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Transcript of interview with Mayor Robert F. Wagner
Interviewer: Jerry Markowitz

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John Jay College, New York, NY

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Jerry Markowitz: Mayor Wagner, we are very honored that you are participating in the History of John Jay project. I wanted to start off by asking you how you came to be involved with the founding of John Jay, which was done at the end of your term of office.

Mayor Wagner: Well, let me just go back a little bit and mention the beginnings of my administration. I was elected in 1953, took over in 1954; and my first police commissioner I appointed was an old friend of mine, Frances Adams, who had been the US attorney here for the southern district of New York; [He was] a very able man who had an outstanding record. I had great faith in him, and he certainly deserved all of the support that I gave him. I remember Frank Adams.

I guess it's a little sideline on it when, prior to taking over as mayor – I was borough president of Manhattan at that time – I was announcing my new appointments. I announced Frank Adams' appointment. Of course the appointment of a police commissioner is of great interest to the press and to the people of the City of New York and, of course, to the police department as well. The reporters afterward, after they left the meeting with me – we had a little headquarters at the old Hotel Barclay at 48th and Lexington – they asked Frank Adams to go out and introduce himself to the first policeman they could find on the corner. They went out there. Frank Adams came up and said, "My name is Frank Adams." The officer said, "My name is Wagner." That was his start.

Even in the '50s, they were beginning to get some courses—educational courses—of special relationship to the police work. That was being done at Baruch School, as we know, at 23rd Street and Lexington Avenue. That was an

administrative subset of City College, and Frank Adams and I talked about the need of giving greater opportunity to members of the department to further education, to get credits for degrees. We worked these things out at that time with Baruch, and as I said to you before, that was headed by a famous dean, Dean Emmanuel Saxe. His son is a Supreme Court justice now, David Saxe, I believe.

The educational requirements for advancement in police administration, we were finding out – not only here but throughout the United States – steadily were increasing in the Baruch School program to help continue to expand. But it was not the focus of much attention, really, from the administrators of either the Baruch School or City College at that time. Meanwhile, within the police department, with my strong support, the police academy, the training of recruits and basic police work became increasingly important and our department was growing.

For budget reasons during the war period, too, because of the need to use funds in the United States for war purposes, there had been a depletion in the number of policemen we had. We were increasing that steadily at that time to get it up to the size that was important. Also during that time in my mayoralty, corrections and the corrections department became much more important; unfortunately because we needed more prisons at that time, too, as well as now. It was an expanding department, and I called on a friend of my father's, a friend of mine, a wonderful woman who had great legal training. She was a judge, a magistrate of great repute; and she was socially minded as well, understanding the problems of Commissioner Anna Cross. She was my commissioner of corrections for 12 years, all the time that I was mayor. She was highly regarded by everyone; and very importantly, she was highly regarded by the members of the corrections department.

The police academy, to get back to it, came to be headed by a very imaginative police captain, Patrick V. Murphy. As we all remember, he moved on later to become a very distinguished commissioner and a friend of mine, and then went on to Washington to greater things. During that time, too, my third police commissioner was a policeman who came up through the ranks named Michael Murphy. He was a brainy, professional policeman. He was a very good, very honorable fellow. Still, he's retired. I still see him once a year. We have a little reunion, and the two Murphys – one a police commissioner, and the director of the academy Pat Murphy – along with Commissioner Cross – came to me at the time a proposal to fund the police college at the baccalaureate level as part of the expanding City University.

I said, "All right, we'll set it up. You go and see Al Bowker who was the City University chancellor." He was a very close friend of mine to this day. He's living back here in New York now with his wife. We're glad to have them. But he did a terrific job as the chancellor, and he was very impressed with the

idea and it became a formal proposal. He submitted it to his board, which is the Board of Higher Education, we all know. It oversees the work of City University as well as some other things. It was then headed by Gustave Rosenberg, who only recently died. The board approved the creation, and it was named the College of Police Science.

Mike Murphy, the former police commissioner, who had retired, agreed to be an acting president of it to get it underway. The dean of faculty, Donald Riddle – I think you said ...

Markowitz: Princeton. Yes.

Wagner: ... it was Princeton University. I know he was a professor from New Jersey. He did a very, very fine job. We were very fortunate to get him. Then he was there for years, acting; and then Leonard Reisman, who had been a deputy police commissioner for legal affairs in the police department – a very able person – agreed to be a candidate. He was selected for the full-time job at the College of Police Science, it was at that time. I gave it my full support when City University came to submit its budget for inclusion in the city budget. In the meantime, the movements were in that, that we brought together our four-year city colleges, our community colleges, the two-year colleges, and Baruch School, and all the others, into the City University, which was a very good idea. I think people...there was concern about it at the time, but I think everybody agrees it was a good move.

[00:09:00]

Markowitz: Wonderful.

Wagner: It's an educational opportunity for so many of our youngsters. My father came over here as a little immigrant boy from Germany at the age of eight, way back in 1883, I guess. His father was a janitor in the Upper East Side, 106th Street and Lexington Avenue. He would never have had an education if it wasn't for our public school system and City College. In those days there was really free tuition.

Markowitz: Absolutely.

Wagner: From a little boy, first day at school, didn't know a word of English; had the hobnail boots of a farmer from the Rhine country in Germany; he became valedictorian of his class in public school and then Phi Beta Kappa president, head of his class and valedictorian at City College in 1898. He was always very proud of that, and I was proud of it, too. I remember in 1929 I received my answer to my application to go to Yale, and I was admitted to Yale; and I showed it to him. He said, "Congratulations, young fellow; you probably

couldn't have made City College." [LAUGHTER] I said, "I think you're probably right." [LAUGHTER]

Markowitz: Was there any controversy when you set up the City University? It was such a vision that you had, that out of these municipal colleges could be created this City University of New York.

Wagner: Yes. Well, there was a certain amount of it from the then presidents of the various four-year colleges. It was how to preserve their independence and yet be part of a bigger operation. We felt that – I think you could get better overall formulas for education by bringing them all together. They could exchange teachers. They could exchange ideas, although they were very eminent men at the time. Queens College and City College and Hunter College: All of them were excellent, and I remember I wanted to provide a chancellor to pull them together. I called them down to City Hall, and I said, "Now, this is what we ought to do." They were friends of mine. I was very helpful to them, and they to me. I said, you go back and think it out, and we'll have another meeting; and you can tell me what you feel the chancellor's powers should be. This was going to be a person over them.

They thought it out; I'm sure, consulted with each other and came back. They gave me certain recommendations and after hearing them, I said, "I didn't ask you to give me a high-class janitor who was just going to see whether everything was clean and buy some books. He has to have some power." They were very reluctant to do it, and we had a number of good people who were chancellor for a while; but the real star was Al Bowker He was the one who pulled it together, and they all worked very well with him. They all had a high regard for him, and it worked out. They were great men. A number of them – I guess they're all probably gone now. John [Maine], Hunter College, died some time ago. I just went, within the past four or five months to a memorial service for him. He was one of the stars. We had a lot of good ones – Gideon and so on – from Brooklyn College.

I think the city government here in New York, during the time I was mayor – I was most familiar with that time –the predominant portion of the budgets for four-year colleges and then two-year colleges and the graduate school ...

[INTERRUPTION]

Markowitz: You were talking about the funding of the City University and ...

Wagner: Budgets, yes, that's right; and the two-year colleges, and the graduate schools, and so on and so forth. We had a fine graduate school. It was a very important part of the city budget. It grew from year to year; and now of course the state, particularly under Governor Carey, assumed a greater financial burden for the operation. We did well, too, in working with Nelson Rockefeller when he was

governor. Well, this is a sketch, a bit of my connection with the founding of the operation which now is known as John Jay College of Criminal Justice, which plays an important role in our city.

I had a subsequent unofficial connection with John Jay through – I was chairman of the Citizens' Commission on the Future of City University, which was created back in 1972. We made important recommendations to the chancellor at City University and to the City University too, and the public officials and the public, on what we saw as the future of City University; and increased funding by the state – we asked for that, and open admissions. We supported open admissions, which was controversial at that time; but I think it gave so many more youngsters an opportunity to get an education. As we've said, we also gave so many of them an opportunity to be citizens with a higher education, which is so important to make even a greater contribution to their city. I think that's one of the unique attractions for the City of New York, as I mentioned to you about my father, he would never have been able to do that.

Now it's difficult, because education is so much more expensive, and the open admissions – and the additional money available through the state to the City University, was very important, too, for the expansion of John Jay; really a major, all-purpose college with a specialty, as we know, in social justice and police science and administration; and comparable areas of corrections and of firefighting. Many years ago I became chairman, and I suppose I still am, of an organization which you recall I organized – again, when it's needed – the Friends of the City University. I've been active for a number of years in supporting the missions and the goals and the purposes of the City University, and protect it against detractors and critics if we can.

So I feel that, in some small way, I did play a part in the success and moving ahead very, very well. Every time I go there – I'm on the advisory board, and I'm very proud of that – I get a lump in my throat, saying, well, maybe I had a little something to do with making this all possible.

Markowitz: Well, we at the college feel you had a great deal to do with making the college as successful as it is.

Wagner: Well, you, the faculty, and your president, and everybody – they're the ones that keep it going, and we're all proud of you.

Markowitz: Well, we appreciate your support. Could I ask you just one last question?

Wagner: Any question you want, yes.

Markowitz: Do you remember if the education of police officers was controversial in the 1950s and 1960s when Commissioner Adams first proposed it; and then when the idea of a college just for police was proposed ...?

Wagner: Well, it was sort of novel here; and I think when you do something that is new, there is always a little criticism of it. People get adjusted to it. There were some who said, why does a policeman have to have a college degree. Well, as time goes on, we understand it's pretty helpful to understand the problems; because the police have, as years go on, I think, a much more difficult time. Modern techniques, the education, is very helpful to them. So many of them can retire at an age where they can still make a contribution. That's a good thing. To be able to have that education as well as their pension and their experience in the department is very valuable. They've made very good citizens and administrators in various fields in the private employment area.

Markowitz: Thank you again, Mayor.

Wagner: Delighted.

[End of recorded material at 00:19:00]