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Interview with Rick Bommelje

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Oral History Interview with Rick Bommelje and Wenxian Zhang

Wednesday, February 23, 2022

WZ: Good afternoon! My name is Wenxian Zhang. I'm the head of Archives and Special Collections at the Olin Library, Rollins College. With me is Dr. Rick Bommelje, professor in the communications department. So, Rick, you have a very unique experience being a Rollins graduate, and later on, administrator and faculty member at Rollins. So, tell me about your family background. Where did you grow up?

RB: Yes, I grew up in Rochester, New York, and at age fourteen my dad was transferred to Dallas TX. So, we moved to a very different type of climate. In fact, it was kind of eerie because we moved in November of 1963. Kennedy was shot in Dallas, so we were going to the spot.

WZ: Wow.

RB: We stayed there for about a year and a half. My dad got a new job in Louisville, Kentucky. We moved there, and then a year later moved to Orlando, Florida.

WZ: Was he in the military?

RB: No, he was initially with General Motors, and then he shifted to General Electric.

WZ: Okay, so you basically grew up in Orlando. Did you attend the local high schools?

RB: No, I went to three high schools in basically three years. I was in New York, Texas, and Kentucky, that is where I graduated - a year in Texas, a year in Kentucky. So, I spent my sophomore year in New York, my junior year in Texas, and my senior year in Kentucky.

WZ: So, after your family moved to Orlando, that is where you decided to enroll in Rollins?

RB: No, what happened is there was a junior college, it was called Orlando Junior College, and it was in what is now Lake Highland Prep. So, I decided that I would enroll there. I was not really interested, Wenxian, in college that much, but I felt it was the thing to do. I was not a good student at all - got on probation. Of course, the Vietnam War was at the height, and I was notified that I was out of phase, meaning my draft notice was going to be coming fairly soon. So, I had a friend who was in the army, and I talked to him about it. I was able to enlist for the army, but I could finish up my two-year degree. So, that is what I did. After the next two years, then I entered the army.

WZ: Oh, so you were your first two years at Orlando Junior College, and then you were in the military for two years. You were actually serving in Vietnam?

RB: Yes, I served a year in Vietnam and a year in Thailand. It was a total three-year enlistment.

WZ: Wow. How was your experience in service in Southeast Asia?

RB: Well, it was extraordinary. I thought that as long as I was going, I would be able to see a finely tuned military machine in operation. I was not enlisted servicemen, however, when I got to Vietnam, it was a completely different dynamic. You learn many things over there about the government as well, and just all kinds of questions, on why we were there, and what is the point. Anyway, because I had a two-year degree, I was what they call levied into the Army Security Agency, which was the intelligence branch of the army. Most of the folks that went into the ASA were four-year enlistees because they had a year of language school. Their job was to basically detect, based upon where they were in the world, what was happening and then feed that intelligence to the National Security Agency in Washington. I support that mission, if you will. So, after the year, I had, actually, what could be considered an amazing assignment in Miami, in a small army detachment just outside of Homestead. After two weeks there, I could see that this was going to be a very, very difficult tour of duty because the people hated us. I mean it was just crazy. I happened to serve with someone in Vietnam, a senior enlisted person, who went to Virginia with the Army Security Agency in, basically, their assignments unit. He was the head of assignments, and so I called him up and said, "Sarge, I need to get out of here." He said, "Where do you want to go?" I said, "Thailand," and three weeks later I was in Thailand, and I spent the last year there.

WZ: Is that where you met your wife?

RB: Yes. So, I met Quin there. We could not get married there because the army - actually, all service branches - had a rule that you could not marry and bring a young lady back to the States, because there were so many tragic stories about guys bringing ladies back and then leaving them. So I had to, basically, leave her there with the hope that I will send for you. So I came back and enrolled at - at the time it was FTU, of course, that's now UCF. I also got a job at Orlando Utilities, as a meter reader, and I did that during the day. I walked the streets of Orlando from seven until three-thirty and then went to school at night. But I could see fairly quickly, after about the first - probably a term maybe two, that this was going nowhere because at the time it was very, very difficult to finish a complete degree at night at FTU. But one of my friends at Orlando Utilities was actually going to Rollins, and so he made me aware of the School of Continuing Education, and the next term I enrolled.

WZ: Oh.

RB: That was 1972.

WZ: I see, okay. I was wondering because I searched the college Tomokan Yearbook, and you were not featured. So, you were basically a graduate from the School of Continuing Education at Rollins.

RB: Exactly. I am a whole SCE student through and through.

WZ: Okay, that is good, thank you for the clarification. So, tell me about your life as a Rollins student in the Division of Continuing Education.

RB: Well, it was very focused. I decided to major in business, and with the two years that I previously had, I was able to move right into my major. The few courses at UCF that I had, those transferred over. But it was just a perfect opportunity to pursue the degree, while I was working. The staff and SCE were amazing. I never met the Dean; I just met the ladies, and they were typically in their sixties. There were probably about four or five ladies who, I did not know their history or how long they had been here, but they were just so welcoming and guided me through any kind of process steps that I needed to take. So, I finished my degree in '74, May of 1974 – a BS in business.

WZ: Okay, so right after your graduation you began working for Rollins as Assistant to the Dean of Continuing Education, so tell me about that experience.

RB: Yes, well, as I was closing in on my degree, I was looking for upward mobility opportunities at Orlando Utilities, and at the time there were not any. However, there was a senior executive by the name of Walter Barden, and Walter Barden taught math in SCE as an adjunct. In fact, I took his course! One day, just after I had graduated, he called me into his office and said, "I heard of an opportunity that I think you would be perfect for," and he explained that it was Assistant to the Dean of Continuing Education. He said, "Would you like me to make the call? I can call the Dean." He picked up the phone right then, he got through to Doctor Dan Riva and Dr. Riva says, "Send him over." So, I went over with my meter reader suit and interviewed for the job, and met this amazing man, who was a war hero, thirty-year Colonel in the U.S Air Force, former base commander, flew in the Berlin airlift, incredible, very dynamic, charismatic individual. He explained to me that he was looking for - and he used military lingo. He said, "I'm looking for an aide-de-camp, do you know what that is?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, when I was in Japan, as base commander I had an aide-de-camp, which was basically my right-hand person. Whatever I needed to have done, this person was there to fulfill it. In a nutshell, that's the job."

I was just excited about the potential because, well, for one reason. I had heard and it was verified that if you're an employee at Rollins, you get free tuition. So, I had my sight set on a Crummer degree and so the short of it was, they hired me. So, I became the Assistant to the Dean of Continuing Education and served in that role for - you know, I don't know exactly how long, but Dr. Riva was just incredible in terms of literally taking me under his wing. Then promotions came; I became an assistant director. Then, one of the - Rosemary Neff was the associate director

I believe at the time. She became very ill; She passed on. He promoted me into that spot, Associate Director. I then became associate dean and served in that role until he retired.



SCHOOL FOR CONTINUING EDUCATION

(First row) (L to R) Norma Ford, Mildred Blair, Lena Roberts, June Seadeck. (Second row) Richard Bommelje, Rosemary Neff, Dr. Daniel Riva.

1976 Rollins Tomokan Yearbook

WZ: Yeah, I have had a look at your vita, so basically you served as assistant to the dean for three years. So, in 1977 you became Assistant Dean of the School of Continuing Education, and then by 1982, you became Director of the Center for Lifelong Education.

RB: Yes. So, what happened was Dr. Riva had tremendous influence at Rollins. He was specifically handpicked by Dr. Jack Critchfield to come in. Basically, the predecessor to the School of Continuing Education was, I think, something like the Division of General Studies, if I am not mistaken. Dr. Riva, his job was to come in and kind of stand that down, in other words, start to move it out, transition it out, and then the president would give him another role to take on. Well, he came over to - and at that time, there were so many servicemen that were coming back to school, and he said, "This is an incredible opportunity that we're missing here." So, through his influence, the Division of General Studies was then morphed into the School of Continuing Education. From there, through his leadership, it just went skyward very quickly in terms of enrollments. I mean at the peak, Wenxian, there were more folks attending SCE than the day school, and then there were graduate programs. We had the largest federal grant in law enforcement in the Southeast. So, we had, oh golly, representatives from every law enforcement

agency and in federal as well. Secret Service, FBI, all coming to Rollins to pursue their bachelor's and then eventually their master's degree in criminal justice. So, it was a very different day.

Then, the board of trustees made a decision that they wanted to kind of shift gears when Jack Critchfield retired. Actually, he didn't retire. He left to go to the corporate world and eventually became - he was president of, I think, Winter Park Telephone, then Florida Power, then - you know, he just kept ascending. But the board was searching for a liberal arts advocate and they found Thad Seymour. He came in and - actually, there was a movement by a number of faculty for Dr. Riva to put his head in the ring for president, that is how influential he was. But he also had a big ego and he commented to me and several others, "Why do I want to be president when I'm already king (both laugh)?" So, when the new president came in, in his first meeting he said, "I've been waiting to meet the king (both laugh)." So, as part of his new vision, he wanted to put muscle into the Crummer School by bringing this AACSB accreditation into the fold. What that meant then would be that the Dean of Crummer would have oversight over all business programs, and of course, SCE had a thriving business program.

So, the Dean of Business and the Dean of Continuing Education did not get along well at all. Then, there was a time when a consulting team was brought into study SCE, and the dynamic, and all that. It was kind of an interesting turn of events because one of the consultants was leading a meeting, and at that time they had transcriptionists that would transcribe, and I guess send to the people who were attending the meeting. Well, Dr. Riva, by mistake, got a copy of the meeting minutes and they were saying, quote, "I got to get that guy out of here (laughs)." So, it was pretty apparent that - and Dr. Riva didn't need to work. I mean, when I joined he must have been fifty-five; He had a full retirement from the military. So, after a few years, he just felt he wanted to do some other things, so he decided to retire.

At that point, a number of decisions were made to eliminate the school and, basically, start to phase out all career-oriented majors. Criminal justice, out, business out, communication out, you know, the list went on and on. So, we now had a Director of Credit Programs and I was searching for work. By that time, I had already gotten my Crummer degree; I had already gotten a post master's degree at Rollins in educational administration, a specialist in education degree. I had a couple of different job offers, but then I decided to kind of pitch an idea about noncredit programs - anything not pertaining to a degree but was education-oriented. Why not bring everything under one umbrella and then grow from there?

At the time, there was a summer day camp program that SCE was overseeing, and there were a few summer conferences, not many. But there was also a music program for kids. So, the administration bought off on it and the idea. I became the director of noncredit programs and immediately started guiding it into professional development, along with the other things, and it bloomed. Then we - because noncredit programs are not very appealing, so we changed it to Center for Lifelong Education. I had the privilege of really guiding that from inception for a dozen years or so. I mean we built it up, Wenxian, - I had one other person that was kind of overseeing the music program and the summer camp program. She became one of my colleagues and by the time I transitioned out, we had fourteen team members doing all kinds of things.

By that time, I had my doctorate, and I was - also back in 1980, after I had got my master's degree, one of my principal roles was to create the schedule. There was a course that was

unfilled because there were a number of adjuncts. This person worked at a bank and was, I think, going overseas for an extended period of time. We had to find a new instructor so I took this schedule into Dr. Riva. I said, "We've got everything done except for this one course that was Introduction to Management," and he says, "Let me see the schedule." He said, "No, we have an instructor." I said, "Who is that?," and he writes in B-O-M-M-E-L-J-E, and that is how I got my start teaching. From there, I taught that course on a regular basis, well after he retired.

Then, while I was in the school of the Center for Lifelong Education, something happened where, for the most part, the bosses that I had were deans and it was always hands-off because it was not a high priority to them. So, I had the incredible privilege to be able to innovate as I chose, but then through the successions, and as you know, the administration changes, the faculty remains. So, the administrators change, philosophies change, all that, and I have a new boss now who was very different. He was hands-on, asked a lot of questions. Well, if you have been in a unit for a long period of time, you have tried so many different things, and everything he brought to us, we had already tried!

Then, one meeting he said, "You know, team is a very important value to me. It appears that you're not a team player, every time I bring something to you, you rebuff it. I am saying, "Well, I don't rebuff it, we've tried it." He said, "Yeah, but it's a new day," and he was right! It was a new day; it was a new time! I realized there was a listening problem that I had and the irony is that my wife had been telling me this for years – that I had the same problem. So, that prompted me to seek. I had to figure out how to be a better listener, and so I went out and I found an organization, the International Listening Association. I could not find a course. I read all the books, all the articles. There were not many books or articles, for that matter, but I met these folks in the International Listening Association, and they equipped me. So, it was a learn-by-do from the resources they gave me, and for the better part of a year and a half or so, it was just continuous practice.

Then, I was guiding one-day leadership workshops for corporations in the community, and I decided to weave in fifteen minutes on listening. Folks came up and said, "Do you have any more of this?" and I went from fifteen minutes to thirty minutes in a one-day workshop. One of our administrators actually took the one-day workshop. Then, I got a call from Greg Gardner, who at the time was chair of the communication department. He said, "Hey Rick, I hear you're doing some stuff on listening, how would you like to create a course? We have never had a course on listening." So, I'm thinking, well, I'm good for thirty minutes, how am I going to fill the forty hours, right? But I figured the call was coming in for a reason, and I said, "Yes, I'll do it." It was going to be in the Holt school and in the organizational communication major, and I'm thinking, we will start small, slow-paced. I'm thinking, we'll have you know maybe twelve, thirteen students, first time out.

I went to the first class, Wenxian, and there were forty students, and there was a whole waitlist too. I asked, "Why are you here, you know?" "Well, we need to be better listeners." So, they came to hear from the master and I had thirty minutes and a textbook, Wolvin and Coakley's *Listening*, the gold standard. I said to them, "Don't read ahead, just stay with the syllabus," because I was literally one chapter ahead of them each week. At the end of the first term, and we are at a milestone here, January of 1992. So that was thirty years ago, this term. At the end of the term, they taught me something incredible that to this day I just anchor to and that is, if you want to learn it, teach it. I mean they taught me, that first term. Their questions, their challenges, their

comments, they force me to dive deeper and deeper, and that is how I got into the listening world.

Then, I was invited by Charlie Edmondson, who at the time was the provost - I had never thought about becoming a faculty member, never. My pathway to the faculty is so different from, I think, every other person here at this institution, who goes to school to become a faculty member. But I was invited to explore two paths; I could pick. Charlie said, "We can give you kind of a quasi-lecturer consulting role where you'll do a little bit of administrative work, but you'll teach three courses, or we can do the visiting." At the time somehow, someway from my years of experience, I gained this title of associate professor, right? So, I became a visiting associate professor, and I could pick one way or the other. Well, I know, as you do, that if you're in a line that is not connected to anything that's faculty oriented, the likelihood of people writing that line out if they need to is very, very high. So, I said, "Well, visiting associate professor, what does that mean?" He said, "That means you're maximum six years, and then you're gone." I thought, well, I always wanted to go into the business world and if I cannot build a business in six years using the base that I have, there is something wrong with me. So, I said, "We're going to be an associate visiting professor." I taught courses on listening and created new leadership courses for the organizational communication major.

Organizational Communications



Left to Right: Wally Schmidt, Marvin Newman, Kim White-Mills, Richard Bommelje.

1997 Rollins Tomokan Yearbook

About a year and a half into it, Charlie caught up with me again and said, "Would you like to solidify your career here?" and I said, "Well, what does that mean?" He said, "Well, I think there may be an opportunity for me to open up a tenure track spot, but you would have to publish in the communication field." Now I am teaching four or five leadership courses and two sections of listening, and I mean it's robust, but I didn't have to publish. So, he said, "I think we can arrange for the gate to open up, but then it's all on you. You're gonna have to go through all these gates to be able to eventually earn tenure." So, I talked with Quin, and going from an administrative role to a faculty role, I took a huge hit in pay. So, we weighed the benefits and in costs and decided that, well, if I could possibly get tenure, it is lifetime employment. At my age at that time that seemed to be a viable way to go. So, we went in that direction, and the rest played itself out.

WZ: That's so wonderful. Thank you for sharing your story. I notice you are an outstanding teacher; you were recognized as one of the best professors by *Princeton Review*. One of the student comments was, "He's very fair and an incredibly good inspirational teacher. He not only teaches the course but also, gives you life lessons that will stay with you forever." Of course, you have received other recognitions including the Cornell Distinguished Teaching Award and also the Holt School - what is that award? - the Walter Bardon Award?

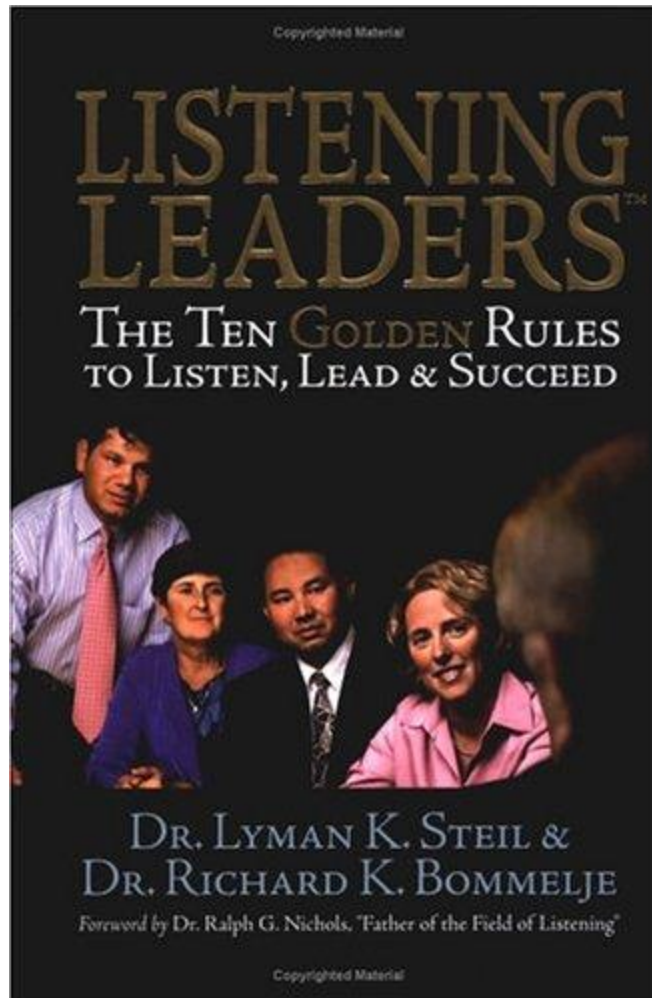
RB: Yes, so, here is the real special part of this. Walter Bardon was my champion to get to Rollins College and an award was named after him. So, to earn that award was just incredible, not once but three times (laughs). I'm just so privileged and I have never viewed myself as a teacher. In my syllabi, I always put learning guide, because I am the master student, to this day. I teach what I need, Wenxian. I teach courses that I need to improve upon in life. To be able to - I call my classes journeys. My teaching style is dramatically changed over the decades. I have never gone to Rate my Professors, never. That Princeton thing came out of the blue. I'm humbled, yet I find that the true gift has been to learn with all these students to this day.

WZ: Yeah, this is so wonderful. I do remember I was in one of your classes - I think 20 years ago, which is hard to believe. You gave a library retreat back in 2002 on listening. I remember clearly the importance of the value of listening you drove towards us, so I still remember today.

RB: Wow.

WZ: Thank you for doing that. Among all the classes that you have taught at Rollins, so definitely listening and leadership, are very, very important topics. So, what are the most important courses that you remember, that you enjoy, or you feel challenged by? I just want to get a sense of your teaching career.

RB: I am going to say, Wenxian, that every course links to an overarching umbrella, and that is listening leadership. Those are two words that - prior to a book project that I was, again, just blessed to be able to work on with my listening mentor, Doctor Lyman Steil. We wrote a book, collaborated, and it is called *Listening Leaders (The Ten Golden Rules to Listen, Lead, and Succeed)*. We interviewed a hundred effective leaders, and I did most of the work, quite frankly. This was when I was in the fold, in the tenure track role. A little history on Lyman Steil, he works side by side with the father of the field of listening Dr. Ralph Nichols, at the University of Minnesota and they created this very, very famous listening program. Subsequently, Dr. Steil was approached by this huge organization up in Minnesota, the Sperry Corporation, at the time, to be a consultant because they wanted to launch a marketing campaign around how well they listen. As he explored this potential, he said "You need to live it before you can tout it." So, he actually took a leave of absence a year to work with the Sperry Corporation, and eventually he left his tenured professor role to become a consultant for Sperry globally.



Cover of the 2004 book, Listening Leaders: The Ten Golden Rules to Listen, Lead & Succeed.

He became my mentor. So, together the pressure was on to publish, and I wanted to do something that was genuinely meaningful to me. So, I pitched the idea of a book. He said, “Well, I’ve already written five books you know, that’s a lot of work.” At this time, he was in his sixties. I said, “I will do 90% of it, I just need you to respond, that is all. You respond, I will do all the work.” He said, “Okay.” About two months into the project, we decided to connect the dots that had never been connected before directly, listening in leadership. About two months in and I am sending emails with all kinds of ideas and beginning drafts of chapters and that. I got an email back from him, and it is date-stamped 2:30 AM. I am thinking, ah he is in it. So, for the next couple of years, we just put our whole energies into that work and Dr. Nichols wrote the foreword to the book. It was just an incredible project and I decided that, in my role as a faculty member, anything that I taught needed to have genuine personal purpose. So, I created this overarching umbrella called listening leadership and so everything that I create connects to that, whether it be graduate or undergraduate.

To answer your question, while the listening course is truly the foundation of everything, that would certainly be number one. Yet, closely followed would be, literally, every other course, because they have so much significance in terms of the meaning as they anchor to the listening dynamic.

WZ: That's great. I also want to clarify, you mentioned communication was a major throughout the Holt School, but then, later on, was closed, and then brought back to the College of Arts and Sciences.

RB: Yes, so there was a communication major in the day school. In the evening, there was an organizational communication major and this was in an effort to, not replace but to - since the business major was gone, what is something that would be appealing to the corporate community? So, organizational communication and then organizational behavior were launched. The communication major in the day school was dissolved when all of the career-oriented majors were purged. There was an effort to try to have an organizational communication major in the in the day program and the Senate - there was a Senate at the time - passed it. You probably have documentation on this. I think it was a week after the Senate passed it, there was a group of faculty that mobilized and voted it down; we don't want an organizational communication major in the day school. So, while the Senate passed it, then a group of core liberal arts faculty mobilized and got enough votes to overturn it in a governance move.

WZ: I see. That is very interesting. So, when was the current communication major brought back?

RB: So, we're operating for years with the number one major, organizational communication. Then, the business major is brought back, as the College of Professional Studies is starting to take shape. But there was a move to bring the business major back and as you know, that met with credible resistance. I was department chair at the time when I got a call from the provost and she said, and this was like in April, "We're going to have a new college. It is going to be called the College of Professional Studies. The board unanimously is behind the president. There is going to be a lot of backlash, we suspect, but we feel that it is necessary because if we don't it is going to impact the accreditation by Crummer." There was something happening between the international business department and the Crummer school, linked to this accreditation. So, after exhausting all possibilities, Lewis Duncan felt that this was the only way to preserve both. So, that is when the College of Professional Studies was launched.

That was an amazing experience to be part of because you can imagine, we - there were four apartments, I think - had the opportunity to, from scratch, create a whole new college, new bylaws. Everything was totally innovative. Of course, there was a backdrop of extreme turbulence, votes of no confidence, and all that, but because of it the president said, "Wherever the students go, the money will follow in the College of Professional Studies." So, the provost said, "Oh and you know that major that you've been talking about?" Because Wenxian, we had the largest communication minor in the entire college. I mean, there were hundreds of students that wanted to minor in communication, so we had that. But they all said, "We want a communication major." As part of the curriculum committee, I served for two years, there was so much resistance, you know, for even talking about that.

So, when CPS formed, the provost says, "Hey, you can create anything you want!" So, that is when our department decided to create the communication studies major, launch it in the day school, and immediately we had 250 students (laughs). But it has just been fascinating to be part of. As the pendulum swings back and forth and administration philosophies come and go, just to see how things change or are misinterpreted or reinterpreted or forgotten - it is just fascinating to

be part of an organization for so many decades. It is almost like the longer I am here the newer I become because people change, systems change, buildings change, majors change. My entire department has changed with a new major that I am not even equipped to teach. We all recognize that, so I am in the last chapter here. I have already announced that maximum two years, if not next year.

WZ: That will be quite a tenure at Rollins since the 1970s. So, how do you view your Rollins career?

RB: Well, it has been so unique and never planned, until I got into the faculty. Then, I had a process to be able to work towards, work towards tenure, work towards full professor. Up until that point, everything was virtually unplanned. As I entered Rollins, I always thought, get the Crummer degree and then go into the business world. That was the idea, initially. But then - I call them champions. There are a few people in my life that I have met that - they go beyond mentors. They are champions who can see things that I cannot see. Walter Barton was a champion, Dr. Riva was a champion, Charlie Edmondson was a champion, Greg Gardner, a champion. They've opened doors that I cannot open myself. My guess is that everybody has a champion or two in their lives and I have tried to play that role whenever I am able to. So, when I look over this long frame, I have such gratitude from so many different angles. But I think certainly in today's age, finishing a career at one place is very unusual with the war paced speed of change. So, that is how I view life at Rollins.

WZ: That's wonderful. So, if you retire in two years you will have more than 50 years - since 1974, right?

RB: Yeah, and I was eligible to retire seven years ago, but quite frankly, it just did not feel like it was time. Even though I was losing the financial gain, it just did not make sense. I have a meeting with myself every year and I ask, "Is the joy still there?" and thus far it has been. But now we are at a point where Quin is doing all kinds of fascinating things, and I have said just recently to my department last month, - I have staked out for planning purposes, this time frame - It is two years max. I may go next year. I mean, 50 is not magical for me. So, that is how I kind of approach it.

WZ: Yes, sure. Another thing I want to mention is, I am doing the history of WPRK. Orange County Regional History Center asked me to write a short essay because this is their seventieth anniversary. So, are you going through the fire? I noticed that you were running the WPRK for some time, tell me about that. You also hired Gordon Fraser, I'm using his desk right now.

RB: You're bringing back very fond memories. As the director of noncredit programs, the vice president of development came into my office one day and said, "That's it, I can't take this WPRK anymore," because WPRK somehow was under his jurisdiction. If you can believe that the vice president of development, - and I guess I can see it, community outreach - but he said that he was driving down Fairbanks and he said whoever the disc jockey was, was using profanity and that did not cut it for him. He said, "Now I have WPRK under your jurisdiction; This is a noncredit program."

I did not know anything about radio, you know? I knew how to turn it on. So, I knew that we needed a manager to be able to get things in order, so we cast out through the *Orlando Sentinel*.

There was a friend of Dr. Seymour's, who I think was a Winter Park influencer, who said, "Hey, there is a guy here, one of my friends Gordon Fraser, but he's 76 years old. I think that he could really do some things with WPRK." So, Gordon applies for the job. He came into the office and within probably a minute and a half, I knew he was the guy for the job. I mean here is a guy who introduced television in the 1938 World's Fair. He was a war correspondent - World War II. He created the predecessor to The Today Show - I mean, just incredible and his memory was impeccable. I think he went to Brown if I'm not mistaken. He spoke about his classmates and what, you know, the guy next to him was wearing (laughs).

He came in and did a marvelous job with that radio station. I remember one time, and I don't know how his wife put up with it, but he was there day and night overseeing the new way of programming, the new way of presenting, and he modeled the way. He had a firm grasp of everything that was going on and so, he taught these students many, many things about character building and that type of thing. But he had to have some surgery. As they were wheeling him into the surgical suite, he had this small transistor radio and he's listening to WPRK until his wife had to take it off of his chest (laughs). But that's my fond memories of WPRK.

WZ: That's beautiful. Thank you for sharing and I really appreciate you sharing your experience, your work at Rollins, so you mentioned quite a few names, a few events, anything else you wanted to share with me?

RB: I think I have the unique perspective of serving as a student, an alum, a staff member, and an administrator – because that first job was truly a staff position - and then a faculty member, having all these different perspectives and being very aware of the different perspectives. To me, that has given me a way to listen to the institution in a very multi-dimensional way. I see my colleagues in the faculty who can get very energized, if you will, about certain items, and yet there is no perspective about what does the decision mean to the operation of the College. At the same time, administrators make decisions, even if they have been formerly faculty members, they haven't been faculty members in a while, and so, the empathy level needs to be taken into consideration.

I will give you a classic case, and I know you were involved in the meetings, is when there was a downsizing two years ago, and how those decisions were made. One of the casualties, if you will, was a long-term lecturer in our department, who was blindsided because he had about a year, or maybe two, left before he retired. He was so upset, and he was given like seven minutes in a meeting - very cold-cut and dry, this is the way it is. I understand that, but there is a way to, again, infuse empathy. But mistakenly, I think, the document was sent to him along with some other papers that showed the list of all the people and their ages.

WZ: That is awful, terrible.

RB: I didn't see the list but when he tells me that twelve of the eighteen were sixty or older, it just gives me pause, you know. But, I don't get paid to make those tough decisions. So, I don't know all of the details. I only know one story, one casualty, one piece of document, you know, so I have to let that stuff go and move on.

WZ: Yes, I hear you. I was on that financial tax force for the COVID-19. I have to say this one, I would say it's the most stressful committee assignment I have ever served at Rollins for over the

last twenty-some years. One of my colleagues in my department at the library was laid off as well, I feel very – it is painful that that decision was made like that. Anyway, yes, we had to accept that reality and move on, so life goes on. I do really want to thank you for your time, Rick, for all your contributions. One last note, I wanted to ask you about, on the bright side, *America's Got Talents!* So, I want to ask about your experience with your wife being such a celebrity - you are famous (Both laugh)! Your wife -

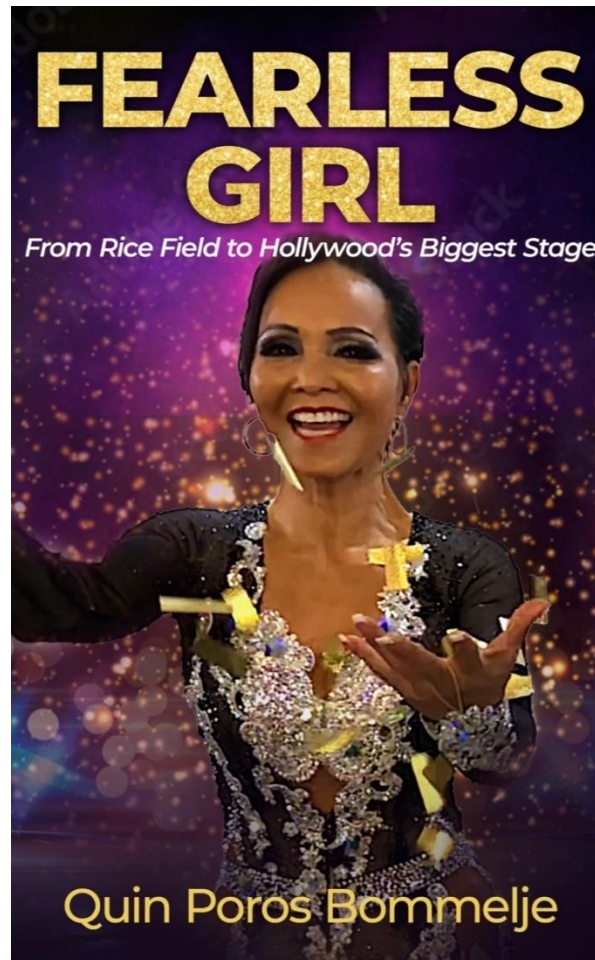


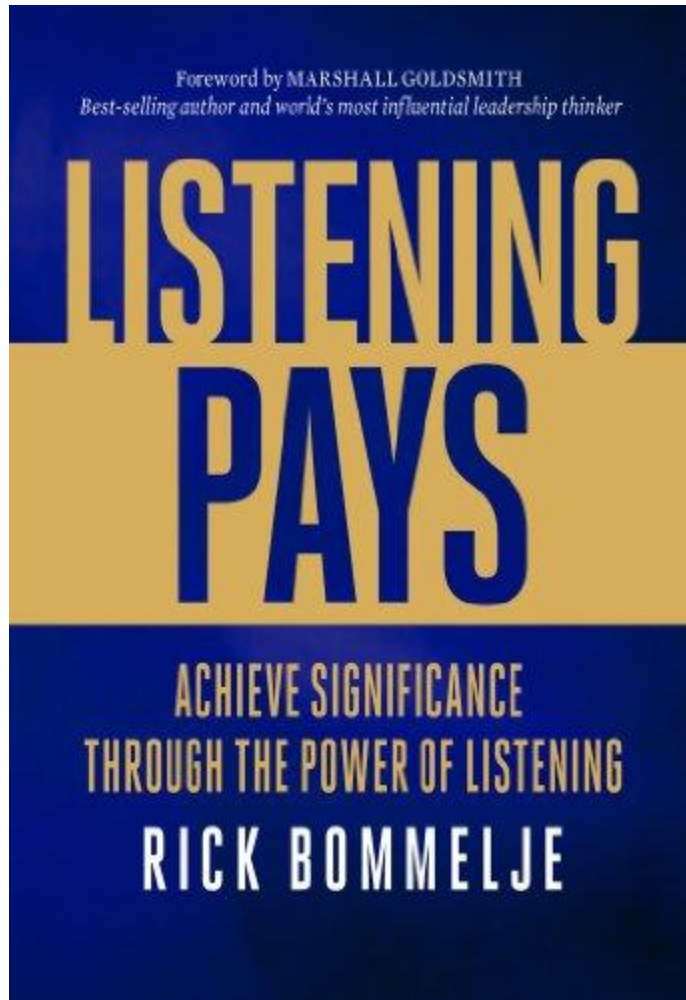
Image courtesy of Rick Bommelje

RB: My wife is famous, right, I am a bystander and a number one supporter, but that has been an amazing and extraordinary experience that - in fact, we are working on a book project writing Quin's story now. But, as I reflect on the magnitude of the meaning of this, I mean, she started dancing at age 60 never having danced before and ten years later she is on the Dolby theater stage dancing in front of seventeen-million people. How does that happen? Well, we believe it is through divine intervention, but to go through that and to watch her go through that - she has so much courage. I knew that in the beginning when she came to America having spent - she hardly spoke English. She had never been to an airport before getting on the airplane. She had limited, like, four years of school. Then roll the clock, decades later, going through all this. Then having her homeland - after they won the golden buzzer, there was so much media, globally that there was a *USA Today* picture of her giving the traditional Thai wai, where she bows to the judges, and they captured that.

The next day, she got calls from a couple of her friends here who are Thai saying, "You're on every TV station and newspaper in Thailand!" It was unbelievable in terms of - everybody wanted to interview Quin from *USA Today*, golly, who else? That is extremely noteworthy. The list went on and on and on and on - *Good Housekeeping* - but after that was done, we were gonna go home over the holidays to Thailand, this was in December of that year, and there was a man who wanted to interview Quin, but he wanted to do it in person. He did not want to do it over zoom or anything like that. Long behold, this guy was like the Larry King of Thailand. He arranged for Quin to be interviewed and the idea was for him to interview her for an hour. The hour became four hours. We did not know but this person had retired with a huge media company. He actually introduced and was the first publisher of the first English newspaper in Thailand. He was just so caught up with Quin's story coming from poverty in the village, and you know, here she was. Well, the next week - he has a TV show on primetime Thai TV - and the next week Quin was featured Monday through Thursday night as a continuing episode over these four hours. So, all of a sudden, everywhere she went she was noticed. Here's the key that really goes beyond my wildest imagination. As she was growing up, of course when you're poor, you're a farmer, people look down on you. She always had this dream of being noticed and it came fulfilled, to this day.

WZ: That's a fantastic story. So, besides your *Listening Leader*, we also have your two other books, *Listening Pays* and *Be Quick to Listen*, so I am looking forward to adding your new books on Quin and *America's Got Talent* to the Rollins collection.

RB: That would be amazing. This is going to be the best one, for sure. The *Listening Pays* book, just to give you a quick, little back story of that, when I would go into organizations with *Listening Leaders*, we would give them a copy of the book as a resource. As they received the book, I could see it in their eyes. They would say, in their eyes without telling me anything, "Thank you for the book, Rick, I will never read it (laughs). It is too big, it is too thick, there are cases, I don't have the time." So over, about a five-year period, I decided to take the essence of *Listening Leaders* and create a story. So, that took me about five years, for this to come online. When I went through the full professor tenure process - or say it the necessary publications and everything, articles and all that - they asked me what I was most proud of. I said, "I am proud of this book, which is not in my portfolio. It is a self-published book. I did not want that to be a distraction to anybody on this committee. This is what I am most proud of," to this day.



Cover of Dr. Rick Bommelje's 2013 book Listening Pays: Achieve Significance Through the Power of Listening.

WZ: Well, that is wonderful. Thank you so much, Rick for sharing your story. I learned a great deal about your life at Rollins. Thank you for all your contributions.

RB: Thank you, Wenxian. This has been - I am grateful to you for the opportunity because this will be the - this is it! This is the last opportunity I will ever have to be able to share my story to this level, with a kindred spirit, who is an incredible listener. I mean, you're ready to teach the course when I leave (laughs)!

WZ: I don't know about that, but I appreciate your confidence. Thank you so much, Rick.

RB: (Laughs) Without a doubt and you have also given me the space to listen to my own voice. In this hour and 15 minutes, or so, that we have been together, you have given me this space for me to have just wonderful memories. That is a gift that I will always treasure from you, so thank you,

WZ: Much appreciation, Rick. Bye-bye.

RB: Bye.