there from Fort Sill at the ceremony.*
- Ross** It was important to me to have someone there from Fort Sill, to have our soldiers represented, because not only are they so important in the life of southwest Oklahoma, and in fact all of the state of Oklahoma, they are important to me personally. They are a high priority for me.
- Nykolaiszyn** *Well that is good to hear. In this time, we always think about our soldiers and appreciate what they do but they are right here in your backyard and a part of your community and it is nice to see.*
- Ross** I have had to attend too many funerals of soldiers. People just don't realize the sacrifice they make.

- Nykolaiszyn** *And they have honored you as well. Would you like to talk a little bit about that?*
- Ross** I have been so fortunate to participate in a nationwide program that they have that is operated by the Secretary of Defense. It is called the Joint Civilian Orientation Conference. It was a weeklong program where we started out in Washington, D.C. At that time it was Secretary Rumsfeld. It was a group of individuals, about fifty individuals from across the United States, and we had the opportunity to visit all branches of the service from the Coast Guard to the Navy to the Army to the Air Force. It was just a trip of a lifetime. In addition to that, I was honored to be inducted into what is called St. Barbara's. St. Barbara is the patron saint of the field artillery. That was very special to me because primarily that is reserved for active duty officers. Not too many civilians are inducted, though some are. Fewer women are inducted. It is to recognize the support to the Army and to the Marine Corps. So that was a very special and humbling honor for me.
- Nykolaiszyn** *But very telling of your commitment as well.*
- Ross** Yes. My dad was very patriotic. He served in the Navy, but his military service was very important to him. In part, I come by that naturally and the familiarity and the closeness that I have gotten to experience here in Lawton has just cemented that early feeling.
- Nykolaiszyn** *Well one of the other things that you have done here at Cameron is your ability to really go above and beyond your early fundraising goals when you first started. Can you talk a little bit about fundraising and your campaign?*
- Ross** It is really a tribute to the people who live here in southwest Oklahoma. I mentioned earlier the Centennial and the opportunity the Centennial provided, one of which was to raise private money for the University, which is now so critical in terms of operating a university. So we put together a campaign for this Centennial celebration and it was originally an \$8.5 million campaign. It was to fund student scholarships, endowed faculty positions and two pieces of construction, the Centennial gardens and a new student union. We called it a student activities complex. I can remember doing a lot of this very quietly on weekends at home alone. When I initially shared it with just a few select people, they thought I had lost my mind, which needless to say shook my confidence. But then I shared it with some others very selectively and I had some people grab hold of it and say yeah, I think this may be doable. The McMahon Foundation was the first group; wonderful group of trustees. It's a local foundation.

I shared my vision with the chairman of the McMahon Foundation, Dr. [Charles] Graybill, and he latched on it immediately. He said, "We will help you with this." And of course, they were just pivotal to the success of the campaign. Then I went to McCasland Foundation in Duncan and they too agreed to be a significant early supporter. With those two foundations on board it became much more doable and possible, and of course you do a quiet phase with the campaign. You never announce it publically until you have over half of the money raised. That is what we did, but there were still plenty of naysayers who just said, "You can't raise that kind of money in Southwest Oklahoma. This is a working class community. The money is simply not here. It has never been done before."

It was a three year campaign. Two years into a three year campaign we were over \$8.5 million so we increased the goal to \$10 million. At the end of the three years we ended up with almost \$12.6 million, so 48 percent over goal. It just speaks volumes about Southwest Oklahoma. We were fortunate. We had donors from Wichita Falls, we had donors from all across the state of Oklahoma but the predominance was in southwest Oklahoma. It really speaks to their appreciation of Cameron University and their belief in Cameron's future. It has been transformational.

Nykolaiszyn

So now on campus we are seeing capital improvements?

Ross

Yes, we have done over \$55 million in capital improvements. We have a brand new business building that was funded by the legislature's Capital Bond Program, \$ 8.7 million facility, technology rich, simulated Wall Street trading floor, faculty-student interaction areas, just a gorgeous building. As a result of the Centennial campaign, we have our new student union or student activities complex rightfully name the McMahon Centennial Complex in recognition of the McMahon contribution, and we have the Bentley Gardens. We took a 2.6 acre asphalt parking lot right in the center of campus and transformed it into gardens with a pond, gazebo, lots of green area, flowers, trees. That is named for Don and Steven Bentley who made the major contribution to this project. We also have planted over five hundred trees primarily through the generosity of Regent Jon Stewart, who is one of the OU regents who lives in Tulsa. We built a new student apartment complex and that includes what we call a learning center with a faculty member-in-residence. The Lawton voters passed an increase in their property taxes, which is extraordinarily unusual to fund a conference center. We have been very fortunate that we have had so much external investment and really the campus looks very different now than it did just a matter of years ago.

Nykolaiszyn *And student scholarships are up?*

Ross Student scholarships are at all time highs. In fact, our student scholarships have grown over 180 percent. We are recognized nationally, we are number three in the nation based on a study by *U.S. News and World Report* in its best college publication. Number three in the nation out of 572 universities with our students graduating with the lowest debt. Sixty-five percent of our students graduate without any debt and that is because of student scholarships.

Nykolaiszyn *That is saying something.*

Ross We are real proud of that.

Nykolaiszyn *Just nine years on the job?*

Ross Just completed my ninth year.

Nykolaiszyn *So you have done a lot in your nine year span. Wow.*

Ross I haven't done anything. (Laughs) Faculty, staff, students and the community have accomplished a lot.

Nykolaiszyn *You have guided the ship.*

Ross It has been fun.

Nykolaiszyn *What are some of your everyday challenges? It is an interesting time in the nation, economically. As a college president, what are some of your challenges?*

Ross Money is always a challenge. We have had state budget cuts almost every year I have been president at Cameron. In fact, the first state budget cut came six weeks into my presidency and there were three that first year. They are real and they are hurtful. They impact our services to students. Services that are badly needed. Again, with my academic background, we do all we can to protect the academic quality of what we do. We don't do it if it is not at the level of quality it needs to be to serve the students. But our students at Cameron and our students at so many of the colleges and universities across the state, excluding the two research universities, they need these services. Many of them aren't prepared to go to college; they need to be in remedial course work. They need tutoring opportunities. They are single parents. They have other challenges, so services really make a difference in their ultimate success in college, and those are dramatically affected every time we have a state budget cut.

We have been very careful at Cameron to be cautious too in raising our tuition in response to state budget cuts. We are the second most affordable university in Oklahoma and as I indicated, we have a strong scholarship program as evidenced by the fact that most of our students graduate without any debt. But it's a real struggle to provide the services and quality of education in light of the state cuts that we have had. Cameron is known and has a statistical record for being a very safe campus, and that is something that we are very diligent about. But, that is something I think about in everything we do. The safety of our students, the safety of our faculty, staff and visitors. For example, when we built our student apartments, we steel reinforced our hallways on the first floor for serve weather. I don't know of any other university that has done that. Perhaps many have but I am unaware if that is the case. We really put a lot of emphasis on safety of everyone at the University. As you know, in recent legislative sessions, there has been legislation introduced to have guns on campus. That is frightening to me, so safety is a concern and those things that are out of your control in terms of any initiative that might make the campus more dangerous by putting guns on campus. Those are two of the issues that I worry about.

Nykolaiszyn

Well, as you look toward the future of Cameron University, what do you see? What is your vision?

Ross

Cameron has a very bright future. I think we have laid a firm foundation. We were very pleased. We had our Higher Learning Commission accreditation visit this past fall. Something that occurs every ten years. Cameron University was deemed to be a role model institution by the team, and we had an unconditional reaffirmation of our accreditation. The best accreditation report in the university's history. The deficiencies that existed ten years ago, all of those were addressed and many of those were even moved to a strong strength for the university. So the foundation I think is very strong, and that is the academic side of the institution which I focus on more even than the visual, physical transformation. But there is much to be done. We don't have a childcare center on campus, and that is something I would ultimately like to have. Only this past year did we add a student wellness center on campus. That had never existed. There had not been counseling services for our students. There had not been access to acute medical care until we established that. Just this spring we added a central academic advising center to help students succeed in college. Our retention and graduation rates must improve and we are focused on that. So there is much work left to be done.

Nykolaiszyn

When you look back twenty years from now, thirty years from now...

Ross I will be dead! (Laughter)

Nykolaiszyn *No, no. (Laughter) What do you think your legacy will be?*

Ross One of the things I try and remind myself daily (and I remind the faculty and staff probably more often they want to hear it) is that Cameron University is only temporarily in our care. We are stewards of Cameron University for only a short time and we need to leave it better than we found it and with the prospect of a bright future. So what I hope my legacy will be, not all the buildings we have done, but rather that we have provided access to more students primarily from Southwest Oklahoma to college, because so many students in this area don't prepare to go to college, don't aspire to go to college and don't go to college, so to raise those expectations to go to college; to literally change the culture of the community, and to provide students access to a quality education that will transform their life. I hope that would be my legacy.

Nykolaiszyn *Now looking back on your career, I have noticed that you were on budget committees. (Laughs) Not usually a place that women, I know back to the woman thing, but not normally a place where women get to serve. Do you think that is a place that is important for those who look forward to trying to get a post as a president to serve on those types of committees?*

Ross Absolutely. You have to understand the budget process. You have to understand the legislative process in terms of allocating money. You have to understand the State Regents' process. You need to be familiar with your own institution's budget. You can't make decisions for the institution if the money doesn't follow the decisions. You have to be well-grounded and well-versed and know where the money is. In addition to that, you need to know how to build a building. You don't need to know how to hammer a nail, but you need to know the process. You need to know what to ask architects; you need to know what to ask construction managers and what to look for. You need to be willing to wear a hard hat, and go around and look at the construction site and see what's going on, see if it's on schedule and if it is within budget. Those things that often times, I don't think that some women have experience in. You have got to find the opportunity to gain that experience and latch hold of it to be successful, I think.

Nykolaiszyn *Any other words of wisdom for those who are looking to do what you have done?*

Ross (Laughs) Take risks knowing that not all of them will pay off. Listen to everyone. I get some of my very best ideas from custodial crew members, from students. You really find out what is working at the

University and what's not. Laugh; don't take yourself too seriously. Remember that the university is only temporarily in your care. Work hard.

Nykolaiszyn *Is it hard to find that balance between work and family?*

Ross Yes. Sometimes, but I also think it can be very compatible and that is the way I look at it. When things may not be going right at work or at the university, and at first I had children to go home to, now I have a granddaughter that I can Skype with. It just puts everything in perspective.

Nykolaiszyn *Well in 2011, you were inducted into the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame. Were you shocked when you got the call?*

Ross I was shocked. I was in Texas visiting my son and my sister and I received the phone call. Mrs. Walker told me I was one of this year's recipients. I was shocked, I was surprised and I didn't even tell any family members about it that day. I waited a full twenty-four hours before I mentioned it and then I swore them to secrecy. I don't know why. (Laughter) I guess it was the thought that it may not be real and I didn't want to be embarrassed, but I was surprised; very surprised. I know many of the past recipients and if I don't know them personally I know of their work and their contributions to this state. I'm simply not in their league, so I was surprised.

Nykolaiszyn *Now at the induction ceremony not too long ago, do you remember who presented you?*

Ross Yes. Glen Johnson, Chancellor of the Oklahoma System of Higher Education.

Nykolaiszyn *What was that like hearing him say all of those kind words about you?*

Ross He was overly generous. He is a great friend. I have known Chancellor Johnson since he was Speaker of the House of Representatives, and then of course he was President at Southeastern Oklahoma State University for ten years and I worked with him in that capacity. Then he became Chancellor. Through the years I've had the opportunity not just to work with him but to observe him. He is such an effective leader and articulate spokesman on behalf of higher education, and just a solid quality good person. To have him nominate me and have him also present me for induction made a special day extraordinary.

Nykolaiszyn *You had a lot of people in attendance. Some family, colleagues and maybe students?*

Ross Yes. I did. I never go anywhere without Cameron University students. They are too important to me. So the president of the student government association, Cody Gardner, was there and I was so grateful that she came.

Nykolaiszyn *I am sure as kids are growing up and they look at women of Oklahoma history and they come across your name, they read your story, they learn more about you. What would you like to tell them?*

Ross To remember who they are and where they came from and what their values are and how very fortunate we are to be from the great state of Oklahoma. That is how I feel, and I encourage them to share that feeling. It is a feeling of warmth and love.

Nykolaiszyn *An Oklahoma girl born in Wakita, and a college president now.*

Ross I have been very lucky; very, very lucky.

Nykolaiszyn *What does Oklahoma mean to you?*

Ross Oklahoma means Wakita and Medford and Grandma and opportunity and hard work and Cameron and my kids. It is just everything. Everything one could wish for in a life has been Oklahoma.

Nykolaiszyn *Is there anybody you would like to make mention of or thank who have helped play an important role in your life?*

Ross There are countless people who have played an important role in my life without which I certainly wouldn't be president of Cameron. In fact, every person who has been in my life I thank because in some way or another they have touched me in a permanent way.

Nykolaiszyn *Favorite part of the job?*

Ross Students. That's easy. If I am having a bad day and things aren't going right, if we are getting another budget cut, faculty member dismissed class too early, whatever it might be. It is just not going right. All I have to do is walk out of my office and walk across campus and see students and say hello, and stop and visit, and I come back a different person. Life is good again. Students are wonderful. I feel so blessed to have the opportunity to come to work every single day where there are students and committed faculty and staff and a supportive community. It's wonderful.

Nykolaiszyn *What is next? What do you hope to do?*

Ross The University has to continue to move forward. You can't ever become complacent or even take a deep breath. You have got to continue to move forward. I think that is true for Cameron University. I think that is true for each of us. As professionals, each of us, as human beings, we have got to continue to move forward. There are always new challenges. There are always things that need to be done. There are always new ideas. There is always a problem to be solved and there is no time to waste.

Nykolaiszyn *Well before I ask my last question, is there anything else you would like to add that I have not made mention of today? Anything else you would like to tell me?*

Ross I am very grateful to the Commission on the Status of Women; those individuals who volunteer their time, their energy and their effort to deal with women's issues, to raise the awareness of woman's and children's issues and to recognize women in the state of Oklahoma. I am very grateful to them. Not just for including me in this year's Hall of Fame induction class, but what they do every single day with the Commission and what it means to this state.

Nykolaiszyn *When history is written about you, what would you like for it to say?*

Ross This sounds like death is right around the corner. (Laughter) That I am a small town girl from Wakita, Oklahoma, who loved her children and grandchildren and had a passion for education.

Nykolaiszyn *Well President Ross, thank you so much for joining me today.*

Ross Thank you.

----- *End of interview* -----