

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Donald Palmisano

COLLECTION: 4700.3063

IDENTIFICATION: President of American Medical Association (2003-2004) and the Louisiana State Medical Society (1984-1985)

INTERVIEWER: Trent James

SERIES: Louisiana State Medical Society

INTERVIEW DATE: February 2 and 3, 2017

FOCUS DATES: 1940s-2017

ABSTRACT:

Session I

Tape 5100

Introduction; Palmisano is a medical doctor, has a Juris Doctor degree, and is a fellow of the American College of Surgeons; born in Irish Channel of New Orleans, July 24, 1939; describes whereabouts of the Irish Channel; his father was a policeman; when gang activity heated up in the Irish Channel, Palmisano was sent to St. Paul's College, a boarding school across the lake in Covington for six years; parents were Mary Caronna and Dominic Palmisano; paternal grandparents came to New Orleans from Ustica, an island in the Tyrrhenian Sea; maternal grandparents came from Salaparuta in Sicily; for his sixtieth birthday, his wife arranged an expedition to Italy to find their family roots; names and short biographies of his siblings; kindness of his older brother, Lionel Treadaway; Palmisano was the first in his family to go to college; younger siblings also went to college and got advanced degrees; two beautiful Redemptorist Catholic churches across the street from each other in the Irish Channel, one Irish, one German; memory of interview with principal of the boarding school, who discouraged him from entering when he'd just finished second grade; Palmisano's father said no problem, stick him in fourth grade; he was smaller than all the other kids; at boarding school, he discovered his woodsman side; describes techniques of trapping flying squirrels to keep as pets; raising pet fish; great-uncle was Dixieland musician/carpenter Nick LaRocca, who built Palmisano a fish house in the backyard; breeding Siamese fighting fish to sell; *Times Picayune* did a story on his menagerie; leadership lessons learned from *Bomba the Jungle Boy* adventure series; wanted to finish high school in New Orleans, where he could meet more girls than at his all-boys school in Covington; eclectic demographics of St. Paul's College, from reform school kids to children of South American political leaders; transferred to De La Salle High School in New Orleans in 1953; Palmisano was the salutatorian of his class; his mother taught him about generosity and tipping well; father taught him courage; got a scholarship to Tulane University as an

undergraduate; failed his first gross anatomy class at Tulane Medical School; father talked him out of quitting med school; when he graduated, he won research and psychiatry neurology awards; considered going into psychiatry but decided it took too long to wait for patients to change; Dr. Oscar Creech inspired him to become a surgeon; finished medical school in 1963; internship at Charity Hospital; chose a mixed medicine internship, which would give him exposure to different types of medicine; doing rotations with leaders in the field of thyroid and transplant surgery; making a deal with LSU residents to get kidneys for transplant from Charity Hospital; during the Vietnam War, signed up for service before he got drafted; after his schooling, he was assigned to Ellsworth Air Force Base in South Dakota; he, his wife and two daughters moved to South Dakota; married in 1961; his first marriage lasted 25 years; his second and current marriage is 25 plus years; Palmisano learned to fly at Ellsworth; heroic rescue of the crew of a B52 bomber that caught fire at Ellsworth; at that time, it was the only B52 crash in history that everybody survived; medals awarded; attained rank of major; writing to Louisiana Congressperson F. Edward Hebert requesting vascular instruments, much to his superior's displeasure; Palmisano has great respect for master sergeants; knowledge of firearms; acquiring equipment to go hunting with his friend; deer hunting; after his military service, Palmisano went into practice with Dr. Jim Brown in New Orleans; his practice grew until Hurricane Katrina closed it; at first they worked with multiple hospitals, but eventually focused on Pendleton Memorial Methodist Hospital; lists where the other doctors went after their joint practice closed; responding to an emergency call he heard Mayor Schiro make on the radio right after Hurricane Betsy; New Orleans' lack of hurricane preparedness; living arrangements after Katrina; sourcing communication devices for doctors after Katrina; distributing communicators to doctors around greater New Orleans area; New Orleans coroner Frank Minyard made Palmisano an assistant coroner so he could easily get past barricades and into New Orleans; describes the risk management company he started in the late 1980s; now he mostly lectures; doing commencement addresses; describes his six commandments of medicine; gives talks on leadership; now he's writing a suspense novel; famous novelist Robin Cook came to one of his talks and asked for a copy of his speech; meeting famous novelist Tess Gerritsen; taking writing courses; kids and grandkids; getting served with a bogus medical malpractice lawsuit; getting turned down for insurance because of this claim; as a result of his lawsuit experience, got involved with medical society to help change laws; Palmisano appointed to head medical malpractice committee; invited to Monroe, where Dr. John Cooksey was working to pass a cap on damages and wanted Palmisano to help; medical society was opposed to this change; enlisting the help of WWII veteran and hero Dr. Brooks Garrett to get medical society to reconsider; getting help from former state representative Shady Wall; filibustering and political maneuverings behind Act 817 of 1975; murder of a leader in the right to work movement; Palmisano had a weekly Sunday morning debate on a radio show with an attorney in the late 1970s; growing interest in attending law school; enrolled in night law school at Loyola in late 1970s; completed program in four-and-a-half years; writing a law review article about medical countersuits; example of an egregious lawsuit against a doctor; his countersuit article became so popular that some opponents to his viewpoint withdrew donations to Loyola Law School; a doctor in Evangeline Parish won a countersuit based on Palmisano's work; how he used his knowledge of the law; involvement with LAMMICO; self-insurance for doctors; serving on a governor's committee in the 1980s re: limits on medical damages; mentions his successful cataract surgery; now serves on a board of a large insurer of physicians; his failed 1975 run for third vice president of the Louisiana State Medical Society; ran for other offices, eventually

became president in 1984; developing interest in contract medicine, antitrust and managed care; explains “monopsony power”; getting involved with American Medical Association; running for the House of Delegates of the Louisiana State Medical Society; “My attitude is there was a crisis and there remains a crisis in many areas in medicine. And I was willing to make the effort, spend the time, and I thought I had the information in my brain as a result of going to law school and doing a lot of study on these issues, and so I did and I won.”; mentions Jim Brown, who handles the medical society’s retirement plan; Palmisano got Juan Watkins to be his campaign manager when he ran for an AMA board position; preparing short speeches in a variety of lengths for the campaign trail; efforts to talk to an AMA bigwig in New York; after a failed election, calling all the delegates to find out why they did or did not vote for him; learning by listening to other people; ran unopposed for president elect of AMA; year as president elect, on the road 249 days; as president, on the road 302 days; on the road 250 days when immediate past president; making speeches, appearing on TV shows; his efforts to set caps on non-economic damages around the country; Texas changed its constitution to set these caps; testified on many issues, including medical liability and patient safety; his work on the National Patient Safety Foundation board; personal financial impact of traveling so much for the AMA for three years; also made money from his Intrepid Resources company; his detractors wrote nasty and inaccurate things about him on websites; an ugly confrontation at an AMA meeting; work with informed consent legislation; describes Hondroulis case on informed consent; working on Louisiana’s alternative law that gives physicians 100% protection unless they lie; talks about elective leadership seminar he teaches for Tulane Medical School; Palmisano’s approach to giving excellent two-minute speeches; records students’ speeches to help them learn; “Just by seeing yourself, some tick, nervousness, whatever, you can eliminate it.”; use ChapStick before a speech so you don’t lick your lips; trick to look less sweaty on camera; worries that nowadays students don’t get enough clinical experience; as an intern, had to boil and reuse needles; a time he realized a diabetic aide on the ward was suffering from low blood sugar; saving a patient by cutting open his chest and manually squeezing his heart; “I try to tell the students that sometimes you have to act in a crisis, and you don’t know what the results are going to be. Now, you might be criticized. But you’ve got to be willing to take the criticism”; never be too proud to ask for help; describes his 2008 book *On Leadership*; “A leader is defined as a fully informed and decisive person with integrity who advances courageously toward a goal and is determined to overcome obstacles and setbacks along the way.”; leaders must make decisions; tells the story of how his father, a police officer, dealt with a hostage situation; describes his book *The Little Red Book of Leadership Lessons*; lessons he learned from Paul Galanti, who spent seven years as a POW in North Vietnam; admiration for Marie Curie; the ambition of people trying to get to the moon; importance of having a backup recorder; describes a 1972 case of a woman with a gangrenous small bowel who Palmisano treated with hyperalimentation; Palmisano made homemade version of newly invented Broviac catheter; diagnosing patient’s copper deficiency; “My discovery of that led to the conclusion that copper is an essential nutrient to adult health.”; the patient managed to live a semi-normal life before dying from a fungal infection two years later; “The moral of the story is just because nobody knows the answer, doesn’t mean there isn’t an answer. You should reach out to other people.”; Palmisano was also a pilot, and flew a T-34 that he co-owned with several other people to medical meetings around the state; whereabouts and condition of that plane now; flying was much more efficient than driving around Louisiana; being based in New Orleans also gave him an advantage because it’s a major media market; travel to China; served on Nobel laureates panel; meeting lawyer and author Philip Howard;

importance of involvement in medical societies; easy access to information with the internet; “You have to make use of the tools available to you.”; physicians must make good use of internet; first time Palmisano accessed the internet he stayed on all night.

Session II

Tape 5101

Introduction; Palmisano’s work in health system reform; presented Orleans Parish Medical Society’s opinion on health system reform before the health subcommittee of the United States House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee; advocated for a health system where the patient is in control, but the doctor is a trusted advisor; continued his health system reform work while serving in the AMA; poor opinion of PPACA or the Affordable Care Act; patients must have right to pick their doctors; pricing for medical services needs to be more transparent; advocates for health savings accounts; medical system in Great Britain isn’t good; socialized medicine never works; health system in Australia; it’s not feasible for government to pay for endless tests; in Great Britain, actuaries calculate cost of procedures and how many quality years a person is likely to have left; in Canada, patients die while on waiting lists for procedures; trust in medicine is based on patient confidentiality; American Psychiatric Association made him an honorary fellow; gives an example of gaining trust from a patient by respecting his privacy; lost a lot of family time to his medical practice; his daughter went into prosthodontics so she could be in medical field without sacrificing as much as he had; “When you accomplish something, there’s usually a lot of other people are sacrificing for you.”; respect for military; did many angiograms; explains angiography; notes from field hearing involving Congressman Rostenkowski; importance of documentation: “memories fade, people lie, witnesses die.”; is very careful when he travels, because many other countries don’t have adequate medical safety standards; communicating to people through his websites and podcasts; mentions podcast guests, including a doctor with the world’s largest amateur telescope; another doctor guest, who’s also a stock car racer; reads his writing to kids and grandkids to make sure it’s interesting enough.

TAPES: 2 (T5100, T5101)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: Total = 3 hours, 23 minutes
Session I = 2 hours, 49 minutes
Session II = 34 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: Total = 103 pages
Session I = 87 pages
Session II = 16 pages

PHOTOGRAPHS / PHOTOGRAPHER: 7 digital photos

OTHER MATERIALS: 2 Curricula vitae; 2 Articles; Correspondence; Obituary

RESTRICTIONS: None