



Oral History Interview of Bill Coughlin

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Interview Summary

Bill Coughlin, former director of admissions at Suffolk University, discusses his forty-three career at the university. Coughlin discusses his early life, including studying at Holy Cross and Boston University, and his time as a high school teacher in Connecticut. He describes the growth of Suffolk University from 1966-2010, including aspects of the university's culture, the evolution of the admissions department, reaching international students, plus the introduction of residence halls and other additions to the Suffolk campus. The interview concludes with a discussion of Coughlin's life post-retirement.

Subject Headings

Coughlin, Bill

College student development programs -- United States

Suffolk University – History

Universities and colleges – Administration

TRANSCRIPT BEGINS

JIM NELSON: Good afternoon. My name is Jim Nelson. I'm the retired director of athletics emeritus at Suffolk University. Today is Tuesday, October 29, and I'm here this afternoon with my longtime colleague and very good friend, Bill Coughlin. Bill has served the university, very well as the director of admissions here at Suffolk. And Bill, you came to Suffolk in the fall of 1966. Tell me about your time before Suffolk, your high school, college, and what employment you may have had before you arrived on campus.

[00:00:45]

BILL COUGHLIN: Good afternoon, Jim. Nice to be interviewed by you. I feel safe. Anyway, Brockton High School, Class of '47. Holy Cross, four years. And when I left the Cross, I went to Boston University to get a Master's in education. And at that time, the Korean War was on and the draft was right there and picked me up. And so, I had two years of army service during the Korean conflict.

JIM NELSON: Thank you for that.

[00:01:18]

BILL COUGHLIN: Oh, welcome. And was able to become a sergeant, which is rather quick. But I was in the office where they made promotions, so it was nice. And from there, I went to Putnam High School as a social studies teacher for three years.

JIM NELSON: Putnam High School located where?

BILL COUGHLIN: Connecticut, right over the border line. I came up to Sharon High for another three years. Here it was English and social studies. And from there, I went to Milton as a guidance counselor. It was a time where they were giving money for people who became counselors, and so I was able to participate. Did a lot more work at BU with their certificate for advanced study. And from there, I went to Canton High School and was a director of guidance

there. And I got a call to come in to interview for a position at Suffolk. That was in '66. And who was there waiting but you, Jim. The two of us were hired the same afternoon.

JIM NELSON: Yes, we were. I remember it well.

[00:02:33]

BILL COUGHLIN: Do you mind if I tell the story of the judge that said, “Did you play for Bob Cousy at BC?” and Jim said, “I did.” “Mr. Flannery, I think he has all the credentials.” And you did. As a matter of fact, I know that this is your 53rd year at Suffolk, and I think you're the longest employee at the moment. I was director of admissions for 29 years, and then I stayed on part-time for another fourteen. So, I actually fully retired in 2010. It was a great, great – you could say “moment,” but it was my life. It was beautiful.

JIM NELSON: And who made you aware that there was going to be a position open at Suffolk University?

[00:03:24]

BILL COUGHLIN: Well, I think it came through the president's office to Brad Sullivan, who was the dean of admissions at that time. I got the call from him. I had positively no interest in coming to Boston and leaving Canton High and that area, but it was the right move for me.

JIM NELSON: So, Brad was the dean of admissions, and you became director of admissions at that time.

BILL COUGHLIN: Yes.

JIM NELSON: You referenced us sitting there with then-judge Johnny Fenton, Sr. and we all know that his son, Johnny Fenton, Jr., who later became the dean of our law school and a professor. But you also had an association with young John Fenton. And what was that?

BILL COUGHLIN: Being his roommate at Holy Cross didn't hurt my chances of getting employment at Suffolk. I guess if they called you, you had good qualifications, which – but that was wonderful. Jack was my roommate. But you know, he spent more time driving back home on weekends than I could imagine. But he was a loyal friend.

JIM NELSON: Right. And another great stalwart, certainly, of our university. And you said that you were a little reluctant to leave Canton High School on that. And what was the deciding factor that made you make the decision to come here to Beacon Hill?

[00:05:15]

BILL COUGHLIN: Well, at ten o' clock that night, we were both interviewed. I got a call from the judge. He said, "We're going to hire you, and you will be starting August 1st." That was the end of that. No more time to say I'm not coming, or any time. But it was good.

JIM NELSON: And again, what were your years of employment here at Suffolk?

[00:05:37]

BILL COUGHLIN: Well, I guess it added up to 44 years. '66 to 2010.

JIM NELSON: 2010, okay. And your first job title?

BILL COUGHLIN: Here was director of admissions. And it was kind of an unusual situation because I was the only person for a year and a half that was doing admissions, and the admissions were for undergraduates and graduates, day and night. So, the first year, I had approximately 5,000 applications alone. And at night, I'd be taking 25 to 30 folders home on the train to Stoughton, and people knew and they had a table for me where I could do my work and get my folders done. And somehow, it worked out, but that was kind of a surprise. I should've asked, is there anybody else working in admissions? But it was fine.

JIM NELSON: And was it for just undergraduate?

BILL COUGHLIN: No, graduate, too, day and night. Everything.

JIM NELSON: But not the law school.

BILL COUGHLIN: Not the law school, correct.

JIM NELSON: Okay. Do you recall who the law school director of admissions was?

[00:06:58]

BILL COUGHLIN: I was thinking John Deliso, but that was just a little bit later.

JIM NELSON: I think he came a little bit later on, not at that time. And who did you report to?

[00:07:08]

BILL COUGHLIN: I reported to Dean Goodrich. And he was the liberal arts dean. And throughout the years, it was usually the Dean, Ronayne, somebody else in liberal arts. The business school didn't seem to get involved in the admissions direction, and they just let it be the way it was.

JIM NELSON: And you mentioned about – you were the admissions office as the one individual. What about individuals that you hired to assist you to be associate or assistant directors of admissions? Can you tell us a little bit about some of those individuals?

BILL COUGHLIN: Yeah. It never was more than four of us when I was there as the director of admissions. The first hire was a gentleman by the name of Ed Saunders. Ed was at Xaverian High at the time. He'd been at BC – no, not Ed was strictly Xaverian. And he was a powerful man. He didn't really seem to play the role of an admissions counselor. But he really knew the kids. He knew how to work with them, and he was quick, and he was bright. So, I was very lucky Ed was with me for a number of years, number of years. Nancy Fine came along as a graduate of Suffolk, and she pretty much was the person responsible for the high number of transfer students we were able to enroll. She made all kinds of legal contracts with two-year

schools, telling how many credits they'd get for certain courses. It was a good job; she did a good job at it.

JIM NELSON: And what year into your tenure was that, the first year? Second year? Third year that you were here that Nancy came on?

BILL COUGHLIN: No, I'm thinking it probably was after she graduated, six or seven years.

JIM NELSON: Okay. Because she just recently retired from the university after an equally storied career here.

[00:09:36]

BILL COUGHLIN: She did a perfect job on transfers. She knew what she was doing and she did it. I was very proud of her.

JIM NELSON: And other individuals that later joined you?

[00:09:50]

BILL COUGHLIN: Well, we had a young lady by the name of Martha Holmes who was very, very nice to have. And two things that happened in the admissions world: one was visiting high schools, going to college fairs and things of that. I was completely imbued in knowing counselors in a 40-mile radius, and so was Ed Saunders. So, we could call any high school, any place and make contacts, which we did. And that was a good part of it. And so most of the counselors that we hired later on could do that. They could make good contacts. And we had – as I say, it was never more than four people here and there that we had along the way. Another thing that I wanted to specialize was interviews. I wanted the counselors to be good interview people, happy to do it, meet the students, and not to find it a burden. So, we developed a system where we were always open for any interview at any time.

And I would say if there was a high point in my life at Suffolk, it would probably be the interviews that I would conduct for the students who wanted to have them. There's one incident

where I remember a gentleman who was in the waiting room, and I said, “Come down, go into my office. I’ll be right back.” And I came back and he was sitting at my desk in my chair. And I was saying to myself, well, I’m certainly not going to embarrass him. So, I interviewed him from his seat. And he was a good candidate, and I never, to this day, understood what made him decide to take over the office.

JIM NELSON: And you accepted him.

[00:11:42]

BILL COUGHLIN: I did as a matter of fact, yeah. He was good.

JIM NELSON: Another individual that comes to mind: your good friend Joe Walsh. He came later on too?

[00:11:54]

BILL COUGHLIN: Yes, thank you for mentioning it. I couldn’t have done it without Joe, as I say about others. But Joe was the one that had been hired at BC, just as he interviewed for us. But for some reason – and it was a good reason – he came to us. Talk about knowing the counselors. He really knew them. He had been at Arlington Catholic before he went to BC, and then to Suffolk. And his forte was international students. He was amazing. He was in Madrid. He spoke Spanish from his experience with the Peace Corps. And so, in a matter of a year or so, 130 students were coming in from Spain and internationals, so a whole new picture of internationals was opened up, primarily because of – I would say Joe Walsh. He had a fantastic way with students. They liked him. It was good.

JIM NELSON: At the time that you and I started, on the same day, Suffolk was just the one building, the Archer building. And then that following year, they opened up the Donahue Building.

BILL COUGHLIN: It was the fall when I arrived. Yes. I started in August, but in September they made the change.

JIM NELSON: And I believe you had a number of different office locations during your tenure. Do you recall a number of those different spaces?

BILL COUGHLIN: I counted it recently, and I was up to five different changes. One time, we went across the street to the building where Ms. Mac used to reign. And that was very close corners. And then we moved up the hill to another one.

JIM NELSON: Across the street meaning --?

[00:13:58]

BILL COUGHLIN: That little building [simultaneous conversation]

JIM NELSON: I believe that might've been 56 Temple.

BILL COUGHLIN: That's right. You got it right.

JIM NELSON: One of the few brownstones that Suffolk owned on their property.

[00:14:15]

BILL COUGHLIN: It was awfully crowded. It was not really pleasant, but it didn't last too long.

JIM NELSON: Well that's interesting you should mention that it wasn't very pleasant because that's where the athletic office was located.

BILL COUGHLIN: Oh, that's right [laughter].

JIM NELSON: I'm not taking that personally, even though some of those uniforms probably needed to be cleaned on a few occasions.

BILL COUGHLIN: I'm not sure where you went from that point, were you in a new place?

JIM NELSON: Nine different locations, so similar to you, we moved around. And after you moved out of 56 Temple, do you recall your next location?

BILL COUGHLIN: What was it, across the street there, up the hill, and just a big building?

JIM NELSON: The Sawyer Building?

BILL COUGHLIN: No, it was on the left there. I don't know.

JIM NELSON: Well at one time, the university had moved over to 100 Cambridge Street. Or, some of the administrator's offices. But I don't think you were over there.

BILL COUGHLIN: No. There was – I think of Jim Woods when you talk –

JIM NELSON: Tell us a little bit about Jim Woods.

[00:15:27]

BILL COUGHLIN: He was there when I arrived.

JIM NELSON: In what position? What position did he have?

[00:15:33]

BILL COUGHLIN: He was the director of placement.

JIM NELSON: That's correct.

BILL COUGHLIN: He had been an FBI agent in Boston. Some said he was in charge of all the programs and the people in the FBI in Boston. He wasn't an active FBI, but what a man. He had a lot of class and courage, and you might say civility. He gave it all to Suffolk and it was great.

And for young people coming in, he was the man. Plus, yourself, you know, so pay attention. Jim Woods, great, great guy.

JIM NELSON: You mentioned Jim Woods. And certainly, how about not only in admissions, but some of your other former colleagues that you had both a wonderful professional and personal relationship with?

BILL COUGHLIN: Well, I did list Tom Fulham. He was a real wonderful man.

JIM NELSON: The former president who succeeded John Fenton.

[00:16:50]

BILL COUGHLIN: That's right. President Fenton five years, and then Tom five. Tom was the president, and it was kind of unusual. He didn't have a PhD, and I first said he didn't need it. He was a businessman who was into the fishing industry. A great mind. And he was the kind of person that I would go to occasionally. I said, "President Fulham, this is bothering me." He'd always have a nice, quick answer. He was a businessman. He was bright. He was a great president. I'm glad we had him. And of course, Frank Flannery, who was at your interview and mine.

JIM NELSON: And he was the vice president treasurer.

[00:17:38]

BILL COUGHLIN: And sometimes he filled in as president. That happened occasionally.

JIM NELSON: On two occasions.

BILL COUGHLIN: Very modest, bright guy. You could always hear him say, "Well, the budget is balanced," and how he did it, no one knew. But in those younger years, we always felt that Frank Flannery was one of the very – he watched things very well. Judy Minardi was a lovely person in placement.

JIM NELSON: Human Resources.

BILL COUGHLIN: Human Resources, yeah. She was a person who knew she was compassionate, and enjoyed her a lot. Of course, Joe Strain. Been there so many years.

JIM NELSON: Associate Dean.

BILL COUGHLIN: Yeah. And I had heard of him because he used to be involved in debating and public speaking, and always he had a contest at Suffolk each year. But he was a solid Suffolk-ite. And I'm not sure of this, but I knew he flew a helicopter, and I think it was in Korea or World War II. Do you remember that? Which one?

JIM NELSON: I do, yes.

[00:18:45]

BILL COUGHLIN: It couldn't have been Vietnam because he would've been too old for that.

JIM NELSON: No, his career, I recall seeing a photo of him with his flight uniform on.

BILL COUGHLIN: So, there are a lot of others. I got your name right here Jim. [Coughlin points to his notes] [Laughter] actually, I will say because we have good friends. You keep things going. I don't know how you do it, but it's 53 years, I figured it out. And you have done so much more than just be athletic director and the different teams that you took care of, plus teaching. One day I went by and I said, "He's teaching a class. He's teaching a class? How can that be?" It turned out it was the right thing.

JIM NELSON: My predecessor, Charlie Law, taught a course, the theory and practice of athletics. And when he retired, Dean Ronayne asked if I would continue teaching that course. And I did not want to because I was going to be athletic director, but I'm so pleased that he did give me that opportunity.

[00:19:52]

BILL COUGHLIN: It was a good match for both of you, and all the events that you helped run were good. And I'm just wondering what's next for you. You did a good job, and I more than congratulate you.

JIM NELSON: We also had another close friend, Lou Connelly. And tell me a little bit of your relationship with Lou, who was the public affairs director, and also was part-time sports information director.

BILL COUGHLIN: I can always remember he was being interviewed by Mr. Flannery and I went over and said hello to him. And it got out that he had been at the World Series when the Red Sox won, and he was the journalist who wrote the lead in the headline. We thought that was pretty good. Lou brought with him the journalistic abilities that you'd find in a good newspaper, and he said he would apply to Suffolk, and he did. He seemed to like it here more than the other stuff.

JIM NELSON: Very much so. He had five daughters who graduated from Suffolk. And I think three of them also went to our law school as well.

[00:21:11]

BILL COUGHLIN: That was amazing. That was a great – they were wonderful ladies, all of them.

JIM NELSON: Do you recall the story of when Johnny Fenton, Sr. was interviewing him for the position, and you mentioned about the World Series was going on. And John Fenton, after he interviewed Lou, said, “Do you know where there are any tickets for tonight’s game?”

[Laughter]

[00:21:41]

BILL COUGHLIN: The other judge he'd call me, and sometimes on a Friday afternoon if things were quiet. And he'd say, "Billy." And I'd say, "Yes, Judge." He said, "I don't know if you've heard this before or not." And he'd tell me a story which I had heard three times before. And I'd say, "No, I never heard that one before, Judge." So, he taught me how to repeat the same story over and over as if it were new. You were a lot like that yourself, Jim.

JIM NELSON: My understanding is although I was not directly privy to those Friday afternoon lunches that occurred down at the 99 – tell me a little bit about those and who was attending and who, if anyone, came back to work after lunch.

BILL COUGHLIN: Well, it would be about five or six. It could be Lou Connelly, it could be Frank, and it could be Ed Saunders. We had a group administration. Jim Woods would be there. And once in a while, the president would come, President Fenton. And we felt we had a good group. We could get things done very easily, sometimes over asparagus, whatever it was. But yeah, sometimes one or two might take too many sombreros. But we'd lead him to the right school, at least, on the way back. That was rare!

JIM NELSON: In admissions in those early years, what was the high school demographics in terms of Catholic schools or noted public schools? What did you focus on?

[00:23:32]

BILL COUGHLIN: No dormitories when I first came. And so, we had to look to a 40-mile radius. And the Catholic schools, in my particular day, third, fourth, fifth year, are monitored 40% of the freshman attendees. And some people questioned, why are you doing that? And I said, "That's where the students are." And the Catholic schools wanted a small, private – they didn't want the state schools at the time. So, we had an advantage. So, we'd have about 400 freshmen, and then later on it was 200 transfers. But the 400 freshmen came from an area that was 25 – some schools were fifteen. We knew the schools that we could depend upon for high numbers. So, it was just concentrating on that area, and it worked. We never were under-solicited. We had enough.

[00:24:36]

I remember my first year here, I went to Dean Goodrich. And I'd only been here since August, and he said, "Well, how many people will you expect for this September to enroll?" And I said 635. I don't know what I was talking about, but we got exactly 635. Something was happening that gave me the right numbers, but he thought I was pretty clever.

JIM NELSON: Interesting. And five to 600 was, at that time, what you were looking for?

BILL COUGHLIN: Yeah, exactly.

JIM NELSON: Okay.

BILL COUGHLIN: That would be daytime, and of course, evening would be a different group of people. They really were just as many as we could get. We'd probably get couple of hundred evening.

JIM NELSON: And on the evening students, what was the philosophy in terms of going out and recruiting evening students? Did they come to you, or was there a certain cohort that you would go and look at?

BILL COUGHLIN: No, you said it. They came to us. They saw Suffolk as having a reasonable tuition, and most likely the business courses. And it was not really recruiting, but the word would be spread among themselves.

JIM NELSON: And our location at that time, adjacent to the statehouse. We did have a number of people from the statehouse and others that worked at the statehouse coming to take classes and to pursue a degree. But were they mostly looking for law degrees at that time or not?

[00:26:31]

BILL COUGHLIN: I can remember – I don't exactly remember the names – but I remember about six representatives came undergraduate. And they'd come into the office and we'd be sure

to help them exactly the way they wanted, yeah. Speaking of the statehouse, one of the beautiful, wonderful things that I enjoyed about Suffolk – at noontime, I would take a walk in any direction – Boston Commons, Filene’s, Jordan’s, Statehouse – go down towards the Celtics emporium down – what was it called, North Station, right? Yeah.

[00:27:11]

It was wonderful. Down to the river. I used to jog occasionally, at noontime just go down to the river. So, it’s a beautiful location. And I think people loved it here, always kind of out of the way. It was the center of Boston. It was good.

JIM NELSON: And during your tenure, Suffolk began a comprehensive initiative in recruiting students from overseas. Now, you mentioned Joe Walsh, so certainly as the facility for being able to speak Spanish because of his years in the Peace Corps. How did our emphasis on international students come about? And especially so, we were a campus without residence halls.

BILL COUGHLIN: You got that right. All of a sudden, Joe had made the inroads and the college took over and became one of our schools or campus in Madrid. But the fever was there, and they had these tours that went through Europe, through the Far East, that were already established for places where they did have dormitories and so forth. And one of the biggest surprise – the great things of being at Suffolk was I was sent to Moscow, which didn’t seem as though when I came up for that interview that I was going to be ever in Moscow.

JIM NELSON: Moscow, Maine, maybe.

[00:28:40]

BILL COUGHLIN: [laughter] There's a scholarship for people for Moscow. And I interviewed 20. So that was just a nice thing. Marguerite Dennis, who had joined us in the eighties, '83, four, five, was very, very active in the international programs. And we all kind of were part of the team. And not only Moscow and Europe – I went to Hong Kong, and I saw places and visited places I loved to be. And that was good. So, all of a sudden, the international flavor is there and

students are coming. At some point, it was 12% of our population. And then of course, the dorms opened, and that was the reason we could keep up with it.

JIM NELSON: Right. That was a remarkable shift in the philosophy of our university.

[00:29:41]

BILL COUGHLIN: You know, a lot of things, they bubble. I wasn't always sure where they bubbled – from whence they bubbled. But they were – all of a sudden, we were into dorms. Good. International transfers – so we sort of – I compared coming here to a sunflower that was blooming in one spot. Then all of a sudden you got 15, 16 different sunflowers in the central part of Boston. I think it was wonderful.

JIM NELSON: If I recall, at one point, we had a number of students from Nigeria coming to the university. And then we opened the campus in Senegal, West Africa. And were you a part of that?

BILL COUGHLIN: No, I was not in Senegal. But a great number of Nigerian students were coming in for interviews and applying. And the reason was things were okay in Nigeria at the time, and as you know, later on they just went overboard and it all ended. They were not able to send in any of their students. So anyway, some of the students spoke English. Some of them were very persistent, and if I had to reject one, they'd come in and say, "Mr. Coughlin, do you want to be my brother?" I said I do, but I can't accept you. And I had a little pad that said "no" on it. And I said, "I'm going to show you the problem here. Are you going to be accepted? No." "Well, Mr. Coughlin," they would go on. I'd have to give sometimes three or four no's to get the – they were persistent, but they didn't have the credentials.

JIM NELSON: I see, okay. And some of the other personalities at the university, your long-time tenure allowed you to interact with other departments and department heads as well. There are some individuals that you recall for various reasons?

[00:32:04]

BILL COUGHLIN: Yes. We would get to know the faculty as best we could, and it was fun. I'm trying to think of the professor that was in history, and he was just a wonderful person.

JIM NELSON: John Cavanagh?

[00:32:21]

BILL COUGHLIN: Well, he was fun. He was good, John Cavanagh.

JIM NELSON: And then there was Professor Hartman.

BILL COUGHLIN: They always said Hartman – his highest mark was a D plus. He frightened most of his students, but he was good.

JIM NELSON: He was known for giving triple F's if I'm not mistaken.

BILL COUGHLIN: You kind of got him at the no, no, no, F, F, F.

JIM NELSON: And what was the relationship between your office, the admissions office, and the various academic offices? Were they able to assist you as far as recruiting students, or were you pretty much out there on your own?

[00:33:13]

BILL COUGHLIN: Yeah, we were on our own. There were times where a couple of faculty members would help out on a college night. But we found that going to high schools and college fairs – we would do that. And we had the ability. And so, we didn't really need to call. I'm sure that they would've volunteered if we asked them, but we didn't.

JIM NELSON: And who would you consider to be our competition, other colleges that students would come down to making that final decision?

[00:33:53]

BILL COUGHLIN: Well, generally it was between Suffolk and a state school. At one time it was Boston State, but they joined over at UMass Boston. Bridgewater. There's a chain of state schools. There were at least five in the area. That was it. We didn't have to compete with Harvard. We were sort of a specialty type school, to be honest. What are they, in the center of Boston and good educated. We were sort of a surprise school to most people. But we didn't really figure we had competition.

JIM NELSON: And any particular individual who you'd say had the most influence on your career here at the university?

BILL COUGHLIN: If I found a person seemed to be somewhat pleasant, that was my hero every time. I try to avoid people who are a little bit proud and without gentility. You fit into that category [laughter] you set me up again.

JIM NELSON: [laughter] looking for someone else.

BILL COUGHLIN: No, in relation to the faculty, first of all, you could deal with the deans any time you wanted to. And there was very little – it was a very friendly atmosphere, I thought. And there were times where you might've been questioned on a situation, of course. And you figured out how to solve that problem. But those times were rare. There was no – I didn't feel any pressure on me or my staff. We just had to get through the applications and do them well. We could always get the right number, and it was good that you didn't have a lot of pressure. Admissions can be a terrible place now for the pressure.

JIM NELSON: I would think, I would think. And what were some of the challenges that you encountered during your tenure here at the university, and how did you overcome those?

[00:36:26]

BILL COUGHLIN: Well, starting out alone, rather than challenges, I always felt that what I got was a benefit, an opportunity. The challenge was to get enough students in different categories, be it undergraduate, transfers. Transfers – it was a challenging situation, but I had the right

people to make it work out. Nancy Fine. And everything we did was small. We were not ever, as you call, big time. It was, do a small situation and do it right.

JIM NELSON: And what did you enjoy the most about your work here at Suffolk?

[00:37:21]

BILL COUGHLIN: First of all, the travel into Boston. I used to go to South Station from Stoughton, and I would walk up the hill. And I just enjoyed seeing people and watching them. And it was just action here. At noontime, it was more interesting things to do. And the work itself – interviewing, as I mentioned, I liked that. Doing the folders was a good challenge. That was a good challenge. And overall, I just felt comfortable.

JIM NELSON: You speak about and you did mention before about the folders, bringing those home on that. What were you looking for in a student that made you feel that they would be a success here at Suffolk?

BILL COUGHLIN: Yeah. Well, all admissions offices will set standards and maybe get them and maybe not. We knew that our school was a fully accredited university, but we also knew that we weren't going to get the valedictorians of the world. So, I say we put our sights on what would be considered a likely candidate who could do the work at Suffolk. Now, that is judged sometimes by the grade point average, so we certainly would be looking for somebody who was at the C plus, B minus area. A lot of schools would never consider a C plus, but we depend upon the subject you got it in, English or whatever, and also you had to use the SATs. The SATs were a burden because everybody was so nervous about them.

[00:39:19]

But we kind of looked for somebody in the 400 area. We weren't saying you had to be five and six. And so, if you could start that premise at 400. What you really would do would be look for reasons to accept them, not to reject. Yeah. And it worked, it worked. We really weren't always positive of the statistics and so forth, but what happened was it generally worked. And schools

are going to have so many students who leave. And I don't know the exact statistic, but probably of 100 students who came to Suffolk, 65 to 70 would graduate, and others would not be there.

JIM NELSON: And what were some of the institutional changes that you witnessed over the years here at Suffolk, from coming back in 1966 with one building on that here at the university? What changes did you really notice and applaud and appreciate?

[00:40:33]

BILL COUGHLIN: I really just thought of – oh, what's happening now? Oh, good, they're doing this program, or they're putting up a dormitory. It's just seeing that somebody and some other people were kind of clever and deciding what to do and what not to do. Mr. Flannery would be one of those people that was not afraid to put up a dormitory or work on other professors bringing in courses. The business people seemed to be more adjusted to establishing more of the things you'd want. Liberal arts is still sort of – like liberal arts, they have majors and they sort of stick with it. But I really wasn't always sure how all these things started.

JIM NELSON: And what do you consider to be your most important contribution to the university?

BILL COUGHLIN: Well, I don't think I can answer that question because I just am satisfied if I do the job that I'm supposed to do and it's successful. There are too many people that are altogether – there's a total contribution. I don't know how I'd fit into that group.

JIM NELSON: Is there one or several memorable experiences while working at Suffolk that you recall?

[00:42:08]

BILL COUGHLIN: Well as I mentioned, going to Hong Kong and Moscow was just – it was so much against – not against, but I never expected this little school on the hill who would be sending me and others. That was a great achievement. One of the things at the beginning is they used to have a Christmas party, and everybody would be there, all the families. Everything was

very nice. So generally, it was a nice place to be, nice place to work. That was the school's accomplishment.

JIM NELSON: You mentioned about those holiday parties and dean's receptions. And also, there were gatherings of faculty staff and administration for the various picnic events. And one of them I think I recall, and maybe you recall, that occurred. You have an idea what I'm referring to?

[00:43:27]

BILL COUGHLIN: I still can feel it.

JIM NELSON: Why don't you tell us a little bit about that?

BILL COUGHLIN: UMass Boston having a good field day, and we were playing softball. Let's see, Jim was at bat. And I was the pitcher. And I lobbed him just down his alley, and Jim can't not swing at these.

JIM NELSON: Who's this Jim you're referring to? Would that be me?

BILL COUGHLIN: Yes, Jim Nelson. My idol.

JIM NELSON: And then what happened?

BILL COUGHLIN: He hit a ball 100,000 miles an hour that hit me in the chest. Whew. And it was a good hit. The only thing is I thought I was going to die. He didn't like that at all, in the sense that he had done that to me. He was very kind. The next day, Monday, I went down and I showed him what was left of the imprint on my chest. He was very sorry. But I have to tell you Jim, there was no injury beyond that looksee.

JIM NELSON: I'm very thankful that there was not an injury, Bill, because I do remember that so very well. And I thought I had hit you right over the heart area, and I thought I had killed you

at one point [laughter] you were down in a heap. And that was the last time I would participate in a softball game because of that.

[00:45:06]

BILL COUGHLIN: I saw the look in your face. I knew you were serious. But the truth is, I don't know why, I don't know the reason that it left an imprint but no real pain, and my heart is feeling good. Thank you, doctor.

JIM NELSON: Given your noteworthy years at Suffolk admissions and extensive knowledge in the field, what advice would you provide to the current Suffolk administration?

[00:45:40]

BILL COUGHLIN: I think things, but I never relay them to the authorities.

JIM NELSON: But your own personal thoughts.

BILL COUGHLIN: Yeah, I know that generally, people don't listen to underlings, what they have to say.

JIM NELSON: But this is your opportunity.

BILL COUGHLIN: It's hard to imagine the Suffolk of Joe Strain, where he, as I say, had debates and speeches. And we knew about him when we were in high school. I remember this Joe Strain, how all of that evolved. I guess you could see Suffolk grow. Some places like Harvard, as we know, you don't know where they are. We always knew where we were.

JIM NELSON: You mentioned about where we were. Where are we, in terms of our niche here in Boston, Massachusetts and beyond? In your opinion.

[00:46:53]

BILL COUGHLIN: Well, a lot of schools – about two or three schools have closed in the area, and mostly two-year schools. So here you are in Boston. You can look at Emerson – well, that’s not what we are, we’re quite different from that. You look at Curry out in Milton. Suffolk is – oh, I know the reason. When we talk to people at the beginning, they said, “Oh, yeah, Suffolk is a law school.” Always, “Suffolk is a law school.” Why that? Because everybody knew that. But it was good. At least you know the word Suffolk. And as we “South Folk” I think that’s what it means, right? And from there, we could probably go farther. But that’s the key: how do you have a school so small, yet at one time, the law school was said to be the largest law school in the country?

[00:47:52]

Because it had a night school and a day school, and it was unusual for a law school to have more than a day. So, Suffolk grew – oh, Suffolk Law. And then undergraduate. All these things pop up. No, there's no school like it.

JIM NELSON: And what's kept you engaged since your retirement? I believe you were a runner for many years, and then you were a bicycle rider.

BILL COUGHLIN: I ran for about 20 years, jogging as I mentioned. At noontimes, I’d leave to go down to the river. I do a lot of reading. I read, read, read. I do a lot of housework, helping out. I’m just kind of enjoying retirement. We have five grown children who –

JIM NELSON: You and your wife, Marion.

BILL COUGHLIN: Marion, my wife. And then nine grandchildren, two great-grandchildren. Anybody who was grandchildren knows what that means. It’s a lot of business and good times. Yeah, I am satisfied with retirement. And you will be, too.

JIM NELSON: Did you seek any employment after your retirement from Suffolk?

[00:49:25]

BILL COUGHLIN: No. As I say, it's been nine years. I do help out a little bit at one of the local elementary schools. My daughter is a principal, and she often calls upon me to do something. At least keep a little education on the forefront.

JIM NELSON: And tell me, what does the future hold for Bill Coughlin?

[00:49:58]

BILL COUGHLIN: I thought something dropped on my head. I've thought of that for centuries, but it doesn't come out right. To be whom I am at the moment, and not to cause any trouble to anybody.

JIM NELSON: Recently, the university started an initiative called SURF: Suffolk University Retired Friends. And certainly, you have a host of those friends over the years. Is that something that you might think about in terms of continuing a relationship with your former colleagues?

BILL COUGHLIN: Probably not. Not that I had my fill, but somehow, I stay around the area in Stoughton. I don't get involved with coming to Boston.

JIM NELSON: Coming in town with the traffic issues that we face?

BILL COUGHLIN: Yeah, and today you were very kind to get me here, and I thank you.

JIM NELSON: No problem. Is there anything else that you would like to address that we haven't covered in our conversation?

BILL COUGHLIN: I did my homework, a couple of pages worth. After World War II, veterans were welcomed to Suffolk, whoever did it did a wonderful job. And that really gave some power to Suffolk. They were interested in veterans, and they also helped, and it was a good school. That was '45, '46, '47. Let's see, let's see. I have interviews, and some people say, "Isn't that kind of boring?" No. "What do you do in an interview?" Well, you immediately let the person feel

totally at ease and feel free to talk, and also for you to give some of yourself. You don't have to be big stories, but some things that join into what they're saying. That usually works.

[00:52:36]

It's a good – of course in counseling, I had to learn those things. I try to follow them. We're pretty good. How many buildings do we have now, fifteen?

JIM NELSON: I think thirteen if I'm not mistaken, scattered throughout Beacon Hill, and now coming up towards Government Center.

[00:53:02]

BILL COUGHLIN: I think generally you would say that Suffolk is small and doesn't necessarily have competition, but it's legitimate. And by that, I mean it offers the education that is supposed to be offered by a good university. I sometimes wonder how people make the great sacrifice of getting here. They can't park, but they come in the hundreds. That's beyond me. But you don't hear anything that's unpleasant about Suffolk. I was happy to be a part of it.

JIM NELSON: And what are your thoughts about the legacy that might you see from this oral history project?

BILL COUGHLIN: A few years ago, or many years ago, I sat to record [interviews] – we didn't use TV – and one was the librarian. Brown was her name. Which one? Brown? What was it?

JIM NELSON: Pat Brown, yes. She's in the Hall of Fame, Athletic Hall of Fame [simultaneous conversation]

BILL COUGHLIN: And I did another one, thinking this is what we should do, not to leave these people leave us without leaving their message. And so, I had two tapes, and I think someone else was doing it. But somehow it didn't continue. But I think it's a great idea.

JIM NELSON: That's wonderful. Any closing thoughts that you might have, Bill? Please feel free.

[00:54:49]

BILL COUGHLIN: Closing thoughts. I'd like to sing Star Spangled Banner if I may. I was thinking the other day that people's voices, they're so boring, somebody on the radio. Oh, squeaky. And that's the reason there is song, so that if people sing, generally it works out. Now you remember, you sang the Star-Spangled Banner.

JIM NELSON: Much to the surprise of the audience.

[00:55:14]

BILL COUGHLIN: That was one of the highlights of my career, when you sang the Star-Spangled Banner.

JIM NELSON: I'm sorry for your career if that was the highlight [laughter]

BILL COUGHLIN: I'm thinking now. There weren't too many people that were crazy at Suffolk. We had some wild people, but never too crazy.

JIM NELSON: Some interesting personalities.

BILL COUGHLIN: Yeah. I don't know if they meshed, but they all seemed to be part of a team. We were always – wow, this is a nice school here. I didn't know it'd be so good. It was good.

JIM NELSON: Well, certainly I want to thank you for coming in today to add to this oral history project. And what are your thoughts in terms of encouraging others to do the same?

BILL COUGHLIN: I think you can probably get six out of ten that will do it. Some will have bad legs and bad backs. But in essence, it would be nice if we could get them all here. My answer is yes. Go get them.

JIM NELSON: That's wonderful. Well thank you very much, Bill.

BILL COUGHLIN: Okay, Jim. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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