

INTERVIEW – MR. RON CODY

INTERVIEWER: GIL FOLLEHER

INTERVEIWER: MR. RON CODY
PRESIDENT JA OF THE TWIN CITIES

- Two-time winner of Charles A. Hook Award, an annual award to the highest performing JA professional
- Inductee to the JA Staff Hall of Fame

DATE OF INTERVIEW: JANUARY 18, 2007

ABBREVIATIONS USED: FOLLEHER = Gil Folleher
CODY = Ron Cody
JA = Junior Achievement
NAJAC = National Junior Achiever’s Conference

FOLLEHER: Today is January 18, 2007. My name is Gill Folleher and I’m interviewing Ronald D. Cody for the archives of Junior Achievement. We are conducting this interview in Palm Springs, California. Ron, I’d like to first of all ask, how did you become involved in Junior Achievement?

CODY: Well, it was in my junior year at Marquette High School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, my home town. Ken White, our local program director put on an assembly program and promised us wealth, success, scholarships, dates with girls, money, all sorts of things, and that’s all I had to hear. By the way, that’s a line that I continued to use in my own career in all of our high school programs, [laughter] promising the kids everything. Sign up for Junior Achievement. My good friend, Dick Hiebner, and I said, “Well let’s give it a try.” He came from a wealthy family so he wasn’t concerned about money. He lasted one week. But I fell in love with the organization. They put me in a radio company sponsored by a major ad agency in Milwaukee and WCCO radio, the radio station. I was not a jock in high school, I wasn’t admired, I really wasn’t anything; I had an impossible time finding my niche. Suddenly, JA made me feel like a person

and I was writing scripts and doing interviews. We had a monthly half-hour radio show, and I just fell in love with the whole experience. I stayed in JA for three years and, I'm probably one of the only people that I know of who stayed in Junior Achievement my first year of college.

FOLLEHER: Really.

CODY: For three years I was so hooked and I was in entertainment companies the second two years. That sort of influenced a whole field of interest I attempted to develop later on. But that's how I heard about JA. Sorry for the long answer.

FOLLEHER: No, that's wonderful. I know as you stated you've been involved since you were a student. What different type of activities and positions have you held in the organization as a student, as staff, as advisor?

CODY: Well, one of the reasons I stayed in JA for three years is I had an ambition to win contests. And again, I found a level of self-confidence within Junior Achievement that I didn't know that I could find. I won the President of the Year contest one year and I won the sales contest. I went to the National Sales Contest in New York and finished second there. A cute girl beat me out and so –

FOLLEHER: Remember who that was?

CODY: No, I don't remember her name. She was from the South and she was really a cute gal and I knew I didn't have a prayer. I came in second. But, anyway, it was those kinds of experiences that were important and memorable to me. And then at *[recording interrupted]*

FOLLEHER: Ron, what staff positions have you held in this organization?

CODY: As I mentioned earlier, I was really intrigued with entertainment fields. After graduating from Marquette I got a degree in theater arts from the now long-defunct but then quite famous Pasadena College of Theater Arts. Dustin Hoffman was a classmate, so it was a classy joint back in those days. I had a couple good job offers out in California with NBC and Music Corporation of America and so forth, but they didn't pay very much. So I came home to Milwaukee at my folk's urging to think things over. While there I stopped and paid a courtesy call on Junior Achievement and they said, "Would you like to sign on with us short-term?" This was my first

paid job. “Would you like to help us organize our assembly programs?” And I thought, well that’s right in my line of interest, and I did that for a couple months fully intending to go back to California. Then the guy who recruited me into Junior Achievement, Ken White, was fired. I won’t go into the details; it wasn’t a messy story, and he shouldn’t have been fired. Suddenly they said, “Would you like to replace him and be the Program Director.” Well, I was overwhelmed and flattered. Suddenly I’m going to be the Program Director of the JA of Southeastern Wisconsin and California gradually slipped away.

So I stuck with that for about three years, then left Junior Achievement. A JA board member enticed me away to join the advertising department at a local corporation, Inland Steel Products, and I hated the job; about as dull as it could possibly be. I left that, managed a community theater for about a year and a half in Elm Grove, Wisconsin. Then a new Executive Director came to town, Jerry Bartholomay, a name that will live in history. He got ahold of me and said, “I need you.” I can picture now Uncle Sam pointing off; that was Jerry pointing off the poster and I was won over and back to Junior Achievement. I went in a way that was probably one of the biggest mistakes of my life but, overall, it was a good decision. It was a very difficult time working for the individual who hired me as maybe a few others in Junior Achievement would testify. I couldn’t tolerate the position of Program Director for long and Jerry decided, we mutually decided, that I should set up the development department for JA in Milwaukee, the first fund raising activity that we had. A wonderful friend and associate joined the staff at that time, Dan Verbest. Dan became the Program Director and I was the Development Director.

Then in about 1969 I got a call from Henry Heffner, the Central Regional Vice President asking me if I would want to follow such prestigious individuals as Gil Folleher and others in the Assistants job. I was ready to get out of Milwaukee. I was happy with JA but very unhappy with my boss. I spent two years in the regional office, two of the most delightful years I’d spent in my entire career. Henry was fun guy, a real people person. I learned a whole lot from him about dealing with people and the politics of the organization. That was perhaps the most important thing that I learned, the politics of getting done what you needed to get done and who to know and so forth.

While I was working for Henry, one of the areas that Henry was about to close up was Louisville, Kentucky. This would be in 1970 and I remember Henry used to call me “Boy.” He

said, “Boy, I’m going to have to put you down there for a while.” And I said, “Well, how long?” And he said, “Maybe six months because we want to save Louisville.” I said, “Why don’t I just move there, Henry?” We decided that was probably the best thing. I decided it was the best thing for me and I became President of JA of Louisville. And that was truly a highlight of my career. Wonderful people in Kentucky; very laid back. The best anecdote I can tell about being a young ambitious JA staffer in Kentucky was one day, I’d been there about six months, one of my board members who very much resembled a southern gentleman with long white hair, Colonel Sanders type, put his arm around me after a board meeting and said, “Son, we know what you’re trying to accomplish here and we appreciate it but you’ve got to remember down here it takes us a year just to look a guy over.” And I’ll never forget that. I thought, oh wow, my career isn’t going to advance too quickly here and maybe I should be looking for other opportunities. Lo and behold, Junior Achievement of Minneapolis opened up and I submitted my application. Thanks to the efforts of our then Regional Vice President John Dickinson I was able to land the job in Minneapolis and became the President of JA of Minneapolis. After that we became JA of the Twin Cities when we merged with Saint Paul. Forty years later I concluded my career with JA of the Twin Cities. Is that enough?

FOLLEHER: Oh, that’s wonderful! I will ask one question about Milwaukee: Before you left Milwaukee, who was your assistant and didn’t you hire that person?

CODY: I hired the finest individual, the most wonderful, capable, loyal staff person any one could ever hope to work with: Janie Sedlack. That was her maiden name. Dan Verbest, who I mentioned earlier, had the good fortune to recognize all of those good qualities in Janie. I guess I was working too hard. They started dating and not too much later they were married; a beautiful couple. But that was probably the one saving grace and highlight of my tenure in Milwaukee, Janie Sedlack, who I love dearly.

FOLLEHER: Wonderful story. I know, Ron, that you have been involved in many events, many activities, many committees, in the organization. Do you have some highlights that you’d like to talk about?

CODY: I think that we were all involved in events such as the Future Unlimited Banquets that we put on, and the Hall of Fame, and going to NAJAC [National Junior Achievers Conference]

and so forth. NAJAC was certainly one of the joys of my experiences both as a student and as a staff person. It was just the wonderful camaraderie of having students from all over the country and just being a part of that environment, first at the campus of Miami University and then later on at the campus of Indiana University where the conference stayed for many years. But I think the greatest joy that I had in terms of events was being able to develop a very successful event in the Twin Cities. It was a dinner-dance and live and silent auction that made a lot of money for us every year. We weren't the only area doing that but it was something that I was able to develop and nurture and grow over the years. And it was something I was very proud of. It put a lot of money in the bank for JA and that was the important thing. Anything that raised money for JA.

FOLLEHER: You also hosted the National Staff Conferences and National Hall of Fame. I know that you had somebody perform at your National Business Hall of Fame Conference hosted in Minneapolis. She and her husband performed professionally for one of their very first times. Do you remember that lady's name who you discovered?

CODY: [laughter] Gil, a bit of correction there. The person I'll take credit for discovering, not totally, was Linda Etter, who's very famous, and Paul, and I don't know Paul's last name. Etter was her professional name. Actually it was at a JA National Staff Conference and I remember wanting to do something special. We had a budget and they were going to cost us, I think, \$3,500. I went to Frank Evans who then coordinated the whole conference activity. Frank said we didn't have that kind of money for entertainment. It's the one time I literally got on my knees and begged and said, "Frank, let's just take a chance on this because I think it will be the highlight of the Wednesday night-out dinner/banquet." We had to do something really spectacular and then, of course, they were an unbelievable hit at by the end of the evening. I remember the whole conference was up dancing around between the tables to Paul's musical renditions on the organ and Linda's great voice. So that was a highlight. I think enough with the highlights.

FOLLEHER: Okay. Ron, Junior Achievement has had impact on so many people's lives and you have been involved in many facets of the organization. How would you describe that impact on you personally?

CODY: Well it completely changed my life in that I was very much lacking in self-confidence and was trying to find myself. As you know, Gil, and as so many others who have been in Junior Achievement as students know, JA really gave me some wonderful opportunities to meet people that you couldn't imagine meeting. Not just our volunteer advisors but I remember in the good old days when CEO's of local corporations would visit the JA center. And we'd be in their office. I remember being able to sit and chat with folks like Ed Mosler and the head of the soap company [Colgate-Palmolive], Bayard Colgate, who was a regular at the staff conference and individuals like that. People who I would never have had any hope or imagination of meeting and they all inspired me tremendously. Well, I think that pretty well sums it up. JA had tremendous influence on me and also it gave me a career that's been very rewarding. I think, minus my experiences as a student I obviously may not have wound up with a career in JA, a 40 year career.

FOLLEHER: Is there one memorable experience of all those that come to mind that is the most impressive for you?

RC: Well, you mean in terms of my JA career?

FOLLEHER: Yes

CODY: I will say humbly and proudly I'm one of the few individuals I believe who has won the Hook Award [Charles A. Hook Award, an annual award for the highest performing staff professional] on two occasions and the credit goes to an awful lot of people who were very supportive. In particular, two Regional Vice Presidents: You, Gill Folleher, and Jim Hemak, who were both very, very supportive and helpful to me through some very challenging times, one of them being the merger of JA of Minneapolis and Saint Paul and that's a whole story in itself. But winning the Hook Award twice and then being inducted into the National JA Staff Hall of Fame. Obviously those are tremendous honors that one can't forget.

FOLLEHER: Is there one person or more than one person that you would say had the greatest influence on your career, perhaps as a mentor?

CODY: Well, that is very difficult to narrow it to one person because I've tried to and have drawn from every person that I've worked for, including the individual that I mentioned in

Milwaukee that I had trouble working for. He taught me an awful lot about people relations and how not to associate with people. Henry Heffner, taught me the politics of the organization. I think the individuals that most impressed me were two or three executives who were on our board who chaired our board and who to this day, to me, embody the ethical side of the free enterprise that is so, unfortunately, lacking today. These individuals I respected tremendously. I remember Dave Coach, who was a senior-level exec at a major corporation, always said to me, “Ron, here are my priorities as CEO of my company: My customers, my employees, my community, and my stockholders in that order.” And I wish that were still true today. They enhanced my career and made me feel much prouder about what I was doing.

FOLLEHER: Wonderful. We have had many challenges in Junior Achievement over the years and I’d like to ask you what perhaps your personal ones may have been or the organizations, whichever you’d like to bring forth at this time; challenges that the organization had or you had.

CODY: Well, I think that – I know there are many challenges and fund raising was always the greatest. But I think the transition period that JA went through moving from the after-school program to the classroom program was a very traumatic period of time. I was based in a very liberal state with very strong teacher unions. The classroom programs were very difficult to market to very skeptical educators who felt that JA finally was going to achieve a soap box in the classroom to pitch capitalism and so-forth. So, it took a lot of effort, years of effort really, to win over our school districts and once we did, of course, they couldn’t get enough of our programs. That certainly was a major challenge. And then, of course, later in my career, the challenge of keeping high level business people directly involved in the organization and on the board. As I finished out my years in JA that was perhaps the most frustrating and greatest disappointment I had seeing how the priorities in the corporate community and among corporate CEOs were changing. I don’t want to debate whether that was out of necessity or what-have-you, but it was extremely difficult to get high-level execs to not only serve on your board but to be personally involved. And so different from the early days in JA when those individuals enjoyed sitting down with students and discussing problems that they both encountered be it marketing issues, production issues and so forth.

FOLLEHER: If you had to do it over again, Ron, is there anything you’d do differently?

CODY: Not really, no. That's really a soul-searching question, but no, I'm satisfied with all of the efforts that I made on behalf of JA and on my own behalf. I'm not so sure that I wouldn't have wound up in a completely different field and who knows, you don't know what direction your life is going to take. I still have a tremendous interest in the entertainment field and sort of try to keep my finger in that working with a local community theater and so forth. But it was just a matter of circumstance that led me to what really has been an extremely rewarding career in JA so I'm not sure I'd change anything.

FOLLEHER: Okay, thank you. What comes to mind when I ask you, could you articulate to me what was your most rewarding accomplishment in JA, why did you select that?

CODY: Gil, I think it was the number of individuals that I felt I was able to influence. Like you, and we're old friends, I always went the extra mile. When it was the JA company program I was there almost every evening, the last one to leave and so forth. That made an impact on a lot of young people who, to this day, occasionally I'll run into or hear from or what have you who will say, "Junior Achievement changed my life." That's a pretty profound thing to hear from someone and I understand it from my personal experience. So I think the opportunity to impact and individual's life to the extent that JA allowed is certainly what I'd point to as the accomplishment I'm most proud of.

FOLLEHER: My last question to you here is, and we're certainly not erecting a tombstone, but I'd like to ask what you would like to be remembered for.

CODY: Oh, I think I'd like to be remembered as a decent person, a nice guy who always tried to do the best. Didn't always accomplish that. I made plenty of mistakes along the way but I think I had the best interest of not only JA but the other person in mind and always tried to ensure that the outcome was positive for all concerned.

GF: Ron, thank you very much for your time today. Ladies and gentlemen that concludes our interview with Mr. Ronald Cody, retired president of Junior Achievement of the Twin Cities. Thank you very much, Ron.

Transcribed and edited by Ray Darby, second editor Jean Richcreek

