DENNIS MILLER: On August 14th, 2007, I sat down with former Mansfield University President Rod Kelchner to talk with him about his last ten years as president. I wanted to pick up his story from the 1987 interview he did with history professor Dr. Robert Unger. At that time, Dr. Kelchner was working, both in public and behind the scenes, to save North Hall. I also wanted to get his recollections and interpretations of his final decade, which was both tumultuous and triumphant. It was a period of dreams coming true, political intrigue, and a brush with death. Here’s part one of a four-part interview.

DENNIS MILLER: So before we start, I don’t know if it’s full disclosure or if it just adds another dimension to the interview, but I start here as PR director in 1980 and reported to you. And you were the dean of development and external relations. Is that right?

ROD KELCHNER: That’s right.

DENNIS MILLER: And you’ve been retired nearly ten years now.

ROD KELCHNER: Yeah, it’s, uh, well it’s about nine and a half I guess. Yes.

DENNIS MILLER: And you look better than ever.

ROD KELCHNER: Thank you.

DENNIS MILLER: What are you doing?

ROD KELCHNER: As little as possible. [Laughter.] No, we’ve been lucky. We’ve been lucky. I try to stay active: do my healthy things, eat healthy food, think healthy thoughts.

DENNIS MILLER: Yeah. And a lot of golf.

ROD KELCHNER: More tennis than golf.

DENNIS MILLER: Really?

ROD KELCHNER: I used to be able to play tennis six days a week and it wouldn’t bother me. And now I can’t do that so I have to play golf a couple of days to rest up so I can play tennis.

DENNIS MILLER: How old are you now?

ROD KELCHNER: Seventy-three.

DENNIS MILLER: And you and Joan have, if I’m right, two homes?

ROD KELCHNER: Yes.

DENNIS MILLER: One in State College and--

ROD KELCHNER: One on Marco Island, Florida. And we spend, oh, four or five months in Marco and the rest back here.

DENNIS MILLER: Mm-hm. And you come back here to see the kids and the grandkids.

ROD KELCHNER: Right, right. That’s a strong attraction. I’d probably stay a little longer in Florida, but Grammy gets a little homesick and I do too, so we come back. Plus, you know, in, in mid-May on Marco Island, it starts to get a bit humid and it’s not as pleasant as it was earlier in the year. So yeah,
we’re, we have the best of both worlds.

DENNIS MILLER: Yeah. I want to pick up where your 1987 interview with Bob Unger left off. You were talking about your efforts at that time to save North Hall. Janet Travis, president of Mansfield State College at the time, if I remember right, ordered you to go to Harrisburg and take care of North Hall.

ROD KELCHNER: Correct.

DENNIS MILLER: Tell us the story again.

ROD KELCHNER: She was very impatient about North Hall. And probably for good reason because it was standing and it was standing there, and it certainly was an eyesore and nothing was happening. And so she simply said, “Go to Harrisburg and, and find out what’s going on and take care of it. I want that building down.” I’d always thought that North Hall should be, renovated and so when I went to Harrisburg, before I, and I really didn’t know what to do to “take care of it.” I mean, that’s a nice order, but what do you do? And so when I went to Harrisburg, I went to see Fred Noye who was, is a Mansfield graduate and at that time was in the House and was a ranking member of the house. And I had visited with Fred many times and this time I stopped and he said, “What are you doing here?” And I told him the story and he said, “Well, what do you think about North Hall?” And I said, “I think we should try to keep it.” And he said, “I agree.” And I said, “But you know, she’s told me to take care of this.” And he said, “Well.” He said, “I’ll tell you what.” He said, “I will do...” He said, “Any bill or any appropriation that develops in the House that appropriates money for the demolition of North Hall, I will stop it in the House.” And he said, “Now you go see Senator Hager – Henry Hager,” our senator at that time, “and see if he’ll do the same in the Senate.” And so I went and talked to Henry and he said, “Sure.” He said, “I think the building should be saved,” and he said, “So any bill that starts in the House or any money to destroy it, I will stop that legislation. And if Fred will do the same thing in the House, we have it tied up.” So he said, “You know, nothing is going to happen and nobody will know the difference.” And I said, “Good.” So I came back and she basically said, “Well, did you take care of that?” And I said, “Yes.” Fortunately she didn’t pursue the subject and I felt I wasn’t being too misleading. I did take care of it but I took care of it the way I thought it should be taken care of, not the way she thought it should be taken care of.

DENNIS MILLER: Yeah.

ROD KELCHNER: And from there, why, it was a matter of trying to get money appropriated for the renovation and then to get the governor to sign, actually, to get the money appropriated for the renovation, Fred Noye was instrumental in that. And he got some moneys in various bills to, uh, to save it. And, uh, Governor Thornburg, I think, was the first who signed the bills. But then Governor Thornburg left office and the money had not yet been appropriated. And as you know, in Harrisburg it’s nice to say the money’s in the budget, but there’s a lot of money in the budget for projects that never see the light of day. And to get a governor then to actually sign the appropriation was a real battle. And there was a secretary of the budget at that time who really wasn’t in favor of the project. I don’t know why, but he just wasn’t and I do know this much: that one day that secretary of the budget visited Mansfield – never revealed his identity. And that’s really not a professional courtesy. There’s sort of an unwritten rule that if uh, an official comes to the campus, they report to the president and say, “I’m here for whatever reason.” And this man appeared and went through North Hall, or at least looked around, and he decided that it wasn’t worth saving, even though the money had been appropriated, which I thought was maybe a bit unusual.

DENNIS MILLER: Right.

ROD KELCHNER: But then that secretary of the budget retired and we had another secretary of the budget, and he was equally ornery for some reason. So it was a, uh, constant struggle of going to Harrisburg and trying to find somebody who would get the governor – obviously the governor of Pennsylvania doesn’t sit around and worry about what appropriation bills he’s going to sign. I mean, that’s staff work. And that particular secretary of the budget, I would visit his office and I knew he was there; I could hear him on the telephone. It happened that I was a friend of his receptionist and she would
admit that he was there but he wouldn’t see me. And I would sit in the office and wait and wait and finally he out-waited me and I’d get tired and I’d come home. So it was a long struggle to get the money appropriated, but finally, I guess it was Governor Casey who came up and he looked at the place and I had a chance to meet with him, and he said, “Okay, we’re going to do this.” And once the governor saw it, it was kind of like Governor Thornburg; he himself was persuaded – had been persuaded that the building was worth saving. And Casey, once he saw it, Governor Casey was persuaded. But to try to work through the bureaucracy--

DENNIS MILLER: Right, yeah, yeah.

ROD KELCHNER: Was a real challenge. So then the money was appropriated and the renovation began.

DENNIS MILLER: That’s interesting. I didn’t realize that two governors were in favor of it but it was the bureaucracy underneath them that was holding it up basically.

ROD KELCHNER: Yup. Well, over the years, I found that the bureaucracy in Harrisburg became thicker and thicker and deeper and deeper. And maybe when I first went to Harrisburg I was naïve and maybe I was ignorant of the process, but it did not seem to me as though there was as much bureaucratic red tape to be cut as there was later, when I had to go. I think, over the twenty years or so that I went to Harrisburg, it just became more, more bureaucratic. So you found yourself cultivating the staff, and of course staff changes, and you hope that you can make some, some dent in that structure. But it was Fred Noye and Henry Hager who basically said, you know, “Yeah. We’ll find a way.”

DENNIS MILLER: So was it one of those guys? In your 1987 interview with Unger, it kind of ended, you said you went to North Hall and you talked with someone to put it on hold and you couldn’t say who it was at that time.

ROD KELCHNER: It was basically two people. I knew, I knew that I had Fred’s support but I wasn’t sure about Henry because we just hadn’t talked very much about it. And so when Fred said, “I’ll do it in the House…” See, at that time, Fred was, I think, the third-ranking member in the House and Henry was the president pro temporary of the Senate. And so I knew that there was no legislation going to move to appropriate money for the destruction or for the contracts to be awarded. I just knew that.

DENNIS MILLER: Yeah.

ROD KELCHNER: And I was lucky enough to have those kinds of contacts, and of course President Travis, well, she just didn’t have those contacts because she was, kind of, in and out.

DENNIS MILLER: Right. Uh, well, Fred Noye was really out front in his support of North Hall.

ROD KELCHNER: Oh yes.

DENNIS MILLER: I mean, he was up here all the time if I remember right.

ROD KELCHNER: Yes. Yeah. No question where Fred stood on that issue.

DENNIS MILLER: Yeah. A lot of other people – alumni, faculty, staff, students – also lobbied to save North Hall, but you always seemed to be at the center. And obviously, from what you said, you were active behind the scenes. You persisted for twenty years. What did North Hall mean to you that you invested so much time, energy, and emotion into it?

ROD KELCHNER: Number one, I’ve been interested in history; you know that was my discipline, for the most part, I was in history. And North Hall seemed to be the one entity – the one force – that was Mansfield. No matter with whom you spoke, no matter what the subject, when it came to Mansfield and what it represented, it seemed like North Hall was always integral in that representation. Uh, you know, you talked to the women who lived there and they had their stories. You talked to the faculty who taught
there and they had their stories. You talked to the students who ate there and they had their stories. You
talked to the guys who had the panty-raids; they had their stories. You talked to the women who
encouraged the panty-raids and they had their stories. It was very difficult to erase North Hall from this
campus. And, to me, it was a source of pride. One of the things that I tried very hard to accomplish was
to restore a pride in this university. And I thought we suffered from a kind of, uh, oh, second-class
citizenship as far as our pride was concerned. We were small; we were rural; nobody paid attention to us;
they were going to close us. You know, every time the moon changed somebody was going to close
Mansfield. And I continually look for some way to muster, uh, a feeling of pride and it just seemed to me
that North Hall was integral to that. And if North Hall was going to come down, an awful lot of Mansfield
was going to crumble with it. And I didn’t want that to happen. And I saw North Hall as the kind of
representation of this school – even though it wasn’t the first building as many people thought; it was not.
It seemed to me to be the, the only unifying force that existed. Plus, it was a great building; it was a
historic building. This business about it being the oldest steel-structured building in the country – I don’t
know if that’s true or not, but we’re close.

DENNIS MILLER: Mm-hm. Yeah.

ROD KELCHNER: And it just, too many, too many of the essential elements of this university were tied
into that building that I just felt we had to do something to save it. Plus we needed it. I mean, I… Now
Dennis, I’m not sure in the beginning if I had any idea what we’d do with it if we got it. In fact, somebody
– I think it was my good friend Ken Lee[?] – said during that process, “Well okay, if you get it, what are
you going to do with it?” Well, I think they, the library was the, uh, best, the best alternative.

DENNIS MILLER: Yeah.

ROD KELCHNER: But I think it was probably Larry Nesbitt who pushed that. I, I don’t remember how
that materialized either. It just kind of happened and when it happened the library seemed to be the right
thing. And so we needed it. But it was more important than that; it was the symbol of this university.

DENNIS MILLER: It’s interesting how all these things are tying in together, because I have interviewed
Larry and, um, it pretty much was Larry who came up with the idea. Um, and then he credits you and the
administration for allowing it to happen. So, and, and he says it, pretty much, in the same way, that it just
happened.

ROD KELCHNER: Yeah.

DENNIS MILLER: So, almost as if it were meant to be after two decades of persistence.

ROD KELCHNER: Well that is an aside. If Larry Nesbitt – and I believe it was Larry who came up with
the idea – and if you know Larry as I know Larry, you just don’t say no and then forget it because he’ll be
on your calendar for the next day and the next day and the next day. You talk about persistence. But the
work he did in the, the development of that project was yeoman work. I mean, that, that, he and, and Bill
Yost[?] did a lot of work behind the scenes that I don’t think people probably know about. Uh, but uh,
yeah, it, it was the right project and the right people and it just kind of evolved.

DENNIS MILLER: So what were your feelings when you finally cut the ribbon, when you went upstairs,
you sat down in the president’s office – I’m asking you this because you came here as a history professor
and a coach, and three decades later, you’re the president of a university in a one hundred-year-old building
that you were instrumental in saving. What were your thoughts and feelings?

ROD KELCHNER: I don’t know that you even think much about it, Dennis. I mean, uh, so much had
gone into it that, uh, there had been so many climaxes and some periods of depression… I probably…
Number one, the first time I walked in the office and it was completed, I was just awe-stricken. And I
don’t use that term lightly.

DENNIS MILLER: Right.
ROD KELCHNER: I had no idea it could be that beautiful. What they had done far exceeded any expectation I had. So you say, “How did you feel?” I was awe-stricken, I was humbled, I thought, “Jeez, how did this happen?” You know. And, and then I realized I probably wouldn’t have long to enjoy it. And as far as, you know, the career, you think more about those things more after you retire than you did at the time because there was always a calendar to maintain, there was a project that you had to go into. You didn’t have time to sit around and say, “Oh gee, isn’t this wonderful?” Because if I start to do that, Mrs. Herbst would come in and say, “Rod, we have to do this today.” And then away we would go.

DENNIS MILLER: That would be Marlene Herbst, your secretary for years and years.

ROD KELCHNER: Yeah, yeah. And my right hand. And left hand.

DENNIS MILLER: Yeah.

DENNIS MILLER: This concludes part one of a four-part interview with Dr. Rod Kelchner, president of Mansfield University from 1984 to 1998. Please tell others about it and feel free to use it your own history projects.