

Oral History Interview with John Slobodnik, Mundelein Superintendent of Maintenance 1989,
Currently Project Director, Loyola University, Taped November 18th, 1998

Gill: This is Keith Gill for the Loyola Oral History Program class project on the history of Mundelein college, and I'm here today on Wednesday November 18th at the sky scraper building in room [number] 100 on the main floor with John Slobodnik and we're going to talk today as much as we can about the history of the building facilities and John's particular experience with the transfer and anything else that may be of interest.

[Interviewer adjusts and places the tape player between them.]

John if you could please just ... so everybody knows what's the spelling of it [your name].

Slobodnik: S-L-O-B-O-D-N-I-K

KG: what was your date of birth, just for the record if you don't mind

JS: 6/4/38

KG: Were you born and raised in Illinois?

JS: I was born in Chicago and raised for about 10 years on the West Side. [!] Went to Blessed Sacrament School, grade school.

KG: Was that a BVM school?

JS: Yes, a BVM school.

KG: So you were born and raised here in Chicago, what schools did you go to after high school and elementary, did you get a college degree?

JS: I went to two years of college, taking on courses as they came up

KG: Was there a focus to the classes, were you looking for an engineering degree?

JS: No, just going for a bachelor's degree

KG: One of my questions that I had here just for general interest, did you have any military service?

JS: No, I was too young for the Korean war and I was too old; I kept getting deferred for the Vietnam war, Conflict.

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- KG: I see. Lucky you. [Laugh]. Not having had any chance to see your resume or talking to you before hand I'm just not sure how did you come to work at Loyola or get into your field of work, what kind of jobs did you have after college, basically what led you here?
- JS: Is that very relevant?
- KG: I suppose not, if you're not [comfortable] ...
- JS: Its just, a myriad of things that got me to where I'm at now.
- KG: OK, then why don't you tell me a little bit about, or how you came to Mundelein. When did you start here and did you interview with somebody in the BVM?
- JS: Yes, I can't think of the president's name, I was trying to think of it.
- KG: It wouldn't have been Ida Gannon would it?
- JS: No, no it was the president.. I can't think of her name. She was president when the transition was being done, 89-90
- KG: Oh yeah I think I have that here actually
[searches papers]
but you weren't working here prior to getting the position you were hired in [?]
- JS: No. My introduction to Mundelein was strictly advisory; there were some people on the board who had asked me to contact the president because they were having troubles with certain elements of the buildings and maintenance to see if I could lend a hand. And just looking at what their problems were and giving them some advice, and that's always good to have, I said sure.
- KG: sort of a consultant?
- JS: Yeah. I came over here - do you have her name by any chance [the president who hired Mr. Slobodnik]?

Gill

KG: I had it in a file but for some reason it's not with me today, sorry about that.

JS: No I should have looked it up myself. I didn't think it was relevant.

KG: No wait a minute. Actually I do have it. I was looking for a different paper. Carolyn Farrell interim President?

JS: No.

KG: Mary Breslin?

JS: Breslin. That's the one. That's who it was. So I talked to Sister Breslin about their different problems and I worked with her maybe for about, I don't know two and a half or three months. Working with different aspects of maintenance and problems that they had and there were a lot of them here. And then she had asked me if I knew anybody who could take on the job of Superintendent in charge of Maintenance I guess was the title. I told her I'd look around and I looked around and I asked several people but they were pretty well entrenched. People who I really thought could do the job because there was a lot of innovative problems that they really had here and it really needed somebody with a lot of experience. Somebody who could work well with people and somebody who was a little bit innovative I guess. Because it was an all women's college. I thought about it because I was, had twenty years in the job I had and probably really ran that -
[KG gets up and closes the door to eliminate background noise]

- because the job I had really wasn't ... it kind of ran the gamut. It really wasn't challenging for me any more. And my career so to speak. Working at Mundelein trying to help out. Because I really believed in the concept of the women's college. Apparently this is the only one of its kind that was still in existence strictly for women I guess.

KG: It was one of the last that's for sure

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- JS: It was one of the last that's for sure. And I really liked the buildings. I thought they had a lot of potential [and] could be revived. And I thought I could do it some good, do the college some good by coming on board. So I had talked to sister Breslin who had struck up some little deal and in June or July of 1989 I believe that I came on board. July or something like that I really can't remember exactly when it was. And they had [counts] one, two, three, four - they had four buildings at that time and they really needed a lot of repair. And I thought that they were on a lot more solid footing financially than I was led to believe. They just didn't have the money to do it. To take care of the repairs, make repairs. The kind that they really needed to drive this [college] into the 21st century. They just didn't have it.
- KG: Was it a problem of deferred maintenance? You talked about innovations were needed or somebody with the talents to change some of these things...
- JS: Yeah, there was too much deferred maintenance here. It was just overwhelming what the problems were. They had not spent any money on the buildings for years and years.
- KG: Other than heating and cleaning?
- JS: Well, even that. They just did minimally [what was needed] to keep the places running. After about five months I kind of got the impression that the campus was not on solid footing ... and my fears came to fruition when about 8 months after I started that they ... pulled the plug on it. Which was a very sad state only because I think a lot of women were cheated out of a good education.
- KG: The students[?].
- JS: The students

Gill

KG: You went to BVM schools all through your schooling, High school as well and Junior High?

JS: No not High School, well grade schools. High school I went to [Graceland (?) High School unclear].

KG: You were attracted to Mundelein because of the BVM [unclear]?

JS: I think the BVM themselves are a wonderful group of ladies. You can't say enough about them I guess. One of the problems is that they were there to help people and they did that but I think some sight was lost that this is also a business. They might have given away more scholarships [laugh] then it was feasible.

KG: To keep the money coming in some how

JS: Sure. To keep this place running. Just to give you an example I was picked up by Loyola, as was a lot of other people and most of all the maintenance and custodial people are still working for Loyola. And I was asked to come aboard on the facilities department, which the department that I work for was called the Properties Department, and I do all the capitol projects. One of the capital projects after Loyola had purchased the property was to renovate the exterior of the sky building which is taking off the stone, looking at all the supports, and putting together the building on the outside almost piece by piece. That was a two and a half-year project and that was eight and a half million dollars. So you can see the kind of work that had to be done here. Just that alone.

KG: And that was a distinct need? Here were things falling off?

JS: Absolutely. All the limestone was spalling and cracking. The steel that all the supports were [made of were] rotting away, all the iron you had six by six inch piece of angle iron that the stone laid on and you could just take your hand and crumble it because the rust just ate it away. That's just one item. That was eight and a half million dollars. That wasn't

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more than our operating budget for 4 or 5 years I would imagine. Just to give you an idea of what the BVMs were up against. Like I say, bringing in the Mundelein colleges to the Twenty-First Century.

KG: I realize that's just one project and I'm sure there many others that could or should be done but just maybe going into that a bit further, did you feel that that kind of degradation was just the age of the building or the age of the building plus the deferred maintenance, or all that plus faulty construction to begin with?...

JS: I think that the construction to begin with was very good. It was a very sound building a very good building. Of course it was built back in the 30's. They didn't have the technology that we have today, they don't have the steel we have today and they don't have the materials we have today to preserve steel for long periods of time which we incorporated in to the new renovation of the exterior. Now this should last twice as long as it did previously. As you well know by what the Chicago papers had [recently] with all the terracotta falling off the buildings. That is what is happening here.

KG: About what is going on downtown right now on the buildings? *

*[Note: This refers to the problems recently experienced in Chicago with a building on upper Wacker Drive near Michigan Avenue and also a building next to the Schubert Theater on Monroe. Large pieces of Terra Cotta are falling off the buildings and crashing to the street below. In an effort to avoid injury to pedestrians the City of Chicago is mandating emergency surveys to identify other potential problems].

JS: Yeah what is going on downtown right now. Sure.. is what could have been faced by the sisters, you know, they did some patching but it really wasn't getting into the heart of the building you know. And the heart of the building was the supports and what held all the stone, there was just nothing there. Just to give you kind of an idea of what they faced in

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one item alone. That's just the facade; that had nothing to do with the interior or the other buildings they had...

KG: Has Loyola been just as proactive with everything else, are you and they identifying things that should be done next and what are some, I mean electricity and heating, and this is not the only properties too right there are...

JS: yeah right, Loyola owns all the properties the academic buildings that you see

KG: Yeah, well that Mundelein owned like the house over here

JS: Yes Coffee Hall, they owned Piper hall and they had another building, yes the Library, and they owned another building that was torn down. That building was really [laughs], Loyola either had to put hundreds of thousands of dollars into it or tear it down and we tore it down.

KG: That was a residence hall right?

JS: Yes that was a residence hall and I want to say Northwind or North hall or something.

KG: That was basically at Kenmore and Sheridan, at the parking lot out there

JS: Yes, yes right.. I can't remember what they called it. It was a large building. What they did back then you couldn't do today and I think the.. Ahh.. [Searches for the appropriate words indicating the dangerous situation] the city fathers were very lenient with the sisters and Mundelein College. As soon as Loyola bought all the properties boy they, the city put the hammer down and we had to upgrade the security alarms in here and fire alarms, not security alarms; I'm sorry fire alarms, fire alarms.

KG: And they had to be in code...

JS: [unclear] right now.

KG: So that is going on right now [bringing other buildings up to code]?

Gill

- JS: Well... there was some movement to renovate the interior of the sky building but that has since been put aside for the time being for reasons I don't know.. they have interests elsewhere. And Loyola is limited to the amount of money that they have, but they try to take care of the worst problems I guess.
- KG: Is the building listed as a national landmark?
- JS: well I think some of it is, like the front lobby is, the stairs are,...
- KG: Entry hallway..
- JS: and the entry hallway, Yes I think it is listed but only for the certain aspects of it
- KG: Does that change anything that does or should be done or...
- JS: No it's just Landmark status, you have to be careful of any kind of renovations that you do, you know, it has to be within the accordence of historical organizations.
- KG: They don't want you hacking holes in the front stairs and stuff...
- JS: No and that's good too, because they preserve a lot of the architecture that could be lost
[unintelligible]
- KG: Maybe back to the transfer a little bit. You said when you came here you were not aware that this was in the works or not even being thought of but it happened and...
- JS: I said my question earlier, like I say I was leaving a job with twenty years [seniority] and it wasn't because I didn't have to leave there. It was through my own volition that I left because I really thought this was a more challenging job. It offered new avenues, expanded your [my] abilities a little bit. And one of my questions of course was who wants to leave one job where you have total security to come to another job unless it's on good solid footings and I was told by Sister Breslin that we were definitely very solid, very sound organization. And I specifically brought to her attention some of the problems that

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needed addressing and the indication was that there would be no problem in getting these things done, not immediately but as time went on.

KG: So did you work with her or did you yourself come up with a kind of long-range plan?

JS: No, I came up with a long-range plan and she was my immediate supervisor and I talked to her, she was the one I had to answer to. So I came up with my own plan and organization for the maintenance and custodial people.

KG: It sounds like quite a chore

JS: [I] Tried to get more out of the people, though they were doing a very good job, some of their energies were somewhat misdirected and [I] tried to focus on certain things. And really without being able to go buy a new pump or buy new belts or new fans.. I knew that after about 5 months that I was really not told the whole length of the story. And I guess [laughs] one day we were all called together and were told that Mundelein was closing.

KG: So this was out of the blue for you basically..

JS: Yes, for a lot of people, that we were closing, that they were looking to sell the college itself and..

KG: At the time did you think that they were trying to keep it quiet because they didn't want publicity to get out or do you think that themselves they weren't sure what was going to happen?

JS: I really don't know, I really wasn't in on any of the discussions. It was totally a matter of cost I guess, I guess they wanted to graduate the last class. And I don't know internally how they worked it academically; I really don't have any idea.

KG: Once it was announced were you involved in any way in helping the transfer happen initially?

Gill

JS: No. The only thing that I worked with once Loyola was looking to purchase the property; I worked with the facilities people in trying to get my people jobs within their [Loyolas] organization. And really Loyola was very, very good at, I don't know what they did academically I wasn't in on it, but the maintenance aspect of it the people were very fortunate that they picked up all the people here at Mundelein college. And in fact the maintenance people [counts] one, two, three, four maintenance people that worked for me are still working for Loyola.

KG: And they didn't lose any seniority or retirement benefits? It carried over?

JS: No, that was one of the real, real nice things I mean some of the fellas had fifteen, sixteen years seniority and they allowed them to bring that over into Loyola which is unheard of, their vacation they were allowed to bring over too.

KG: Great.

JS: I think it was really a good deal for the employees, now how Mundelein made out dealing with Loyola [as] far as being compensated on that I have no idea.

[pause]

KG: So the exterior was one major project. You said they kind of slowed on the interior.. I was walking around here a couple of weekends ago they have a pool here, a gym... are any of those still used by Loyola?

JS: I don't know. I know the pool was at one time and I know the Gym was. I have been privy to some of the long-range plans that were - one of the long-range plans was to demo our steam plant, Loyola's Steam plant, and to put the steam plant inside Mundelein College. Take the Gym and the pool out..because this has an internal smokestack we were going to use the internal smokestack here to transfer our steam plant because the steam plant now is small. And here again Loyola is really [in] growing pains too and they have to

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enlarge their capacity for steam and air-conditioning and rather than to do it on the property that's there which is very valuable, if that steam plant wasn't there they could use that for open space for, put another building up there is..

KG: Is that the one on the corner by the Cudahy Library?

JS: Yes right that's the one with the huge smokestack. And it's really a depressing sight to see that big smokestack [laughs] right in the middle of campus.

KG: That's right next to a residence hall isn't it?

JS: Yes, Damen hall and yes.

KG: That's interesting.

JS: So one of the things that Mundelein was going to be used for was to house the steam plant which fits very nicely nobody would even know we would be in there and ...

KG: Sounds like a big project though to get everything out of there.

JS: Well that's the easy problem

KG: They'd have to go through the ceilings I guess right?

JS: Yeah, but the building would have to lay all new steam lines and condensate lines throughout the whole campus. And which that was already engineered and would have been done it's just that the money wasn't appropriated for this project. So Mundelein [the skyscraper building] really, the building itself really will at some time be almost a focal point of Loyola's expanding expansion.

KG: It sounds like they are really gathering the resources.

JS: Yes, you know, it's like everything else. You start spending too much, start spending more than you are taking in and then you have problems. This way here they take the real essential problems [and] address them. And I did most of that. I put up the new

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parking garage for Loyola and this new Gentile Center the new gym at Loyola. That's the kind of things that I am involved in.

KG: Well that's great. Those are big projects.

JS: Yeah, yeah and it is and I did the lakeshore project, all the revetment work, protection to protect the shoreline so it was a lot..

KG: So you had to work a lot closer with the city probably?

JS: [I] worked with the city, Army Corps of Engineers, barges, oil rigs...

KG: And you have a staff of people helping you that knew these parts of the work?

JS: Oh sure I hired the engineers, the architects, and the; we put out, we put together the budgets for Loyola so they know what's appropriated or the money they made, and, its interesting; big projects.

KG: Yes, it's quite a, something to look back on that you were involved in. I work at the Museum of Science and Industry and we moved a 727 airplane around and we will be moving our submarine and I get to be involved with things like that and ten years ago I look back and you know Jeez, I can't believe we spent the money to do that or that we possibly pulled this off.

JS: But then again you look at the revetment project which cost us I think two million dollars.

KG: What's that?

JS: The revetment project, the protecting the shoreline, put out the big boulders and stuff, probably cost us two million, two and a half million dollars about five years ago, today you'd spend double that doing that same project.

KG: Well those are the kinds of projects that I mean people see it happening but then they don't realize that it happened in a way. It's funny. You don't see a building as a result. It's

hard to justify, or not justify but you say, hey that was important and if we didn't do it we wouldn't have..

JS: Yes you wouldn't have a shoreline! Chicago's losing its shoreline; it's starting to erode like all the rest of the Chicago and Michigan shorelines. Everything is eroded ... we're losing [unclear]...

KG: Preventative maintenance. What's your title?

JS: Well I don't know... Project Manager, Director.

KG: Now you're involved in the whole campus, not just Mundelein area?

JS: Yes, I just happen to house my office here [sky building]. This is about the third time I've been moved around here but I just happened to because of the empty space. These floors are empty from ten on up to fourteen there's nobody there and so my boss asked me to go up there so I could keep an eye on the other floors just [to] have somebody in that part of the building; you know have some presence there.

KG: So then you don't get involved with the downtown campus or Mallinkrodt?

JS: No, Mallinkrodt I have not, the downtown campus I'm re-doing the exterior of Lewis towers right now. [We're] doing the same thing that we did at the sky building. There again you've got terra cotta falling off, bricks are all loose, and so we're checking all the supports that hold the brick up, that hold the big pieces of terra cotta up, a lot of those I have looked at have been rusted away [unclear]. And I've done some exterior job on the big kiosks up there. But my job isn't really limited to the campuses themselves. We did the job over on Hoyne Avenue and I just got done building the soccer and the baseball field for Loyola on Hoyne and Devon Avenue, just a little bit south of Devon Avenue on Hoyne on the West side there's a big soccer field.

KG: Oh, OK, I didn't know that was Loyola's.

Gill

JS: Yeah, we just got done with that a year ago.

KG: Now I did wonder where the baseball team played or softball...

JS: Yes that's where they play. I'm involved in the non-academic buildings, the investment properties that Loyola owns outside of the rental properties and that. I oversee what goes on there. I have a handle on the investment properties outside of campus.

KG: So it sounds like the transfer, in your case, was actually pretty good. You get to do quite a bit now.

JS: Yeah, I really thought that Loyola really put their best foot forward in dealing with the employees.

KG: It's great they showed the confidence in you too.

JS: I was happy that all the people that worked for me were able to land jobs because they're all good people, hard working people. And like I said, you're also working for the people from Mundelein. [unclear] But you know, the transition itself I guess it was something that was just going to happen sooner or later, but they say where were they going to come up with 8.5 million dollars just to do the renovation on the outside. Loyola's computer budget for a year was bigger than Mundelein's entire budget.

KG: For what?

JS: Operating budget.

KG: Wow, that puts it in perspective. I was going to ask, so the annual budget before and after [what was it like]?

JS: Well, I really didn't get to see any budget, I really never put a budget together. I wasn't here long enough. I had asked to see what was appropriated for line items but... [rolling eyes and shrug with thoughtful pause] there wasn't anything. ...[unintelligible] was used for either academics or book or computers, they were not with federal funded programs.

Gill

KG: Does Loyola now treat it all as one big pot or do they still sort of identify...

JS: Loyola?

KG: yeah, do they identify the Mundelein campus as sort of separate or...

JS: No. No I think its, they look at is as a part of their overall operating budget like they do everything else. Here again I don't get involved in the maintenance of these buildings or the upkeep of these buildings... about the only thing that I do is I specifically take a line item such as... if they wanted to rebuild the interior because there was a problem with it [the terra cotta] and [with] it being mandated by the city of Chicago that anything over five stories had to be inspected and so there was going to be...

KG: and that was back when that was done here, that was the mandate?

JS: Well now it is but we had already started on it and now with all this terra cotta falling off in the city they're mandating every, I think its every five years or every year I don't know what it is, that you have to put a report in with the city that you inspected, put a pair of binoculars on the ground, but I'm sure that is going to change with all the problems they're having. They'll probably have a more, better way of inspecting the facade of these buildings

KG: Is that something that you can tell from the ground and look at? Or do you have to get on a lift and push it to see if it moves

JS: No. Sure you gotta get up on a lift and hit it with your hand and listen for that hollow sound.

KG: How do you see a relationship between your personal life and religious life. You mentioned your BVM [schooling] early on ... do you see any connection is that one of the strong reasons why you came here?

Gill

- JS: Yeah, I felt very strongly about the women's college. I thought it was a great idea that the women could go someplace where they weren't in competition with men all the time where they ... where they were in competition with each other. And I thought if I had a daughter I would want her to go there because you know, there were very few places that women were able to go to.
- KG: They've talked about how Mundelein was a place for women to find their own voice and to develop themselves as leaders...
- JS: Absolutely, Absolutely without being in competition. And I just thought of helping the sisters out, I've always had a strong, I don't know if you'd call it religious background. You believe what you believe in, everybody believes in their own ways; you look out for your fellow man I guess that's being religious.
- KG: Sure. But it was definitely something other than business
- JS: Yes, I think if it was business I would have stayed where I was at.
- KG: Yes [laugh]
- JS: Because the place [previous job] was certainly a lot easier. I mean I had it [unclear] I mean that's nice I was looking for more of a challenge, you know something to bite your teeth into and make mistakes you know, people are always going to make mistakes, and that's how you learn.
- KG: Sure, and [to] be allowed to make mistakes. I don't know enough about Mundelein to cover the whole base but is there something that should be spoken about or looked into and maybe you can't talk about it but somebody else maybe should know some things before...

JS: Yeah well I could be, I really don't know that much about Mundelein college. All I do know, that the people who worked here were amazing ... [I] had a lot of respect for the sisters. Sister Ida Gannon was certainly a special [unclear]...

KG: She's quite an important person isn't she?

JS: I guess she is. I'm just speaking for myself. I really wish I had an opportunity to work with her when she was president. I think we could have got a lot [unclear]...No, I got a Mundelein sweatshirt that I bought here and I preserve it and wear it on special occasions [big smile].

KG: [laugh] That's pretty good.

JS: Its something that I'm very proud of, you don't see to many of them out there

KG: I bet. I guess there wouldn't be too many of them out there. [cough].

JS: But I guess that's about all that I could...

KG: I guess I may have another question. At some point men students were allowed to enroll and did you see, in the short time you were here, any tensions between the women and men students?

JS: No I think most of them were in weekend college. And it was a great concept, I believe it was started [Weekend College] by Mundelein and it was a good thing for them. I really didn't see that [tension] because the college really belonged to the women and the men were there to try and get whatever they could at the Weekend College. I think that was a good perspective but I think what I saw I think they [the women] were in a very good element of their own. They didn't have to look their prettiest, they didn't have to and so they could be who they were, they could wear jeans or they could wear some thing sloppy, floppy, I guess men do the same thing, you know

KG: But the pressures were not there...

Gill

JS: No it's the opposite I think [If you went to a place with all guys] you know maybe [the guys] might not shave that day or something and that's the way they [the women] were.

KG: laugh

JS: The sisters really, really made everybody feel... They really put a lot into it because some of them... Like I'd usually get here six thirty or quarter after six in the morning and already there were some of the sisters that were helping students sitting down with them helping the, I thought that was really, that was really something that you don't see today and it's really something I don't see today at Loyola ... you know, sharing jokes with the sisters... [Side one is running out of tape and recording quality is failing, the conversation is unclear].

[End of side one]

JS: One of the successes [of Mundelein] was that personal involvement with the sisters and....I'm sure everybody feels that way about it. I think the majority of the other students; they felt a very closeness together. I don't know how the faculty is [at Loyola] but I know the faculty at Mundelein were very close because if you wanted to accomplish something you had to do it as a group because you probably had to pool your funds. You had to be innovative on how to get it done. You couldn't do that by yourself. Today the department will say "I want my class room repainted, my office repainted and I've got the money in my budget to do it. Well that wasn't so back then. You had to get together with everybody so when you bought two gallons of paint you were able to paint two offices instead of one, you know. I think that the campus, the circle, I think that the staff and faculty were much closer. And I think you can see that when Mundelein has alumni meetings and that I think a lot of people come back and support Mundeleins events. The way it appears to me. Maybe I ... just can go by ... what it appears... to me

KG: Yes, well... I can see how given the challenges they had, meeting the bills and all that develops a certain amount of do what you can to get it done attitude, everyone pitches in.

JS: I think, like I say, you can still see it in your own mind, they come back here and help support all these students here and be real supportive of all the sisters you know...

KG: In a way they became mentors much more than it is today?

JS: Well I don't know what the importance of the students but I do know that they put a lot of personal time, not as a teacher, but as a person to person. In most cases somebody, I believe, I don't know this for a fact but I believe if they saw somebody kind of teetering with not understanding something it could possibly follow up as ... Like I say I come in in the morning and there would be one or two sisters sitting down with the students all the time going over whatever they were going over you know, so it led me to believe that there was a lot of interpersonal communication with the students. And that's what their life was about I guess.

KG: Yes, well we've ran out of the time that you have available. I do really appreciate your time we've spent just about 45 minutes, almost an hour really so I guess we'll wrap it up there.

End of Interview