

1. Introduction

“Polk” agreed to sit for a series of interviews to discuss his life with a graduate student from UNC Chapel Hill in the fall of 2019. These interviews began with the nuts and bolts of Polk’s biographical information – an overview of the places he has lived, the things he has done, and the people he knows and loves – but were meaningfully enriched by the personal elements he shared, including details, jokes, and reflections on his life experiences. The following arrangement of Polk’s recollections and insights come directly from him; and represent the “snippets of a life journey” he has chosen to share.

2. Childhood

Polk was born in 1944 in Lexington, Virginia. His mother was herself from Lexington, and had relocated from Tennessee to Lexington to live with her parents and to deliver Polk while Polk’s father, Polk Sr., was serving as an Army doctor in World War II. Polk reports thoroughly enjoying the period of his early childhood spent in Lexington, stating he was “blessed” to spend so much time in such a great place. Beyond the simple location of Lexington, which he and his family would visit every summer after his father returned from the war and the family returned to Tennessee, Polk stresses the importance of family during this phase of his childhood. When asked about his role models, Polk is quick to highlight the influence of his mother, stating “my mother and her parents were great role models, and a great family of good people.” He is effusive in his praise of his maternal grandparents, calling his grandmother and his grandfather “kind, caring, and loving people.” His paternal grandparents are mentioned with similar warmth, with a succinct summary of his feelings towards his parents and both sets of

grandparents offered as: “I guess I couldn’t help but be a good person with all that goodness surrounding me!”

Polk’s familial pride is not at all restricted to his parents and grandparents, it in fact has its roots in mid- 19th Century America. James K. Polk was elected as the nation’s 11th President in November of 1844; and led the United States into, and through, the Mexican-American War, which resulted in the annexation of most of what became the American Southwest. Polk is proud that his lineage includes a distant link to the US President, as Polk is a great-uncle of Polk’s by his father’s side. The men of Polk’s paternal line have celebrated their connection to James K. Polk by passing on a similar name across multiple generations, and Polk is very proud of his “historic” and “unusual” name, which ties him to US history as well as to his father and great-grandfather. As both Polk and President Polk lived much of their lives in Tennessee, Polk has even been able to interact with other descendants of Polk’s in periodic gatherings, which has reinforced his familial pride.

Following his service in WWII, Polk’s father transitioned from active duty in the Army to the Army Reserves and returned his family to his hometown of Bolivar, Tennessee. By this point, Polk’s family included his sister Maria, 6 years his junior. Polk’s father purchased a two-story home in the small town of Bolivar and opened his own medical practice on the lower level. Polk indicates that this arraignment worked very well for his father, as he could serve as an accessible community resource, popping downstairs into his office when called upon by someone in need, and even making house calls. Polk once again lived with one of his grandparents for a time, as his paternal grandmother lived with the family after their move to Bolivar. The family’s move

also placed him closer to an extended network of his father's "kinfolk" in Tennessee, and he reports spending a lot of time with his cousins in the Bolivar area. As previously mentioned, the Tate family took annual summer trips to Lexington to visit Polk's maternal grandparents, an arrangement for which Polk feels "very fortunate," as he got to maintain close relationships with that side of the family. Polk describes his relationship with his sister Maria as very close during their childhood in Bolivar, that he cared for and befriended her especially as they had few relatives her age. The final family relationship that Polk highlights when discussing his childhood is the one he had with his dog Prince. While the family "almost always had a dog" while Polk was growing up, Prince was, in the tradition of "a boy and his dog," Polk's dog. Polk fondly recalled the collie following him around town, and gamely keeping up with him as he rode his bicycle in the neighborhood.

As Polk grew up in Bolivar, he developed interests in academics, particularly science and math, sports, and the Episcopal Church. He reports having always been a good student, with his academic ambition and a knack for science and math blossoming in high school. "Fairly popular" among his classmates, Polk remembers graduating from high school as either valedictorian or salutatorian, attributing his inability to decide on his final rank to the fact that he often swapped the top spot with the same person throughout their final two years of high school. Far from being a bitter rival, Polk's valedictorian/salutatorian partner was one of his "best buddies," Mitch, who he specifically calls his "smarts buddy" of that time. Polk states that his strong suits were always math and science, and that he suspects he inherited some of his talent in these fields from his physical father. His interest in math would one day lead him into the

realm of architecture, but in his high school years, he assumed he would use his skills to take on the family tradition of medicine.

While studies occupied a significant portion of Polk's time in high school, he always allotted time for the Episcopal church he attended, sports, and a little bit of boyish childhood hijinks. A reasonably talented athlete, Polk played "pretty much any sport there was," but points to his abilities on the basketball court as his top calling card in the world of Bolivar athletics. He was active on both the diamond and the gridiron, stating he was "ok at baseball" and "played a little bit of football in high school," but basketball would remain his preferred sport through his adult life. Polk's mother ensured that both he and his sister were raised in the Episcopal church, and he became increasingly involved as he grew up. By the time he finished elementary school, Polk was an acolyte in the Episcopal church in Bolivar, identifying this role as "a part of life that was good for me to learn." He enjoyed assisting and learning from the lead pastor at his church, and felt that the church and his responsibilities helped keep him from being "too raucous" as a boy. Despite the steadying influence his role in the church had on him, Polk admits (with the trace of a impish grin) to being a bit of a "hellion" when the right circumstances arose. While by no means a snitch, Polk indicates that he had a "partner in crime" of sorts in his good friend Howard. Howard was Polk's "sports buddy" growing up, and he and some other boys found ways to raise a small degree of Cain by dropping watermelons off of bridges to watch them splatter and by "getting in a little trouble with firecrackers" (this is, unfortunately, all of the detail Polk is willing to give into his youthful pyrotechnic career). By the time Polk graduated high school and prepared

to take on his adult life, he was a confident and active young man with academic talent in mathematics and strong family ties.

2. Adulthood

Coming out of high school, Polk had an important decision to make in where he would attend college – and his grades offered him a variety of options. He considered going to the University of Tennessee in Knoxville due to its proximity to Bolivar, but ultimately set his sights in Durham, North Carolina and Duke University. He was impressed with the academic offerings available at Duke, and in making his decision felt that Durham represented a middle ground of sorts between his family in Virginia and his family in Tennessee. Polk joined the Naval ROTC program and chose to major in Civil Engineering, putting his early appreciation for math and design to good use and graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in 1966. When asked, by his UNC-grad-student interviewer, if his pride in being a distant relative of UNC alumnus James K. Polk ever conflicted with his decision to attend the local rival, Polk offers a small smile and the answer “no, not really.” If anything, Polk views his decision to go to Duke as one that maximized his ability to interact with both campuses and get the most out of his collegiate experience. This started with his love for basketball, as he frequently played in pickup games at both Duke and UNC: “I felt like I was in the heart of basketball country!” This would also extend to his his dating life in undergrad “I ended up dating there [UNC] a fair amount.” Ultimately, being open to dating across campus lines led Polk to meet a particularly special UNC alumna named “Stacy”.

Following his graduation from Duke in 1966, Polk commissioned as an officer in the United States Navy. Polk reports feeling that joining ROTC and, subsequently, the

Navy was a “natural path” for him since his father served in the Army. He served for four years as a line officer, rotating through “just about every billet,” thereby learning in a variety of positions. Polk appreciated this diversity of responsibilities because he felt that it was a “wonderfully educational” experience in flexibility and leadership. Polk used his position of leadership in the Navy to “push the envelope a bit,” meaning that he was always looking to identify ways that he could act with freedom of choice within the rigid structure of the orders-based Navy. His service took him as far across the globe as Vietnam, where he served as a supply officer on amphibious craft, but also included a stint as close to home as Norfolk. This duty station was one of Polk’s favorites, as he was able to visit his grandparents in Lexington and even see his mother on the occasions she was able to visit from Bolivar. After leaving the Navy, Polk returned to school – this time back in Tennessee at UT, where he would add a Bachelor of Arts in Architecture to his previous engineering experience from Duke, in 1973.

As mentioned previously, Polk went on several dates with students in both Chapel Hill and Durham while an undergraduate student at Duke – before leaving home his mother and father “agreed that I should date for a while and not get married right away and not marry the first girl that came along.” Their hope was that, by “playing the field for a bit,” he could figure out what he found most important in a life partner. This strategy may have worked for an undergrad, but it wasn’t until a little later on that he would perfect his search and find that Stacy was the one he’d been looking for the whole time. He was immediately struck by Stacy’s intelligence, warmth, and kindness; and was impressed with how caring she was towards others. He was “amazed” at how

perfectly Stacy's personality characteristics and passion for others matched his personal values.

Polk and Stacy would marry in 1984, merge their families, and settle into a happy life in the Triangle. While he does not go into much detail into his architectural career or personal life before marrying Stacy, he does mention his love for architecture, which he felt was a perfect fit for his gifts and gave him a great deal of satisfaction. At the time of his marriage to Stacy, Polk had two sons – “Fred,” born in 1970, and “Jack”, born in 1974. Stacy had a daughter, Elizabeth, when the couple got married, and Polk reports that they all joined into a happy family unit in a short amount of time. As Stacy was from Roxboro, the family visited her family frequently for holidays, but would go to Lexington or Bolivar for longer breaks from school, thereby keeping up Polk's value in deep familial connections and passing this value along to his children. Polk also fondly mentions annual family trips to the mountains or to the beach, and even once or twice traveling to Europe. He states that he and Stacy shared a love for travel with their kids, and always sought to plan trips to places that the children would enjoy, places that they would appreciate the significance of, and places with educational opportunities, since it was readily apparent that they shared their parent's love for learning and intelligence. Polk lights up when talking about his children – he repeats several times that he is “very proud” of all three, and describes each as talented, smart, and driven individuals. He points to the wall of his room to a display of important events from his life, pointing fondly to a picture of him and his sons, and of him and Stacy, and asks that a picture of this display be included in this project.

[PICTURE GOES HERE – but has identifying info in it so not included in class copy]

3. Pearls of wisdom, reflection of life

Polk's love for his family and the respect he feels for others, both of which he frequently stresses during the interview, are at the heart of his answer to the question "what's your best piece of advice for living?" He answers "I have found that I'm happiest when I am with my family and when I am interested in and nice to most people." He stresses that he was "really fortunate" to come from a good lineage, to have wonderful children, and to have a loving wife – these people were all identified as being kind, caring, and loving people, qualities he finds incredibly important. He defines a "successful life" as one in which you pursue a career that you enjoy and are good at, like he did with architecture, and one in which you find people you can enjoy being with: "marrying well, having children, and having good friends." Polk concludes by giving advice to treat others as you would be treated: "I don't want to be mean to anyone, I was raised in the church and my mother raised me to be nice."

4. Conclusion

Today, Polk lives in the Carol Woods Retirement Community in Chapel Hill. He maintains an active lifestyle, visiting the fitness center a couple of times every week and swimming in the indoor pool once a week. This, he claims (as he dramatically pooches out his stomach and gives it a hearty pat) is to "maintain my girlish figure." The building adjacent to his hosts periodic social events like group book readings and dances, and activities like exercise classes that he enjoys attending. He's very sociable – during the interview, held in a common area, several other residents walk by and he stands to greet each with a hug. Polk has even found a way to use his leadership and

architectural skills, gathering feedback from other residents from his building about the garden and gazebo area outside their building – currently under renovation – and passing along designs to the contractors responsible for the designs. He feels proud to chip in “my two cents,” and enjoys talking with the crew that works on the garden, including leading a charge to include more plants in an area of the garden that is subject to heavy water flow and erosion. Of course, his favorite occasions are those that he can spend with his family, he makes it clear that he treasures opportunities to spend time with them.



Polk's Garden

5. Student Reflections

This was a fascinating assignment to complete, and one that really affirmed why I chose to take this class. I thoroughly enjoyed getting face time with an older adult and asking him questions that allowed him to reflect on his life. This individual is in Carol Woods in part because of his dementia, so I also valued the opportunity to practice interviewing someone with dementia as a practical experience for myself as a physical therapist going forward. “Polk” was a lot of fun to work with, and I found myself moved

by how deeply he cares for his family, I occasionally had a hard time moving him off the subject in order to glean more basic biographical information from him! It was difficult to capture just how active and engaged he is in Carol Woods, which is another thing that impressed me. He's really made the garden area outside of his building a major project for himself, clandestinely changing the orientation of the pipe in the picture above because he's convinced it could be better, collecting feedback from fellow residents, and talking with the crew. It was cool to see that he continues to exercise his body and mind with regularity. This assignment has inspired me to do something similar for both sets of my grandparents, I'm finishing this reflection over the Thanksgiving break and am planning on setting aside time on Saturday or Sunday to go over to my mom's parents' and initiate the process of interviewing them, to be completed over the winter break. When I first introduced the concept to my grandmother, she lit up, stating that they'd been wanting to record some "pearls of wisdom" for their grandchildren, but hadn't sat down to do it. I think this will be a truly special experience, one that I am looking forward to, and one that I think will be special for their children and grandchildren.