

## Dr. J. Ardis Bell Interview

**Lace:** What is your name?

**Bell:** My name is Ardis Bell.

**Lace:** Ok. Are you from around here originally?

**Bell:** I was born and reared in Fort Worth.

**Lace:** So, you have lived here all your life?

**Bell:** All my life.

**Lace:** And you went to the University of Texas?

**Bell:** Right. In Austin. Yes.

**Lace:** And then, where for medical school?

**Bell:** Galveston. The University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, Texas.

**Lace:** That was when there were maybe just two medical schools in the State, or was that the only one?

**Bell:** No, there was one in Dallas and one in San Antonio, so I guess there were at least three.

**Lace:** Where did you go to high school?

**Bell:** Arlington Heights in Fort Worth, on the West side.

**Lace:** What led you to a career in medicine?

**Bell:** This is going to sound strange, but back when I was in high school there was a series of movies, Dr. Kildare, with Lou Ayres, seems like he was always helping people so much, I thought that was something I would enjoy doing. So, I went into the Navy in 1942 and I went in as a hospital apprentice and then a pharmacist's mate, and then I got out of the Navy and went out to the University of Texas and applied for and was accepted as a premed student. And after premed student then I was accepted at the University of Texas medical branch at Galveston.

**Lace:** And you graduated from med school when?

**Bell:** In 1955.

**Lace:** Ok. And then you were in family practice, correct?

**Bell:** Yes.

**Lace:** Did you ever consider being a specialist at all?

**Bell:** No. I enjoyed doing what I was doing and it was very pleasing for me.

**Lace:** Growing up here in Fort Worth, I know I grew up in Fort Worth too. I was Paschal, of course. You were in Arlington Heights.

**Bell:** I remember your father.

**Lace:** My father was a physician

**Lace:** I know I remember who my childhood heroes were. Who were your childhood heroes?

**Bell:** One of them was Joe DiMaggio. I used to like baseball, never was that good at it, but I tried. But Joe DiMaggio was one of my idols.

**Lace:** Any other heroes?

**Bell:** Well, after I was in practice Dr. May Owen was one. Of course she was on the Board with me at the College too.

**Lace:** Now in our histories with TCC, we always say that the idea for a junior college came in the early 60s and it's never been any more definite than that. Do you remember a certain year, or a certain time, a certain event or a certain person, that sort of where the whole idea for a junior college came from?

**Bell:** I was still in Rotary Club. I was president that year in 1965, and Dr. Newell Odell, who was superintendent at HEB schools at that time said, you know what we need in this area is a junior college. I got to thinking about that and it appealed to me. So, we had a group in our Rotary Club and we had a steering committee, they were getting ready to call for an election for a junior college. Mr. Jenkins Garrett called me, we met and had lunch together, and found that he had a group organized to form a junior college. So, we joined forces and called for an election, which was the 31<sup>st</sup> of July 1965, and you know the history from there on.

**Lace:** I've read through all the materials that came out of that campaign, the initial campaign, for the creation of the college, there's a big, thick book of clippings. You all worked very hard to get that done, didn't you?

**Bell:** We covered this county. We did work hard. We went to a lot civic clubs, ladies clubs. Anybody that would listen to us we made a presentation. It turned out it worked quite well.

**Lace:** Was there ever any doubt in your mind personally that it would pass?

**Bell:** No. I was very optimistic.

**Lace:** Now were you so optimistic as to think it would pass by better than a two to one margin?

**Bell:** No. I was surprised. I think it passed by a four to one margin. But no, I didn't think it would bode quite that well.

**Lace:** Now at some point, the people working toward the formation of the College needed to put up seven names for the board of trustees. How did it come that your name was on that list.

**Bell:** Well on the steering committee was Mr. Charles Brinkley. He called me and wanted to know would I be interested in being on the board of a junior college. I said I certainly would and was very appreciative that he thought of me. That's how my name was submitted through him.

**Lace:** So, the seven of you together, I have seen the pictures, and you drew for terms, how long your terms would be. And you were advised by someone from the University of Texas.

**Bell:** Dr. Colvert.

**Lace:** And what was his role?

**Bell:** Giving advice mainly. I remember he said first of all I don't think your campus should be over 5,000 in students. But we started out with 4,000. But, of course you know some of the campuses now have as many as 15,000.

**Lace:** Well, gosh Dr. Bell, if we had just 5,000 students per campus, we would have to have 10 campuses.

**Bell:** Yeah we would. What enrollment now 50,000 now?

**Lace:** It's a little over 50,000.

**Bell:** I never dreamed it would be that big, frankly.

**Lace:** Do you think anybody did?

**Bell:** Probably not.

**Lace:** What were the hardest parts of getting the College started?

**Bell:** Educating people is the benefit of it.

**Lace:** Oh, really. And what did you tell them was the benefit of the College?

**Bell:** Well, I thought we could give a good education. And it would be a lot cheaper for people where they could live at home basically and attend a college.

**Lace:** Were there some people that really kind of had to be into talked to the idea? I know that TCU was a little reticent and UT Arlington was, sort of, looked a little bit at this newcomer.

**Bell:** They both thought we would be in competition. It turns out that we actually enhanced the education toward them. So, I think we finally convinced them of that fact.

**Lace:** Of course, we didn't have a campus in Arlington until 1996, 30 years after the College was founded. Do you think it was sort of maybe a little agreement with the people in Arlington that if they would support us that we wouldn't pop a campus there right away?

**Bell:** Yes. Yes. Probably that area tended to not want a college as much as some of the others did.

**Lace:** Now what about the construction of the two campuses. You started right off the bat. You were building the South Campus and Northeast Campus at the same time.

**Bell:** Well, they said that we could not open that campus for one year. We were determined that we would. Of course, we opened the South Campus first.

**Lace:** Were you over at the South Campus the day it opened?

**Bell:** I was not.

**Lace:** I've heard the stories about how hard it rained that day and I heard Dr. Rushing talk about being on the bridge over I-20 with Dr. May Owen and looking at this new Campus.

**Bell:** Yeah, she was there the first day. I was not there the first day.

**Lace:** What kept you away? I would think you would want to be there.

**Bell:** I think I had some emergencies. I don't remember for sure.

**Lace:** I know that the Northeast Campus, you wanted to open the Northeast Campus in the fall of 1968, but I think there were some problems with construction.

**Bell:** Yeah, there was. We had to wait to open in 1968. We opened in '68.

**Lace:** Was it the spring semester of '69 when it actually opened? I'd heard that there were some labor problems.

**Bell:** Yeah. There was, you're right. There were some labor problems. I guess it was the early part of '69.

**Lace:** Now we say that the Northeast Campus opened in '68, but actually those students who were registered for Northeast Campus attended South Campus in the fall of 68. So, I guess the campus was opened, but it still wasn't.

**Bell:** It didn't have students until '69.

**Lace:** As I remember, the land for the South Campus was excess surplus government land.

**Bell:** Yes.

**Lace:** But the Northeast Campus, we had to buy that property.

**Bell:** Yes.

**Lace:** Do you remember how much we paid for it?

**Bell:** No. I do not.

**Lace:** I'm sure it's worth a whole lot more now.

**Bell:** Yeah. I don't remember.

**Lace:** How large, as the College started to grow and grow and grow, and you, of course, stayed on the Board, did you at some point think, gosh, how big can this place get?

**Bell:** Yes. It kept exceeding my expectations as far as enrollment numbers.

**Lace:** What would you say were the biggest changes at Tarrant County College from when you were there when it opened in 1967 and when you left the board in 2008?

**Bell:** Biggest changes. I guess the enrollment was the biggest change. I think the acceptance too. A lot of people were not aware of what a junior college, what role it was to fill. I think we finally educated the people of Tarrant County, so that was one of the biggest changes.

**Lace:** Now, I remember you and I have talked many times about the cohesiveness of the Board - that the board was not political, was not partisan, that you all worked together over the years.

**Bell:** We certainly did. We had some disagreements, but they were very minor. Most everything we voted on was unanimous; very few discussions of not getting along, as it were.

**Lace:** Now when we came to the building of the new campus and we were going to build it on both sides of the river, and there was quite a bit of controversial debate, were you surprised at the opposition that came up to the new campus?

**Bell:** Yes I was. I thought it would go over like the others did, but I was surprised. Yes.

**Lace:** Now, I know the cost of overruns must have troubled you and other members of the Board.

**Bell:** It did. That came as a surprise several times.

**Lace:** And it just kept, it seems like every time we'd get a new figure, it was higher and higher and higher.

**Bell:** Right. Right. That was very discouraging.

**Lace:** Did the negative publicity surprise and disappoint you at all?

**Bell:** In a way it did but then I could not blame people for being upset over the escalating of the cost.

**Lace:** Now, the Board was pretty much harmonious throughout your entire tenure, and of course, after you left in 2008, there was some very marked differences of opinion on the Board. Did that get back to you and how did it make you feel?

**Bell:** Actually, it did not get back to me. Most of mine was reading the newspaper.

**Lace:** Well, certainly the publicity we got was, after all those years of getting mainly favorable publicity, I know I was very disappointed to see all the negative publicity we got.

**Bell:** Yeah, I was too.

**Lace:** Now if you had it to do all over again, do you think you would have gone ahead and built that campus?

**Bell:** On one side of the river. Not on both sides.

**Lace:** It was just sort of too grand a plan.

**Bell:** Yes. You're right. Too grand a plan.

**Lace:** Now, if a young person came to you today, and said, you know I want to go to college, but I just don't know if I want to take the time to do that, maybe I just ought to go work and not go to college. What would you tell them?

**Bell:** I'd tell them to go to college.

**Lace:** Why?

**Bell:** Well, one thing it may be minor. It's worth a lot of money financially to a person. Theoretically, a person that gets a college education will make over a million dollars more than if he didn't. But I think just the knowledge that you gain will be so self-satisfactory to you.

**Lace:** What are your best memories of all your years at Tarrant County College?

**Bell:** The acceptance. I think that people learned that we were for real and accepted us.

**Lace:** What about specific moments that stand out in your memory? Specific events.

**Bell:** Groundbreaking different campuses. And graduation. I always got a thrill out of watching the students go across the stage and get their diplomas.

**Lace:** Is there one groundbreaking that you remember more than the others?

**Bell:** Well, of course, the very first campus, and the Southeast Campus. I remember it was raining and we had everything set. You remember that. It rained and we had to postpone it.

**Lace:** We postponed it twice. And we finally had to have it in that little house.

**Bell:** Right.

**Lace:** Now the one I had in mind was the Northwest Campus and that mule. How did that come about?

**Bell:** Well, of course, Joe Rushing had been reared on a farm and he knew how to use a mule to plow. I didn't, but I grabbed a hold as if I knew what I was doing, but that was quite a thrill alright.

**Lace:** Was that the first and last time you've ever been behind a mule-driven plow?

**Bell:** We did that at our church. I learned how to plow at the church with a mule.

**Lace:** Well, of course, the groundbreaking I remember best was the one for the new campus where we were over on the levy, and as it turned out that was the only ground we ever broke on that side of the river.

**Bell:** Yeah, right. I remember that, of course.

**Lace:** If you had the opportunity to invite anybody, living or dead, fictional or nonfictional, to a dinner party, who do you think it would be, and why?

**Bell:** I've been asked that before. I would love to invite Jesus Christ, assuming I recognized who he was.

**Lace:** Anybody else?

**Bell:** My wife. She backed me though all this. In fact, before she died I got to tell her what she meant to me. I would love to have had her there.

**Lace:** Anybody else?

**Bell:** Maybe Dr. May Owen.

**Lace:** Dr. Owen, she was so unassuming that she brought so much to the Board. Tell me a little bit about her.

**Bell:** She was one of the most brilliant ladies you'd ever know. The most humble. She really gave a lot to the College alright.

**Lace:** That was a very strong Board, that first one.

**Bell:** Yes, I agree. It was.

**Lace:** James Garrett.

**Bell:** Ed Hudson.

**Lace:** Ed Hudson.

**Bell:** John Finn.

**Lace:** Reverend Hanes.

**Bell:** Reverend Hanes, Yes.

**Bell:** Delbert Adams.

**Lace:** I think you and the others got the whole College started off on the right foot.

**Bell:** Well, I like to think we did.

**Lace:** Now, at that dinner party I was talking about, what do you think would be on the menu? If you had those people, or would it matter?

**Bell:** I don't think it would matter. I think they would be just happy to be there.

**Lace:** After you retired, we had this big shindig out at Northeast Campus, and we declared that the library on the campus was going to be the J. Ardis Bell Library. Do you remember that?

**Bell:** Yes.

**Lace:** What did you think of that?

**Bell:** It was quite a thrill. I used to think that when I went to get Joe Rushing in Florida they named a building after him, and how he happened to be president at Fort Lauderdale. And I thought what a great thing to have a building named after you. And I never dreamed I'd have one after me. Then there was Jenkins Garrett with the Library down at South Campus. So I was so thrilled to have a library named for me.

**Lace:** How would you like to be remembered?

**Bell:** Well, that I was quite sincere in what I did. Very pleased at what we had accomplished.

**Lace:** What would you like engraved on your stone?

**Bell**: That I cared.