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Arboretum Foundation

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SPEECH FOR ARBORETUM FOUNDATION ANNUAL MEETING JUNE 11, 2010

Presented by Duane Kelly at the Graham Visitors Center on the occasion of the Arboretum Foundation's 75th Anniversary

When The Arboretum Foundation was founded in 1935 our country was stuck in the Great Depression. In fact, when you dig a little bit you discover that the Depression was not only when the Foundation was founded, it was why it was founded. The Depression had created a terrible funding crisis at the University of Washington, one that threatened the very survival of the Arboretum. Faced with that peril, citizens, with the encouragement of the city, state and University, stepped up and created this organization in order to save the Arboretum. That Depression-era timing explains why much of the early structural work on the Arboretum was performed with WPA labor in the 1930s.

As we now celebrate our 75th Anniversary we find ourselves in the worst economy our country has experienced since the 1930s. It speaks volumes for the health and vibrancy of this organization that it is still here and operating, not just to stave off the Arboretum's death or maintain the status quo, but you are raising funds, running programs, implementing a visionary master plan, and otherwise providing leadership to elevate this Arboretum to be one of the finest in the country.

Eleven years after the Foundation was established, there was another important milestone: in 1946 Donald Graham went to England and recruited a young passionate Irish horticulturist who had trained at Wisley and elsewhere, to move to Seattle and become Director of the

Arboretum. That was Brian Mulligan. He and his wife lived in the stone cottage to begin with and his starting salary was \$300 a month. He served as Director of the Arboretum for 23 years, retiring in 1972. While Brian's tenure wasn't always smooth – the politics would at time befuddle and exasperate him – he was widely respected and beloved by the community.

15 years after Brian's retirement, my involvement with the Arboretum Foundation began, in 1987. Actually the truth is – and I need to be careful since my wife Alice is in the audience – that my involvement began much earlier, when I was an undergraduate in the early 1970s. I had figured out that a romantic date could be renting a canoe from the boat house by Husky stadium, rowing over to the Arboretum and having a picnic lunch around Duck Bay. The girls always seemed to think that was a cool date. It also offered me the great advantage of being cheap. Little did I know at the time how involved I was to later become with the Arboretum.

In the mid-1980s I had gotten this idea to start a large world-class flower show in Seattle, modeled after the big shows in Philadelphia and Boston that Alice and I had visited. In my research I had learned that a preview gala was an important component of these events, so I decided we should have a gala too and it should benefit a non-profit horticulture organization. I made some inquiries and concluded there were only two viable options – Northwest Horticultural Society and The Arboretum Foundation. At the time, the Foundation was the larger and more robust organization, as it still is today. I met with two of the officers, Carol Simons and Dick Doss. Dick had been the President of the Frederick & Nelson department

store. We hit it off so I offered the gala to the Foundation, they accepted, and the Flower Show's Preview Party quickly became an important fund-raiser on the Foundation's annual calendar.

But unbeknownst to me, it had occurred to Carol and Dick that someone who could organize a big flower show could also probably be of service to the Foundation and Arboretum. They soon asked me to be part of the Long-Range Planning Committee which was chaired at the time by Al Adams. Strategic planning happened to be one of my strengths so that was a good committee to throw me into.

At the time that our Long-Range Planning Committee was doing its work, relations with the University were not good. Here I need to give some historical. As we all know, the 60s were a divisive time in America, for all kinds of reasons. Well they were a divisive time for the Arboretum too. There was controversy over two main issues. One was whether a large "floral hall" suitable for exhibitions should be built in the Arboretum, and the other was whether part of the Arboretum should be fenced. The sixties with its mantra of freedom were not a good time to recommend fencing anything.

At the center of the dispute were two prominent and wealthy personalities – Donald Graham and Elizabeth Miller. Each was accustomed to getting their own way and they could not settle their differences. The disagreement escalated until Betty Miller's faction split off from the Foundation; Betty's faction eventually became the Northwest Horticulture Society

and they started to put their money and energy behind the formation of a new academic unit at the University – the Center for Urban Horticulture. They influenced and help fund the hiring of Harold Tukey out of Cornell University to be the inaugural CUH Director. Harold arrived at his new job in Seattle in 1979. One of the first things he did was contact a professor at Purdue whom he had great respect for. And that's how John Wott found his way to Seattle in 1981, driving here from Indiana in a Blue Buick with a U-Haul trailer. Harold Tukey served as joint Director of CUH and the Arboretum for 12 years, resigning in 1991.

I never met Donald Graham but I did end up working a bit with Betty Miller, she of the Elizabeth C. Miller Library at CUH and the Miller Garden in the Highlands. Betty came from the Midwest where she was part of the Cargill Grain family and fortune. She was a force of nature who did not expect her will to be resisted. I'll share one anecdote with you. Betty had been to the Philadelphia Flower Show often, sometimes as a judge, and she had always wanted a show of that scale and caliber for Seattle. When I showed up in the late 80s with a commitment to create such a show here, she saw me not as an independent entrepreneur but as the embodiment of her will. I just happened to be the form that her willpower took. And having this view of the flower show – one that I never dared disabuse her of - in the early years of the flower show, shortly after the show was held, she would summon me to her house in the Highlands. As we sat in her library, looking out at her beautiful garden, she would tell me the many things about the flower show that we could do better next year. I really liked her and

we got on just fine. In these post-show critiques I was prudent enough to never bring up the subject of Donald Graham.

Harold Tukey's dual responsibilities inevitably led to conflicts. His primary concern was for CUH not the Arboretum, and understandably so. CUH was a new institution, with new facilities and precarious funding. Harold had his hands full with those challenges.

During this period when our Long-range Planning Committee was meeting and there was this friction between the University, City and Foundation, we were fortunate that Harold Tukey wasn't our only main contact with the University. Besides Harold, there was a University attorney who oversaw all the University's substantial real estate interests, including the Metropolitan Tract downtown. This attorney, along with a prominent civic leader who lived in the Montlake neighborhood, served on the Arboretum and Botanical Garden Committee (ABGC) which was the one forum, mandated by the State Legislature and meeting on a regular basis, where the Foundation, City and University were forced to communicate with each other – whether they wanted to or not. Those two individuals recognized the value of the Arboretum to the City, the region and the state, not just to the University. These were two very smart people whose political instincts were to look at the big picture, seek common ground and minimize conflict. Taking that approach they performed an incredibly valuable service to the larger community as well as to the Arboretum and the University during that difficult period. As the years went on these two stayed involved and eventually assumed

prominent leadership roles in the Foundation. The civic leader I am referring to is our new President Della Balick and the man who was head of UW real estate is the infamous Neal Lessenger.

That Long-Range Planning Committee met for about two years in the early 90s and did critical work. We eventually presented a plan to the Board that recommended three bold steps:

1. The University commit a full-time director to the Arboretum. At that time Harold Tukey was head of both CUH and the Arboretum and his commitment was clearly much more for CUH than the Arboretum. The situation of a director with divided priorities was not working. The City was just as frustrated with that situation as the Foundation.
2. The Foundation become more professional by hiring an Executive Director. When I first got involved, the Foundation was still completely volunteer-run. There was no paid executive. We had one full-time secretary and a part-time bookkeeper. You can imagine how the volunteer Foundation President position was a more than full-time job. We were becoming busier and cracks were appearing because the organization had just become too big and complex to be run entirely by volunteers.
3. The Foundation initiate, help fund, and advocate for a Master Plan for the Arboretum. There was an old Arboretum master plan, created by Jones & Jones, the firm that had

created the very successful master plan for Woodland Park Zoo, but its Arboretum plan had become passé and dated. Our committee concluded that there really wasn't a plan for the Arboretum's future and without a plan, it would have no future. Without a plan the Arboretum's likely fate would be to decline into a mediocre municipal park.

- a. We took much of our inspiration for a new master plan based on the success the Zoo had had with its Plan. As part of our due diligence we interviewed Zoo Director David Towne, and Grant Jones, partner at Jones & Jones that created that plan. In the 1970s Woodland Park Zoo was an embarrassment. Many of the animals were housed in decrepit conditions and there was no unifying vision for the place. With a visionary master plan it evolved to become known as one of the best in the country.

Each of these three initiatives were bold and certainly did not represent business as usual for our organization. There was vigorous debate on the Board about the wisdom of these initiatives. The most controversy surrounded the creation of a master plan. The financial commitment represented by a paid executive director and a master plan was a significant increase in our annual budget and there was understandable anxiety about our ability to fund those commitments. It took two or three more years but eventually all three initiatives were implemented.

I feel fortunate that Brian Mulligan was still around when I first became involved with the Foundation. As the idea that the Arboretum needed a new master plan gained momentum, I consulted with Brian to make sure he didn't think we were going off on some crazy tangent. Brian had never paid much attention to the original Olmsted plan because he felt that its plan for where things should be planted was often impractical, and he didn't think the Jones & Jones plan had been very useful. So all in all he encouraged us to proceed.

The University appointed John Wott as full-time director of the Arboretum; I think it had been about 10 years since we last had a full-time director when Brian Mulligan retired.

After some initial skepticism, the City quickly became supportive of the concept of a Master Plan. Holly Miller was head of Parks at the time and she was followed by Ken Bounds. Neither of them relished the prospect of the Arboretum declining to just another park. So they became an enthusiastic partner as did the University under the prodding of John Wott. All three parties participated in the search for firm to do the Master Plan. We selected the Portico landscape architecture firm, which had extensive experience doing master plans for zoos, botanical gardens and arboreta around the world. In fact some of the Portico's principals had cut their teeth while working at Jones & Jones, before leaving and starting their own firm.

In 1993 I was asked if I would serve as Foundation president. I agreed and served in the 1993-1995 period. It was during my administration that we hired our first executive director.

When non-profits make the change from volunteer to professional leadership, that is often a rocky transition that fails once or twice before the organization gets it right. This is because it is really difficult for a longstanding tradition-bound organization to know what it really needs in a paid executive. Our experience was no exception. One of the fun parts of my presidency was I had to fire our first two executive directors. After the second firing the board approached one of its own members, Deb Andrews, who was interested in moving back into the job market and who knew the Foundation very well, and offered her the job. She accepted and served the organization admirably for over ten years.

A significant part of the Foundation's energy in that period was to advocate for a new master plan. There was a fair amount of suspicion from surrounding neighborhoods about a new master plan. The Montlake community was the most suspicious, in fact there were times when it seemed downright paranoid. There were so many public meetings that some evenings John Wott, I and others had to split up and go to different meetings. I particularly remember one heated meeting in Montlake where the discussion spilled over into some yelling, and I wondered what I had got myself into.

In the early 90s we at the Foundation, sometimes in a chiding tone, told the City, University and public that the Arboretum was one of Seattle's great but unappreciated and inadequately cared for treasures. Today it is much more appreciated and better cared for because of our combined efforts. It also has greater importance I believe to our community

than it ever has. When he was planning Central Park, Frederick Law Olmsted observed that parks are the lungs of a city. With 200 acres right smack dab in the middle of Seattle, this place represents a pretty good pair of lungs. Twenty years ago I did not appreciate how the density of our city was going to increase. Have you been to Ballard lately? There are so many new condominium and apartment buildings that Ballard now looks more like a high-density neighborhood in San Francisco. As density increases, places such as the Arboretum represent greater and greater value to citizens and visitors because more people don't have yards and if they do have yards, they tend to be much smaller than was the case 30, 40, 50 years ago.

I want to shift directions here from the direct history of the Arboretum and talk about you and what you represent. When one reviews the history of the Arboretum and the Foundation it is clear that without volunteers, their civic pride and passion for horticulture, this Arboretum would have died in its infancy. It is volunteers, contributing their labor, their political capital, and their money – who more than anything else have kept this place going. You are the present incarnation of that great spirit.

Seattle has a particularly strong ethos of civic volunteerism. Did you know that the University of Washington provides more volunteers to the Peace Corps than any other large university in the entire country. I'm not sure what accounts for all this – maybe it's something in the water.

A scholar who has done extensive research on social networks and volunteerism is Robert Putnam, a professor of public policy at Harvard. He wrote a book called "Bowling Alone" about this research. One of Putnam's findings was that social bonds – and volunteering for the Arboretum Foundation is a perfect example of what Putnam is talking about – that those social bonds are the most powerful predictor of life satisfaction, every bit as important, for example as a healthy marriage. You may not realize it at the time, but when you are sitting through another committee or board meeting, or for that matter, today's Annual Meeting, you really are increasing the satisfaction you feel about your life.

In Putnam's terms, Seattle possesses a high degree of "social capital." The Foundation is one of those organizations that is continuously revitalized by incoming waves of new leaders and members. When I became involved in the Arboretum I was welcomed and mentored by many who had already been volunteering here for decades. 20 years have lapsed since my first involvement, and a number of those fine, generous people are no longer with us. When I was younger I did not appreciate how I was standing on the shoulders of all those passionate, dedicated volunteers who preceded me. And I've also watched with interest and pride, since I disengaged with the Arboretum, how many other smart, talented, generous, dedicated citizens – that is to say, you and your colleagues – have stepped up and not only kept this organization going, but growing, thriving, and now you are proving false the fears of those who said we could never get a master plan designed, funded and approved, and even if we

somehow managed to accomplish all that, we'd never muster the political will and funding to implement it. Well they were wrong and the most compelling evidence for that assertion is you and what you are accomplishing in the present, in the face of the worst economy our country has seen since the Depression.

When we look back over our lives, to have cared for this treasure, and ensured its presence for our descendants, in a form even more beautiful and more educational than it was for us - that is no small legacy to leave behind. I commend you and thank you for your engagement.