

## **Interview with Dr. Robert Dockson**

Conducted by Frances Feldman in his office on February 22, 1989.

Dr. Dockson has been a distinguished and influential volunteer in the arena of health and welfare. For ten years he was the dean of the USC Graduate School of Business; subsequently he became the president and executive officer of California Federal Savings and Loan Corporation. The focus of this interview will be his role in the voluntary aspect of social welfare in California.

FELDMAN: I assume that you have never been in a paid social welfare position in California; is that right?

DOCKSON: That is correct.

FELDMAN: So your activities in social welfare have all been as a volunteer?

DOCKSON: Yes, my paid work was at the University of Southern California.

FELDMAN: Well, that was in a way also voluntary, wasn't it? But I hope we will touch on that a little. In starting, would you tell me first how you got connected with any social agency?

DOCKSON: As you are asking this question, Frances, I am thinking back many, many years - way back before college, when I first became concerned over society. While I went through my Bachelor's program at the University of Illinois, I became acquainted with a man by the name of Dean Converse. Dean Converse influenced my life a great deal. At that point in time his concern was over the Mississippi Valley. He talked to me about the needs of people; he convinced me that I should go ahead and get my graduate degrees. I swung, as time went by, from international relations first, towards economics - after all, economics is a concern for our economy, of our society; how it operates affects everyone. I really think that my interest goes back to my concern over the general economic and political situation, and the work that I completed in graduate school in these areas further stimulated my continuing concern for how we live and what type of infrastructure we have - just the way society is.

I was then fortunate enough after the war, World War II, to have taken a course in human values at USC. In that philosophy course we studied a number of philosophers: St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and all of those men who wrote about what makes life worthwhile. I think that all of those things influenced me.

After completing my course of studies, I went on to begin my teaching career. I was teaching economics at Rutgers University, when I was invited to come out to California to work with the Prudential Insurance Company. I was an economist for Prudential – head of the Research Division. At Prudential, I became interested in what was then called the ‘Red Feather’: it was the Community Chest. I became involved with the Chest and I developed the first, ‘Fair Share’ giving plan that I think ever existed.

I remember the Sloan Foundation had a chapter of our plan that we developed for the old Community Chest; they asked me to serve on different groups down there. I served in various ways to help these agencies and this activity also got me interested in social welfare. That is really how it all started.

I have served on, I suppose, 20 to 25 different agencies and groups and have become closely associated with a few. I must say that while I have become very distressed over some of the problems that some of them have, I cannot help but feel that I need to hang in there because you want to help. Tonight I am going to first, a discussion period, and then dinner with a group of doctors and laypeople from Orthopedic Hospital. We will be discussing that agency and all of its problems and what we can do to try and resolve some of those problems. So my interest in social welfare goes way back when I started: that’s 50 years ago until now. I have been interested in these things all that time and it started the way I said.

FELDMAN: Was it from your work with what was then the Community Chest that you got connected with the Welfare Planning Council?

Dockson: Yes, I became interested in the Welfare Planning Council and participated in some old research projects, although I have forgotten what that specific research was. We carried on with some of those economic research projects over at Prudential. We were building a good research division; the purpose of it was to try to look at California – and the 11 western States, but our emphasis, of course, was here, on California because that is where most of our volunteers were. I became involved with the Welfare Planning Council and their research groups and the various problems that we had. I remember now, although I cannot recall all of their names, some of the individuals who were very inspirational as far as I was concerned. They were anxious to get a young person, like I was then, involved in the social work problems of our community.

FELDMAN: I am sure you do not know or remember that our paths crossed then. You were chairman of the Research Division.

DOCKSON: I have a faint recollection of that, but until now I did not know that. Frances, I do not think that you have ever mentioned that at the University while I was there.

FELDMAN: No, I do not think that I did. What reminds me of it now, aside from your own discussion of the Research Department, was that you were there when I was developing the Money Management Project under the auspices of the Research Department. The resulting text is used around the country: you see, you had a role in that. This evening I will be giving a talk on the meanings of money to the elderly. My target population is changing, but you see it is still the same fundamental principle that emerged out of that study when you were chairing the Research Committee.

DOCKSON: You know, now as you are talking that way, I think of the many other ways that this research goes; I think of course of many other things. The most recent, was my attempt in this company to bring a social worker into the company itself; they were particularly interested. I think she was in gerontology.

FELDMAN: Yes, Virginia Boyington.

DOCKSON: Well, we brought her in and she did a wonderful job for us! It is typical of the academic mind; a company often must do things, while the academic mind wants to wander off and take things in different ways – you cannot do that. But she did a lot of good for our customers and I think many things for many of our own people. There I was trying to bring social work into the business setting, and we did.

I think that one of the areas that I had a great deal of satisfaction out of is Orthopedic Hospital. I have been involved with them for about 17 years, I think.

Yet our work last year in the United Way had its problems. I was invited to be chairman of the so-called 'Blue Ribbon' committee to look at those problems. I felt that we made a significant contribution because we really did a good job. It was an excellent panel, excellent people.

FELDMAN: Was this when the community became incensed over the way the funds were being used?

DOCKSON: Yes.

FELDMAN: Could you elaborate a little on that, because I think that it was a very significant event and I think a contribution that was quite outstanding?

DOCKSON: I think the committee's contribution was very significant. I received a call one day from the then-president of the United Way. We were reading about all of this scandal in the newspapers; it appeared to be the misuse of funds given to the United Way. After all, we all give to the Los Angeles United Way and to read in the newspapers about those funds being used to help move someone from Cincinnati out here or to make them loans which they have not repaid –this almost sounds like a fraudulent claim. People were incensed. This one writer, whom I met with and

interviewed, had something that he could write and the newspapers could print it – so they did. People were saying, “I am not going to give to the United Way anymore.”

About that time, the president of the United Way and another chief executive officer who knows me very well, came out and said to me “Bob, we know that your reputation in this community is good and that you have no ax to grind. We also know that this huge agency is in difficulty and we need to have a ‘blue ribbon’ committee that will look honestly, objectively, and in depth on the problems of the United Way.” I replied, “I want you to put this request in writing and define for me just what it is that you want done.” They did, so I have a document in our files that said, in essence, “We want to give you carte blanche to look at the United Way, its organization, management and function. You are free to go anywhere the committee wants to go.”

We then labored over the kinds of people that we wanted on the committee. We had Sister Magdalene, for example, on that committee; we had lawyers on that committee; we had accountants; we had people that represented women’s groups; labor was represented on that committee; we had the entire community – including ethnic groups represented.

We conducted that study for a period of, as I recall, four or five months. We explored in depth: had great interviews, invited in all of the people who were connected to this problem, including the men who had served as volunteers, as well as the paid employees. I created subcommittees to look at the loans to such and such a person or gifts in some cases to such and such a person. Before the study began to take shape, we all were very worried for a long time about the results. The subcommittee chairmen would report to the full committee and that full committee would then have its input. The staff of our choosing, not the United Way’s choosing, would help us.

When the study was finally completed and ready to be released, we held a big press conference here. In essence, the results of that study were that the United Way was strong and making a tremendous contribution in our community. However, it had some

management problems. The management of the United Way had taken a leaf out of the book of many other companies and realized that to attract attractive people into the United Way, that they would have to look elsewhere than here. Our cost of living, however, was so much higher than anywhere else: Illinois, Ohio, Michigan or wherever else people were invited to come from. So the United Way made moving-cost loans, this was the one area that got the most press attention. The collection of these loans, however, had not been pursued aggressively after the new personnel got here. They had appeared to be working out and agreed to reimburse the United Way. We were very critical of management in that regard.

In purpose and intent, the volunteers withstood the test of scrutiny. I was very proud when it was all done and I could look these press people in the eye and say, "There was no fraud here. This was done to try to do a better job: the laxness in how it was administered was a reflection upon the then-current management." If you will recall Frances, that management team was moved out in the next six to nine months. There had to be a transition period because that management team was well known and well liked in this community and had developed all kinds of contacts that were important for the United Way.

The agencies suffered somewhat because we could not convince everyone, although I had many sessions about this. I think in the second year however, all of that loss of contributions was made up and the agencies were back on track. So I think that the committee made a significant contribution. United Way could have gone under unless this group was created to look at what it was that was causing the difficulties.

FELDMAN: Are you still connected with the United Way?

DICKSON: No, My only connection is to continue to make financial contributions. I have no desire to continue with the United Way although they have tried to get me involved. It was much more important that I stay completely away from being a part of the United Way, and I did.

We were talking about different types of programs. I am getting involved right now in Alzheimer's and the French Foundation [in Orange County]. I went on that Board to try to help them because that is such a horrible disease. We are trying to help them raise money.

It is things of this nature that I have enjoyed working with and have tried to make a contribution. I have been particularly concerned about helping the Doheny Eye Institute, for example. I have helped the police with their D.A.R.E. program, which I think is a significant program; also Sheriff Block's program, which I think he calls SAFE. These are programs that I believe do a good job. At the Haynes Foundation, we have just given a grant to study the impact of the D.A.R.E. program in one community to see whether or not it is doing what they hope it should be doing.

The D.A.R.E. program, as you know, is a drug program for youngsters in grade school. I gave a little talk the other night to a group of men who were talking about the problems of our society; there is no question in my mind that the most severe problem facing our society is drugs and what they are doing to the younger generation who will one day be sitting in my chair. This simply must be stopped. Whenever anyone has asked me to participate in those programs I have become interested and involved.

I have also served as chairman of conservative campaigns to raise money for different causes. I remember Ed Davis, the former Chief of Police of Los Angeles, coming to me and asking me to serve as the chairman of a committee regarding a bond issue that would have raised money for the upgrade and purchase of machines, radios, and the like for his police force. They had called me in rather late, however; ultimately it was defeated as a bond issue. During a post-mortem meeting we were having after the election, Ed Davis noted that radio communication was something that the Police Department needed despite the outcome of the bond issue. I replied that I did not think we had handled it right in this election cycle; rather, we began to work to raise the money. Although I do not know if it is true today, our police force acquired the finest communications system, because the next time the bond issue was passed. It was a

big amount of money, \$75 or \$80 million. That was very helpful to the police so that they could do their job more effectively and safely.

We could go on and on about some of these things, but I feel that every man who serves in the kind of jobs that I have had, owes much to his community. How do you pay the community back? Sure, maybe you can do it by helping your company, but I really do not believe that any of these efforts were done with that thought in mind. It is not done to put our company ahead; rather, it is because I believe that we should be spending a certain amount of our time dealing with the societal problems that we have.

FELDMAN: When you look back over the organizations and crusades, if I can call them that, that you have been involved with, what stands out as especially satisfying and/or significant? Does any special event stand out?

DOCKSON: There are a couple. In 1982 or 1983 interest rates were very high and housing came to almost a complete standstill; I was concerned. It is true that it did affect the company, by the limited stream of housing. We were really beginning to have housing problems in California. At that time, I was very active in the State Chamber of Commerce, I had been President. I said that we had to tackle this problem. We created a conference on housing: the need for housing and what was happening to housing. People attended from Washington D.C., as well as local experts. That was a very successful conference. A publication came out of that conference that pointed to the fact that something had to be done, with some specific recommendations. I carried that same problem over to the California Business Roundtable, where I was also active. I took on the problem of housing there. I think that the participation in those two programs resulted in decent publications whose purpose was to stimulate people's interest in housing and provide them information on where housing was going. These efforts stand out in my mind.

In addition, I have already mentioned the United Way. I am convinced that the United Way could have suffered a setback which could have lasted for years, if we had not

provided an objective view of the organization that specified what was wrong and what should be done to rectify the problem. Basically, our report confirmed that the organization was sound, and that its purpose was true: money was not really misused. These things had to be brought to the attention of the press and the public; I feel that was a significant contribution.

Also, all of my work on behalf of universities and the like, in a way is a part of this. I have been involved in both Pepperdine University and USC, which I have enjoyed a great deal. I did go around to a lot of agencies at one point in time and that was a good experience; so there are a lot of things. I think with regard to my contributions, these are the things that come to mind right now. I have worked awfully hard at Orthopedic Hospital and I worked hard, Frances, to bring Orthopedic Hospital into the fold of the University. But I must say that the cooperation we got from the University and the lack of foresight and vision was very disappointing.

FELDMAN: Isn't it now affiliated?

DICKSON: It is affiliated, but it is going to lose out ultimately, because they are building that new hospital over on the Health Science campus. It is now being said that all of the doctors, who became affiliated with the University, must send their elective patients over to that new hospital in the future. It is just ridiculous. I wanted Gerontology to go over to Orthopedic Hospital. I had visions of all kinds of things that could be done with that land. That land is so close to the University, it is just wrong not to try to make immediate use of it.

FELDMAN: You do not think that it might still come about?

DICKSON: Well, yes, I think eventually it will.

FELDMAN: But it takes a long time.

DICKSON: Yes. Norman Topping [USC President] and I had lunch the other day and he sees it like I do, but some current managers just did not understand; they have not seen it. From the day that Franz Bauer – do you remember Franz Bauer [the former Dean of the Medical School]?

FELDMAN: Yes, indeed.

DICKSON: He and I first started that process when he was alive, to bring Orthopedic Hospital into the fold of the University. I had been chairman of the subcommittee in charge of that relationship for several years. When the University made this deal with National Medical Enterprises to build University Hospital, they did not read the fine print. The fine print stipulated that their patients must be sent to that new hospital. They carried us well down before they finally sat down with me and explained to me that is what had happened. Look at that piece of land down there so close to the University. You could move so many areas of the University onto that campus.

FELDMAN: I know that some of the research that is actually based in the health sciences is conducted at Orthopedic Hospital.

DICKSON: At Orthopedic Hospital we have some of the most extensive resources and equipment available. Another area, Frances, that I think has given me more satisfaction than anything else that I have done in terms of this area, is that I have been on the Board of the Haynes Foundation since before I left the University. We have given millions of dollars to different projects and scholarships. In fact, the University of Southern California had no scholarships from the Haynes Foundation until we went on the Board and argued on behalf of the University; now the University has more scholarships than anyone else does.

We have just finished reviewing 52 applications for small grants; these are grants for faculty summer fellowships. Again I was pleased, because the applications come in from all of the universities around, USC, and from time to time, the School of Social

Work - have received assistance from the Haynes Foundation. Those grants that we have given were earmarked for projects of all kinds having to do with the social sciences. All of them generally have to do with the welfare of people in California – mainly in Los Angeles. I overlooked this undertaking when I was talking earlier. The Haynes Foundation has been a true inspiration that I have been involved with for all these years- since before I left the University.

FELDMAN: I remember Maynard Toll talking about your contribution.

DICKSON: Maynard and I were close friends. He was a very wonderful person who was interested in all of these things; together, we were interested in the same areas.

FELDMAN: We completed an oral interview with him.

DICKSON: He did an interview before he died?

FELDMAN: Yes, Ethel.

DICKSON: Back on the Welfare Planning Council, his wife was involved in that.

FELDMAN: Yes.

DICKSON: I had forgotten that until right now.

FELDMAN: She worked very closely with my husband when he was Director of Health and then Mental Health.

DICKSON: Wasn't she active in the schools, too?

FELDMAN: Yes, she was.

DICKSON: Well, bless her heart.

FELDMAN: As to your views about what a person who is not a social work professional can do in the field of social welfare, that professionals could or could not do: what is there special that a lay volunteer could contribute?

DICKSON: My answer depends on whether it is either what you would like to hear or what is the real answer. I believe that a lay person brings a great deal to an agency: it can be a hospital, a YMCA, the Boy Scouts, or some other projects that I have been involved in. I do not care what area it is, but I have seen this happen time and time again. Let me take the YMCA as an example. The YMCA has been important to a lot of men in our community. I have seen those men go onto that board and bring in much better accounting and organizational skills to bear upon the organization. This includes passing judgment upon the structure of the organization and making decisions to move out old management in order to bring in competent help. Secondly, I have seen them come up with much better ideas. Who would have thought, for example, that a golf tournament could be held in my name and make money for the YMCA? I think this is the fourth or fifth year that the golf tournament has been held. Last year that tournament, in one day, contributed \$136,000 to the YMCA. The tournament has gone up each year in terms of what it has contributed to the YMCA. As you know, it takes a long time to raise \$136,000. That idea came out of a friend of mine: he wanted to do it, he pushed it through, and so he did it. The professionals in the YMCA would not have thought of that; they would not have done anything like that. Of course, the raising of money is important.

At the meeting I am going to tonight, a layman will conduct the meeting. This is a group of four laymen and four or five doctors. We will sit for four or five hours and we will explore how we can manage this particular problem we have within the hospital. Now in this case, the professional cannot get this problem resolved because of the competition amongst the doctors themselves; some one must pass judgment. We have one particular lay person that ran his own business; he eventually sold his own business and

has been very successful. He loves the hospital. He goes down there and spends days over there straightening out their books, bringing in the most modern approach to system accounting that is available. No professional in that hospital can do that.

Over at the Scouts, I have watched our lay people raise big sums of money for the Boy Scouts. I have something here [a printed invitation] that they invited me to participate in for the Boy Scouts: it is a meeting of some of the older men to meet with some of the kids to talk about the problems in Scouting. That has to be done to successfully get my attention, because probably half the letters I get are letters from organizations asking for money. You know that these letters are professionally done, but when a friend of yours signs the letters, they get your attention. I think the lay people make 'it' happen, Frances. I go way back and I learned something back when I was first interested in the Community Chest and the Welfare Planning Council. I remember thinking that if professionals in social welfare want to get things done, then they have to call upon competent lay people to help them get it done. The wise agency will know that and get competent and capable people from the community to work on their behalf to get the problem solved. You can get a group of fine professional people, but if they do not know how to sell their services, promote their services or raise money – the organization will die.

FELDMAN: But even if professional staff knew how to accomplish each of these functions, there is something else that I believe you are saying. That is, the lay volunteer can contribute: in the way of community involvement, contacts, expertise, and a lot of time and skill, that the professionals even with this knowledge cannot due to restraints on their time and funds.

DICKSON: I agree with you 100%, but I think that the successful agency is a marriage of those two components. The lay person has respect for the professional in his field and has a deep interest in wanting to see something done. In turn, the professional must respect the lay person and not engage in politics and the backbiting, which I have seen behind the scenes. They must give credit to that lay person for trying to help. I

could not agree more with you more. It is a long, continuous advantage that this professional might have, to be able to raise the money due to the contacts that they maintain. However, to sustain an agency so that it will go on over time - they must involve the community and the leaders within the community to achieve the agency's goals and objectives. This is the same importance that the lay people attach to fulfilling their desire to be a part of the community and participate in it.

FELDMAN: I think that is important. It is one reason why we are including in our little project, interviews with people who have been involved in voluntary work. We know that without the work of the volunteers, social agencies could not get very far. It is a very important dynamic to agencies' success: community service.

I want to ask you also if you might have a biographical statement that might list some of the organizations with which you have been connected in one way or another.

DICKSON: My secretary has changed that statement over time, but I think we have a current one that I would be glad to give you.

FELDMAN: All right; also, do you have a photograph that I could have too?

DICKSON: I do not know. They took some photographs of me the other day; I will ask them for one.

FELDMAN: You have mentioned also that you have been the subject of some other oral histories. I was wondering whether you could tell me several things about them: 1) their purpose; 2) where they are located; 3) if they seem relevant, would you object to our getting copies of them and putting it with ours?

DICKSON: I did not mean to imply, Frances, that I had histories. I have been through many interviews.

FELDMAN: Yes, you did say interviews.

DICKSON: I do not think that I have ever had an oral history done with me. However, it does remind me that I have raised money for the School of Public Administration to do an oral history of the Speakers of the House up in Sacramento.

FELDMAN: Oh yes, I remember that.

DICKSON: Jess Unruh's project. We raised quite a bit of money for that project at his request, although I never did hear the results of it. No, I have not completed an oral history interview although I have completed lots of interviews.

FELDMAN: I asked about it because if there were some that were relevant, it would be helpful for us to have them available for the researcher who wants to know more.

DICKSON: What you should get though, is the United Way study which I spoke of earlier.

FELDMAN: No, we did not get it. Could we get it through Mr. Cornelius or do you have it?

DICKSON: I do not know if we have any extra copies of that study here; I want to keep one available here. I really feel that was a significant report.

FELDMAN: That also reminds me of something else that I did not want to leave without asking you. That is, whether you have anywhere any reports or correspondence that would show something that has happened in the past – trying to get things going in social agencies. It could be anything that might be of use to our archival collection.

DICKSON: I do not think so, Frances. I do not think that any of this material could be used.

FELDMAN: I was just asking because sometimes somebody remembers something that would be appropriate.

DICKSON: I would not know where it is. I could tell you, though, of something that would be worthwhile - that original study which was done by the Sloan Foundation regarding the Fair Share giving corporations. That is a study I would love to find and give you a copy of. I remember the little book that came out – I have not seen it or thought of it in years. That study showed some pretty impressive thinking going back to 38 years ago or something like that.

FELDMAN: If you were able to come across it or even if you were only able to let me know where I might find it, we would track it down. It is certainly significant because it set the pattern for federated financing of social agencies.

DICKSON: They followed that pattern for several years and still use the phrase “fair share giving”. You can look it up, but they must have a list of publications of the Albert Sloan Foundation. The Sloan Foundation published this book around 1950 – 1952 – I was at Prudential at the time and it was before I returned to the University. I also know the Haynes Foundation has a listing of all of its’ publications, so I would assume that the Sloan Foundation has done the same.