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Briana O'Higgins interviewing David Dodson, former engineer at Boeing.

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Dave, are you from Wichita?

Not Originally.

Where are you from?

I was born in western Kansas and I grew up in Kansas, Colorado, Texas.

When you were growing up were you aware of Boeing and its presence in Wichita?

Not so much until I was maybe in my teens. Uh, I went to high school over in El Dorado, so I was close by over here and I was aware of Boeing at that time.

Do you remember sort of what you knew of Boeing, or its role in the community?

Beyond it just being an airplane company at the time, I didn't know anymore.

What degrees do you hold and from what colleges or universities?

Um, I've got a BS ME, mechanical engineering, from Kansas State.

Have you had any family members that worked at Boeing?

...

Any family members that worked at Boeing? Or were you the only one?

I believe I am, I believe I had a distant cousin that worked in the northwest, but no immediate family, no.

When did you start work at Boeing? What was the circumstance of that first job?

Well I graduated in December of 78 and uh, I had interviewed at the placement office at K-state, at that time there was a lot of oil industry, pipeline companies, and a few refineries that were looking for people. And then some aircraft companies came to town so, I uh, I kind of a funny story... McDonnell Douglas came to town and they were having free Hors d'oeuvres, and I thought oh, maybe I will go talk to them, and then Boeing came to town and they said they were going to have a meal, prime rib, free prime rib meal. And I said, well I'll go talk to them. So from that point, I liked what I heard at the meal and, did an interview and did a plant trip, and then the next

thing you know I hired on, so. I sorta showed up here because I wanted a free meal. Haha.

So they came up to your university to recruit graduates?

Yes.Yes.

And you were not yet graduated yet and you heard about this free meal?

Yeah.

Will you kind of describe what you remember from that event? A little more what they were offering and what, sort of they talked about?

They had brought some engineers, uh, and some recruiting people and they had us broke up into separate tables and maybe four or five of us at each table and they talked about what they did there and what we could be expect and that sort of thing.

What sort of stood out from Boeing against the other offers or other companies that were wooing graduates that made you want to work there?

They were more aggressive at the time I guess I would say, you know. Not just the meal, but they wanted a trip, they sent us, they were ready to have a plant visit right off and uh, I went and toured the plant and saw the kind of, saw the place. Since I was familiar with Wichita also, it uh, fairly familiar with it at the time, that helped too. But huh, they were just pretty aggressive in saying that they wanted new engineers at Boeing, they were hiring big at the time... ha...

How old are you now?

I am 56.

So you have been working at Boeing for around 30....?

33, and $\frac{3}{4}$ years.

What was your job title at Boeing? I guess the last one.

I was... yeah... I think the last one was senior engineer.

And what did you start out as?

I was just a, I think they started you just basically engineer. And you moved up.

Will you sort of describe, I guess briefly, what your duties were. I imagine they changed over those 33 years.

Yeah, it did quite a bit. Early on, um, when I was started I started working in systems area. I was hired in to do mechanism design and I started doing aircraft systems, fuel and hydraulic. Those sort of... air conditioning. That was for the B52 at the time, which was a big active program it was a, they were, that was what they were bringing a lot of people on, was to work on that. And uh, we did drawing, we would do the engineering update the drawings there, as I completed that I ended up getting onto the re-engine program and I got on that one pretty early. I helped put together some of the documentation for the requirements um, systems spec documents. And then we got into designing what we were going to do and at that time we were still doing pen and ink drawings and a bunch of us did drawings and released those. And spent some time out on the aircraft. The first on was here, uh, it was ih, what to do to make adjustments to engineering and that. Uh, on the aircraft I made adjustments to things, corrections and things like that. And then, so that was really the first program that I worked on from beginning to end uh, that was to put all the new CM56 engines on the 135s. And from there I went on into commercial mod area and did a, and we did mod work where they, well the one program that I got on the National Guard had bought some old airplanes, four old airplanes and converted them for their use to carry the troops around on. Then I moved into a program where I started doing lead work. Where I, I wasn't in management but you assign work packages and see that the stuff gets moved along and as well as doing presentations and that sort of thing for the customer about what you are doing. That was for uh, um, joint stars which was a surveillance program. A surveillance aircraft. They ended up uses those in the first Gulf war to hunt scud launchers. So that is kind of neat. It is kind of neat to see something you did like that actually helping people out I guess doing that stuff. And uh, after that I did some commercial mod work um, it was a big special freighter program where they take older 747s that are, they either needed to be highly maintained, a lot of work done to them to get into the passenger use, but usually what they ended up doing was converting them to freighters, which is what we did. Um, to the designs to put in extra floor beams and a cargo door. I was still working on the systems interior side of that very heavy. And then when the new airplane, uh, triple 7 came in. That was the first one that was really done CAD. Started doing that on computers and uh..

Did they train you?

Yes yes. We went to training for um, three and a half weeks and then started in doing the program. I ended up working on the rolls Royce translating sleeve, the trust reverser. Then we did some parts, this one, in order to stop the aircraft when you land on the ground they always hit the thrust reversers and it throws you in the seat. What they are doing is uh, re directing some of the abs thrust forward, so you have this large sleeve on the engine that slides back, opens these cascades and lets the thrust go forward and stops ya so you don't run off the runway. So I was doing some little parts of that and uh, kind of started, after that that was the introduction of everybody to doing an actual full up CAD program and,

How was that transition for you?

I liked it at the time, it was something new. You know, I was kind of tired of the old ink and paper stuff that always, so it was kind of neat that we were able to get into that. And then I got in on, later on, the next generation where they redesigned the 737 for new engines and that was all same way, it was all done on CAD and they kinda have done that ever since. All CAD stuff. Every once in a while we come across some old uh, program where we still gotta do something, but.. that got less and less, and now we don't even touch that stuff. Everything is just done. I kind of transitioned into, with the CAD, starting doing a lot of structures work. And uh, uh, that kind of was the second half of my career and that is what I am doing now at Spirit, I was hired in as a structures. Because I have done that.

What was it sort of... did you move up over the years? Did you have agency in what projects you worked on?

Yeah I had gotten into a lead and I was even. I had a supervisor and he was a real nice guy and he kind of promoted everybody that worked for him. He was one of the better ones that I have ever had. His name was tom Gleeson. He really promoted and tried to help people to move on. Not just, he wasn't just worried about getting the job done. He was also um, help build the next generation of leadership out there.

Was that sort of, did it sway from the norm of what was going on at the time? Was it hard to move up for a lot of people?

Um, not so much. It depended on where you were. It was kind of circumstance and you know, some people are more go getters than others. Um...

Kind of like you would expect?

Yeah. I had. I think at that time I was up, considered for a to move into management and at the last minute another fellow from another areas was moved in to take over and I kind of had, was starting to have second thoughts about whether I really wanted to work my way out of engine- out of the nuts and bolts of engineering because I really kind of liked the hands on part of the engineering and as you move into management you get more into personnel and a lot of non engineering. I heard a quote one time, an engineer isn't happy until he has worked his way out of his career, so I kind of thought I would really rather stay in the design end of things and that is what I have done a lot ever since. I later got into special apps area that we did some interesting stuff that I cant go into details about. But that was some of the most interesting work I ever did. We had a, since it was a smaller and uh, kind of proprietary and we couldn't talk with others our group got kind of close. And some of the, so of the people that I have worked with over the years in that group I'm still close with. They came to my retirement party, that was mostly folks from that group. We had a pretty good experience with that.

Were classified projects sort of frequent at Boeing here?

Not that much. There... they always had something going on depending on what the customers were looking for.

And you were classified from your family and everyone? Not to share details.

No, these kinds of programs you don't give details to anybody but who you are working with. You don't even talk about them outside of the area.

What was the most frustrating part about your job?

Oh some of it is the company what so big and they, they were very bureaucratic and sometimes it was so hard to get anything, even the simplest thing. It would just be like I cannot believe the bureaucracy we have to go through just to do this, and that was kind of, you just had to kind of bite the bullet and say, hey well, everybody's got their box to check and everybody has to tick off before we move to the next level.

What was sort of, how was Wichita Boeing painted in the larger company? It is this big huge company were you guys part of the larger thing, or an after thought, how did you feel in relationship to the larger company?

Uh, Wichita was it always seemed like whenever I visit the northwest it was kind of, we were thought of as the cow pasture out here I guess. Hahaha. That was some of the attitude, but once we would work with different uh, groups or folks, and they would kind of start to change that attitude, but the general going in attitude was this was the frontier out here.

Was that because of the Boeing Wichita or just Wichita?

I think there was some folks, up in the, the ones I am thinking about are in the northwest. They, at various times over the years Wichita got certain work that might have otherwise gone to the northwest and I think there was a little bit of sour grapes on some of that. Thinking that they should be doing the work, not the cowboys out here in the prairie. But um, the advantage that Wichita had, it was still kind of small enough compared kind of to the northwest, everybody in the northwest is highly specialized. I mean, we have gone up there and talked to a guy that knows everything there is to know about putting the galley between doors three and four on a 747 and it is just Jamco's galley. If there is another vendor, somebody else knows that. And here, um, you know, we did all the galleys. We did all the lavatories, I mean we, the workforce here was a lot more adept at jumping around and doing a lot of different things. We didn't have the giant workforce like they had, it was just kind of the way you did stuff. You had to be more nimble about stuff. So.

Did you sort of socialize outside of Boeing? What was your social circle like when you were working there?

Yeah initially when I hired in it was a big hiring push, so we were all new to town so it was kind of a group of folks that were new to town, just been here a few years and at that time the company still had recreation. So, we would play softball, baseball, soccer, we had soccer leagues.

The company did?

Yeah the company did and uh, we did other socializing together. Yeah, there was quite a few, quite a bit of socializing with folks because uh, uh, we were kind of all in the same circumstance. All recent, recently brought into town. There was also a lot of people that were hiring in that were multi-generation Boeing. You know their parents, one or both had worked out there. Or a cousin or a sister, so there was a lot of folks that had a family feel about it too. It was almost like a Boeing family, you'd say.

What... I am interested in more about your softball teams, what after work was like. Especially in those early years. What did the company put on, it sounds like they sponsored your teams, and what sort of fashion.

They had leagues. They had a ball park out there. We also played soccer outdoors. There was a whole recreational um, uh, I don't know what it was, kind of like an organization. We played soccer leagues uh, against each other and the company. And we played a lot outdoors and we went to an indoor league and it was off site, at some of the, at that time there was indoor soccer around town because soccer was real popular because of the Wings at the time. And uh, Boeing would have our leagues, we would play in several of those. They would set it up and we had games in these different soccer buildings all over town.

How did that sort of fade out? Or did it stop, I'm, not even sure that is true?

Yeah that all faded out. Um, well some of the old ball diamonds they would move them around, and the soccer fields, when they would have to build a new building. Originally, when I first got here there was a large pond that dated back to the 50s that people fished at, and then all the ball diamonds were behind it. And then they came in and they needed to put a big assembly plant there. So they filled that all in, they made some new diamonds over by the, at that time, it was the animal shelter, the Humane Society over there. And then, I think the Boeing employee association at that time went out and bought a lake on the southwest side of town, for employees. And it all kind of transitioned to them. But uh, it kinda faded down, partly, uh, we all got a little older and we started getting married and starting families and all that. So, kind of just changed our focus in life, that sort of thing.

What sort of changes, ..., what sort of major changes did you witness in how the company was run over your 33 years there?

Well everybody points to one event that was a, a change in the way stuff was run and that was when the merger with McDonnell Douglas. I don't know. That was in '96. And uh, some people have nothing good to say about that point. A lot of the McDonnell Douglas management came into the company. I don't know if it was a... there was definitely a change in the direction. Not that maybe the Boeing company wasn't already going in that direction anyway, it accelerated a little bit. And we started being, hearing a lot of stuff like we're a team, we aren't a family. And kind of building the idea that we are a team to build, uh, we should have kind of a team attitude, working as teams. There was that before, but it kind of intensified after that, and then, of course, with all the mergers of the two companies they started being in a scramble between the two plants over who was going to get what programs and all that. And uh, I don't know if I just didn't notice it before, but it seemed like there needed to be, advocates for your site. Higher up in management. And um, some sites had very strong advocates and they got a lot of work, and some didn't.

It felt like it was ... less equitable?

Yeah, it was more, yeah, internal competition seemed to ramp up at that point, because you had. Well you had that, and they had purchased from Rockwell, the North American and rocketine parts too. So suddenly the company just got huge. It like doubled in size and a lot of the different sites were doing the same things. Duplicates, and everyone knew that that wasn't going to last long. And um. That was just kind of the starts of trimming down.

What was the atmosphere then? Was everyone scared.

Oh, they had, we had been through a big down sizing right before that, that was when down sizing was the big thing, so um, the uh, workload of everybody kind of changed and we all were picking up the slack and everybody from that point on was working a lot.. I was doing more then what they used to do before that I mean. We had to do more with less and that just kind of seemed to be the whole attitude here in Wichita from then on, and just ramped up from there, to uh, you know, that we had to get by, we had to cut our rates, we had to do this we had to make sure everything was kind of a, uh, like some kind of an intense ball team I guess.

Over your years of employment there what did you feel, did you feel like an allegiance to the company? Did that change? Did you at one time have a strong bond with it and then maybe at some other times not so much?

Maybe up and down, but I guess over the years I felt like it was everything that Boeing did, or that I did for Boeing was some way reflecting on me, so um I felt somewhat of an allegiance to it, yeah.

Did you feel like the company valued you as a worker throughout all those years and cared about you and provided what you needed?

Probably all right. I was up and down on that. Sometimes I was very high on that and sometimes it was like, I'm not so sure they are. Haha.

Was it sort of always up and down, or was it up or down over a course of years?

Uh, the last 10 years it has kind of been sliding down. At that point it seemed like a lot of stuff that we used to do here suddenly we weren't able to do this kind of work anymore and that kind of work and they were, every time we would do a new project it was like you know, there was one project there I was on at the shop and they were wanting us to make some large placards to stick on them. We had done the engineering to just stencil them, and I went over there and I said why are we doing this? Why don't we just stencil it on there? And they said, they don't keep the stencil stuff around anymore, they sold off those tools, so, now to mark that we need to make placards. And it was like, OK, now I understand. And just capabilities just kept disappearing as they, you know they were trying to do efficiencies I guess, somebody had put numbers to it and decided this machine sitting around half the time making stencils, so they just go buy a stencil or pay somebody to go build some placards, and um, that sort of thing. So it just kinda slowly coasted in, I mean. Um, when they were getting ready to sell Spirit to Spirit, you know, the commercial side, it just didn't seem like they were out chasing work like they used to for the commercial. It was just kinda waiting there to be sold, and when they did everybody kind of had the attitude- we are going to be gone in five years. It just kind of slowly trickled down and it was like well, I guess it wasn't five it was seven. But essentially that's what happened.

So you felt it coming?

Yeah, I mean. Yeah. You could see it all the time that it was less and less you even felt obliged to scramble a bit more or do stuff outside your, your comfort area, or just do stuff you know, start doing stuff that used to be done by planners. Or, even to help out a vendor who was having trouble with inspection. Uh, they sent several of us with a reverse engineering tool to help and inspect parts to help get stuff along. So, kinda just started doing more and more. Which was kinda good for us, but it meant um, that we were really scrambling more and more to keep work going, programs going here.

Are you saying they were trying to...

I think everybody starting trying push the, you know, and here toward the end the folks that were left were the ones who usually gave 110 percent all the time and they were trying to push that.

To save the company..?

To keep things going, yeah. There were some people that had a well, seemed like they had a shock when this happened, I mean they were literally shocked. I... I was surprised at it, I mean I was surprised at the timing of it, but I wasn't um, surprised that it happened.

Will you describe to me what you were doing, that day, the day that you heard. Do you remember what was going on?

It was right before thanksgiving. Uh, I think it was just a regular day and we were getting ready for the thanksgiving holiday in a couple of days and we heard the announcement that they may be considering closing the place. You know I don't even remember. You would think I would, but I don't. I think it had gotten out in the news media and the company they have a lot of internal news stuff, and I think they sent it around, there may have been an email, I can't recall. But I had never heard anything, we've heard lots of rumors and everything, but that was kinda, I just had a bad feeling when I heard that. I was like, we have never heard this before. That is when I started updating my resume and sent it out.

Did you know right at that moment that you wouldn't want to move with them if they gave you the opportunity?

No, in fact I did receive an offer, what they call a second round offer to go to OKC and do some work, and my wife and I we went down there and we looked around at the facility a little bit and Oklahoma city I really hadn't been down there that much other than just driving through. So, kinda looked around. Um, had I not had another offer I would probably be packing to move to Oklahoma City because it wasn't, I wasn't totally against moving. But, I don't know that that was the most advantageous thing for me.

What was the reaction from your colleagues, and your family I guess.

Um, some of my, my parents, they are still alive and in Emporia. They were fairly upset, they weren't happy about that. Co-workers, most people kind of went through those phases, kinda disbelief then anger, a little bit over it. Then kinda acceptance I guess.

Um... Boeing...

Yeah, in a way it is kinda like a death in the family in one way. Cuz I didn't realize, but I spent more time working out there than I have done anything else in my life. Its like, kinda a big deal.

How do you feel about it now? Leaving that job?

Well I am OK with it. Because it has worked out fairly well with me, but I guess I made my peace with it. I had considered before all this that, as I had reached early retirement age at 55, that it.... Uh, if I was able to get another position somewhere and start collecting my early pension at the same time then it would be a big financial gain for me, so uh, I talked about it and after I turned 55 I sent a couple resumes out, but the economy really wasn't uh, doing so well at that point and I just got some thanks but no thanks return. And then uh, I was told I would be going over to work on the Usef Tanker, and I thought, well that will keep me employed here for a little while, so I will go do that. Haha. Turns out that wasn't the case. So I had kind of thought about doing this anyway. Retiring and then going somewhere else. So, whenever they uh, said that they were going to close the place, I thought I need to do that. And now. So. Uh, that's what I pursued.

You said you had a retirement party?

Yes I did. Last week. Yeah, it is kinda a shame, I know a lot of people that are left out there that I worked with for years, and in the past they have had retirement parties, uh, at Boeing. Or, at, folks would be able to come in maybe do it in a lobby or in a conference room somewhere. Or offsite, but after, but as they close the place, at least it seems to me at least a lot of people are retiring and leaving. Or they have something very small that is almost kind of uh, like quietly going off and leaving and it seemed like after 33 years uh, I would at least be able to do something to recognize that. And one of my friends was telling me that you don't just run off. So my wife organized a small party. We had it over at the Kansas Aviation Museum and um, so folks come by after work and, it was pretty good. It was good seeing some folks before I left.

Last weekend?

Well Actually it was in the middle of the week. But yeah.

What was your impression of Boeing as a contributor to Wichita? Did you feel like that contributed to the Wichita community?

Oh I think they did. Not just in being the biggest employer. Um, the company tried to do a lot of community stuff. They were always bagging uh, uh, lots of different non-profit events. There was always a Boeing sponsorship and I thought there was always a lot of uh, they really tried to keep community involvement and filter money and help. There was always, uh, oh drives out there for uh, backpacks for kids at Christmas and coat drives and food drives. And they used to organize that in the shop a lot of folks uh, get together and build toys. There was just all kinds of different activities. And then they were still up until now looking for volunteers to help at the Lords Diner to help serve food and that sort of thing.

So those activities continued through 2011 at least?

I think it is going to be a shame that Boeing is not going to be here to help support all that stuff. Because not just the economics they did a lot of other support in activities in town that I don't know that it would fully be picked up by other companies here.

Um, I know you have only been at Spirit for like three days, but...

This was my third day today, Haha.

What difference, if any, can you pinpoint now?

Well um, I noticed right off at my first day at orientation that was about thirty five forty of us new hires coming in, and I thought wow this place is still growing I guess. But I want to say, I, we, kind of got used to not seeing new people over at Boeing. It was just the same old group all the time. And kinda the attitude, in just what little time I have been there, it feels more upbeat, like you know, ... I guess there is a future here, there is things going to be happening we are going to do stuff. Um, it kinda has, I guess just an upbeat feeling more. Um, Boeing over the years, and you just didn't notice it until you got away from it that it kinda, you just kinda slid down into a... holding on. Just holding on type of attitude. And Spirit doesn't seem, it seems to be still on a more upbeat.

Did any of your colleagues get hired at Spirit?

Yes, some of them have in fact I saw one of them yesterday. I saw his name on the chart so I shot him an email and said, hey I am over here now. I am sitting here. So he came over and said HI.

That's nice.

Yeah.

What... Do you think Boeing leaving the Wichita community will hurt the community? We talked about them losing the philanthropies already... or how do you think Wichita is going to change? I know it is a big question.

Well they had a lot of reach I guess, outside of Kansas., outside of US because of you know connections with selling overseas and a lot of uh. Well, on the defense side with the different plants, there was always a lot of news reported about Boeing. Selling this many airplanes or getting this contract or that contract. Even if it didn't actually do something here. It may have. I guess a lot of that connection to that has kind of diminished. So. And then the other thing is, ha, there is not money coming into the community. Yeah. That was that was outside coming into Kansas. Coming into Wichita that is not going to be there.

Um what would you personally, sort of, what do you think you will think about Boeing like 10, 15, 20 years from now when you look back on your experience there?

I think I uh, pretty much positive all the way. I mean, they've. They've provided a good life for me and my family, and uh, a lot of people I know for them and their families. So a lot of us wouldn't be as well off as we are now. So. Uh. They've helped grow me, all the training and everything that I am using now, I was provided by them. I mean, you know, I went to, I had the engineering degree, but a lot of the stuff that we use now in, was on the job training. And, it just was partially from experience, partially from actual training. And that, so. I guess they made a lot of what I am now. Economically, hahaha.

How do you hope the greater Wichita community looks back on Boeing? Tomorrow, today, 10 years from now?

...

Because right now there is a little animosity I guess you could say.

Yeah. That's understandable. There is a lot of animosity inside of Boeing still. But most of us have kind of moved on from that. Maybe, hopefully, well I hope it is positive. But, I am not really sure how people will feel if... if Wichita, you know has problems down the road, economically Boeing may get blamed and maybe rightfully so. I don't know so. It kind of depends on how things go. It might be kinda just glossed over, but it could end up being the one to point at- this was the start of everything bad.

Do you have a lot of co-workers, colleagues that are looking for work, or are expecting to be unemployed come January?

Yeah there is quite a few. Um, were I was at in tanker there is quite a few folks I know that middle of next month they are going to be laid off and unfortunately they are very good at what they do, but nobody is hiring those skills right now. And you you, and even though they are at the top of their game, nobody is looking for those kinds of skills. They are just out the door. I really feel bad about that. But I mean, I have been real fortunate to come to a new job and be able to retire and all this, and uh. Sometimes I feel funny talking about that to people I know because I know that they are not as fortunate. It is not looking as good for them.

Do you think that Wichita has a strong aviation future? I know you said you thought it looks that way at Spirit...

I.... I have a little more confidence in it now. I know that Spirit's doing really well. Airbus as been really talking a lot about wanting to commit more to Wichita and the aviation around here. And hopefully, I don't even know what is going on at Hawker

Beech, but hopefully whatever is going on over there gets settled out and hopefully that will come back strong too. So, I think there is a good chance that aircraft could bounce back here.

That is probably about it for me, unless you think there is something about your experience that um, I should have asked you about.

I think you hit all the high points. I truly hope that it gets better because I am still part of the community here, we've committed to stay here, and I don't want to see it go down.

Did you think about that when you decided to stay here?

Actually we did. Lisa and I discussed this quite a bit. It was like, is this town, um, becoming another part of the rust belt? Maybe is this the time to get out of here? We had those discussions.

And the answer is still not clear?

Yeah, it looked like it was a good bet to stay here.

Are you attached to Wichita now?

Yeah this has been my home for over 33 years. I have lived here longer than I have lived anywhere else. So, yeah. Although it is funny, somebody asked me, you're from Wichita? No, I moved here to go to work. I mean I have lived here longer than anywhere else, but I guess you still have that, well I came from somewhere else.

You weren't born here...

Yeah the ones that were born and raised here, they really feel the ownership, this is, that they are Wichitans.