

Western Trauma Association
Past President Interview
R. Christie Wray, Jr., MD interviewing Jim Benjamin, MD
February 26, 2003
Steamboat Springs, Colorado

Wray: How did you first get interested in the field of medicine, not your specific area of medicine, but just in medicine in general?

Benjamin: That's a hard one to say, I didn't even think about applying to medical school till, I guess when I was going to high school, I had an appointment at West Point and I went through the whole process to make my father happy who had a career in the Army and as I went through that process and went through the physical exams pretty much to a man, every doctor in the military told me that if I wanted to be a doctor that was the wrong way to approach it. So I had to make a decision, and then unfortunately, got an appointment to West Point and had to make a decision at that time to go to the University of Arizona and apply to medical school.

Wray: And the University of Arizona, because of geography?

Benjamin: Yes, I was living in Tucson and it was an inexpensive state school and obviously my parents weren't very happy with my decision not to go to West Point.

Wray: And how did you choose the particular medical school you attended?

Benjamin: Again, I applied probably....I didn't apply to that many schools, probably six or seven schools and I got in at the university of Arizona, so that made that choice easy.

Wray: And then how about your location of your residency?

Benjamin: Well, one of the founders of Western Trauma, Bob Voltz was one of my mentors and when I was an undergraduate I volunteered at the University Hospital and serendipitously it was on the orthopedic floor and that's when I first met Dr. Voltz. Also, when I was applying he was on the Admission Committee. Then when he would lecture to us, he always made a point of calling on me when I was a medical student and of course I didn't know the answers very frequently, but I think his influence had a lot to do with choosing orthopedics and staying at the University of Arizona for my residency.

Wray: What factors in his teaching or personality attracted you in particular?

Benjamin: Bob was always very problematic and he didn't agonize a lot over making decisions and he also seemed to have a pretty well balanced life and enjoyed, you know, family and skiing and getting out and I just think he served as a good role model.

Wray: What changes have you seen in the field of orthopedic surgery over your professional lifetime?

Benjamin: Oh my goodness, dramatic, I'm starting to feel old when I tell the residents stories about how we use to deal especially with trauma, rodding femurs or how we took care of fractures when I was a resident is so completely different than what we do now. I remember we didn't have power tools. Even femurs that we rodded when I first started was open, using a hand bitten brace. Rodding a tibia was something we rarely did and you know the explosion of technology and the different implants that we have to deal with complicated fractures, has changed at least the trauma part of what I do dramatically.

Wray: You mentioned of course, Bob Voltz and his influence on you. Was it Bob that first got you involved with the Western Trauma Association?

Benjamin: Oh yeah, Bob and I started coming to this meeting when I was a resident. Also Bob used to drag me to the academy meetings because Ann didn't want to go with him. He use to take me to dinners of the hip society and knee society and introduce me to all these people whose names were in text books back then, certainly as far as the WTA he was the one who started bringing me here, oh my goodness, when I think I was a second year resident.

Wray: What changes have you seen, if any, in the scientific program over the years you have been attending the WTA?

Benjamin: Well, the same ones you have and they're pretty interesting I think. A lot of the values of the WTA have stayed the same, but you remember the days when we'd have trouble even getting enough papers to present and a lot of them would be case studies about fast food restaurants, breasts and the fried fry oil and those sorts of things and now the program has gotten to the point where it has gotten very cutting edge and scientific, a lot of the basic science work I didn't even pretend to understand, but I still enjoy the WTA for a lot of the reasons I started coming back in the '70's.

Wray: And what would you amplify on what those reasons are?

Benjamin: Well, we all go to our own specialty meetings and have that sort of the same group of colleagues that we see and talk about the same things. This is the only place I can go where I have friends that I've known for 20 years in different specialties where I may just see them once a year but we all have a lot of history together, both in the association and personal history that makes this a really special meeting for me.

Wray: On a lighter level what are some of the midranges of some of the WTA been?

Benjamin: Well, as I mentioned to you, I don't understand half of the papers that are presented at this meeting, so for me the social activity is really an important chance for me to spend

time with people skiing and you know the various functions, lunch on the mountain and the dinner that we are going to have tonight and get a chance to get caught up on everybody's life. I think that's a real important part of this meeting and it's the only meeting I can go to that you can actually drink at the afternoon session.

Wray: A pleasant diversion.

Benjamin: Yes....

Wray: On a truly lighter level, many of the members didn't know that you had a different streak to you until the teeth appeared. Would you like to comment about the teeth?

Benjamin: Well, I think that made their day at Lake Louise and I don't know I've always been a practical joker. The thing that amazed me the most about those is as heinous as they were I think about 80% of people didn't even comment that there was anything different or wrong when they saw me wearing them. In fact, the first day of the meeting, Jim Edneg and a group of people were standing at the bottom of the mountain talking and I came up and said hello and asked them if they knew if there were any doctors up here and they all looked at me and said no, and started back into their conversation, which I thought must have been very important and as I started walking away I heard Ernie ask if that was Jim Benjamin, so they must have had some effect.

Wray: They were a high point at the meeting.

Benjamin: Laugh...well too bad, I would hope there were other things to remember.

Wray: Well there are, but it brought a different aspect of your personality on the WTA out in the open. How did you get involved in the governance of the organization?

Benjamin: I don't know that's a little harder to put my finger on. I think like most people who come regularly you get involved on the board or different committees and you know, maybe it's just because I showed up on a regular basis that I ended up as president. I consider it a real honor. It was certainly one of the highlights of my career.

Wray: I think you may just be being too modest by half. Do you have thoughts about the future about the organization?

Benjamin: You know one of the troubling things that we struggle with every year is the limitation on membership and you know, people wait a long time to get in and I think that's obviously with any organization, the future is in the younger people that are coming up, both residents and physicians and I hope that we can continue to make it an attractive meeting and organization for younger people, that can perpetuate what we are doing.

Wray: Is there anything you would like to say in closing?

Benjamin: No, just that I hope that I can keep coming for a lot of years and hope you know, the legs hold up and I can keep skiing or snowboarding, I guess.

Wray: Keep riding those snowboards down the hill.

Benjamin: Yeah, all right, Chris I appreciate it.

Wray: Well, thank you very much.

Tape ends at 6:41 - no further interview on this tape.