

**Oral History Interview**  
**with**  
**Rhonda Hooper**

Interview Conducted by  
Jerry Gill  
December 5, 2010

O-STATE Stories  
Oral History Project

**Special Collections & University Archives**  
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# O-State Stories

An Oral History Project of the OSU Library

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## Interview History

Interviewer: Jerry Gill

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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 purpose of O-STATE Stories Oral History Project is to gather and preserve memories revolving around Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College (OAMC) and Oklahoma State University (OSU).

This project was approved by the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board on October 5, 2006.

## Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with Rhonda Hooper is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on December 5, 2010.

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## About Rhonda Hooper...

Rhonda Hooper was born in Shreveport, Louisiana, and moved with her family to Oklahoma when she was ten years old. She grew up in Oklahoma City and went to school at John Marshall. She was always active and hardworking, developing a solid work ethic at an early age. When she graduated high school, she was accepted at Harvard University but wanted to stay closer to home. She enrolled at Oklahoma State University in 1974. She initially majored in art, but changed her major after the first semester to journalism with a focus on advertising. She pledged with Delta Delta Delta sorority and participated in almost everything she possibly could. She was in the student senate, the Homecoming executive committee, Mortar Board, and was a Top Ten senior and a *Redskin* Congratulate.

When Rhonda graduated from OSU in 1978, she went to work for Ackerman McQueen advertising agency in Oklahoma City and quickly moved up within the company. She became the director of advertising for Technical Oil Tool Corporation and was one of the few female managers in the agency. In 1986 Jordan Associates lured her away from Ackerman McQueen. She almost immediately began working on large accounts with noteworthy clients such as Cellular One and Hardee's Food Systems. Rhonda also worked with the Department of Commerce and the Oklahoma Turnpike Authority. In 2006, she became the president and CEO of the company.

Among her many professional successes, Rhonda has devoted countless hours to OSU and her community. She served on the Oklahoma County chapter of the OSU Alumni Association, later becoming chapter president. She transitioned from the county chapter to the national Association board, and served as president for the 2001-2002 term. She led the Alumni Association team down new, improved roads of participation, events, and recruitment, and played an integral role in the development of the Alumni Center. To name a few more of her commitments, Rhonda is on the executive committee of the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce and is chairman of the Oklahoma City Convention and Visitors Commission. She is on the Oklahoma City Economic Development Trust, the executive committee of Oklahoma Business Roundtable, and is chair elect of Leadership Oklahoma. She is also on the Board of the Oklahoma City Boathouse Foundation and is on the OSU-OKC President's Advisory Board. She has been recognized as an Outstanding Alum in the OSU College of Arts and Sciences, and in 2007 she was honored as an OSU Distinguished Alum.

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## Rhonda Hooper



Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Jerry Gill

December 5, 2010

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

**Gill** *My name is Jerry Gill, and today is December 5, 2010. I'm visiting with Rhonda Hooper here in her office in Oklahoma City. This interview is for the O-STATE Stories Project of the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program. Rhonda, thank you for taking time from your hectic professional schedule to spend some time with us today.*

**Hooper** You're certainly welcome, Jerry. As you know, I've been beaten up the last few days, so hopefully I can sustain and keep it up. (Laughs)

**Gill** *Just smile as much as you can.*

**Hooper** Yes. (Laughs)

**Gill** *Rhonda, obviously we want to talk about your long, rich, and lengthy relationship with Oklahoma State University, but I want to first of all start off with your early life, where you grew up, and a little bit about your family. Can you share some stuff with us?*

**Hooper** You bet. Well, I was born in Shreveport, Louisiana, and lived there until I was ten. Moved to Tulsa, there for two years, moved to Oklahoma City. When I was in the professional workforce I went back to Tulsa for a while, but, bottom line, Shreveport. My dad got an opportunity to come to work for State Farm in Oklahoma, and we came. I still have family in Shreveport, but I definitely love Oklahoma more.

**Gill** *How old were you, Rhonda, when you moved to Oklahoma City?*

**Hooper** Twelve.

**Gill** *So you went through junior high and high school.*

**Hooper** Junior high, high school, and then...

**Gill** *What school was that, here?*

**Hooper** I went to John Marshall.

**Gill** *John Marshall.*

**Hooper** Yes. Back in my day, John Marshall had, I think there were eight to nine hundred in my graduating class, and I was valedictorian. They needed somebody to be valedictorian. I guess I got the position. It was a great experience, but there were over two thousand in our high school, so coming to a university was still a big deal, a big change in the number of people and a little intimidating.

**Gill** *Rhonda, first of all let me back up and ask, were there some values, some principles you learned within your family or while you were growing up that helped influence your success later in life?*

**Hooper** Probably a strong work ethic from both my father and my mother. My father was very gifted in that anything he ever read, he could remember. Y'all would've hit it off big time because he could read something and he would remember it. (Laughter) He knew dates in history and what happened. It was amazing. My father was so smart that he also didn't use it to his advantage, but I learned from that. I saw what he was capable of and didn't do. Then I saw what my mother was very smart in doing and how she had a job here and there, but what she did, she was excellent at. I just saw both of them come from not such great backgrounds, from the standpoint they weren't entitled or given anything. They earned it. That instilled in me the same kind of mindset.

**Gill** *Is there a story about how you got to Oklahoma State University?*

**Hooper** Yes. (Laughs) Actually, everybody thinks I'm an idiot for doing this, but I can't help it. I was actually accepted to Harvard, and my boyfriend, who I had been dating for many a year, he went to Harvard. I realized I couldn't keep up with the Joneses, if you will, so I decided I wanted to stay closer to home, and I checked out Louisiana State, which is where my sister went. I didn't like the fact that it rained every day at four o'clock. We had been in Oklahoma, so I felt more partial to Oklahoma. My parents said I could go anywhere in the United States except OU. (Laughter)

**Gill** *Well, I see that started early in life! (Laughter)*

**Hooper** Yes, that started early in life. (Laughs) Bottom line, I thought, “Well, I’ll just go to OSU for the first year, and then I’ll go and do something beyond,” and I fell in love with OSU and didn’t want to leave. But, no, the thing with Harvard was really cool. I had lots of opportunities and got to meet a lot of people, but my family was not able to really afford that environment, and I made that decision on my own.

**Gill** *Was it a tough decision for you?*

**Hooper** Not really because I had been around them enough to realize that wasn’t me and just because—I went to some classes at Harvard and everything else, and I thought, “They’re basically the same as what we have here.” It was just the tradition and the cachet. To me, your pedigree is just your pedigree. It’s who you are inside that makes a difference.

**Gill** *Rhonda, what year did you enroll at Oklahoma State, fall of...*

**Hooper** Nineteen seventy-four, fall of ’74.

**Gill** *Your major?*

**Hooper** My major, first, was art. I was an art major. I took some classes. You had to take all of your prerequisites and so on, but I did take a lot of art classes at the time. Those art classes required a lot of drawing, obviously, and I realized that drawing nudes was not my cup of tea. (Laughter) I was like, “This is um...” There were some very talented people in those classes, and I was talented, but I thought, “Now, how am I going to make money?” So I backed off that, and I switched my major my freshman year. Second semester, I went into journalism with emphasis in advertising. I didn’t have a minor because they didn’t recognize minors then, so marketing was my second. But I had a lot of hours of science. I was major into science.

**Gill** *Rhonda, kind of looking back, you’ve been very successful in your career in marketing, advertising, etcetera. Did you know at that time that that’s what you wanted to do? You were pretty sure. Where did that come from?*

**Hooper** What spawned it is that advertising allowed creativity to happen. I had always been one of those that is always thinking of different things. I used to capture it on paper with my work, but then I realized I had the capability to think creatively as well, so it sounded like a cool profession. I think I was influenced early on by *Bewitched* and watching Darrin [Stephens]. (Laughter) It seemed like a really interesting and fulfilling approach to always getting to touch new things and make

things happen. I'm not a rote-type person. If you made me sit and produce documents all day, I'd go stark raving mad. I have to be out there, so I think the reason I picked this—and I am not an impulsive person by any means. I do have a process of evaluating things, but the one thing I was impulsive about was picking my major.

I was influenced by somebody that we were doing—it was Homecoming. So, see? The Homecoming influenced me my freshman year, and we were doing the Homecoming sign, the “Welcome Back, Alumni.” I was in a sorority. I had just pledged, and I think we were doing it with Phi Taus. The guy that—he and I were doing the sign. We were talking amongst doing all this. He was an advertising major, and I thought, “Well, that sounds really cool.” Well, that's what influenced me is his verbatims about that. It was like, “I can't believe I did that,” but at the same time, as I got into it, I—and that, punctuated by Dr. Manzer, Dr. Lee Manzer. He is amazing. In consumer behavior, I took one of his classes, and I was inspired. I thought, “This is what I need to do.” That, coupled with the business side of it, is what influenced me.

**Gill** *You mentioned Dr. Manzer. Were there other faculty or staff that influenced you in your development as a student?*

**Hooper** There were. As far as pinpointing who they were, I can't remember all their names. I was one of those that sat on the front row or second to the front row, and I participated. That's just who I am. I still do that. I have a tendency to get right up there. Why be in the back and be wallpaper? If you don't take it seriously, there's no point, so I had a lot of people influence me. Dr. Wisherd, Sheila Wisherd, was my counselor, and she was influential on the AAF, the American Advertising Federation competition that we do. OSU is a participant. She really gave me a sense of confidence and exposed me to the business sides of things in her field. She was very special to me, too. I'm not sure if she—she had cancer several years ago so, I'm not sure of her status. I never have talked to her since graduating, but she was a very dear person.

**Gill** *Can you share some information about your undergraduate activities, organizations, things you were involved in?*

**Hooper** Well, the counsel I got when I first pledged was...

**Gill** *The sorority you pledged?*

**Hooper** Delta Delta Delta, and they encouraged us to get involved on campus. Well, don't challenge me because I'll take it to the monty, and I basically went all out. I was involved in a lot of different things. Some of the more significant, I was on the executive committee of Homecoming.

I was in Mortar Board. I was Arts and Science's student senator. Let's see. Lots of different things I got involved in. Ultimately I was a Redskin Congratulate when we had a yearbook, which I hate that we don't have a yearbook now because, I tell you what, digital is one thing, but being able to pick up and share memories is more critical. So I was involved in that. I was a Top Ten senior. Lots of different things I was involved in. Then as far as the sorority, I was an officer in several different levels. I honestly can't remember everything.

**Gill** *That's great.*

**Hooper** I know it was so much so that when I graduated I said, "I'm taking a hiatus on activities for a while."

**Gill** *Rhonda, what year did you graduate?*

**Hooper** Nineteen seventy-eight.

**Gill** *Seventy-eight. Could you share briefly some highlights of your professional career since you left Oklahoma State University?*

**Hooper** Okay. After I left, I did take a period of time to chill out. (Laughs) I decided I wasn't going to actively pursue getting in a job market. I had a job that I was making a lot of money at, and that was bartending. (Laughter)

**Gill** *Where was that?*

**Hooper** It was a small little bar called Bonaparte's in Shepherd Mall. This bar, we catered to OCU law students. I think we had six tables and eighteen bar chairs, but back in the late '70s I was making \$200 a night, which was a lot of money.

**Gill** *Basically out of tips?*

**Hooper** Yes. It was quite a bit of money, and it was hard for me to think, (Laughter) "Okay, I'm going to give this up and go to..." which was low-paying. I think my first job, I think I made \$800 a month. So, I mean, \$200 a night, \$800 a month! (Laughs) Okay. I couldn't have done both because I worked long hours. I did that for a few months, and then I entered the job-seeking market in the fall. So while everybody else was zigging, I zagged, meaning I had a different entry point, which basically—my second interview I was offered a position and went to work for Ackerman McQueen here in Oklahoma City.

**Gill** *Which is one of the top advertising agencies.*



**Hooper**

Yes. The two leading advertising agencies in Oklahoma are Ackerman McQueen and Jordan Associates. I looked at going out of state. I had thought about going to Denver to be a ski bum, to ski and to work and everything else and realized I couldn't afford to live there. Hey, you know, fresh out of college, you're twenty-one, twenty-two, going to go have fun, too, but I realized I needed to have a roommate. I didn't have the resources at that point to do it, so I decided to stay close to home, again, and went to work for Ackerman in the creative department. I was a copywriter and then went from copywriting to the creative director's assistant. From creative director's assistant to traffic manager, from traffic manager to AE, account executive in the Oklahoma City office, then Tulsa, then back to Oklahoma City, and I did that all in three years.

I worked seven days a week, and I said three years or twenty-one in dog years. (Laughter) I mean, it was long hours, but it was rewarding for me at the same time. But, yes, at the ripe old age of twenty-four, one of my accounts was the National Rifle Association, so I was going to Washington DC very often. I was playing with the big boys. It was pretty fulfilling, but at the same time, there was more to life. I moved on, so I went on to the client's side. I was director of advertising for Technical Oil Tool Corporation (TOTCO), which was a Baker International company. We had over 2,500 employees in offices all over the US. I was one of the only female managers.

**Gill**

*Baker is an oil tool company?*

**Hooper**

Baker is an oil tool company. Why I went to that, I like mechanical reasoning. I like technical stuff. I get into it, so I thought, "Well, why not?" I enjoyed it. I worked there a little over four years. I wasn't looking to change when Jordan came after me, but I enjoyed it. I loved being in the business. The guys, at first, were resistant to me, but I had to win them over. I had to work with engineers and with sales force and manufacturing, and I learned diplomacy. I learned you can't be heavy-handed or they'll ax you. I learned there's more to life than marketing, and just because marketing needs, it doesn't mean everybody else is going to be on the same page. It was cool.

We were, like, third when I came to work at TOTCO, and we became number one through a focus on the brand, through doing the right things to market. When we went to trade shows, we had a professional demeanor. We knew our stuff. We had rules when people would come to the booth and how they had to behave because when I first came onboard, the guys were sitting in chairs, smoking at a trade show, and I was like, "No!" (Laughs) I made them wear matching blazers, the whole bit, and it was amazing. They resisted, but then ultimately it worked, and

they were going, “Okay.” So I earned their respect. We just had a twenty-something-year reunion of TOTCO, and it was awesome. We built a strong bond there, and the employees were fabulous.

**Gill** *Then you moved to Jordan?*

**Hooper** Then Jordan reached out, and it took five interviews for them to convince me to come over because my reference point was, “No! No agency!” It was the right move, and I came to work at Jordan.

**Gill** *What year was it?*

**Hooper** Eighty-six.

**Gill** *Eighty-six, and you’ve been with them ever since.*

**Hooper** Yes, since then. I had the opportunity to work on Cellular One. Jordan Associates actually introduced cellular phones.

**Gill** *Ah!*

**Hooper** Yes. I worked in seventeen markets for Cellular One, and I was an account coordinator, I think, when I started. That was really cool. Now, I mean—the cellular phones when we launched were those huge old boxes, and now they’re the tiny little microchip, at this point. That was a neat experience. Then worked on a lot of the government business. At the time, [Henry] Bellmon was the governor of Oklahoma. [Warren] Doc Jordan, the founder of Jordan Associates, he’s the one that helped get Bellmon elected the first time, then the senate, and then the second time, so he had me on that business. I worked on the Oklahoma Turnpike Authority and the Department of Commerce and did the “Don’t Lay That Trash On Oklahoma” campaign and a lot of those different things. It was a good experience. Then went from that arena to —our president of the agency, Jeanette Gamba, said, “Would you like to lead the Hardee’s business?” Hardee’s Food Systems, quick-service restaurants, and I jumped on it. We grew that business from what started as only a statewide basis to the point when we worked for them for twenty-one years. When they left the agency a few years ago, we had twenty-five states, and it was major, seven-figure piece of business. I loved being in the quick-service restaurant business. I get bored easily, Jerry, as you know, and so if it’s not broken, I will break it and have something to work on. I like diversity of client base, and today I get to touch every piece of business to some extent.

**Gill** *And, of course, today, you’re president and CEO [Chief Executive Officer].*

- Hooper** I have been president and CEO for four years.
- Gill** *I think your business made the second largest advertising marketing firm in the state.*
- Hooper** Yes. We represent a diverse base of clients, and I get to do a lot of it. I have a great team. It's really the team. I mean, I'm not as much hands-on. I'm more in strategic planning, strategic direction of client initiatives. When I'm not doing that, I'm involved in a lot of boards. I enjoy that, but at the same time I'm saying no to everything right now. (Laughs) There's a point of maxing out.
- Gill** *Rhonda, I know there's a lot of recognition that you've received through the years professionally. Are there some that have been more meaningful than others? Could you mention some that you've received personally that have been meaningful to you?*
- Hooper** I'd say, personally, what meant the most to me was being a distinguished alumnus at OSU. I'm tearing up because I'm looking at you, and that meant a lot, and you were my host. It was neat. It was very neat. It so happened that I've done different things. I've been recognized, and it means something, but I think that meant the most. I think that meant the most. It was very special, and I didn't know OSU was so special until later in life. We take it for granted while we're in school, and it's later that you see different life experiences and then you see the commitment. I'm impressed with the commitment that OSU leaders have. I say OSU leaders. I'm talking about volunteer leaders. I'm talking about those who work for the university, and that's why I chose early on to get involved in the Alumni Association. I attribute this to Kirk Jewell. Kirk Jewell and Marsha Wooden on a local chapter level asked me to come aboard on the Oklahoma County chapter.
- Gill** *Rhonda, could you take a minute because you started the Oklahoma County chapter before you moved to the national level. Could you talk about some of the things, the years, the activities that you had the chapter and things involved in it? This would've been what years?*
- Hooper** Oh, gosh, Jerry. What years? I don't know. It was back—it was in the '90s. It was probably mid- to latter part of the '90s. Oh, it'd be about '95, '96, maybe. I got involved on the county level, and I went to several meetings and saw what we could do. Early on, our county decided to create a program for seniors. We had been doing the Honors Banquets, and we needed to reengineer, and so we came up with our own program. I think at one year, we had leading students come to Frontier City, and we had a big recruitment effort. It was more of a scene. It had lots of

activities and lots of things, and it was an interchange. We had financial aid and some other things that were more meaningful versus less stodgy. Not to be bad about previous, but they were more regimented. It was time for change. The county did a lot of that. We were a very close-knit group. We heard what was going on from the Stillwater needs, and then we would figure out how to make it happen. Oklahoma County, at the time, was the leading chapter. I think now it's competitive. Tulsa is really doing very well.

**Gill** *You were chapter president?*

**Hooper** Then I became chapter president. I told—actually, my comment to Marsha, (I think it was Marsha) I said, “I’ll get involved as long as I don’t have to be the leader.” (Laughter) Kirk and Marsha still give me grief about that. Then I went from county to being on the association board. That’s when we had seventy-nine members of the board, I believe. Wasn’t it? How many?

**Gill** *That’s about right.*

**Hooper** So it was a huge, huge group, but it was very—I loved every aspect of it. Then went on to the executive committee, and we were very close. We worked hard together. We were innovative, but we wouldn’t have had the passion had it not been for the leadership of the Alumni Association and, Jerry, you and Larry [Shell], fabulous team. You had a good group of people working with you. Y’all gave us the parameters, and we just took it.

**Gill** *Let’s talk about some of the parameters.*

**Hooper** Okay. (Laughs)

**Gill** *I recall some of them, but I want to hear you talk about them. First of all, the years you went onto the board was somewhere around mid-’90s for the national board, and then you were president...*

**Hooper** In 2001, 2002.

**Gill** *So you had about six, eight years. During that time, there were several things that you did. First of all, I’d like to talk about some of the members of your leadership team who were on the board with you, and other officers. What names do you think of when you think of your time there?*

**Hooper** I have a memory span that is not very long.

**Gill** *There was Kathy [Laster]...*

**Hooper** Kathy, well, Kathy was president two terms prior. Gene Batchelder, Sam Combs, Clayton Taylor, Leo Presley, Ronda McKown—oh, shoot, Ditch Witch, out in California...

**Gill** *Rogers, Paul Rogers.*

**Hooper** Paul Rogers, yes. Oh, man, there's quite a few. I would have to look back at my notes. I didn't get your questions ahead of time, so this is all spur of the moment. Our group was really cool and from all different walks of life, but we all shared the same foundation of knowledge, and that's what we pulled together to make happen.

**Gill** *Do you remember—I can think of two events of strategic planning that I think you were president right towards the end of that, right?*

**Hooper** Yes.

**Gill** *First of all, I just want to ask you, do you remember, coming aboard, what were some of the challenges, some of the opportunities that you recall at that time?*

**Hooper** Well, the challenges were (and they still are challenges) there was an over proliferation of communication when you're an alumnus. An alumnus that is not involved doesn't understand the difference between athletics, the Foundation, the Alumni Association, their respective college, or blah, blah, blah. It's all competing, and so one of the things that we did in the strategic planning was, "What's the voice of the Alumni Association? What's our position in this communications link?" Our intent was to get a voice, and ours was, "We are the voice of the alumni," and that's where we landed. We had always been. We just framed it. We have the ability to reconnect alumni to their university, so we came up and Randy Wedel. Randy was part of this. We broke out into...

**Gill** *Paul Schulte.*

**Hooper** Paul Schulte, duh! How could I—okay, sorry, Paul. Sorry, Randy. We broke into creative visioning, and it was Randy and I. We came in on the Connections for Life theme line. It was like, "Yes! This is it!" It incorporated all of the people that participated in the strategic planning session.

**Gill** *Can you talk a little bit about that, because that, in a lot of ways, changed the Alumni Association. What year was this? It was about a*

*year long, nearly a couple years.*

**Hooper** It was '99. I think '98, '99, and our continuum was from diapers to Depends. (Laughter) It was like, "How do we get alumni involved to the point that their legacies would feel part of OSU?" and then, "How do we stay with them over all their life stages to the point of Depends?" (Laughs)

**Gill** *So the overarching priority, then, was that Connections for Life theme, communications...*

**Hooper** And in Stillwater, but the Alumni Association should be where the Alumni are. It doesn't matter if you're in Dallas or if you're in Istanbul. The Alumni Association should have relevance and connectivity to you as an alumnus. So the strategic planning process, we did research. We had visioning, creative visioning exercises. From all this data and from the compilation of research, I took that and basically did the marketing plan, if you will. Then, "How do we roll this out? How do we embrace it? How do we become and raise our significance so that graduates from OSU would want to be a member of the Alumni Association?" Then, "What is the Alumni Association's stature at OSU, and how do we make sure that we are always heard and that we are not passed under the rug?" Not that anybody would, but it was important for the Alumni Association.

**Gill** *As I recall, Rhonda, you took some of those themes into your year as president, which was a couple years later. Just thinking out loud, you have, certainly, the professional expertise in all your years in marketing and advertising, in the business, and in branding. It seems, as I recall, the Alumni Association strategic planning during your tenure on the board, especially your year as national president, used your skill sets and honesty to positively influence the image, branding the image, the direction of it, the communication, the voice. Do you want to speak to some of those things because we talked about electronic communications, websites, and etcetera?*

**Hooper** That's how, actually, the Orange Connections website came to fruition and then the online store so that orange could be purchased wherever you were, and there were different initiatives that spun out of it. I worked with the staff, and we said, "All right, this is what we want to accomplish from a positioning of the brand from the Alumni Association." We had meetings with the staff, and then they brought it to life, be it in print, be it in direct marketing, through recruitment efforts. The whole legacy program came from this concept. The orange ball sticker had always been, but it further reinforced our deference of that orange ball and why people would want to have the orange ball. Yes, the

legacy program, we created that.

**Gill** *That diapers, Depends?*

**Hooper** It was the diapers, the—yes.

**Gill** *The diaper stage of it.*

**Hooper** Yes, starting the diapers. These were innovative ideas to the point that it was recognized nationally by CASE [Council for Advancement and Support of Education], and OU was trying to copy a lot of our ideas. It was leading the pack, and we had done a good job of evaluating what other best practices of Alumni Associations were doing and how could we do a better job. No one had done this, so we were carving new paths, and it was awesome. The Alumni Association (this was prior to the building of the building) to most people, the Alumni Association was that window in the Student Union, and that was it. So our key was how do we take that window and position it with the right relevant products, more so than just discounts at Stillwater merchants. What does that mean, and then how does that position us that we then built a building? More people now know that Homecoming is brought because of the Alumni Association.

**Gill** *And the building helped.*

**Hooper** The building helped. It provided the bricks and mortar and the evidence of this organization, so all of it tied together. I feel good about what efforts we did in those strategic planning sessions. I remember going to Guthrie, and we were—remember that? We had these retreats, and we were questioning everything, and “How do we do things better?” That was the springboard to cool things.

**Gill** *Let me pick up on that, Rhonda. From your perspective, after the strategic planning and implementations in the following two, three, or four years, how was the Alumni Association different as an organization, coming out of this continued planning, than it was before?*

**Hooper** Confident, understood where it was going, and had a plan to get there. Yes, strategic planning does that, but I think beyond that, it framed a skeleton of just business terms, and it personified, truly, what the importance of an alumnus is, that an OSU alumnus is different than any other alum. If you put a Cowboy alum, compared to, oh, let’s just pick A&M. I won’t pick somebody closer. (Laughter) We carry ourselves differently. We have a sense of humility, but yet we’re effective. You don’t have to be boisterous and loud-mouthed and obnoxious to make a difference. I’d say that we captured all those personality traits and what

truly makes us special as part of this plan. It even became evident in how the design of the Alumni Center ended up. It was evident in its décor and its furnishings. Today's Alumni Center personifies the integrity and just that you really like this person. When you walk in the Alumni Center, it's a very friendly, approachable, yet smart...

**Gill**

*Functional.*

**Hooper**

...and functional. So all that planning—see? It even went to that, and today I think it's prevalent on membership. I know we need to grow membership again. I mean, there's a trend with a lot of people not wanting to belong to things, but you drive around, you see those round, orange ball stickers, and it's your automatic like of that individual because we have something in common, and it's the university.

**Gill**

*Quickly, just kind of touching on this, you mentioned a little bit about some of the outcomes in the strategic planning. I think the Alumni Center—you spent several hours on committees looking at furniture and design, did a program study of what we wanted to do, how it needed to function, and, of course, programming. I want to give you credit. You spent a lot of hours on just, I mean, stuff that's important to me, but like picking out furniture, furnishings, décor, paintings, location, and you must feel good about that because—did it come out as you hoped it would?*

**Hooper**

It did, it really did. And Jerry, there were four of us: you, Larry, Clayton, and I. I was your female balance. (Laughs) It's like, "Okay, guys!"

**Gill**

*No, no, no.*

**Hooper**

What was cool is we aren't interior designers, but it captured the essence of the brand that we wanted it to, and it has the right amount of cowboy with class. I mean, not that cowboys aren't classy. It's classy cowboy, okay? I am very impressed. I remember us sitting through all those swatches, and, "Do we do this?" "Do we do that?" and it's like, [groans], but it was good.

**Gill**

*Rhonda, somewhat of a broader, philosophical question, if we can, in your opinion, why is it important for alumni to remain engaged with their alumni association?*

**Hooper**

To remain engaged, or to even get involved in the first place?

**Gill**

*To get involved, period, to at some point connect. Why is it important to be—could you have a strong university? Could you have a strong alumni association without the involvement?*



**Hooper** No.

**Gill** *What's your opinion about that?*

**Hooper** A university is only as good as its alumni. If you're just granting degrees and things like that, unless there's engagement, it's just another university. What separates it is the people behind it. It's important for alumni to be a part of it. Just graduating isn't enough. You need to maintain a level of communication and understanding. I wasn't involved in the Alumni Association for several years. It took, what, twenty years or fifteen years before I started having an interest, but the more I got exposed, the more I saw the passion and the smarts pulling together. It made me excited, and I thought, "This is a place that we need to be involved." So it's important for alumni to be part of the association.

It's very inexpensive. I mean, it's \$45 a year. It's \$700, I think, for a lifetime membership. In the scheme of things, that's no big deal, but yet it fosters things for scholarships. You understand all things OSU, and then you choose where you want to be involved: at all, or nothing, or you want to just be a silent partner. What most people think, I mean, probably a lot of people think, is athletics when they think of the university. As an alum, it's so much more. We wouldn't have the caliber of the faculty, we wouldn't have the caliber of our president, unless we had engaged alumni.

**Gill** *Can I pick up with that, your engagement motif? What are the legitimate roles of alumni in supporting their university? What kinds of things should the Alumni Association be engaging alumni in, in your opinion? How should they be helping the university?*

**Hooper** Well, I think they need to—the Alumni Association is probably most effective in raising a constituency of knowledgeable alumni, so, friend-raising, if you will. Friend-raising from the standpoint that once you are involved, then you can choose to be more involved. It's not about just giving money, okay? That's one component, if anything, but not everybody is capable of giving money. People want to give their talent. They want to give if they have some time. They want to give an opportunity if they feel they could help a student coming through. There are so many levels of engagement. The key is to letting that individual have the choice and giving them that open door. Our job is to connect, is to be the gateway of alumni to the university. Then, depending upon how far they want to get in that gateway, it's up to them.

**Gill** *We use the terms "ambassadors for OSU," "advocates for OSU."*

- Hooper** Absolutely, ambassadors. It's the intrinsic aspects. You see people proudly—in fact, when I was Christmas shopping Saturday and Sunday, I saw OSU outfits all over the place, and I'm like, "Yes!" It was up to the alumni to put the best face forward. It's expected of those who are employed by OSU, but to the general populous, to people that are out there, they're our ambassadors. The more that they can help from a recruitment standpoint, they understand—somebody's child is investigating different universities, I'm the first to go, "Let me get you a tour at OSU. Let me..." Those systems are in place at OSU. I can make a call, and it happens, and that's amazing. My job is to help fuel future graduates as much as it is past graduates.
- Gill** *You've alluded a couple times to the relationship to the university. How do you feel about the current organizational structure of the Alumni Association and its relationship with the university?*
- Hooper** I'm probably not as voiced on what it is currently because having been president in 2002, I'm still involved on Leadership Council, but I'm not as in a frontal position. I think us being self-governing, I think that has been a good thing. I think the standpoint of its significance is there. It's regarded well with the university. I'm impressed with President [Burns] Hargis' approach to things and how he is doing a good balance of talent. I think as far as how the Alumni Association is structured, it's definitely more effective than it was with seventy-nine, eighty-something board members, but yet at the same time, being on the Leadership Council, I don't feel as...
- Gill** *Invested?*
- Hooper** ...invested, yes, as invested as I did. But I'm saying that just because my time has been, not that it's current.
- Gill** *Rhonda, you were talking a little bit about the mission of the Alumni Association. Can you share your thoughts on the mission of the Alumni Association and its relationship with the Foundation, with athletics? You alluded to this a little bit earlier, about how they work together. Your thoughts on that?*
- Hooper** I think before we went through the strategic planning, before we identified who we were, I think we were lost. We were lost. I think now our counterparts respect us, and there's more working relationships with each other. The three-legged stool, if you will, athletics, the Foundation, the Alumni Association, each one has a mission, but they're all contingent upon each other. They need to be separated as far as their respective roles, but together they are the focal point of how alumni get reengaged.

**Gill** *You feel that each one of them has a different mission...*

**Hooper** Yes.

**Gill** *...that's unique and different and can be maintained separately.*

**Hooper** Absolutely. They should maintain separate because that way each mission is effectively tracked and performed, performance-based, otherwise, some things might give to the other. But I think the three being the three-legged stool, to me, is the most effective. From all the things that I did in terms of looking at best practices, in terms of us moving to self-governing, there were reasons we did what we did, and they were good decisions. Now, it has made it more difficult from a revenue-generation standpoint and some other things, but it needed to be more difficult.

**Gill** *Generally, how do you feel about the future of the Alumni Association?*

**Hooper** I think the future of the Alumni Association is very good. You know how I feel about you, Jerry. I think you did an awesome job, and I think Larry Shell does an awesome job. I think the future, going forward, I see that Larry has put into place the right people. What he needs now is more revenue opportunities, and then get out of the way. Get out of the way. It's going to happen. I feel very strongly about the Alumni Association. I think the only thing is to always—it needs to have its place. It needs to have its leg, and it doesn't need to be messed with. (Laughs) Okay?

**Gill** *Special memories about all your times with the Alumni Association and your work, I think there would be a lot of good memories, but are there some special ones that just jump out at you?*

**Hooper** From the Alumni Association?

**Gill** Yes.

**Hooper** Oh, man! There's a bunch. I think Camp Cowboy was awesome, when we went through Camp Cowboy, when we took our whole board and did that. Remember? That was pretty fun. When we did Camp Cowboy for incoming freshmen, I got to speak several times. Loved doing that around the campfire. In fact, one year it was pitch black, and Coach Miles was speaking, Les Miles. He and I had to go out to the campfire in the pitch black. His son (I can't remember his name, the little one) had the flashlight, and he was shining it up or down. It wasn't straight. So he kept going, "Put it out in the front!" because we were just through all the

weeds or whatever, and none of the kids had come to the campfire yet. We were trying to find our way. I thought, “Great. This is fun.” That was a lot of fun. The Alumni Association, getting everybody fired up at the—I remember the Cotton Bowl and the Alamo Bowl. I can’t believe we’re going to the Alamo Bowl again. I think we were a much better team than we were back then. Just the bowl games and getting people together. Love the creative visioning that we did. Love getting in the room and hashing things out. There were a lot of special memories. It’s just hard to pinpoint.

**Gill** *Let me ask you this, Rhonda. All the time and energy that you put into your leadership roles when you had very hectic eighteen-hour days and this kind of thing, yet you put a lot of time and energy and passion into that, where did that passion come from? Why were you willing to give so much, Rhonda?*

**Hooper** I don’t know where it comes from, other than the fact that I think I came out of the womb like that because my mom and dad would counsel me. I always had a strong work ethic, and they kept saying, “You do too much. You do too much.” I mean, if I had an art project in grade school, I would always go above and beyond. My mother would keep saying, “You’re going to burn yourself out. Quit doing that.” Well, I’m still not burning myself out, but I might be if I don’t... (Laughs) Where do I have the passion, if I believe in something?

**Gill** *Why OSU? I mean, you could’ve given it to a lot of other places.*

**Hooper** Because I believed in its leadership, truly. Once I saw efforts and I saw how real people were, I thought, “This is cool, and this is going to help other people. This is going to help students. It’s going to be the bridge between young and old.” I got passionate, and the passion just went for it. When I was president, I was working long hours, and it was also one of the worst times in history for Jordan Associates. One of our associates was murdered by his estranged wife and her boyfriend. Then we lost two of our largest accounts, days apart, so I was dealing with a lot of this. I wasn’t CEO. I was EVP [Executive Vice President] at the time. I was dealing with a lot of this, work-wise, and I was doing Alumni Association every other hour. It was a tough time, but I wasn’t going to let it be obvious. You just keep plugging away, and if your heart’s in the right place, things will work out. My heart was in the right place because I felt the Alumni Association’s heart was in the right place. The motivations were there, the sense of ethics, the—I just liked the people. And because of that, that’s why I got focused on it. It’s been hard to replace. Of all the things I’ve done since, nothing’s as special in my heart.

**Gill** *A couple quick questions. You have given time to other things. Just briefly, can you share some of the organizations that you—in two hours' time? (Laughter)*

**Hooper** I am on the executive committee of the Oklahoma City Chamber. I'm chairman of the Oklahoma City Convention and Visitors Commission [Bureau]. I'm on the Oklahoma City Economic Development Trust, the Oklahoma Center for Advancement of Science and Technology. I'm on the executive committee of the Oklahoma City National Memorial and Museum, executive committee of Oklahoma Business Roundtable. I am chair-elect of Leadership Oklahoma. I am on the Board of the Oklahoma City Boathouse Foundation. That's a handful.

**Gill** *You've worn me out already.*

**Hooper** I'm a handful. I counted seventeen boards or committees or special initiatives at one point, and I was like, "What am I doing?"

**Gill** *You've been in Leadership Oklahoma.*

**Hooper** Leadership Oklahoma, yes. In fact, I'm chair-elect. I've been doing strategic planning for that. I take over this summer, and that's an organization of about 1,400 people. It's pretty cool. But, let's see. I know there's a bunch more things I'm doing, and I apologize. If I haven't had meetings recently, I don't remember them all.

**Gill** *Kind of putting one there I meant to ask you earlier, tell me about how you feel about Kathy Laster.*

**Hooper** What do I think about Kathy? I think Kathy's awesome.

**Gill** *Kathy helped lead this strategic planning.*

**Hooper** She did. In fact, she was critical to the visioning process. Kathy is a very passionate person, too. They could put Kathy and me in a room and all—yes. (Laughs) She's fantastic. We had some good people, but Kathy in particular—I mean, when you're willing to put your heart and soul into something, it's obvious. That infuses a lot of engagement, if it's smart infusion of heart and soul, if you will. There's lots of heart and soul that can be off on a tangent, but I think that was critical.

**Gill** *Let me close with this question. This is a serious question, Rhonda. How do you hope people will remember Rhonda Hooper?*

**Hooper** Oh, shoot. Gosh! I haven't been asked that question.

**Gill** *We're not ready to write your obituary yet, but...*

**Hooper** I was going to say, "Am I going somewhere?" (Laughter) Because, I tell you, I feel like today I'm going somewhere! (Laughs) Oh, shoot. I think, "Remember the person that challenged the status quo and didn't know the term 'No' and just figured out how to make it happen, and had the intestinal fortitude and the dynamics to get people involved to make a difference." How do you want to be remembered? Not that you're going anywhere, either. (Laughs)

**Gill** *This interview is for you. Anything we've failed to cover, things that were important to mention?*

**Hooper** Did I answer all the questions you had?

**Gill** *You got an A on every one of them. (Laughter)*

**Hooper** Good.

**Gill** *You're a valedictorian again! (Laughter)*

**Hooper** I think that was very comprehensive. I think what you're doing for the Library is really awesome. No better person to do that than you. Jerry Gill remembers—it's like, "Got to show you all these things." I mean, you're a historian at heart, and you were a historian in everything you did at the Alumni Association. That pays off, obviously. I guess I would sum up that OSU means a lot to me. It's not just winning on the field. It's winning in every aspect. I want OSU to be the leading institution in this state and leading other institutions on a national level. It's because we do things in a smarter and more dynamic way. It's not about just taking the easy way out. It's always challenging.

**Gill** *We hit that sixty-minute mark.*

**Hooper** Okay.

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