

INTERVIEWEE: Gilbert P. Folleher

INTERVIEWER: Ron Cody

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Gilbert Folleher was a JA professional for 38 years retiring in 1998.

- Developed the first national personnel and training departments
- Led the development of in-school programs transforming JA
- Served as President of JA of Seattle Washington
- Won the Hook Award, the highest staff award
- Inducted into the Staff Hall of Fame.

CODY: We have the pleasure of talking to a JA legend today...Gilbert P. Folleher. When did you first become involved with JA, Gil?

FOLLEHER: Well, first of all I would like to thank you, Mr. Cody, for taking the time to interview me today. I appreciate the opportunity to have this in the permanent archives of Junior Achievement.

Question was: when did I first become involved. It had to be in 1955 when I was a sophomore in high school in Toledo, Ohio. A gentleman who was the part-time director of Junior Achievement at that time, Tom Rutter, came to my school, Scott High School, and put on a program and we signed up for Junior Achievement. That's where I first heard about it and first got involved.

CODY: Gil, what were your first impressions of JA? Your first experiences?

FOLLEHER: Well, my first experience was "What the heck am I getting into." I remember walking into a building with a lot of other kids that I'd never seen before in my life. And going to a room—there were some adults there—and I think Dana Corporation was our sponsor at the time. And I thought, "Am I gonna like this?" The meeting kept going on and on—it lasted a couple hours. And I said to myself: "I think I'm gonna like this." That was my first impression.

CODY: And that was the beginning of a very lengthy relationship. Going back to your many years of involvement with JA, what positions have you held in Junior Achievement...as a student, an Achiever, staff member, advisor, on and on? Where did it all begin?

FOLLEHER: Well, if I am correct, in my mathematician's mind, I've probably been involved with Junior Achievement for over 50 years. I first got involved in 1955 for three years: sophomore, junior and senior. They only let sophomores, junior and seniors in JA. There were no freshmen in those days in the original company program. And then, when I was going to the University of Toledo, I got a part-time job at the JA Center—being the janitor. That's how I got involved from that standpoint—keeping the Center cleaned, and those machines moved from

room to room. The reason that was an attractive job is because I could work that around my university schedule.

CODY: So, when did you decide to make JA a career?

FOLLEHER: A very interesting question. Tom Rutter, who had become a mentor by this point, did not have a fulltime program director, and he induced me to become his first fulltime program director after I graduated from University of Toledo. I had a Bachelor of Education degree, and the only thing Tom didn't tell me—he did tell me he was going to pay me the same amount that teachers made at that time, which was \$4,500 a year. The only thing he didn't mention, and I didn't realize...not smart enough to realize...that teachers got three months off. We worked twelve months!

So, that is how I got involved, as program director of Toledo. From there, I went to Cleveland, Ohio in 1965, and became the assistant to Henry Heffner, the Central Region Vice-President at that time. I was his first Regional Assistant, the second person in the nation in that role.

After a couple of years with Henry, I went to New York City to become part of the national operation, located at 51 West 51st Street at that time--across the street from Radio City Music Hall. I was Assistant to the National Program Director, Jim Sweeny. Part of what I did with him was to help create the first achiever company manual along with the advisor manual. Again, we're talking about the original JA program.

While I was at National, I had several different positions before moving on; one being Personnel Director—setting up our first personnel department. And, then I did the same thing with training. As National Training Director, I set up the department and did the training. Prior to that, everybody at the National Headquarters would take a turn doing the training.

In 1971, I became the organization's Research and Development Director. The sole purpose was to help design our in-school programs. I had the privilege of working on Project Business—the start of our in-school programs—the forerunner of what we have now. In those days it certainly was a program that was far-sighted because it was hard to convince the field we were going to a program in schools, on school time. Those involved in JA certainly know where we are today because of those programs. And I feel privileged to have been a part of that movement.

In 1972, I moved to Seattle, Washington and became the Executive Director of JA there. We had just the original company program while I was there, for three years, my first time around in Seattle.

I moved from there to Denver in 1975 to serve as Vice President of the Western Region. We had fourteen states in the region at that particular time. In 1981, I returned to the National headquarters in Stamford, Connecticut as National Program Director, and later, served as Senior Vice-President of Programs. During that period, we started Applied Economics under the tutelage of National President Karl Flemke, and so I had the opportunity to get a senior high program started.

I also served as Senior Vice-President of Program Marketing, and then as Vice-President of Human Resources and helped with the move of the National headquarters to Colorado Springs in 1987. When the office moved to Colorado Springs, I took a detour, back to Seattle, Washington, where I stayed until I retired in 1998.

CODY: Gil, how many years were you on the professional staff, total?

FOLLEHER: I retired after 38 years.

CODY: Thirty-eight years. Wow! Now in the 38 years, as a volunteer, an Achiever, and as a professional staff person, you were very much involved in a lot of major events and major activities for JA. Maybe you could mention a few of those things. What stands out most in your mind?

FOLLEHER: A couple...NAJAC, the National Junior Achievers Conference, because I was both an Achiever, a counselor, and also involved on staff. I was involved with the National Business Hall of Fame from the creation in 1975. And also, was involved in various task forces and the National Staff Conference—as it was called at that time. I hosted the conference in Seattle in 1973...so many committees, many opportunities to help serve the organization.

CODY: Any special remembrances from any of those activities? Anything that you remember to this day, any life-long experiences related to those events or activities?

FOLLEHER: I remember my first involvement with NAJAC. I think the attendance, at that time, was somewhere around 1200 kids from all over the nation. And it was an eye-opening thing because you were involved with kids from all over the United States. And of course that was my first opportunity to meet people from all over. And even though there were that many kids there, they had a group situation, where I think there were 50 kids in a group—again it was diversified from the standpoint of them being from all different states. That stands out in my mind.

Also the fact of what we did with the National Business Hall of Fame Conference and our partnership with Fortune Magazine at that time. We really got some outstanding individuals inducted into our National Hall of Fame. That stands out in my mind.

CODY: Gil, out of all the individuals whose lives you've impacted in the course of your career, be it students, volunteers, teachers, board members, donors and so forth, what kind of impact do you think JA has had on the individuals you and JA have encountered over the years?

FOLLEHER: I think of relationship building with the individuals that you mentioned; it takes teamwork to be effective. When I was on the program end of it, you saw the kids involved in JA mature as they went through the program and became outstanding citizens, and very important individuals in their own right and in their fields of endeavor. I think Junior Achievement had that type of impact on a lot of people. The Board Members were very kind in those days, very generous and supportive of their employees, giving volunteers to the organization.

CODY: Let me ask you, related to that...this is going to be a tough one to answer, but out of all your experiences in JA, is there any one thing that really stands out as being most memorable? I mean you've had a lot of experiences.

FOLLEHER: I think the one that was most gratifying to me was the position I had as the National Training Director. I feel I was able to influence some lives of our staff and could see the progress of those people, and followed the progress of those people throughout their careers. That was very satisfying. As far as other experiences, there were many that were important; the most important was probably working on our in-school programming back in the 1970s, like Project Business. The reason I say that is because of the tenor of the times in those years, if you look back on it...if we hadn't done something to change the way we were operating Junior Achievement...we wouldn't be in business today.

It was hard to get volunteers and teenagers to come out at night anymore. And the companies were getting reluctant to give us volunteers. And while the original JA company program could never, ever be duplicated in my mind, because of how good it was, we really wouldn't be in business today if we still had that one program. So that's why I say the most important thing was working on those in-school programs.

Regarding experiences, I think working with all the people and the friendships that were developed over the years has to stand out. I look at some memorable moments...of being inducted into the JA Hall of Fame, getting the Hook Award for leadership in JA. Those are very satisfying. Overall it has been a very satisfying career.

CODY: Well, Gil you talked about the numbers of folks you've influenced during your career; now I'm going to turn the tables. Who are the people that most influenced you and your career in JA? Which individuals?

FOLLEHER: That's really an easy question. There were four. And they are in this order: Tom Rutter, Henry Heffner, Jim Sweeny, and Joe Francomano. Tom Rutter; he hired me. He taught me the basics. People always kid me about using 3x5 cards and having a "to-do" list. Now don't blame me, blame Tom. He's the one that got me started on that. Henry Heffner knew how to handle people. He was the best "marketer" we ever had. I knew how to work with people and to get people around to your ideas. Jim Sweeny: detail, detail, detail. If you're going to do something, do it right, and make sure that you're organized. I thank him, to this day, for that. And as far as Joe Francomano, who was my boss for so many years, I understood what quiet leadership was all about. And those are the four people that stand out in my mind.

CODY: You had a lot of tremendous success in your career but there must have been a few disappointments or really major challenges along the way. Do any come to mind? Any disappointments?

FOLLEHER: I'm sure there are. As far as obstacles, I would say the 1980's in starting Project Business. The obstacles were with the field. The field, at that time, I mean "local JA areas", for the most part were against doing the in-school program, because they were in a comfort zone with the original company program.

And there were a few progressive JA areas that thankfully took part in the organization of this new program and the experimentation, so that we could work out the bugs. Everyone was eventually brought around, but I have to tell you—and Ron, you know this, you were around in the 1980s also—it was a very tough time. And those were very stressful times in the organization.

CODY: Gil, in your opinion what do you think JA's greatest successes have been? Or even JA's greatest failures. Anything stick out in your mind?

FOLLEHER: I think JA could have been much more aggressive in telling others: press, media, donors, about how good we were with the original Company Program. I think that we were in a comfort zone, and had we done some things back in the 1970s, we would be a much bigger organization than we are today. And also an organization that people would think of when they think of economic education or business education. I don't think we're there yet. I think we have outstanding programs. However, I think the public perception of us is not what it should be.

CODY: Gil, let's go on rewind for a moment. If you had everything in your entire career to do over again, is there anything you would do differently? Would you work for Junior Achievement for 38 years? And if so, what would you do differently in the course of your career?

FOLLEHER: (Laughs) You're a good interviewer. I definitely think I would do some things over. I think to answer your question about whether or not I would work for Junior Achievement, the answer would be yes. I had a very satisfying career. Nothing comes to mind right now—what I would definitely do differently, because I know this is being recorded and I do not want to be sued!

CODY: (laughs). Gil I'm going to ask a really pointed question now. You can only give one answer, one item. What was your personal, most rewarding accomplishment in JA? What did you, Gil Folleher, above all else, feel that you brought to the organization as it is today?

FOLLEHER: I think knowing that I had an impact on the organization. From the Company manual to the Advisor's Handbook, setting up new departments we didn't have. Training...that I mentioned before, and in-school programs having been a part of all those. I mean, how do you pick out one, over the other? I'm grateful to the organization for recognizing me—with the Hook Award and the Hall of Fame. I just have to say it was a very satisfying career. Very meaningful.

CODY: Before I ask you what you most want to be remembered for, by the folks that come after you, let me ask what you think the greatest challenge is that JA faces today? Do you have any thoughts on how it should be addressed?

FOLLEHER: The greatest challenge today is focus. I think that we have, as I mentioned earlier, outstanding programs, and I think we have too many. I think we need to look at the portfolio. I

think that we're making it very difficult for Areas to function. I think also one of the things that is nearest and dearest to my heart is human resources and training.

Also, with the integration of International...we're now International JA...is to make everybody happy. That certainly is a challenge for those at the JA Worldwide, and that'll keep them busy for many years to come.

CODY: One final question of you, and this is a biggie. How would you most like to be remembered—by folks that come after you? When they talk about Gil Folleher, twenty years from now, what do you most want them to remember?

FOLLEHER: That he did his best. That he worked hard. That he was fair. That he possessed integrity. I'd like to think that all my decisions were always based on what was right for the organization, and not what was right for Gil Folleher.

CODY: This concludes the interview of Gil Folleher on January 18, 2007. Thanks Gil.

Editor: Ron Cody, Jean Richcreek