Interview with
Sandy Wheeler # FM-V-L-2008-070

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Interviewer: Mark R. DePue

DePue: Hello. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today is Thursday, October 9, 2008 and today it is my pleasure to interview Sandy Wheeler. Hi, Sandy.

Wheeler: Hello, Mark.

DePue: Sandy and I have had a chance to talk before. We talked about your experiences as a very young girl, as a child, growing up while your father was overseas during World War II. It was a lot of fun talking to you about that. So, why are we here today? We're here today because we want to do a series with Sandy on your experiences running the Rail Golf Classic for twenty-seven years. We're not going to necessarily get to too much of that today, but like anything we do in life, we bring things to our job because of the experiences we've had in the past.

Wheeler: So true.

DePue: We're going to talk about those experiences from the time you're about six or seven years old when daddy came home from the war, up to the time when you step in and take over, at least that's where we hope to get. Tell me a little bit about your parents.

Wheeler: I'm the daughter of Frederick Vincent and Mona Lutz Dehner. I'm one of four children that my folks had. We lived in Lincoln, Illinois. I'm the only one of the four of us that was born in Lincoln, Illinois. The other three were born in Springfield.

DePue: And when were you born?

Wheeler: Oh, you had to go there (DePue chuckles). Let's see if I can remember. Nineteen thirty-nine. So do the math.

DePue: We'll leave it at that.

Wheeler: (chuckles) Do the math. Educated at St. Mary's Grade School in Lincoln, graduated from Lincoln Community High School, went to Lincoln College for a while studying music and subsequently did some more collegiate education down here at Lincoln Land.

DePue: What did your parents do for a living?

Wheeler: My father and his brother Henry, better known as Heinie Dehner, owned a package liquor store in the Dehner block in Lincoln, Illinois. My great-grandfather built an entire block for his family in Lincoln, so our liquor store, the Dehner Shoe Store, the Dehner Butcher Shop was all in this big block. My mother was a stay-at-home mom until we were all grown and then she went back to what she did before she was married and she was in retailing.

DePue: Would you describe your life growing up as a typical one?

Wheeler: Very typical. Very strict. Good German parents, good German grandparents who were always there. My grandparents only lived a couple blocks from us, so Mommo and Popo Dehner were always a part of it. Now my grandmother Lutz lived in Springfield, so Springfield was always a part of our lives. My grandfather Lutz and my grandmother Lutz were divorced and Toops, was what we called my grandfather Lutz. It was Mommo, Poppo, Weale and Toops, so those were the grandparents' names. He moved down to Carrollton, Illinois, so he was a little further away.

DePue: Were any of these first generation Americans?

Wheeler: No.

DePue: Okay, so it goes back a little further than that.

Wheeler: It goes back a little further than that. We've had a little trouble – my middle daughter, Kimberly, is the genealogist in the family and she's so far into it. She is educated as a lawyer, but she's now becoming certified as a genealogist. She's really into it. She's had a little better luck getting her father's lineage than the Dehners and the Lutz.

DePue: Anything else about your childhood? I think you started singing fairly early on, did you not?

Wheeler: I did. Mother saw to it that we all took piano lessons, so music started early in our lives and we had a choir that sang at St. Mary's and the organ player discovered that I had a voice and I was only about eight years old.

DePue: Did he discover you had a talent for playing the piano and organ?

Wheeler: It was a she. I took my lessons from a nun, Sister Mary Charlotte, and ultimately, I played the organ at St. Mary's Church. I used to sing mass almost every day and as the years progressed with singing, by the time I was twelve I was singing weddings and funerals and I had a mature voice with a bravado at a very, very early age.

DePue: Did you like it?

Wheeler: Loved it, loved it.

DePue: What was it that you loved about it?

Wheeler: Well, finding out there was a voice there and being able to sing beautiful music and it wasn't bad that so many people would tell me how good I was, excuse me (laughs).

DePue: Did you like the attention it gave you?

Wheeler: Well, of course.

DePue: Was there somebody else in the family who had some musical talent?

Wheeler: My sister Sharon could have been a concert pianist. She played beautifully. Unfortunately, she didn't have what we call in the Dehner family the moxie to perform for people. She would just go to pieces. She was so, so talented and played all of the things, Prelude in C-sharp minor, she played Chopin, she played Schubert. Gorgeous, just gorgeous, but she just couldn't. When we were in high school she would audition to go to contest and she couldn't even get through the audition at school. It was very sad to me.

DePue: It sounds though like she wanted to be successful at it.

Wheeler: Oh, of course.

DePue: How much was this a reflection of what your parents wanted the two of you to do?

Wheeler: It is exactly what our parents wanted us to do. Sharon would be at the piano at 7 a.m. every morning practicing, but she loved it. I think it was very, very

sad for her not to be able to take it to that performance level. Me, just give me a crowd. (laughs)

DePue: So you had what they say, moxie.

Wheeler: I had the moxie. I wish I could have given her, I think I only need half of what I had (laughs). I think if Sharon had had half of it she'd have gone on.

DePue: Do you think she had more talent musically, or different talent?

Wheeler: Entirely different. I played the piano, too, but I would never, ever get close to her ability. She could sing, but she didn't have my voice.

DePue: Let's get into the high school years. At that time, what would you say you wanted to do with you life?

Wheeler: Sing, twirl my baton, not too interested in academics (laughs), which was very difficult for my parents. I was in thespians, which is the acting club. If we had had Title 9 back when I was a student, I'd have been an athlete. I loved playing basketball, I was a great runner, just all these things, all these extracurricular things were really what kept me going.

DePue: But not the academics, necessarily?

Wheeler: Well, you know, if I had applied myself, I think that I probably would have been a straight A student, but I was the only freshman ever admitted to both the mixed chorus and the girls chorus. That was very important to me. I was a baton twirler with the marching band.

DePue: Were you getting some professional training for voice?

Wheeler: I was also singing in the Lincoln College choir, which basically was an adult choir. I was about fourteen, fifteen at the time. The director's name was Bill Tagg and I had to audition for him and he put me in the choir. He went to my home and met with my mother and father and said, "I want to train your daughter." Well, my folks really didn't have money for singing lessons, so we traded. I babysat for his kids and he gave me singing lessons. But the worst part of that was, you know for many years, people had been telling me how good I was, how wonderful I was and patting me on the back. I didn't take those lessons seriously and it was the biggest mistake of my life. He was a wonderful guy. He was a great teacher. It didn't stop me from singing. I was a soloist with that choir. I was a soloist with the municipal band in Lincoln.

DePue: Did all those compliments go to your head a little bit, or did something come along to keep you grounded?

Wheeler: Well, I don't know where you're going with this (both laugh), but…

DePue: That child prodigy— there's an ego that goes along with that.

Wheeler: And I was a gifted child, there was no two ways about that. It was there. I don't think mother and daddy really knew what to do with it. Sharon was an excellent student. She studied all the time and when it came time for her to go to college, they borrowed money for her to be able to go. She worked jobs when she was up there and she was studying to become a teacher—not music. She was going to be a stenography teacher. When it came time for me, after singing and acting, it's my senior year in high school and I had been selected to sing in the Big Twelve Choir. That's our conference for Lincoln Community High School, the Big Twelve, Champaign, Decatur, Peoria. Every chorus sent a soprano, an alto, a tenor and a bass or more, and I was selected as the soprano to go to the U of I and sing in this huge, huge choir with orchestra. The director's name was George Krieger, and we had this wonderful finale for the whole evening called the Voice of Freedom, and it was packed with high A's. I had a very big lyric soprano voice, very big, that I always had to tamper down when I was singing in choruses, you just don't…

DePue: You don't want to dominate every other voice there.

Wheeler: No, no, and you didn't do that, but here I am and I'm about, oh, about ten rows up, straight in front of him and it was quadruple forte. I thought, "Man, oh man, I can cut loose on these," and I did. I mean I was singing those high A's like there's no tomorrow and he called a break and he went, "You, I want to see." I thought, "Oh, my gosh, I've been singing too loudly again. He's not going to embarrass me in front of all these kids, he's going to bring me down and tell me." So I went down to his podium and he asked me what year I was in school and I told him I was a senior. Are you planning to go to college? Well, I would like to. Have you decided where? I said no. I think I forgot to mention he was Indiana University, the top music school in the country, was and is. He said, "Well, I'm going to take you off in a room over here and I want to put you through your vocalese and sing for me a little bit," which we did. All these kids are standing on the risers and George Krieger and I are off in a room and he's auditioning me for a scholarship at Indiana University. Now this is March. He said, "About all of my scholarship money is gone for this semester. I will give you everything that I have left. I will talk to your parents on Monday and we'll try to get this going. Second semester you'll be on a full ride."

DePue: Was this your senior year then?

Wheeler: It's my senior year, this is my senior year. I got home. I didn't need the bus to get home (DePue laughs), I was flying, I was absolutely flying. Mom and Dad just kind of shrugged it off when I told them.

DePue: That wasn't in their plans for you?

Wheeler: That wasn't in their plans for me.

DePue: Why not?

Wheeler: Well, Mr. Krieger did call on Monday and they said thanks, but no thanks. I wasn't a good enough student. That was the reply to three scholarship offers. So, that was pretty much where my formal training ended.

DePue: Let's talk a little bit about, you said "mother" and "daddy".

Wheeler: Always.

DePue: That's interesting. Why mother and why daddy?

Wheeler: Well, to her face a lot of times I called her Momma, but when I refer to her in these situations, I normally call her mother and daddy. I never called my father dad, ever.

DePue: Was she the disciplinarian? Was she the one who provided structure?

Wheeler: No. They were, no (laughs), they went hand in glove (laughs) and hand would be an integral part of that (both laugh).

DePue: Okay, but you never deserved it.

Wheeler: Oh, yes, oh, yes. My family nickname was Punkin. We're a family of nicknamers.

DePue: That was your nickname.

Wheeler: Yeah. P-u-n-k-i-n, Punkin, not Pumpkin.

DePue: Was there a story behind that?

Wheeler: No, my grandfather nicknamed everybody. That was just the way it was. One of my father's brothers name was Lewis, but he was Pick; Pick Dehner became a Hall of Famer at the University of Illinois, broke the individual scoring record in basketball at Madison Square Garden and three-time All American, fabulous guy.

DePue: So there were some athletic genes in the family as well.

Wheeler: He had curly hair, very curly hair, if you think about it.

DePue: Okay, okay.

Wheeler: Pick was short.

DePue: You're very interested in music in high school. You're interested in athletics if you'd had the opportunity.

Wheeler: Yeah.

DePue: But you're also interested in other things and I'm thinking here, if we can get a picture up here of a couple of the other things that you were interested in. I've got a picture of you at the junior-senior prom, I believe.

Wheeler: Well, you know, I didn't get to go my junior year because I was just recovering from walking pneumonia and I not only didn't get to go to junior-senior prom, I didn't get to go swimming, which was very, very, very sad for me, because Lincoln Lake was everything.

DePue: We're looking at the left picture.

Wheeler: Okay, the left picture, that is the senior year and the gentleman in the picture is David Boyd, who was one of my singing buddies. He had a wonderful tenor voice. When he was a little boy his soprano voice was so beautiful that he was selected for one of those famous boys choirs that I've been trying to remember the name for several days and it won't come up. I was not dating David, that was a special treat, because at that point in time I was seeing Bill Wheeler, but my parents didn't know it and they didn't want me to date anybody out of high school. So David did me a great favor and took me to the only prom that I went to that year.

DePue: Did David know that Bill was in the picture?

Wheeler: Absolutely. Everybody knew but mom and dad.

DePue: Does that mean that Bill had graduated from high school already?

Wheeler: Mother and daddy would not let me date anybody out of high school.

DePue: Okay. The other picture that we had up there, I take it that was Bill Wheeler.

Wheeler: That was Bill Wheeler and that's where we met. I had a thing for Bill Wheeler from the time I was twelve years old. I was a water baby, the beach was everything. I got my junior lifesaving when I was twelve. I got my senior lifesaving when I was fifteen. Bill was the head guard, with the best looking legs you ever saw in your life and a tan to die for. You can see my little lifesaving badge there on my bathing suit. I wore it very proudly.

DePue: So was it just the legs and the tan that attracted you to Bill?

Wheeler: He was a very popular guy. Everybody wanted Bill Wheeler to sit on their blanket at the beach, you know, he was there all the time as the head guard and he was a beautiful swimmer. He still is. I call him a symphony in water.

DePue: But there are other things that attracted you as well. I assume his personality did.

Wheeler: Absolutely. We always had fun, but he was just a good looking guy and he loved the same things I loved around the water. He was also a musician—that I didn't know at the time. He went off to college, so I didn't see him for a while. When we started going together, I was eighteen and he was twenty-two and, actually, he was on the rebound from a former engagement. The place to go in Lincoln was the Blue Inn. Now they had a restaurant on one side and they had a bar on the other side. I, as the daughter of Fred Dehner and eighteen years old, was not allowed to go in the bar at the Blue Inn. If I did, everybody would know it and it would get back to daddy.

DePue: This, the daughter of a guy who owned a bar.

Wheeler: Owned a package liquor store, a stand-up bar. Big difference (chuckles), big difference. So it's Easter eve and I'm sitting out in the restaurant part, all dressed and ready to go sing midnight mass at Easter. I was doing a big solo and I was all dressed nicely and I was there with some of my friends. Somebody came out of the bar and said Bill Wheeler is in the bar and he's on the rebound. We lived on Kickapoo Street in Lincoln and to get from Illinois State University, which was called Normal then, you had to walk past my house. He'd hitch rides home all the time to Lincoln from Bloomington, or from Normal, and I was out there raking leaves one Saturday morning when I was sixteen and here comes Bill Wheeler walking down the street and he says to me, "Hi, Sandy, I want you to be the first person in Lincoln to know that I'm engaged. I'm going home to tell grandmommy Wheeler." And he whips out a picture of a redhead. (laughs) Okay, you know, I really didn't think anything about it and two years later he's on the rebound and I said, "Go tell Bill Wheeler that Sandy Dehner's out here and she'd really like to see him."

DePue: This person who told you that Bill Wheeler was out there and was on the rebound, did she know that you were interested?

Wheeler: It was a he.

DePue: Oh.

Wheeler: And, yes, he did know, but I can't remember who it was. It might have been that fellow that ended up being our best man, it could have been Jimmy Hopp. So, anyway, he comes back out. He said to tell you if you come in the bar he'll buy you a drink. Oh, boy, oh, boy, what am I going to do, what am I going to do? I went into the bar and I did not have a drink. I had a coke. And at 11:30, my friends had just left and he drove me to St. Mary's Church and I got out and went in and sang mass and that was it. Basically, that was it.

DePue: After that it was a serious romance.

Wheeler: It was a serious romance and our friends helped us. I can remember one party at Susan Mitchell's house one evening and we invited Bill. Again, if mother and daddy had found out, I'd have been done. That's how they were, though, I mean I just wasn't allowed, and, you know, girls are more mature at eighteen than guys are. There's no two ways about that. So now comes the senior prom. I have graduated from high school and there was a senior prom and I informed mother and daddy that I'm going to take Bill Wheeler. And my mother says, "Oh, Sandy, why don't you take somebody your own age?" (both laugh) But I didn't and that summer he joined the military and went to summer camp and this is one of my favorite stories. I convinced him we should go steady before he left. He really didn't want to, but I wanted that ring and I wanted it hanging around my neck and he used to write me postcards from basic training. I was working at the Illinois State School as a summer intern. I was known to be in the recreation department, but I sang and played for the mentally disabled students, people that were there. That was my job, to play and sing and entertain them. I got home one afternoon at five o'clock and daddy looked at me and he said, "You got a postcard from 'Hi, Honey'." (both laugh) My father was terribly incensed that anybody would call his daughter honey.

DePue: That's not how he had envisioned you.

Wheeler: No, not at all, not at all.

DePue: I would like to go back a little bit. We've got you at the end of high school. What were your dreams in high school? You had this incredible voice and you obviously had the ambition, what were your dreams that maybe you didn't share with anybody else at that time.

Wheeler: You know what, the only thing that appealed to me was something that was totally out of my reach and that was Broadway, totally out of my reach. Girls did not pack up and go to New York City, or even to Chicago to audition. It was not done.

DePue: Well, girls did, but maybe not the daughters of the Dehners.

Wheeler: Well that's it, that's probably it. That summer, actually one of my scholarship offers had come from Millikin University. A retired tenor from the Metropolitan Opera was the teacher over there and he had offered me a scholarship which I didn't get to have. By that time the Muni Opera site here in Springfield had gone fallow. There was nothing going on out there. It was all overgrown. It was terrible.

DePue: Would you say the Muni Opera here in Springfield is an outdoor theater?

Wheeler: Exactly. It is a thousand seat, the best amateur summer theater in the Midwest as far as I'm concerned. Of course, I'm a little prejudiced. Anyway, he put together what he called the Springfield Millikin Summer Theater and I

auditioned and certainly wanted a singing role in *Carousel*, but I ended up not getting a singing role. I played the old bat who ran the *Carousel*. (both laugh) I was eighteen years old, but I guess I did it well, because she had this one really great speech at the end and these are some things I remember. I remember one night I'd ripped through that speech and it was a dandy and as I left the stage there was applause. You, know, whoa! (chuckles).

DePue: You've arrived.

Wheeler: It keeps you coming back for more, I'm telling you.

DePue: How disappointed were you about having your parents say, no, Sandy's not going to college.

Wheeler: You know, I was so young and so naïve, even though I say eighteen year old girls are more mature, it didn't hit me until much later. It really didn't.

DePue: You didn't have resentment for your parents for that?

Wheeler: No, no, no. I guess I didn't realize all the particulars of Sharon's situation. I didn't know that they'd gone and borrowed money. I always called Sharon the favorite child, you know, she was the good student, she was the this, this, this and I was. . .

DePue: She had less to confess when she went to. . .

Wheeler: (laughing) Yeah. We shared a room and I was always getting in trouble for borrowing her clothes. She'd always tattle on me, then I'd get in trouble, but when she wanted to go somewhere, like they had a recreation department where they'd have dances on Saturday night, we'd be doing the housework on Saturday morning, it was a big deal. I mean, you didn't get to sleep late. Get up, do the housework, and that's scrubbing the floors and dusting everything and she'd say, "Go down (daddy's down in the basement) go ask daddy if I can go to the rec tonight." So I'd go downstairs and I say, "Daddy, Sharon wants to go to the rec tonight." I don't know why.

DePue: Let's get to the point where you got married because that didn't happen too shortly after high school .

Wheeler: It certainly didn't. Bill came back from his basic training in December and the talk about getting married just kind of came naturally. We talked about it quite a bit and one December afternoon he drove me out to the lake where it seemed to all happen for us and asked me to marry him. No ring, but we were sitting there, the lake was in front of us and…

DePue: Well he's only back from basic training, it's not like he's got a lot of money.

Wheeler: I know, but he was looking for a job and he was now a part of the Army Reserve. Needless to say, I was pretty tickled and I, at that point, was not living at home. I had had a big blow-out with my parents and I had decided that I need not be there any longer, and don't ask me what that blow-out was. (laughs)

DePue: You saw it a coming.

Wheeler: I certainly did. It was written all over your face. But it had to do with my sister Sharon and I said time to go. They had an employee's residence at the state school, so I got myself a room out there and established my independence and word was out all over town that I was going to marry Bill Wheeler but I hadn't said a word to my parents. Yeah, that was not good. So, we did get a ring and it was in March that we made an appointment to go see mother and daddy and I'll never forget the look on Bill's face when we walked in the door and my daddy was not giving him an inch. We walked in…

DePue: He'd not met your dad before.

Wheeler: We'd been dating, so yeah, and he used to sit on the front porch. He courted me with a baritone ukulele and he'd sit on the front porch and play and sing to me. He didn't play the piano so that's how he learned chord structure in music school. So we'd sit. . .

DePue: I'm thinking kids today don't do that as much.

Wheeler: No, no, but one of the songs that he would sing was "Oh Mona," which is my mother's name. Now mother had a boyfriend when she was very young and he played the tenor ukulele, so mom was totally enmeshed in Bill Wheeler's singing "Oh Mona" and she'd come out on the porch, you know, and he'd sing to her, so that was good. But getting married was another issue altogether and. . .

DePue: I wonder if we can get the picture up while we're talking about this.

Wheeler: Okay, I was nineteen in March. We went to see mother and daddy and dad was sitting in his chair, which is now in my family room and Bill said, "I guess you know why we're here." Of course it was all out all over town and my daddy said, "No, Bill, what are you here for?" Wow! He didn't give him an inch. Bill said, "We want to get married." And then they started rolling out all the reasons why we shouldn't. I was young, too young. I didn't know what I wanted. I didn't know what love is. Why don't you wait a while? Okay, wait six months, wait six months and if you still want to get married, we'll go along with it. March, April, May, June, July, August 21.

DePue: You got married August 21.

Wheeler: Got married August 21.

DePue: Was there anything about Bill that they objected to, or were they focused more on where you were at in your life?

Wheeler: Yeah. They thought Bill was getting a raw deal. (both laugh) It's true. When he would come pick me up for a date after we were engaged, they would take him into my bedroom which had the dust bunnies rolling across the floor and say, "See, you want to live like this?" I swear to God that's what they did. They did everything in the world to try to convince him not to marry me.

DePue: Well they were in your corner, weren't they?

Wheeler: Oh, yeah, I'm telling you.

DePue: After marriage, did it take long to start having a family?

Wheeler: No, no. Lee was born the following year, number one son. In the next seven years, we had five children.

DePue: And we've got a picture of them as well.

Wheeler: You called them the clan?

DePue: Yeah, I did. I'll confess to that, but apparently you're okay with that.

Wheeler: It's great.

DePue: If we can get a picture of the clan up and you can tell us who all the people in the picture are then.

Wheeler: Okay, well when they put it up. There's Bill, of course, that nice thin guy, and there's the momma. The first one looking down is Lee, then there's Liz, Kimmy, Brad and Missy, who momma called Tiger, Sissy, Fatty Foo Foo, Slugger and Bones. Those are their nicknames.

DePue: Fatty Poo Poo?

Wheeler: No, Fatty Foo Foo. She had big, round checks and my mother used to say, "Oh, Sandy, what do you think she's going to be like?" I mean they were just like this, they were jowls. So I called her Fatty Foo Foo.

DePue: She didn't mind that after a while?

Wheeler: Well, you know, that was when she was little, I called her that. When she went to college she was Kimmy. Liz got Sissy because she was Lee's little sissy. I called him Tiger. He was momma's Tiger. She was Lee's sissy. Fatty Foo Foo. Bradley was Slugger, he weighed ten pounds, so. . .

DePue: That's a good boy's name.

Wheeler: I took him over to my Uncle Ed's one day. Uncle Ed was the State's Attorney of Logan County and I took Bradley up on the patio and Uncle Ed was sitting there and he had this beautiful speaking voice and he said, "Well, young man, what's your name?" Bradley was about three years old and he looked at him and said, "I'm Slugger Muldoon." (both laugh) I don't know where the Muldoon came from, but that was it.

DePue: It sounded good.

Wheeler: And Missy was very long and very tall and that's where Bones came from.

DePue: What was Bill doing during these years?

Wheeler: Bill started at the Lincoln Courier as a salesman. He sold ads in the newspaper and he used to go past Myers. Mother was a buyer for Myers Brothers. She bought in Chicago and New York and also did the merchandising there in the store. So whenever he was walking down the street, she could grab him and say, "Now, I want to talk to you about this marrying Sandy again." (both laugh) He could tell you some dandy stories. We had a little apartment. I think we paid sixty-five dollars a month for it, brand new, in Lincoln. Then he had a chance to apply for a job in Mt. Pulaski as the director of their new swimming pool and his pay was going to be a hundred dollars a week. I'm telling you, we were over the moon. We went out and celebrated that night when he got the job. He taught swimming in their school system, he managed the pool and there was a skating rink. Bill was a great skater. He used to go to the skating rink here in Springfield. That's something I never did.

DePue: Roller skating?

Wheeler: Yeah, roller skating. I was always a little jealous that I couldn't skate like that.

DePue: He was one of those guys who could skate backwards and make you look bad trying to skate forwards.

Wheeler: With the feet crossing and the legs were going and, it was yeah, yeah, just really. The board over there that hired him helped us get a house. Lee was six months old when we went there. Then in July of the following year we had Elizabeth. He kept teaching and I was trying to work to help. I was working at WPRC in Lincoln. I was doing traffic, I was writing commercials, I was on the air, you name it, I did it.

DePue: Reading the news?

Wheeler: No, never did the news, never did the news. When I was in high school we had a radio show called Teenage Rendezvous. My friend Bob Cole and I and Joanne Anderson and I was the talent, the singing and channel twenty picked it up. I have a TV guide that talks about Sandy Wheeler, Bob Cole and Joanne Anderson in TV guide, Teenage Rendezvous.

DePue: When you say you're on the air on the radio, what were you doing?

Wheeler: Reading commercials, doing whatever needed to be done in that regard. I never learned how to use a board or run a board, never wanted to, even to this day.

DePue: How long were you at Mt. Pulaski?

Wheeler: We did time in Mt. Pulaski for three years (laughter). The trouble that always existed between Mt. Pulaski and Lincoln was in athletics and, trust me, if you were born in Lincoln, please don't move to Mt. Pulaski (chuckles). The rivalry ran very, very deep, very deep. When we decided to leave, I was by that time working for Channel 20 in Springfield. Bill got a job working in Decatur for WBZ radio. So here we are with the babies, by this time there were three, Kimmy was born in February the next year. So, we didn't like each other at all (both laugh). By the time the babies are in Mt. Pulaski, I drive to Springfield everyday and he drives to Decatur. Now that wasn't working very well, so we had made some contacts with people and through Jack Hoskins who had put Teenage Rendezvous on tv and had hired me to write copy for television, put Bill in touch with Shelby Harbison. They were putting one of the first FM stations in Springfield on the air. They were going to need a salesman. Well, push to shove, we finally got that job done and we left Mt. Pulaski and I believe we moved to Springfield on Kimmy's first birthday.

DePue: So at this time, you're both now working in Springfield.

Wheeler: Yes.

DePue: And not necessarily for competitors. One is in TV and one in radio.

Wheeler: Right.

DePue: Did Bill stay with the radio then for quite a long time after that?

Wheeler: About forty-four years.

DePue: Okay. To keep the story moving forward then, let's focus again on your career and the jobs that you had over the next few years.

Wheeler: Okay. They were varied, but the two oldest Dehner daughters had to take stenography, shorthand and typing, that was your fall-back position, which

was fine and it served me well for many years. It was, let's see, I'm trying to remember – when I wrote copy at Channel 20, I was on the air at Channel 20, I was director of promotions for Channel 20 and. . .

DePue: I have that '62 to '64?

Wheeler: Yeah, and Bradley was born in '64. I left Channel 20 in December of '63 and I had Brad in March of '64. It was always difficult. When I had to go back to work after Lee, I was working for Governor Stratton here in Springfield and it just almost killed me. And, we kept having all these babies, but. . .

DePue: That was a couple years before.

Wheeler: Yeah. So, I can't remember exactly, but all clerical jobs and every couple of years I had to stop and have a baby, so one of the part-time jobs that I thought was going to help us a lot and I could stay home was working in the legislature for enrolling and engrossing. Enrolling and engrossing in the preparation of all the bills to go into the state archives. During January, February and March, there wasn't much to do. You just kind of sit around all day or you didn't go in at all, but, as we know, the legislature starts to get busy, maybe, in April, possibly May, and the days and the nights got longer. I remember one night, these were the old electric typewriters, there weren't any computers, and there were no erasures, no white out, legal-size onion skin paper. My record was seventeen pages without a mistake. I was pretty good.

DePue: I'm not sure I can do seven words without a mistake.

Wheeler: But one morning, it was two o'clock in the morning, and I started to cry.

DePue: You're working at two o'clock in the morning?

Wheeler: I'm typing at two o'clock in the morning. That was the job. Mayme Lawrence was the head of enrolling and engrossing and we would all try to get a mistake past her. She'd hold that paper up to the light so see if we'd tried an eraser, she was something else. She was great. It was two o'clock in the morning and I started crying. She said, "You knew when you took this job what it was going to be like." I said, "No, because I've never typed at two o'clock in the morning before." (laughs) That went through until the end of the session. Ultimately, I became secretary to Senator John Graham and had more regular hours.

DePue: This is about 1966?

Wheeler: Sixty-nine. It conflicted with my acting at the Muni Opera.

DePue: Okay. We'll get into that in a little bit here.

Wheeler: Yeah, but that's when I left the senator.

DePue: I want to go back just a little bit. You said that a lot of these jobs that you moved from one place to another, kind of in between was a baby being born and then a new job. What were you doing at WICS? You said on air. What kind of on air time were you doing?

Wheeler: Sometimes I'd do a noontime show called At Your Service.

DePue: A talk show?

Wheeler: Yeah, a talk show. I did a lot of commercials. I was on the air one noon and we always did a Mel-O-Cream donut commercial after the noon show. Now you put a box of Mel-O-Cream donuts here under these lights and I'm pregnant, okay? I'm sick and pregnant. I'd sit there for a half an hour and then I would have to do the thirty-second commercial about Mel-O-Cream donuts and I was absolutely green. This happened every day. I wrote the commercials and we'd go into the studio and make sure it was right. I also ran the switchboard. I did everything there, whatever they needed, they plugged me in. I would have loved to have done a regular show more often, but it was just where they needed me they put me. When they finally put me in the head of promotion, I got to spend some time with one of my favorite singers, and that was Andy Williams.

DePue: Wow.

Wheeler: I have a very, very old film of the two of us together.

DePue: Did you interview him?

Wheeler: I did, at the Holiday Inn East.

DePue: He was here to do a concert?

Wheeler: He was here to do the State Fair. I have an album that he autographed for me. He said something to me, because, obviously, I was telling him that I sang and that I loved singing and he looked at me and he said, "Why would anybody want to sing?" I'm going, my idol!

DePue: He was serious?

Wheeler: Yeah, it was a very strange comment. Look, he's still singing.

DePue: He knows what it was like to go from town to town and the grind that was, I would suspect.

Wheeler: Well, I got to tell you, the behind-the-scenes isn't so pretty.

DePue: What led to then deciding to move from WICS?

Wheeler: Actually, the manager and I parted ways and I became the first woman that he ever fired. (laughter)

DePue: Gee, I'd like to hear more about that story.

Wheeler: Oh, let's leave it alone. You know, really, what it was, was when I would write a commercial and give it to the production department and they would louse it up somewhere along way and the next day laugh about it and say, "Did you see what we did to so and so last night?" It just burned me up and I was very vocal and very noisy and somewhat of a trouble-maker.

DePue: You were standing up for yourself, perhaps?

Wheeler: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: It was after this that you worked part-time for the Illinois State Senate and then for Representative Graham, was that it?

Wheeler: Senator Graham from Barrington.

DePue: That's a very different kind of experience than what you had in broadcasting for a few years.

Wheeler: Sure.

DePue: I guess what I want to emphasize here is that you've got the thirst for being in the limelight, for singing, for being on TV, for doing all those creative things, and now you're doing something quite different. It is very clerical, very structured. Those are quite different kind of things.

Wheeler: Had to support the family.

DePue: Did you enjoy your time with the senator?

Wheeler: I did. It was an interesting time. Alan Dixon was in the senate at that point in time and somebody would come in and yell, "Alan Dixon's on his feet," and we'd all clear out of the office and go in to hear him because he was something else. He was something else on his feet. It was a little depressing at times. The legislature would go down to the last minute and they'd stop the clock at midnight and they'd be down there arguing in the senate. A senator would stand up and say, "I'm not for it. I'm against it. I'm tired. I want to go home. I vote aye." That did not make me happy. Even then it didn't make me happy at my young age.

DePue: Where did you go after that job?

Wheeler: I don't remember. (laughs) Oh, yeah, I went to I.I.C.L.E., Illinois Institute for Continuing Legal Education.

DePue: What does that mean to the layman?

Wheeler: It means that the lawyers in the state of Illinois were required to take continuing legal education. This was the not-for-profit organization that produced the programs, produced the writing, asked the speakers to speak at the seminars all over the state of Illinois. When I started with them, they were still in the Illinois Bar Association. They just had a few desks over on one side. When I was there and became administrative assistant, I helped build the building and furnish the building, went to Chicago and picked all the furniture.

DePue: The building is where?

Wheeler: It's out on West Jefferson. It's still there.

DePue: When you started there, what were your duties?

Wheeler: Secretarial. It was all secretary, but the executive director, whose name was George Heroux, was very involved in the Muni Opera, the Springfield Muni Opera, and that's where we met and knew that I was looking for a job.

DePue: You met at the Muni Opera?

Wheeler: We met at the Muni. He was in *Bells Are Ringing*.

DePue: Again, we're going to backtrack and hit that a little bit.

Wheeler: I know, (laughs) it's always back there though. (laughs).

DePue: And that's very important. You don't want to lose sight of that, certainly. Did your job at I.I.C.L.E. stay strictly clerical?

Wheeler: No. Ultimately I became the person that went all over the state and booked the places where we would have the seminars and then, right from the beginning, part of the staff always went to these locations and supervised, take the registration names, take the money if they owed money, give them the books, this type of thing. So we were always on site. Somebody from the staff was always on site and we rotated that. It was usually two of us that would go and normally it might be a two day, it might be a one overnight. There weren't any that I recall that were any longer, but a lot of them were in Chicago.

DePue: There's a lot of responsibility to that, then.

Wheeler: Yeah.

DePue: And a lot of time away from a family of five kids.

Wheeler: Well – it wasn't lengthy. I might be gone twice in a month. Once I got to know all these places where we had seminars, I could book on the phone. Or, I would take a week and go do it all in Chicago, do everything that needed to be done there.

DePue: Did you like that?

Wheeler: Yes, very much, very much.

DePue: What was it about that that you liked?

Wheeler: Meeting a lot of different people. I always kind of had an interest in the hotel business, as a matter of fact, it's something I thought about going into at one point.

DePue: Okay. Now it's time to go back and talk about some of the theater things you're doing.

Wheeler: Now's the fun part (laughs). I was at I.I.C.L.E for seven years.

DePue: Nineteen seventy to 1977?

Wheeler: Yeah. I told you about my first trip across the stage in Springfield was as the Springfield Millikin Summer Theater. The site was burned out and the city of Springfield had told the Muni Opera Board that was still in existence, "If you don't get it up and running, we're going to take that lease back." I think they paid a dollar a year for the lease and it was a beautiful site.

DePue: Is this the same location it is today out by Lake Springfield?

Wheeler: Absolutely. So, a group got together and decided, and I wasn't a part of it then. I was 24, I believe, I just had Bradley, yes, and they decided to do a show in Douglas Park, in the Hahn Band Shell, and asked Springfield, "Do you want us to go back to the lake and start presenting musicals again?" I played the mother of a teen-age child, if that tells you anything about how heavy I was (laughs). So that was my first Muni Opera, and that was 1964 and the following year we went back to the lake and they decided to do *South Pacific* and *Music Man*. I was cast as Nelly Forbush. I was the leading lady.

DePue: *South Pacific*.

Wheeler: *South Pacific*.

DePue: Was this just a couple years after the movie came out?

Wheeler: Oh, I don't know, but you knew Ezio Pinza and you knew Mary Martin and you knew all this stuff.

DePue: The question you always get, I would suspect, did you actually wash your hair on stage?

Wheeler: I got to tell you, I did. We got a shampoo that would really lather up quickly, which was Prell shampoo and the stage crew had built a tank and a shower and it had a chain and you pulled a chain and the water came out. So I would soap up and I'm singing, "I'm gonna wash that man right out of my hair," and when it was time for me to get out of the shower I'd pull and get the towel. One night, I yanked the chain so hard the head of the shower went like this, so I had no water to get the soap out of my hair. (DePue laughs)

Wheeler: So I had to towel the soap out of my hair. It was a great experience. The music director was a dear friend, who was also from Lincoln, by the name of Rich Branom, who ultimately became my accompanist for 30 years, and who, by the way, was Bill's neighbor as a boy in Lincoln. And I didn't even know that. So, that was the beginning of a ten year odyssey with the Muni. When I look at that plant out there now, I'm so proud, because what we had that first year in 1965 was a stage, two tent flaps, wooden benches. You had to sit and dig, because it's a downhill hollow, you'd have to dig your heels in the rocks to keep from sliding down hill. The only thing we had in the back were tents for dressing rooms. We had outhouses, or porta potties as we now call them. Very primitive. One night there was a big storm before the show and when we got out to the site, all the costumes that were in the tent had flown out into the corn field, which we had to collect. Then there was also one night when I took my bathing suit back out to the Muni after I'd taken it home and laundered it, the top was missing, so my dear friend Georgia Dirksen. . .

DePue: This would be a problem.

Wheeler: Yeah. She couldn't go on stage that night because I had to wear hers.

DePue: You came back to this in 1964. You got married what year?

Wheeler: Nineteen fifty-eight.

DePue: So, about six years, you've got a pretty lively family started by that time and then you kind of return to your first love, the theater.

Wheeler: Yep.

DePue: What were your emotions at that time? Was there some desire to do that a lot more?

Wheeler: Oh, absolutely. Once you get a taste of it when you've got what I had in me, you want more and even in the beginning years between '65 and my second lead in '69, I did chorus. I just wanted to be on the stage. Very difficult for Bill because it takes six, you know I would work all day, and then go to rehearsal at seven o'clock and it might not get out until eleven, and, of course,

when you move out to the site, its just horrific and he— he was a really good guy, really, really, *really good*.

DePue: He had to cook a lot of meals, I guess?

Wheeler: He didn't cook. (laughs) And he still doesn't. That wasn't his thing. No, I managed to keep them fed before I had to go. Occasionally, because, it was like *Bells Are Ringing*, I had even to fit in dance classes to do the choreography because it was a big dance show. It was tough.

DePue: Was that your second lead, then? *Bells Are Ringing*?

Wheeler: Nineteen sixty-nine, Ella Peterson in *Bells Are Ringing*, which was the Judy Holliday role. A lot of fun. My oldest sister said, "There she is, there's Ella." My oldest sister says that she thinks that's her favorite thing that I had done. And I did, too.

DePue: Why that one, because some of these others are better known.

Wheeler: Yeah, you're right, but the role was really whacky and there was a lot of fun things that I got to do and I did get to sing a couple of ballads which you didn't get to do in *South Pacific*. I always featured myself a ballad singer and I guarantee you, I put the hit on "The Party's Over" (laughs). It was a great show with a great director. Her name was Betty Ward and she was a dear friend and the choreographer, Dorothy Irvine,who had to teach me the mu-cha-cha, which was a very big dance. She worked me like a horse and one night I had to go to dance and then I had to go out to the site, and I said, "Keep her away from me." I was ready to kill her, but boy, could I dance when it was all said and done.

DePue: From year to year, did you see the crowds out at the Muni growing?

Wheeler: Sure. And I saw what the money that we were able to raise, the construction that started, a real concession stand, real bathrooms. This is one of my funniest stories: again, *Bells Are Ringing*, it was a real hot muggy night and the bugs just hang in the lights and humidity when you're on stage and you try not to inhale them. I was thirty and my leading man was eighteen, okay? And he had a little trouble with the love scenes, but he finally got to it and we were out there singing.

DePue: Worried about Bill out there in the audience?

Wheeler: No, no, he was just so young. As a matter of fact, the first night the director said, "We have to rehearse this kiss scene now, Jerry." And he says, "I don't see there's any need for it." I was a little embarrassed and a little ticked off and he just kept arguing with Betty. I finally went over and just laid one on him and I said, "Now, is that so bad?"

DePue: (laughs)

Wheeler: That was the end of the discussion. We were on stage one night in a big love scene and, as I told you, we had porta-potties out there and the wind changed and that odor came. (laughs) Those were real experiences out there, let me tell you. If you look at what was there in 1965 and you look at what's there now, it's amazing.

DePue: What came after *Bells Are Ringing*?

Wheeler: Mame at the Theatre Centre, title role.

DePue: Now there's another one you can belt out some songs with.

Wheeler: You know, I was never a belter, Mark. Belt was an entirely foreign sound to me. I had this lyric voice. I didn't belt in *Bells Are Ringing* at all. It was all my natural voice. When it came to Mame, I had to learn to belt, I had to, and certain things I could do belt and certain things I couldn't. We were in the final rehearsals right before. *Mame* at the Theatre Guild was a very difficult time because my leading man dropped dead two weeks before we went on the stage. His name was Gary Wilson and he was a dear friend and it was a terrible trying time for all of us.

DePue: Did he die of disease?

Wheeler: He had a heart attack. He was out doing a promo at the New Berlin fair for the show. After he died one night, it was time for me to rehearse the big ballad in the show, which is "If You Walked Into My Life," talking about Patrick, the little boy. But I could never belt it, I just couldn't, because the notes got to high, and for whatever reason, I guess I had been belting enough and my voice finally accepted it, because "if that boy with the bugle" at the end is really up there and I let it fly in my belt voice and the whole place went like this and when it was over the director came over and he was in tears and so was I.

DePue: You saw it and he saw it as a tribute for your former leading man?

Wheeler: No. No. It was that I finally got it. It was I got it. And every night I had it on stage. I learned to belt in that show and I learned in some instances it is very important, although I preferred not to do it.

DePue: And after that?

Wheeler: Well, after that, what was it? I probably did, '72, *The Sound of Music.*

DePue: Oh, yes, and I think we have a picture of *The Sound of Music* and some promotional material.

Wheeler: There she is. There she is.

DePue: And I've got to say, you're the spitting image of Julie Andrews there.

Wheeler: (laughs) That was my dream role. That was my dream role. I dieted for six months. Every young girl in town was going to try to be Maria, and I was determined it was going to be me. I worked and dieted and got down to a size nine, which, for a five foot, ten inch person…

DePue: With five kids.

Wheeler: With five children, pretty slim. As a matter of fact, the director told me sometime in rehearsal, he said, "If you lose one more pound I'm kicking you out because you turn sideways and I can't see you." (laughs) Because I got to sing, I got to sing, and I got to be with kids. My family, aunts and uncles came up from St. Louis and it was so fabulous. But, this is my favorite story. Opening night I'm standing backstage with the arm full of roses and all the crowds are, you know, and my good friend Ada Lyn Shrewsberry, whose husband Tom has been on the board and a trustee of the Muni since those days, she came up to me and she said, "I knew they had made the biggest casting mistake in the history of the Muni Opera when they cast you." And I said, "What are you talking about?" She said, "I just couldn't see you with all those children." I said, "Ada Lyn, I have five!" She says, "You were wonderful," and she hugged me but I'll never forget that.

DePue: She didn't know you were the mother of five?

Wheeler: Yes she did! But that wasn't the image I projected. People didn't know that side of me, they didn't.

DePue: Were any of the kids involved in the Muni?

Wheeler: Oh yes. Lee was the token.

I auditioned for the one that got away; the other one that would have put me over the moon was Anna in *The King and I*. I auditioned and the fellow that was directing ended up being the guy that stepped in for Gary when we lost Gary. It got down to two of us and he was having trouble deciding. So he had us come over to his house. Not a good arena. When he called me and told me the reason I didn't get it was because I was over-exposed in Springfield, it broke my heart. So, my son Lee became the token gift. He played the first son of the king, so we had to be there opening night and they got to "Shall We Dance" and I started going (whimper, whimper). Bill says, "If you cry, I'm going to slug you." (laughter) I was heart broken. It was the only Muni show she ever did.

DePue: Of all of the five kids that's the only time that any of them had been on?

Wheeler: Uh-huh. They were young. By this time, Lee must have been, I can't remember, but he was about this high. Then I did *Mame* at the Muni. By this time, Lee played the trombone. All of our kids are musicians. ABC was first grade, do-re-mi was second grade, so they were all taught, even through high school. Liz became a dancer. She became a dancer because she was round shouldered and my beloved pediatrician Dr. Eveloff said you can't tell her to stand up, don't pick on her about it. I was quite troubled. I was five ten, I stood up straight and here's this little girl with her round shoulders. She was twelve years old at the time. One day I said, "What do you think about dance lessons?" Great idea. So we put her in ballet and we found out she was gifted by mistake. She danced seven days a week. We didn't have the money to pay for all those lessons, but Dorothy Irvine said, "Pay me what you can. She's going to dance." She became a part of the ballet company and also was in my shows. Opening night of *Mame* at the Muni, Elizabeth was in the dance corps. You remember the opening scene is Mame throwing this big party and the song is "It's Today" and they're all flappers. So Elizabeth had a flapper dress on. Now, I have to tell you that trained dancers don't wear bras.

DePue: Well, see, I didn't know that.

Wheeler: Well, now you know, and I've told everybody now. So she's standing right beside me, I'm singing "It's Today" and she's doing her shimmy thing and the strap breaks and I thought, "Oh my gosh, she's going to get her mother an X rating on opening night," and that little girl just grabbed that and just kept on shimmying. (laughter) But that was great fun to have her right beside me. She was in high school at that point in time. Lee's in the orchestras all the time. He's a wonderful musician. Trombone was his primary, after piano. They needed a baritone saxophone in the school band, so he taught himself to play to baritone sax. They needed tympani, he taught himself to play the tympani. He conducted the orchestra, the band, at Griffin High School. He is my all-around musician. He can transpose, he can write, he's got a full circle. And it's great fun to have him in the pit. Then, I want to go back to *Mame* at the Theatre Centre, because there's a point about that I'm so terribly proud of and that's the fact that all the shows were sold out and people were clamoring for tickets. And that *Mame* was the only show that was ever held over and put on for an additional three nights. Now you have to understand that they had to call New York and get the rights for three more nights. I mean, it's just not like, "Okay, let's go do it again." I mean, they had to go through the whole do-re-me and that was a thrill, to see that happen.

DePue: Of all the shows that they've had at the Muni?

Wheeler: At the Theatre Centre. My first *Mame* was at the Theatre Centre. They have a lot more performances at the Muni.

DePue: So *Mame* at the Theatre Centre was 1970 and at the Muni was 1975?

Wheeler: Yeah.

DePue: And I think in between those two you also did *Applause*, right? Nineteen seventy-four is what I've got here.

Wheeler: Oh, I missed it. Yes. Margo Channing. *All About Eve* is the original play. A wonderful director, Georgia Dirksen, best friend.

DePue: I expect more people have seen the movie than know about the play.

Wheeler: Yes. The point is very good, and you know what, I wish they'd do it again, because I'd do her so much better now than I did. They really had to train me to be what I needed to be to play Margo Channing.

DePue: It's worth mentioning the Margo Channing role is what Bette Davis played in the movie.

Wheeler: Exactly. And Georgia was into, let's sit down and talk about this character, which I thought was totally crazy. I'm either going to play it or I'm not.

DePue: It is a different kind of role than these others.

Wheeler: Very much so. All of a sudden I was really cranky and not nice to be around and wasn't getting along with anybody and especially Georgia. So one night we were actually out at the site doing the last minute rehearsals and we went out together and I was in tears. I said, "For crying out loud, I have become Margo Channing." And she said, "Right." (laughs) I was not nice to be around.

DePue: What was Bill telling you at that time?

Wheeler: Well, he didn't get involved with any of that stuff.

DePue: He kind of rolled with the punches?

Wheeler: He rolled with the punches. He has trouble giving a compliment. I'm to assume anything that he thinks.

DePue: So you're not going to get lavished with praise when you go home.

Wheeler: No, no, no.

DePue: An old Midwestern kind of approach to life?

Wheeler: (laughs) Yeah. Lincoln Community High School, Normal University, Logan County. In the meantime then, I was doing my own Sandy Wheeler and musical comedy. I was going around doing programs all over the state of Illinois. So we kept busy. But, you know, those were the little checks I was

able to bring in. When I would do my solo work, unless it was specifically a charity event, then I would get paid.

DePue: When you were doing the Muni events you were getting paid?

Wheeler: Oh, no.

DePue: Okay, I didn't think so.

Wheeler: Oh, no, no, no, no, never got paid a nickel.

DePue: Tell me about this Sandy Wheeler show. Is that something you organized yourself?

Wheeler: Sure, but it was just me and Rich Branom. We did musical comedy. We did numbers from shows that I had been in. We did numbers from shows that I'd never been in. He used to find music for me that he thought I would do well.

DePue: Kind of a stand up routine with a little bit of repertoire between songs?

Wheeler: Just like I'm talking to you, I'd talk to an audience and tell stories about the kids. Usually wore an evening gown and Rich was in a tux and I'd walk out on the stage and all the women would go, "Ah," and I'd say, "Well, this is just something I wore this morning to cook for the kids." (laughs) That type of thing. Usually, my signature song was "Clear Day" and when I'd do that I would go into the audience and shake their hands and basically say, "Thank you for having me." The Music Club Federation kept me busy and then I got asked to sing for a five-state convention, which was the highlight, and that year my left lung had collapsed and I was in the hospital. I had been in Chicago to sing with the Concordia Choir. We did one of the big Bach works; I was a soloist. It was on a Saturday and Bill was gone and I was having these terrible chest pains and Kimmy was supposed to go to Girl Scouts and I kept saying, "Kimmy, I don't think I can drive you. My chest hurts." Oh, the big crocodile tears came out and I say, "Okay." She had me. So I'm thinking I'm having a heart attack. I put my little girl in the car and drive her down to The Cathedral, come back and call the doctor. I said, "You know, I don't know what's going on." He said, "Oh, its just a little neuritis or neuralgia. I send you some medicine. You'll be fine."

We were supposed to get on a bus that night – no, Saturday night we sang a concert at home and the director always gave us a little red wine, because we were singing in our upper registers. If he saw a chord or a tendon, he'd make you stop singing, so the wine relaxes those in your throat and I was taking pain pills. The next morning I got up and got on a bus and went to Chicago. I had gone to Dan and said, "I can sing, and I can sing the high notes, but I'm having trouble getting my breath, so the phrasing is going to be a little different. Don't panic." Went to Chicago the next day on the bus. We

sang another concert. More wine. And there are still people telling stories about that ride home from Chicago.

DePue: (laughs) A lot of wine?

Wheeler: I entertained for three and a half hours. The next day I was in the hospital with a collapsed lung. My doctor had a little egg on his face, because at first they thought it was peritonitis and then they found out that my lung was down. And so, now I've got this invitation to sing the biggest gig I ever had in my life, this big five state convention. There was a pulmonary specialist that had seen me when I was a girl. I had scars from my walking pneumonia and they took me to see him, Dr. Trumpy at the clinic down here. He walked into my room and he says, "I know you. I saw you when you were sixteen years old." I'm going, "Holy smoke, what a memory you have." So I said, "Look, I've got this singing engagement. I need to go."

In the meantime, I've got this big event going on in Springfield called Walk for Mankind that I was chairman of, with all the high schools and women's clubs in town that I had organized. I had to watch from my hospital window. He said, "Let's wait." So I was there and he came in about five nights later and my mother was there. He said, "Well, honey, I can't let you go. I can't let you go because I've heard you sing and you're no hummer." (DePue laughs) I swear to God that's what he said. He didn't want that pressure on my lungs and I cried and my mother said, "Oh, Sandy," and I said, "I want to sing up there," (whimpering sounds). So they did ask me the following year and I did accept to do it. It was fabulous, fabulous.

DePue: So that's the lining of the dark cloud.

Wheeler: Exactly, exactly.

DePue: Did it take you long to recover from the collapsed lung?

Wheeler: You know, sometimes they go in and use like a bristle and rough it up. My lung reinflated itself. They didn't have to put a tube in. It was partial, but I had to take it easy. In August I had been asked to sing for the hundredth anniversary of the Dominican nuns, and I was the only lay person that was asked to join them. So I'm back with the doctor and I say, "If I don't do the whole program myself, will you at least let me sing for them?" And he said, "Yes." So I got my friend Jack Duffy, and my friend, was it Georgia? I can't remember, but there were three of us. I had heard that the nuns had had a fashion show the day before, so I took two gowns. I took that one that was in, what I call my Maria gown and I took another one, so when I came out the second time, they all went, "Oooooh!" And I said, "Well you didn't think you were the only ones that were going to have a fashion show," and they loved it, they loved it. That was a real treat to do that.

DePue: Let's get to the point then where you can tell us a little bit about the "Awakening Land" because I know that was important to you.

Wheeler: It was 1977 and Warner Brothers came to Springfield to shoot a six-hour mini-series. Everybody in town that had been at the Muni or the Theatre Centre or anything in between, were all lining up to be extras, for which they were paying $25 a day. I had been performing, I would call semi-professionally, in other words, being paid, as well as having a pretty serious resume with the Muni and all the other things that I did, my acting. So I went to them, gave them my picture and what I had done, my resume, and I said, "If you have a role, I would love to be considered." They said, "Fine," and they took my phone numbers and I was at I.I.C.L.E. then. It was right across the street from the IBM building.

DePue: Was there a long line of people going in?

Wheeler: Everybody I knew. So, we went along for a few weeks and they knew that I knew everybody in the theater community, so they would call me when they needed what is called a character extra. In other words, they wanted somebody that looked like a sharp-nosed widow and I'd give them a name, phone number and off we'd go. So I became friendly with the Warner Brothers casting office. One day I was at a meeting for the Institute and I came back; they said Warner Brothers called and it's an emergency. It was four o'clock in the afternoon. I got off at four-thirty. So, I thought, who do they need at four o'clock tomorrow morning? I called them back, they answered and said, "Boris Sagal, the director, has released a California actress to play a major supporting role and he's going to cast it here; he would like to see you at six o'clock, and we're only going to see three people.

DePue: He said they were going to release a California actress? That was language for that person …

Wheeler: She's not coming. (laughs) She's not coming and somebody here's going to have a chance to play this role, Cora Barker.

DePue: Your eyes pop open at that time?

Wheeler: Yeah and they said, "Can you be at the hotel at six o'clock?" Of course, I had the staff check my schedule (laughs) and then I went home and I was a nervous wreck. It's a pioneer movie, so I pulled out the jeans and a flannel shirt, put a little make-up on my eyes, because that's how I talk and went down to where they were doing the casting. They were in a hotel and it was a dark, rainy evening. It had been a cloudy, rainy, ugly day all day. This was in, I believe, October. Cold, rainy. Every female actress I knew in Springfield was there. They said they were only going to see three, so I thought, "Well, this is going to be good."

The casting office was on the main floor. Boris and his wife, Marge Champion Sagal, were downstairs, and we all troop downstairs and, lordy, I was the first one in. (chuckles) That is not good. I went in and there he sat and he introduced me to his wife and it flew right over my head that it was Marge Champion of movies and Broadway and Marge and Gower Champion and *Showboat*. So, he had my resume, he had my picture and asked me what I'd done. I said, "Well, it's all right there." And he said, "Well, I've been a little busy today and I haven't had time to read it." (DePue laughs) And all of a sudden five foot ten becomes five foot two and I thought, "Now I've blown it." He didn't ask me to read. He talked to me. He talked to me about what I had done and I explained to him that the reason I had only done musical theater was I felt like I could always act and I wouldn't always be able to sing. And that was it. I was in there, maybe, three minutes, maybe two and a half minutes. I read no script. Everybody else went in.

We all went back up to the casting office to get our coats. Nobody said anything. I had my coat on, I had my foot over the threshold and the casting director said, "Sandy, you report at ten o'clock in the morning." That's it and that became an odyssey for me, of walking from what I considered a successful amateur career into the professional world of Screen Actors Guild and Equity and it was everything I had ever dreamed of, but I didn't dream of it when I was eighteen.

DePue: Was it a difficult transition for you to go from the stage and having to project those emotions into a big crowd and now the intimacy of that television camera?

Wheeler: Boris was very clear about that. After I'd spent four or five hours in make-up and wigs and costuming, they said Boris wanted me down at the set so he could look at me and talk to me. He thought I looked perfect and took me aside. There was a lot of hubbub going on. It was still nasty, it was still raining, and he talked to me about the two mediums. He said, "I want everything you project to the last seat in that thousand-seat theater, but I want it right here, I want it right here."

DePue: And that made sense to you?

Wheeler: And it wasn't a problem for me.

DePue: I think you've told me before. What was the first scene they asked you to do?

Wheeler: Cry. (laughs) Bill can tell you about that night. Oh, I was a wreck. Even though you're going to be a speaking actor, they can work you as an extra at lower pay as long as they want, so I had a few days to get my feet wet being with the cast. My first day there, he introduced me to Hal Holbrook, the leading man, and Elizabeth Montgomery, the leading lady. There I am with Hal and the family name was Wheeler, if you can believe it, and so Boris said,

"I want you to meet Sandy Wheeler." And Holbrook said, "You mean your name really is Wheeler?" (both laugh) I said, "Yes."

DePue: And the first time they rolled on you was when you had to cry?

Wheeler: The first speaking part. And that was about five days after I'd done some scenes as an extra, but they were fitting me into my role as Cora Barker.

DePue: Tell us a little bit more about that role.

Wheeler: She was Miss Montgomery's best friend and mid-wife. Strange, huh? The scene that was so dramatic, there were three of us in the scene. There was myself, Liz and another actress whose name I can't remember. It might have been Jane Seymour. It was Jane Seymour's first acting role in the states.

DePue: She had a long career after that.

Wheeler: She's had a long career after that. She was very young, and very shy, and very, very pretty. Liz's youngest child, Suley, had gotten into a cooking fire and burnt to death. The scene was hysteria. The dead baby was in the bed and Liz was crying, I was crying, whoever that third person was, was crying, and I was the one that had to lead Liz and walk over and cover the baby with the blanket. Tough stuff. Not hard to cry, you know? I really, I really didn't have to transfer. I mean, it was…

DePue: You were able to get into the emotions of the scene pretty easily.

Wheeler: Yeah, and the amazing thing was, you know, a take is when you're looking like, we're taking from this camera now and pretty soon we'll be taking from that camera over there. We rehearsed the three different takes and you would expect that you were going to do them several times. We got them all in the first take and it was done.

DePue: No retakes?

Wheeler: No retakes at all. He came up and he hugged us and he had tears in his eyes. He said, "It's never going to get any better than what you just did." It was quite a moment.

DePue: That's an affirmation of everything you've been doing.

Wheeler: Well, interestingly enough, they had only signed me for the time that I would be doing direct scenes with Liz. They decided to keep me. Boris liked what he saw on film and so the two weeks that I was hired for at an exorbitant rate (laughs) it kept getting better and better. Man, stars were in my eyes and Bill was liking it, too.

DePue: The exorbitant rate was?

Wheeler: Eight hundred and sixty-three dollars a week.

DePue: Wow. Okay, that's better than twenty-five dollars a day.

Wheeler: Ah yes, ah yes. And, quite frankly, if they had established me as an extra, as all those other people were, I'd have never gotten the role. It doesn't work that way. You can do that on the stage, you can play two roles on the stage, but you can't do it on film.

DePue: Once it made the TV screen, how much time did you have of those six hours?

Wheeler: I was in the second and third segments. They were named "The Village" and "The Town." The town was where we shot the final scenes and that was shot in Petersburg. We also shot out at New Salem and we shot—what's that little town on the way? I can't remember the name, but there was a little restaurant, old building there, and they do lots of things like they do at New Salem.[1] I can't remember, so we were all over, but the mainly at Riverside Park. We were down on the Sangamon River and it was cold and wet.

DePue: What month was this?

Wheeler: October. And, of course, there was a wrap party after it was all over and my husband does not like to dance. My sister Sharon always says, "I can't believe you married somebody that didn't like to dance."

DePue: Well, maybe he needs to be on roller skates.

Wheeler: I guess! Because he's surely got rhythm and he spent the whole evening dancing with Marge Champion at the wrap party.

DePue: Who is probably one of the most famous dancers in the world then.

Wheeler: I have pictures and I remind him occasionally. So then came the premiere in Chicago and we got a letter from the governor, it was James Thompson at the time, inviting us to the premiere. This is a big deal for Illinois, to shoot this movie in Springfield. Of course, we were both going and we had a whale of a snow storm and it didn't look like we were going to be able to drive up. Bill said, "You're not missing this. Get on the train." I had a hair appointment, you know, I had everything set in Chicago and he drove up later. He got there. When we walked in, Liz and I had the same dress on; hers was burgundy and mine was black. That was pretty funny.

We walked through the door, Bill and I, and Boris grabbed me and Marge grabbed Bill and we went in separate directions. Boris said, "You knew that we liked what we were seeing or we wouldn't have kept you all that time. But I didn't really know until I got back to California what I had and I

[1] The town she refers to is Salisbury.

just want you to know that there is not one foot of what you shot that's on the cutting room floor." I was stunned to have him tell me that. He said, "Marge and I have talked at great length and you belong in this business. You need to be in this business and we're going to help you do that." At the same time, Marge is giving that number to Bill (laughs).

DePue: Maybe that was a tougher sell.

Wheeler: I don't know, but they had made appointments for me with a Chicago agent to get the kind of contacts that you need to get into the business. I remember the day that we went up. I had all of my scrapbooks, which you now have, for the moment. The ideal thing is that an agent would ask you for an exclusive contract. An agent asks you for an exclusive contract, they think that they're going to make a lot of money with you. When you're new, and I was new, you might want more than one agent, and so maybe not get an exclusive deal going. By the time we finished—I believe we saw three agents that day—I had three offers for exclusive contracts.

DePue: Were these people asking you for exclusive contracts as they saw you being in TV and things bigger than that, or were they thinking of the stage at that time?

Wheeler: They were thinking TV. They saw money.

DePue: Which would require you to move.

Wheeler: Which it did. But by that time Liz was in Chicago studying and dancing and she was doing shows in all the suburbs, so she had an apartment. I would drive up on Monday morning and drive home on Friday afternoon, hang the sign "The Maid Is In" and get everything ready, do the laundry, get the groceries, you know, and back on Monday. I thought at the outset that I could get a call, you know, we need you tomorrow at ten o'clock and I'd jump on the train and go up and that would be that. Well, it doesn't work that way. You get a call at ten o'clock in the morning and they want you on Michigan Avenue at two o'clock in the afternoon. You had to be there and that's when I started auditioning for professional theater, which is Equity. That's how I got my Equity card, while I was living in Chicago, but I got the phone call when I was in Springfield, which is really, really neat.

DePue: The phone call to be in a play?

Wheeler: Yeah, to play Mrs. Darling in *Peter Pan* with Nancy Dessault and Alan Sues.

DePue: Did you really want to go into the television side of it though?

Wheeler: I wanted to do both. You can do both.

DePue: You weren't ready to turn your back on the singing then?

Wheeler: Absolutely not! I was just reaching my prime. Seriously. That sounds silly, but I had command of what I was doing by that time. It's a little difficult when you've been a leading lady for ten years and all of a sudden you're playing supporting roles, but, hey, wait a minute, I'm on the stage I've always wanted to be on! And at the age I was, you know, all of the kids in the chorus could have called me grandma for that matter, but I was definitely the newby and I was, I think, thirty-eight years old when I got my Equity card.

DePue: Did the TV work never come?

Wheeler: Oh, it did, it did.

DePue: What kind of work did you do for TV?

Wheeler: I did nationwide commercials, and I came this close to being in *Ordinary People;* that was Robert Redford's first directorial with Mary Tyler Moore and it won an Oscar, and I almost killed myself on Oscar night. (laughs) I really could not believe that I made it. By that time I did have an exclusive with Amelia Lawrence and Redford's people were not seeing anybody that did not have an exclusive contract. That's why you want it, because if they think you're good, they're going to get you in. So all they did was send my picture and I made three cuts for that movie. The next was Redford and now I'm feeling pretty good.

DePue: Robert Redford's going to be looking at your picture.

Wheeler: Robert Redford, he's already looked at it. They want to see me again. Nobody had ever taken the time, nor was I smart enough to ask, "What is this role? What are you looking for?" The next time I went in, it wasn't Redford yet, Redford was going to be the next stop, I was this Sandy Wheeler that you see sitting here, you know, having fun and laughing and cutting up and being crazy. They were looking for a River Forest matron.

DePue: High society?

Wheeler: High society. Nobody told me.

DePue: You could play high society?

Wheeler: I could play high society in a very funny way. I know what the knives and forks are for. (both laugh) And it killed me. So, everybody in the business was saying, "Well, don't worry about it. He's never directed. She's never done a major, yah, yah, yah, yah, Academy Award. (laughs)

DePue: What commercials did you do? Would we recognize any of them? Kids growing up watching TV?

Wheeler: Actually, one was with a teenager in a bathroom, and where did we shoot it? Out in Schaumburg. I had a CB in my car because I was always getting sent to these odd places to do jobs and, thank God, because all those suburbs run together. They had rented this house to shoot this; it was a public service announcement for some electric conglomerate out of Washington, DC. It was big stuff. It was a small bathroom and it was the kid and me in the bathroom with a hair dryer. (both laugh) We were in that bathroom with those hot lights all day. And, of course, it's not like just taking a script with a thirty-second commercial and reading it. You've got ten seconds to get this done and eleven seconds to get this done and you've got to hit it over and over and over again. You may be getting it right but the kid's not getting it right, so I thought I was dead that day. That was just unbearable.

DePue: What were Bill and the kids thinking in terms of this new career that mom was having?

Wheeler: Well, it was very difficult. I think, and I know he was proud of me. I know it was hard for me to be away as much as I was and the other side of it was I don't think he thought that I was going to be as successful as I was. And now, this is my idea, that he was thinking, "What comes next?" You know, Chicago today, what. . .

DePue: Was there a discussion about going out to one of the coasts?

Wheeler: Actually, I did three shows in Milwaukee at Melody Top where I got my Equity card and Gretchen Wyler, a very famous Broadway star, had encouraged me to come to New York. She couldn't believe that I had five kids. Her mother was there and one night she called me into the dressing room and. . .

DePue: This was up in Milwaukee?

Wheeler: This was in Milwaukee. She said she wanted her mother to meet me and would you believe she's got five kids and yada, yada, yada. Gretchen wanted me to come to New York and she was going to help me. Also, I auditioned for Peter Nero who was musical director for *Annie* on Broadway. I auditioned in a ballroom at the Palmer House and knocked them out with a couple of high A's. I was just auditioning for a chorus role and they had me on hold for the role of the secretary on Broadway, which never came to fruition, but we got darn close a couple of times.

DePue: Something you had been thinking about for a couple of decades?

Wheeler: Oh, oh, oh! I don't know if I had ever made it on the stage I'd probably dropped dead. (both laugh) That two and a half to three years that I performed full-time, most people wouldn't have the opportunities that I had or the support that I had from my husband. If it hadn't been for Bill, I wouldn't have been able to do it. He allowed me to go, he let me flex my muscles, he

let me find out I was what I thought I could be and I accepted that, but things were getting a little shaky (laughs) and I thought maybe it was time to look for a full-time job.

DePue: What were the ages of the kids at that time?

Wheeler: I can't remember. We'd been married for twenty years at that point.

DePue: So most of them were still at home?

Wheeler: Oh, yeah. Lee might have been in Wichita by then, in the military, but maybe not. I'd have to think about that. But yes, they were home, they were home. Bill thought that I really, really, really loved being up in Milwaukee. I loved doing the shows. When I went back to that empty apartment at night, I hated it, you know, this isn't what I'd been surrounded with for twenty years. I was so lonesome. He didn't believe that. He thought I was whooping it up the whole time, but I wasn't (laughs) at all. It was a wonderful experience. But two summers, while I was home being a non-gainfully-employed person as an actor, I volunteered for the new golf tournament in town. I was kind of enamored with that. I had done a lot of charity work over the years, fashion shows and just to raise money for charity. I was always big into that.

DePue: I know you want me to mention one of the big designers that came in town.

Wheeler: Oh (laughs) yeah, that was good. I modeled for Oleg Cassini. I really did. Myers Brothers brought Oleg Cassini in to do a charity show. Now, what a lot of people don't know is Oleg Cassini was quite a horseman. It was part of his life.

DePue: For those of us who aren't in the business, a horseman would be. . .

Wheeler: He rode, he rode and we actually did this fashion show out in one of the Bunn stables. We actually changed clothes in the stalls.

DePue: So a real, honest to God horseman.

Wheeler: A real, honest-to-God. I had to help out Albert Myers pick the models. He said, "He's a New York designer; he was Jackie Kennedy's favorite clothing designer, okay?"

DePue: So women of your generation knew who Oleg Cassini was?

Wheeler: You betcha. So I'm trying to find all these little tiny people. I fit in the medium category at that point in time. So, Oleg and Albert and I were standing and we had this whole row of girls over here. We were in a ballroom at one of the hotels and Oleg's going, "This one is good, this one is good, this one is good," and so he picked all these models and Albert says, "Now, I'd really like to have Sandy model. Can we make that work?" And he grabs my

hip bone, just like this, and he says, "Oh, that's got to be at least a size eight." And I thought to myself, "If I'm going to tell you I'm a size ten, your nuts." (laughter) Well first, his clothing line got lost on Ozark Airlines. They had to get all these different things in and they sent in this absolutely gorgeous, shiny, black leather double breasted pantsuit. It was belted and a gorgeous red shirt that fit me to a T and we opened the show. Oleg rode in on the most gorgeous stallion and he had this big Stetson hat on, just straight and sharp, very, very handsome and stunning. He rode over to me; I was standing at the edge of the stage and he takes the hat off and he gives it to me. I put the hat on, I model and I'm gone and I'm happy. (laughter) So happy. That was a great memory, but all for charity.

DePue: I know you put together some other things, like beauty pageants, did a lot of different kinds of charity work.

Wheeler: I did. Really, if I could take whatever talent I had and do it for charity, that was fabulous. There was a trampoline team in Springfield called the Springfield Olympians. This was all kind of coming along when Judy Ford was Miss Illinois County Fair, went on to win Miss Illinois, went on to the Miss America pageant, and her talent was trampoline. I was president of the organization that was raising the money for these kids to travel and compete. All of a sudden, because I was working at the State Fair on their big stage in the Exposition Building, I had to interview Judy every day as Miss Illinois County Fair. She was just, oh, kind of thick. We had to sometimes, you know, "Now Judy—I did this every day—I'm going to ask you your name, you're Judy Ford, you're from Belvedere, Illinois, yah, yah," every day. So we became friends.

Then when she became Miss Illinois, I was chaperoning Miss Lincoln Land from here in Springfield because I was training girls, teaching them how to walk, teaching them how to turn, how the arms work, everything and Judy Ford becomes Miss Illinois. Then I got asked to be on the Miss Illinois pageant committee up in Aurora, Illinois and so we did that. The night that Judy Ford became Miss America, the pageant director was an attorney from Aurora, who I had met through I.I.C.L.E., who went out to Atlantic City every year. He didn't go that year, because he said, "They do not pick bulb-nosed blondes." (laughs)

So, Miss Land of Lincoln and I went over with some friends from Decatur who all had contestants and we were all together for a party to watch Judy. We sat there and she had already won swimsuit, she had already won talent and if she didn't blow it, she was going to become Miss America. When they said Miss America Judy Ford, I started to cry and my mascara ran in my eyes and burned so badly that I couldn't open my eyes. I never saw them put the crown on her, I never saw her take the walk (laughter) and I'm still not over it.

DePue: And of all of that experience, that's what you remember about it?

Wheeler: Then she came to Springfield. She made her first appearance in Illinois for me to help raise money for these trampoline kids. I had put together this whole show. I got this great singing group from Lincoln High School and I had the kids emcee, I had the kids do it all for this young team and Judy. We had the biggest ice storm in the history of… We hardly got Judy in. Nobody came to the show because they didn't want to leave their houses, but it was a great time (laughter).

DePue: Let's go back to the golf tournament. It's about the same timeframe we're talking about. What was it about the golf tournament that attracted you? You'd done all kinds of different things here.

Wheeler: It was so unusual. I didn't play golf, but I thought, "Gosh this is a big thing, LPGA." I didn't think much about the game, though, thought it was kind of silly chasing a white ball to a little hole, but I think it's good for Springfield. That was my whole. . .

DePue: Was this when the LPGA was pretty young?

Wheeler: Oh, yeah. This tournament is the oldest event on the LPGA tour, at thirty-three.

DePue: One of the very first, then?

Wheeler: Well, there had been some come and go; I mean, oldest existing event. I thought I ought to volunteer for that. And as I said, I wasn't gainfully employed. I was ready for another acting job to come along, so I went out and I said, I don't know anything about golf, I don't know anything about the golf course, but I'm a pretty good secretary, so if you need some secretarial work, I'd be happy to do it, which I did that first year. I remember the first year. . .

DePue: Do you remember what year that was?

Wheeler: Nineteen seventy-eight. We were in the office everyday typing what needed to be typed, but now it's time for the first round of the tournament and I got a call at three o'clock in the morning that they had forgotten to do the scorecards and would I please go out to the rail and type the scorecards for the 7 a.m. start time. So, I went out there in the dark, four o'clock in the morning, and Jim Johnson, who is still there, was out on the mower with the lights on and I'm in the little brick house there typing the scorecards. That was first.

DePue: I'm thinking, how do you forget to type the scorecards up?

Wheeler: Well, it wasn't my forgetting because I didn't know anything about it anyway. (laughter) Scorecards, what are they? (laughter) Oh, I got it. (laughter)

DePue: So you start as a secretary?

Wheeler: I worked that week and it was just great fun, a volunteer, of course, everybody volunteers at the tournament. The next year, I'm still running back and forth to Chicago, but I'm still non-gainfully employed and I wanted to go back and volunteer again. They were happy to have me. I knew a few people then and because I was in the office those two years, it occurred to me: the tournament had never made any money. It was losing big bucks and Mr. Jake Bunn and Mr. Leonard Sapp were underwriting the whole thing because the golf course belonged to them and they had dreams of a housing development out there, which we now have, but …

DePue: Did they have dreams at that time of just being a charity event so that they would make money?

Wheeler: Absolutely. As a matter of fact, their first relationship was the Jerry Lewis Muscular Dystrophy Tournament. I believe, I've been told, that Mr. Bunn and Mr. Sapp gave a check to Jerry Lewis, but not out of the tournament funds, a personal check, because there were no tournament funds. They had to pay the bills and they had to pay the losses. That happened, but there was all the talk—the first tournament was in 1976, so we're talking '76, '77—we're now three and four, '78 and '79. The tournament had never made a dollar. When Mr. Bunn died very suddenly, Mr. Sapp said, "I don't want to continue to do this. If Springfield wants to keep the golf tournament here, you go negotiate with the LPGA," and that is when the not-for-profit corporation was founded.

DePue: You being yourself?

Wheeler: No. I wasn't in it yet. This was before me. They were calling it the Rail Charity Golf Classic, which became the corporate name of the tournament. What I saw in those two years of volunteering is, they weren't running it like a business. They were kind of running it like a big time golf outing. Nobody really had their hand on the tiller or their hand on the cash register. It just wasn't working, so everybody was scratching their heads, you know, loss after loss after loss. Can we keep this up? My predecessor's contract was not renewed.

DePue: Were you on the board at that time as well or strictly doing the secretarial job?

Wheeler: I was strictly a volunteer, but I got to know them all. I got to know Phil Spengler and John Homeier and the high rollers that were making it happen. My predecessor kind of packed up and left on the run, didn't finish the business of that year. They came to me and said, "If you could help us and stay on, we'll pay you $5 an hour." Well, shoot, I wasn't doing anything, so I helped.

DePue: Full time.

Wheeler: As much as they needed me. I don't recall that I went to the office every day, but I think it was pretty darn close, and, of course, there was no other help.

DePue: But you've got an Equity card.

Wheeler: True and that was the dream of my life, you know. But, you've got to remember that Bill was getting a little uneasy and they were trying to decide whether the tournament was going to stay in Springfield. If they could continue, they would go on a search for an executive director that knew what he was doing that would help raise the money, had the know-how to do that and then they would decide. In the meantime, again, I've met the doctors and the lawyers and the Indian chiefs who are all involved with this. I'm talking with them and I'm thinking, "Well, Bill wants me to look for a job and I've got this rather significant resume and I think I'll just submit my resume as executive director." They hadn't found anybody that they could afford nationwide and I started doing a little politicking among the board members.

I went into Phil Spengler, who was president of the board. I walked into his office and I said, "Here's my resume. I think I'm going to apply for the job." He kind of sat back and said, "Well, I don't think we can afford to pay a secretary." And I said, "And I don't think I said anything about being a secretary." He said, "You mean *the* job?" And I'm saying to myself, "Right, *the* job," the pitfall of all times, you know. Initially he was really surprised, and I knew, I was absolutely certain that there was no way those men would hire a woman that didn't play golf, that didn't know anything about golf, couldn't find her way around a golf course if you paid her, had never run a business, had never been a chief fundraiser, at whose response I was told, you sell yourself every time you walk on a stage and, they weren't going to hire me, but sweet William would think I'm looking for a job. I had it all figured out and I would go back to. . .

DePue: Oh, I see now.

Wheeler: Oh, yeah. I had a plan. And thereby hangs the tale, a very long tale.

DePue: And that's what we want to pick up for the next couple of sessions. I think it is very important. I have one last question for you. This was at a time in American history when women were just starting to get into these kinds of roles. Did that play a role in the selection as well, do you think?

Wheeler: No. Absolutely not. I think they liked my moxie.

DePue: That moxie again.

Wheeler: It's true. When I went in for my interview with the board, they did it in the evening. I was in the Wanless building, real estate office, a big desk down in the basement that I had for twenty years, took it with me everywhere I went. Phil Spengler's walking down the hallway, taking me to the board meeting.

He's got his fingers crossed behind his head and I'm going, "Nix, nix." (chuckle) So I went in and they asked me what I would do differently. I told them that it needed to be run like a business and that you can't start selling an August tournament in June, that it needs to be year-round and that's about all I said. A minute later I had the job. I went home and I cried all night. That's a true story.

DePue: Tears of joy? Tears of anticipation?

Wheeler: I didn't figure failure was something I wanted to put on my resume and I saw that job as being in the basement and the bricks falling in on me, because nobody had been able to put it together, and what made me think I could? I was not a happy camper.

DePue: I assume you didn't let them see you cry.

Wheeler: Oh, no, no, no, no. I don't think Bill saw me cry, either.

DePue: Let's finish with that then. Bill's reaction to the news.

Wheeler: I don't remember. We'll have to ask him. I think he was glad that I had a full-time job and I was going to be in Springfield.

DePue: Okay, with that, we'll leave the audience (Wheeler laughing) with anticipation to find out how the Rail Golf Classic was built and how you ended up spending twenty-seven years of your life there. Thank you very much Sandy. It's been fun.

Wheeler: Thank you Mark, it has been fun.

(end of interview #1 #2 continues)

Interview with
Sandy Wheeler
Interview # FM-V-L-2008-070

Interview # 2: December 11, 2008
Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Good afternoon. Today is Thursday, December 11, 2008. My name is Mark DePue. I'm a volunteer with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and today it is my privilege to talk with Sandy Wheeler. Now Sandy, this is our second meeting.

Wheeler: It is.

DePue: The first time we learned a lot about you growing up, and your theatrical career and your television career. Really, I'm seeing all of that as kind of setting the stage for success in running a major golf tournament.

Wheeler: And what a surprise that was. (laughter)

DePue: So that's what we're going to talk about today. As we briefly discussed before we got started today, I thought probably the best approach is to ask you a little bit about the history of women's golf and the LPGA tournament and then we'll get into the history of the Rail Golf Classic and how you became involved with that, and we're going to focus on just the first couple of years, too. I think there's too much of a story here that can be covered in just in a couple of hours.

Wheeler: Well the first couple of years, the first three or four years were the toughest, trust me. (laughs)

DePue: I imagine so. Why don't you tell us a little bit about the beginning of women's golf. I don't pretend to be a historian on golf by any means and I don't expect that you're necessarily an expert on golf, either, but could you give us an outline of that?

Wheeler: There were a bunch of wonderful women golfers that got together and travelled around and played what you might call amateur tournaments. They

were very talented golfers. In 1950, the LPGA as an organization was founded. Now I did bring a list of all these founders of the LPGA. They are Alice Bauer, my dear friend Patty Berg. I had the privilege of knowing Patty Berg in a later time in her life. Bettye Danhoff, Helen Detweiller, Marlene Hagge, who actually played at the Rail Classic, Helen Hicks, Opal Hill, Betty Jameson, who I also met, Sally Sessions, Marilynn Smith, who I also know, Shirley Spork, Louise Suggs, who is still very much alive and still participates in all the special events for the LPGA, and the great Babe Zaharias. So that was the group that in 1950 found a way to start a tour.

DePue: I knew that there was a predecessor to this. I think it was the Women's Professional Golf Association that started in 1944.

Wheeler: Right.

DePue: That's an interesting year to start a golf tournament.

Wheeler: Wasn't it, wasn't it?

DePue: And obviously it wasn't all that successful, but women had been playing golf for the last twenty or thirty years before that, hadn't they?

Wheeler: A long time, but it was all amateur. They all played as amateurs and they didn't have big audiences. But I'll tell you what, Babe Zaharias didn't start playing professional golf until 1947, so when you figure that it took that long with this little circuit. They would drive around in their cars. They had no trains, planes and automobiles. They would get in the car together. They would rent rooms wherever they went. They used to get together and sing songs at night. I mean they were quite a tight-knit group, loving the game and bringing it to this tour that we know today.

DePue: Was Zaharias the name that drew the crowd?

Wheeler: Well, I think Patty Berg, too. Patty Berg was not only a great golfer, she was a great character. She continued to make speeches long into my time with the LPGA and you just couldn't be around her and not have a good time. But Babe Zaharias was, she was actually born Mildred.

DePue: That's not nearly as exciting as the nickname Babe, is it?

Wheeler: And her maiden name was Didricksen, s-e-n, which later was changed to s-o-n, and Mildred was called Babe by her family. So she became quite an athlete. She played basketball. She played baseball. She went on in her career to be in javelin throwing, long jump.

DePue: I know she was in the '32 Olympics, so she doesn't get into golf until sixteen years later.

Wheeler: She won two gold medals in the Olympics and won second place, because for some reason she was disqualified from the first place medal and I don't remember that story. She held more records and was named sportsman of the half century, she was named female sportsman, of course. She was just a phenomenal person. But, she was not allowed to play amateur golf because she was considered a professional because she had taken some sponsorship money somewhere along the line. Kind of sounds familiar, doesn't it?

DePue: I know they were much more rigorous about those rules back then.

Wheeler: Absolutely.

DePue: What was it about 1950 then that made these women think that was the time to launch a professional tournament for women?

Wheeler: They found a gentleman that would help them put this organization together, the first commissioner, if you will, and they decided it was time to start looking for sponsors. They had some, but not the way a tour would be organized, and they knew that they needed somebody to do that. But even at that, it was slim pickings.

DePue: Now you mentioned just the term tour, and what little I understand about golf, we're talking about a series of events that are scheduled from year to year.

Wheeler: Yes.

DePue: You could count on them being at the same location, the same time every year. Was there already then an existence before they launched this?

Wheeler: They had a few tournaments. The USGA [U.S. Golf Association] had the women's open, which was an amateur event and Babe Zaharias won that several times, as did Patty Berg, and my good friend Betsy Rawls after the LPGA was formed. But they needed somebody out front. They needed a man that was going to go after the money; you notice I said a man.

DePue: I was going to ask you about that.

Wheeler: (laughs) A man that was going to go after the money and help them create a tour. I'm not familiar with how many events they had that first year, but I'll bet I can tell you in a second, because this is "the bible" Mark. This is what we call a media guide.

DePue: I read some place there were twenty-one events by 1952 and that the purse that year, I believe I saw, was $50,000. In 1952 it was $200,000, but that's still not big money.

Wheeler: That's why it was so unusual when the tournament in Springfield came on board, that the purse was $100,000.

DePue: The purse for that one, single event.

Wheeler: Right, right.

DePue: Now that's quite a ways in the future, but that's still a decent amount of money.

Wheeler: It was the largest purse on the LPGA tour at that point in time in little old Springfield, Illinois.

DePue: Back in the early '50s then, you've got $200,000, that's the total purse in that particular year. That's a lot of money today, but how many women would be chasing after $200,000?

Wheeler: Well, there were the founders and then they kept adding people.

DePue: I would imagine fifty, a hundred, a hundred and fifty?

Wheeler: And probably a winner's share was a thousand dollars or five hundred dollars.

DePue: That barely pays for the hotel room and travel to the next event.

Wheeler: Exactly, and that's why they had to group together, stay in hotel rooms together, but they were such pioneers. The stories are wonderful. I wish I knew more of them, but I've heard enough that they had a great time.

DePue: So they're just like a bunch of guys who get together after the tournament and start sharing their experiences.

Wheeler: And there didn't seem to be a lot of animosity about who won, it was just a matter of getting out there, competing, and, oh, they also had to set up the golf course themselves. They didn't have any staff to take care of all the things that are taken care of today. They had to handle their own scoring. They had to do everything themselves, those early years.

DePue: This is exactly what you talk about, it is a huge difference from a bunch of women golfers who put this on themselves and you take on the role of organizing every aspect.

Wheeler: Exactly.

DePue: And then having somewhere down the road this become a much more professional and organized event where you have people who are brought in to do that exclusively, and then suddenly, the women can actually start focusing on golfing.

Wheeler: Absolutely. It was a lot of years before that happened. The tournament in Palm Springs, California, came on early and Colgate-Palmolive was a great

sponsor and it became an early sponsor of the LPGA tour. When I came along, Ray Volpe was the commissioner, and he goes way back. There was one before Ray that I never knew and could not, through all of my searching, find his name, but there was a gentleman before Mr. Volpe. Mr. Volpe was parked in New York, and he was a marketing man. He was the one that really started putting it together.

DePue: He took it to the next level then.

Wheeler: He certainly did.

DePue: And that was in the 70s then.

Wheeler: Let's see. Ray, probably yes, early 70s.

DePue: What I read, and you can correct me if I'm wrong here.

Wheeler: I probably can't (laughs).

DePue: Nineteen seventy-five was when he came on board.

Wheeler: Okay. That sounds about right.

DePue: Which is not too long before you got involved.

Wheeler: Exactly.

DePue: There was more than just golf involved with this organization. Can you talk about some of the other special missions or goals that the LPGA had in mind?

Wheeler: Well, raising dollars for charity. As it is with the PGA tour, it is with the LPGA tour, and has been. I would say, that in those early days, just making enough to survive and get on to the next stop was all they could do. They also are very interested in teaching children how to play golf and, subsequently, the LPGA developed a teaching division that is very successful.

DePue: Now when you're talking teaching division is this strictly teaching golf, or does it expand beyond that?

Wheeler: Yes, strictly teaching golf.

DePue: What's the rationale for that?

Wheeler: Not all women that have golfing skills have the skills to play on the tour. There are a tremendous amount of women throughout the United States that are fantastic teachers of the game and so that division was developed so that they, too, had a place in the LPGA family. Actually, they vote player of the year, teacher of the year every year and one of my dear friends whose the golf coach out at SIU has been voted the teacher of the year for the LPGA. She's a

whale of a golfer. She came up and played in our tournament many times, but not to the level.

DePue: So even that aspect, the teaching of golf for girls was going on in the late '50s, early and mid-sixties as well?

Wheeler: Girls, women. I know a lot of women who never picked up a golf club until they were forty. (both laugh)

DePue: Some very well.

Wheeler: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: It strikes me, I can't recall when Title X came in, that certainly revolutionized women's athletics, but here you have the LPGA being very much pioneers in that effort, as well.

Wheeler: Without a doubt. And over the years the golf scholarships for women, and it has all grown as a result of this handful of women that had this dream for their sport.

DePue: As far as you know, was the LPGA the first of the women's athletic professional organizations?

Wheeler: Yes, it is. As far as I know, it is.

DePue: And something they're very proud of then, I assume.

Wheeler: Absolutely. You know, with a handful of the founders that are still alive, they are so proud and they're still a part of it and they can stand back and say, "Look what we did."

DePue: Let's talk a little bit about that important step from an organization that's run by golfers to an organization that run by professional managers and administrators, and that would have been in the early '70s. Can you talk about that transition a little bit?

Wheeler: Well, a lot of them weren't run by professionals. They were run by volunteers, the volunteer aspect of the tour has always been critical and. . .

DePue: But I'm talking about the LPGA itself, at the senior level. I'm sorry, I interrupted you.

Wheeler: Well, you're talking about staffing.

DePue: At the LPGA level.

Wheeler: At the LPGA level they started very, very small and as the marketing grew and the number of tournaments grew, then they would bring on people to

assist tournaments, to build their organization. They taught how to present a golf course for the professionals. It was such a small family back then, that they didn't have anywhere near the staffing that they have now. They didn't have public relations people. They didn't have a team of officials that would come around and say you have to do it this way and you have to do it that way, as we do today. The organization has grown in leaps and bounds and when The Rail came on board, there weren't a whole lot of people to show them what to do.

DePue: Ray Volpe, though, was there, and he was the person who took it to that next level?

Wheeler: Absolutely.

DePue: How was it that he was able to elevate the game so much?

Wheeler: Well, they hired him to find more sponsors, find us more exposure, which would allow more tournaments to come on the tour. When this started, it was Ray Volpe and a secretary in New York City, and a few field officials that are the ones that give the rulings during the golf tournament. Ray handled all the public relations. They might have had somebody that occasionally wrote, but there was not near the organization. Everybody was kind of feeling their way with this guy, and he was quite a character. He was a cigar-smoking, good looking guy, really dark hair, but you could tell what he was. He was a marketing guy. He was a go-getter.

DePue: Now you mentioned earlier, that even at the beginning, they had the right guy to do this and Ray was apparently the right guy.

Wheeler: At the right time.

DePue: At the right time. A woman couldn't have done that job?

Wheeler: Not back then. Not a chance.

DePue: Why?

Wheeler: Well, number one, I don't think they had the respect in the marketing world, sports marketing, in particular. It was a whole new venue. As commissioner, he had little to do with the actual presentation of the golf. He was a marketing man. Those thirteen women knew that it was going to take a man to push them forward. They had great personalities. They had Babe Zaharias. They had Patty Berg. They had Marlene Hagge, who was a glamour girl. But a woman never could have done it back then. She would not have been accepted in that world.

DePue: But yet just a couple of years later, you're playing that same role (Wheeler laughs) doing many of the same things at a local level.

Wheeler: Ah, yes.

DePue: Now, I don't want to get too far ahead of the story, because we need to talk a little bit about the origins of the golf classic that you ended up taking over a few years later. Can you tell us how that began?

Wheeler: The tournament came to Springfield in 1976 when Mr. Jacob Bunn and Mr. Leonard Sapp had developed this golf course out of a farm north of Springfield near Sherman. Mr. Bunn was the golfer and Mr. Sapp was the developer, so they joined hands. Mr. Sapp did not play golf. Reminds me of somebody else that I knew. (both laugh) But he knew a good thing when he saw it. An old farm house was their pro shop and the professional, the golf pro, if you will, at that time was a fellow by the name of Jim Maxwell. They were trying to find a way to put The Rail Golf Course on the map. So Mr. Maxwell suggested to Mr. Bunn and Mr. Sapp that maybe, talk to the LPGA, talk to this fledgling organization that doesn't have a lot of tournaments, and maybe they would be willing to come to Springfield and play.

DePue: It takes a certain amount of moxie to think that you can bring them to Springfield, doesn't it? I mean, this is not a major market area.

Wheeler: It's not all moxie, it's money. (laughs) It takes a lot of money. They were willing to give this a try. In the world of professional golf, a title sponsor is the be all and end all – to have some corporation that's willing to put their name on your tournament for X amount of dollars. Well, that wasn't going to happen in Springfield at the get-go. This was absolutely throwing the line in and setting the bait. It wasn't very well organized from an internal situation. Mr. Maxwell wasn't a very good bookkeeper or any of those things.

DePue: It was his job to put the pieces together?

Wheeler: Yeah. They did get some community support. They had a banker in to help, and I guess the first time the banker went to visit Mr. Maxwell, he opened his desk drawer and the checks and the money just fell out. That's how organized they were. However, Patty Berg and Mary Bea Porter came to Springfield and met with Mr. Sapp and Mr. Bunn. They got together and figured out that, yes, we would play this golf course, which had no trees, had no parking lot, had no restroom facilities, but, I guess, they agreed that Mr. Sapp and Mr. Bunn would underwrite the event. Now, needless to say, Commissioner Volpe did his homework and made sure that Mr. Bunn and Mr. Sapp could, in fact, put up the purse, which was the largest purse on the LPGA tour at that point in time.

DePue: So that's what enticed the LPGA there in the first place?

Wheeler: I'm sure, It certainly wasn't the golf course or the facilities.

DePue: But were they also at that point in time looking to expand the number of venues and the number of tournaments that they had?

Wheeler: Oh, of course. And it was decided that they would play on Labor Day weekend and try to hook their wagon to the star of the Jerry Lewis Muscular Dystrophy telethon. So the first tournament was called the Jerry Lewis Muscular Dystrophy Golf Tournament at The Rail. That's a long… (both laugh). I'm not sure how they got it on the logo. I do remember that all the volunteers just wore the LPGA logo on their shirts, we didn't have all that. The mindset was that maybe by hooking up with Jerry Lewis that they would get a photographer, a TV crew out and they'd get a little TV exposure. Well that didn't happen and they lost a ton of money that first year.

DePue: Who was the one who picked up the bill then?

Wheeler: Mr. Sapp and Mr. Bunn.

DePue: I wonder if you can tell us a little bit about those two personalities, because I think they're important to this whole story.

Wheeler: I never had the privilege of knowing Jake Bunn. He passed away before I got started as a volunteer. Mr. Sapp, I had dealings with almost throughout the longevity of my career with the LPGA. After the first two years, '76 - '77, Mr. Bunn died very suddenly before the tournament. In 1978, and I think they lost, I'm thinking $90,000. Oh, the first year was $150,000, then it was $90,000.

DePue: Wow. And these are, not only are they community builders, but they're hard-nosed businessmen, aren't they?

Wheeler: Yes, and Mr. Sapp was indeed that. But he had a vested interest in the promotion of his golf course, which they ultimately hoped would become a setting for beautiful homes and, as we've seen today, that's what happened. Unfortunately, Mr. Bunn never saw that. But after the '77 losses, Mr. Sapp said that he alone was not going to carry on with the golf tournament, underwriting everything. That's when a group of Springfield businessmen got together and said, don't want to quit yet, let's form a not-for-profit corporation and let's give it a go again.

DePue: They obviously saw an awful lot of potential in doing this.

Wheeler: You know, they had a lot of hope, Mark. Everything that I observed, even before I got involved, they were very hopeful because they loved the game of golf so much, and I think they saw potential in the LPGA playing. In those days, there was Kathy Whitworth, who is the winningest professional female golfer ever. They were there and they were playing. But there was a lot of hope and not a lot of direction, as I observed it.

DePue: Let's talk about how you got involved with this.

Wheeler: (laughs) Well, the year was 1978, and in our prior interviews you know at that point in time I was acting full time, singing, performing, but I would be home in segments of time. And as I jokingly would say, I would tell everybody, "I'm not gainfully employed, I'm an actress." So I would volunteer for different things within the community and I was enamored with the golf tournament.

DePue: And as you already alluded to, you're no golfer.

Wheeler: I was no golfer, and my husband wasn't much of a golfer.

DePue: So what drew you to the tournament?

Wheeler: That I thought it was good for Springfield. I went out in '77 briefly and saw it and thought, "Wow, this is neat." Then in '78 because I was home, I wanted to volunteer. Now I didn't know anything about scoring. I didn't know anything about being a marshal. I didn't know anything about a golf tournament at all. So, I said, "Do you need somebody that has some pretty serious secretarial skills?" That was me. So I spent the '78 tournament in the office, thus I was in the circle of how this was happening and things that weren't happening.

DePue: So this is a two or three week crash course on putting on a tournament?

Wheeler: I can remember that first year that I got a phone call at home about three o'clock in the morning and they said, "We forgot to type the score cards." So I got up, got dressed, drove out to The Rail and at 4 a.m., I was in the office typing the score cards and Jim Johnson was out mowing the fairways.

DePue: I would imagine Bill would have some choice words to say after that phone call came in.

Wheeler: (laughs) Well, Bill will have some choice words to say after I tell you what he did after the first tournament. (laughs) I'm going to leave that for the next story.

DePue: Okay. So you became the full-time secretary?

Wheeler: No. I was a volunteer. I was there some; you have two segments. You have advance week for the tournament, then you have tournament week and then the ugly part, the tear-down and closing the shop. So I was there a little bit advance week. I was there all of tournament week and then I was done. That was my volunteer time. I had my volunteer shirt and I had my visor and I was feeling pretty sassy, and I loved what I saw. So the next year, again, I wanted to volunteer, because now I had some knowledge, you know. I felt like I needed to get in there and I would be much more resourceful and helpful to

what was going on. By that time they had hired an executive director. They knew that this organization could not be run on a full-time basis by a volunteer. It was too big.

DePue: And they knew by that time that this was nothing you could slap together in a month or two, that it was a full-time?

Wheeler: You can't start selling a professional golf tournament two months before it begins and hope to raise the dollars that you need. It is a year-around responsibility. I think my predecessor came on board in '77. I'd have to go back and check that, but I think he was there '77 and '78. Excuse me, mistake, '78 and '79.

DePue: I understand that there was someplace in here that you began working full-time as a secretary.

Wheeler: That would have been '79. I came back and when Mr. Bunn passed away and Mr. Sapp said I'm no longer going to underwrite this purse or the expenses, Mr. Volpe said, "Well, if you want to keep the tournament in Springfield, folks (this new, fledgling not-for-profit corporation), you have to guarantee to the LPGA where the purse is coming from." Now they weren't concerned whether we could pay the expenses or not, (DePue laughs) they just wanted to know the players would be paid. So the group went out and got a hundred businessmen, organizations, companies in Springfield to sign a one-year guarantee for $1,000 apiece. Win, lose or draw, it would be the $100,000 purse.

DePue: With the hope that these businesses might be able to recoup that money?

Wheeler: No, not at all. These were just guarantors of the purse. They all had to sign, and all those had to be sent to the LPGA. And that's the way that started.

DePue: I'm not sure you could get that kind of commitment from businesses today, let alone thirty years ago. (Wheeler laughs)

Wheeler: Well, we've done pretty well over the years, Mark (DePue laughs), but, as I said many times after we really got this ball rolling, it's easier to hook your wagon to a winner than try to sell a loser, and that's a fact. So '79, the guarantors were in place, '78 and '79 the guarantors were in place and it didn't go well and there was a lot of friction in the office. At that point in time it became evident that my predecessor's contract was not going to be renewed.

DePue: This was Jim Maxwell or is this somebody else?

Wheeler: No, this was Lenny Dirksen. They had lost $26,000 and they were fighting at the last minute to get the pro-am sold and sales of the pro-ams [when pros play with the amateurs], are critical to the bottom line of any golf tournament.

DePue: For those of us who are novices in this business, tell us a little bit more about what that actually means.

Wheeler: It actually means that you go out, as an amateur in a five-some, four amateurs and a professional, and play a round of golf with them. That's called a pro-am tournament, which is the day before you start actual tournament competition. Back in those days, pro-ams were selling around $400, $500, $600 and for that, they would get credentials for the whole tournament. They would get what we call a pairings party the night before. You get together and have a few cocktails and some hors d'oeuvres and you find out which professional you're going to play with.

DePue: So amateurs are paying big money to be able to do this and that's a source of income for the tournament.

Wheeler: And back then, four, five and six hundred bucks was big money, and you got the people that really love golf and wanted that experience. They were having trouble selling the pro-am. Sales were not good. Mr. Dirksen actually left without cleaning up the business of the tournament that just had transpired. That would be 1979 when Jo Ann Washam won. And so again, people knew that I was not gainfully employed, so they hired me for $5 an hour to try to put the business of the tournament to sleep for another year, if there was going to be another year.

DePue: Your title then?

Wheeler: Secretary. (laughs) I was nothing more than a secretary. I was based in the basement of the old Wanless realty business on South Grand, at a big old desk, and I had an old typewriter and that was it. It was me and the big old desk and the typewriter and tried to put the files together and bring some semblance. But what I saw in those two years was that the tournament wasn't being run as a business. It was being run as a golf outing and I thought, If this tournament's going to survive, this is what needs to change.

DePue: Was there something in particular that drove that point home to you?

Wheeler: Nothing in particular. I looked at the whole set-up and the whole organization. The first year it was fun. The second year I thought, "Ooh, this is bad." I mean, the tension was horrible. Within the confines of the group that were doing it people were yelling at each other, and I though, "Ooh, I don't want anything to do with this anymore."

DePue: Without getting into personalities, tell me a little bit more about that group. This was a board of directors or a committee that you were dealing with?

Wheeler: They were all good people. It was stress and they saw that they were losing money and you could have walked into the office, which was the little Lincoln house out at The Rail, and cut the stress with a knife. You just kind of sit

there and you know, "why didn't you do this and why didn't you do that" and yada, yada, yada. But in the meantime, the good old volunteers are out there running the golf tournament and that's what was important.

DePue: And hopefully they don't know about the tension in the back room.

Wheeler: You hope. You hope that they don't know. But we came out with a great champion that year who became my friend for life.

DePue: That year again was '79?

Wheeler: Nineteen seventy nine. I continued to work in the office at $5 an hour while the board, great people, Phil Spengler; Jerry Turnbul;, GooganBunn, who was the nephew of the founder, Jake Bunn; Jack Sankey; Bill Marriott—all wonderful business people in the community. John Homeier loved the game and wanted this to succeed. So they went on a nationwide search for a new executive director, not even knowing what was coming next.

DePue: What timeframe did that occur? This was after the '79 tournament?

Wheeler: Yes, so this would be September and October.

DePue: Okay, so this was immediately after the tournament.

Wheeler: Uh-uh. They were also very unhappy with the company that had been doing the on-course set-up. Actually, it was Ken Young, husband of Donna Caponi, a great golfer on our tour, so they knew they weren't going to deal with Ken Young anymore. You have to have that kind of assistance to do a professional golf tournament, but he was not very kind to the volunteers, and that's a no-no.

DePue: You can't afford to chase the volunteers away.

Wheeler: So Ken knew that he was finished, and, of course, that wasn't a good thing for the tournament, because you want Donna Caponi to come and play, but it had to be done. She subsequently wasn't married to Ken Young. (laughs) I had been working in show business for a couple of years and I was gone a lot and things needed to settle down at home. My husband really would have loved for me to find a job in Springfield. I had kind of, you know, I'd run my flag up the pole. I'd had this wonderful time and proved a few things to myself about my ability to be a performer, but maybe it was time to settle down and find full-time employment in Springfield. So I started talking to board members and just doing a little talking to this one, talking to that one and so, I though, "What the heck." I want to make Bill think I'm looking for a full-time job. (both laugh) This is no surprise to him, he knows it. So I pulled out my resume and I went in to Mr. Spengler's office, which was upstairs in the Gail Wanless building—Gail Wanless was his father-in-law—and I said, "I think I'm going to apply for the job." Phil sat back in his chair and he says,

"I'm not sure we can afford to pay a secretary." I said, "I don't think I said anything about being a secretary." He said, and I'll never forget it, "You mean, THE job?" And I'm going, "Yeah, THE job." Wow, you know, this is where nobody wants to go. Phil got excited about it and he kind of . . .

DePue: Immediately?

Wheeler: Immediately. I guess we had dealt enough and I had talked with other board members and at that point in time. John Homeier had decided that he was going to make a one-time contribution to the 1980 tournament of $50,000, which was the biggest check the tournament had ever seen. It was a make or break, never see that $50,000 again, but the shot in the arm, or in the bank account, if you will, to get it going. I so remember the night that I was interviewed by the board in the conference room in the Gail Wanless building. They were all sitting there and I had a chair down at the end and they asked me what I would do differently. I told them I would run it like a business and not a game. I probably spoke for no more than two minutes.

DePue: Wow.

Wheeler: Fifteen minutes later I had the job.

DePue: Were they bringing in other people to interview as well?

Wheeler: I think they looked. They did not bring anybody in. Needless to say, there were some contacts through the world of people that might do that and I think they realized that they couldn't afford to do that. And here's this silly redhead that thinks she can do it.

DePue: It just occurred to me, though, that once the executive director is selected, your secretarial job goes out the window.

Wheeler: I was both (laughs). I was both.

DePue: But if they hired somebody else, you would no longer be working.

Wheeler: I don't think so.

DePue: Now it's time to toot your horn a little bit. What was it about Sandy Wheeler that especially was appealing to the board?

Wheeler: I think they all knew that I had a gift of gab and I think they knew that I had a special feeling for the golf tournament. John Homeier dubbed me the "big red machine." Because I was so afraid of failing, that I was fire and ice the whole time. It was eight days a week, twenty-six hours a day. It never left me. It was morning, noon and night. I just couldn't fail, I just couldn't handle. I actually cried the night they hired me.

DePue: Tears of joy or stress or tension or fear?

Wheeler: Fear. I was in the basement and the bricks were coming down. I was not a happy camper at all, but I had accepted it, it was something that I thought maybe I could do. What little did I know. So, okay, I took the job. I'll do it for a couple of years and I'll go right back to show biz (both laugh). Well, they got me, they got me good.

DePue: What was Bill's reaction to your landing the job?

Wheeler: I think he was pleased, because I was bringing income into the family on a regular basis, which is important when you're raising five children. I was going to be there, day in and day out, except when I was on the road selling. No, he was happy, and it was good.

DePue: How about the kids?

Wheeler: They didn't care. (both laugh) When I was spending time in Chicago pursuing my acting career, I'd come home on Friday night and hang the sign "The Maid Is In". You know, do all the laundry and get the groceries and everything, so I think they were probably happy to have mom around on a full-time basis.

DePue: But they're probably also of the age where they're not necessarily going to let you know they're happy.

Wheeler: No, not at all.

DePue: What were your thoughts? You said you had ideas you wanted to run this as a business. What was your plan when you first sat down as the executive director?

Wheeler: The first thing I had to do was go around and collect $260 apiece from the one hundred guarantors that had guaranteed $1,000 apiece, because those were the losses for the tournament. So I got to know these people and at the same time, got to slide another contract in front of them and said, "Would you sign for one more year?" Which they all did, Mark. That was just absolutely remarkable. The biggest thing was working with the board and learning what we had to sell. Back in those days, I didn't think of it as inventory, but that's what it was, it was inventory. You sell tickets, you sell signage, you sell pro-ams, it's all kind of an inventory. You think that a professional golf tournament is going to cost twice your purse. That's the norm. My first budget was $180,000, with a $100,000 purse.

DePue: That was established way up front, that it would be $180,000, that's the money you had to collect to break even?

Wheeler: That was the break even point. Actually, I just recalled, we raised the purse to $125,000 my first year, so I was already burdened with increased dollars. I didn't know how to budget, so the treasurer of the organization for two or three years, helped me budget the golf tournament, but as I learned more, it became easier and easier. I had the sponsorships that they had had to begin with, but I had to go out and find new money. You know that you can't always count on old money. Never before did they have a full-time person. I was hired the end of October, so November 1, I had a check for $50,000 and not much else. I had to start going, but to sell these things you have to develop marketing materials. I knew nothing about printing or brochures or, this was all a learning curve for me. Unbelievable. I look back on it and I go, "How did that happen?"

DePue: That's how I see the parallels between what Ray Volpe is doing at the national level and what you walk into as kind of an amateur, but you obviously have an awful lot of skills that you're bringing to the job in the first place.

Wheeler: Well, I didn't learn until maybe a couple of years later that it really was everything. Because of my involvement raising charitable dollars throughout my time in Springfield, doing all the things that I did that were always for charity, with the fashion shows and the Muni Opera and all the things that went on, so it was fundraising for charity. I remember saying to one person, "I've never sold anything in my life." And he said, "What do you do every time that you walk on a stage?" Light bulb! You know. So I had to take that fire and direct it to this new challenge. It was also administrative and at the end of the day it was show business. What you put on out there was show business.

DePue: But that, it seems to me, a pretty rare set of talents that you're bringing to it. You've got, I think the word you mentioned before, and I mentioned today was moxie.

Wheeler: Moxie.

DePue: You had the moxie. You've got all of the on-stage experience. You know how to deal with people in a direct, pleasant and forceful way. Would it be fair to say that?

Wheeler: Not forceful.

DePue: Convincing.

Wheeler: Convincing, yes.

DePue: But you're also bringing an awful lot of administrative and clerical skills to the job, and those two things don't necessarily always go together, do they?

Wheeler: No. (chuckles) You know, the big thing that I had to do in those first couple of years was to ask people to give this new administration a chance. Let's forget what came before. Let's move forward. And one person in particular was another Mr. Bunn, of Bunn-O-Matic, and after we got a couple of years of winning under our belt, I thought, "Why aren't we going to see this Mr. Bunn?" I went up and talked to Phil about it and I said, "We've got to get Bunn-O-Matic in here." He says, "Oh, no, you don't want to do that." And I say, "Why?" And he said, "Well, he's not too happy because a lot of people that said, when Jake was alive, that were going to give money to the golf tournament, didn't do it, they welched. And he's not too happy about that." And I said, "Well, you know, I've got to go try. I have to go try." He says, "You'll be sorry." (chuckles) My first tournament in 1980 was the first financial success in the history of the tournament.

DePue: Would it be fair to say that first year what you were selling more than anything else was yourself and their belief that you could pull it off?

Wheeler: I think so. I had the fire; really from the get-go, I had the fire. I have a lot of people helping. I mean, they had to prop me up from all directions, but the other thing that went on that year was in letting the Ken Young organization go, we had to hire this new organization out of Florida called Executive Sports, Inc. (ESI), and they are with us to this day. But, Ken Young's position was: We'll rope and stake the golf course, we'll bring in our leader board, we'll handle the scoring, we'll handle the radios, we do everything, volunteers don't have to do that. That's wasn't Executive Sports' modus operandi. They come in and teach you how to build leader boards and scoreboards and how to rope and stake the golf course with volunteers. So, not only did I have Mr. Know How here, I had this whole new presentation of how to put the physical set-up of the golf course together.

DePue: But all that puts the stress that you're relying much more on volunteers, I would think.

Wheeler: Oh, without a doubt.

DePue: Was that the basic philosophy of the tournament?

Wheeler: Absolutely. Every golf tournament relies on volunteers. I mean, no tournament could pay what it takes in people hours to run a professional golf tournament without thousands of volunteers. But my biggest challenge was we had to build a major scoreboard. I'll never forget the day. First of all, I never spent a dollar that I couldn't plead a contribution. I was known as the head beggar in town and we had to build a scoreboard, a big one. So I went out and I begged the lumber, then I begged the concrete to put the posts in and I got a wonderful, wonderful man that used to work for Franklin Life by the way of Jack Rogers, such a darling man, I loved him to pieces, and by golly, I call that the Sandy Wheeler Memorial Scoreboard. (both laugh) So we built

it and we built all the other scoreboards that we needed, the leader board and the volunteers learned how to rope and stake a golf course. Now ESI had people out there showing. They actually would drop a stake, so everything was done, but before they got there, I had to rope and stake the parking lot and other areas that they were not responsible for, so, I had no idea what I was doing, but I did it.

DePue: A big part of your job, then, as you get closer to the event itself is finding the volunteers and then training all these volunteers how to do their jobs because you can't afford to have them go out there and not know what they're doing.

Wheeler: Well, the good thing is that's also part of the Executive Sports' modus operandi. The whole administrative structure of the golf tournament changed with Executive Sports. We have a tournament chairman and then we have vice chairmen across-the-board in the different categories, and then under the vice chairmen, we have the different committee heads. So, as this grew, we had a tournament chairman, eight vice chairmen and eighty-eight committee heads.

DePue: And they're all volunteers.

Wheeler: They're all volunteers.

DePue: And that's just the beginning.

Wheeler: Yeah. No, not then; this is how it is now. This layout, though, presented to me, that this is the way we should be setting up the whole volunteer force, which has worked to this day. But still, you know, we had to go out – people, they had to learn what they were doing and then they each got committees, like communications has the scoreboards and the scoring trailer, they're all grouped together. Then you've got the media personnel. I handled all the media, I handled all the press, but we also had to set up a press room, so we had a corps of volunteers in the press room, all the way across-the-board. The walking scorers, with every three-some there's a walking scorer. The people who ran the leader board, that put up the scores of the leaders, they're out there all day doing their thing. The marshals that hold the quiet please paddles. I think back in the beginning I probably had maybe six hundred volunteers, broken off into these different committees.

DePue: Where did you find all those volunteers?

Wheeler: They came, they came. These are people that love golf.

DePue: So, you basically inherited some very dedicated volunteers?

Wheeler: Absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely. And they thought, "Oh, goody, we get to do this one more time. Let's go out." Its true. As the years went along, I found that people did it for various reasons. They loved the game. They were

involved in a charity that we were raising money for, too, so they just wanted to be a part of what was going on, which pretty much was where I was at, at the beginning.

DePue: You didn't have to do a lot of recruiting?

Wheeler: No. No. No. I didn't. I think the board members, you know, but they all came back. They were willing to give that $50,000 and the rookie a chance.

DePue: Now let's talk a little bit about the charity aspect. I know you mentioned when it first got started it was muscular dystrophy, but I think it evolved after that.

Wheeler: Well, those first two years, '76 and '77, it was the Jerry Lewis Muscular Dystrophy. Then the not-for-profit corporation was formed and it was called the Rail Charity Golf Classic. The Jerry Lewis part was gone. So, this organization had the name charity in its title, and one of my big things was, and I had to keep mentioning, on occasion I said, "You know, we either need to give money to charities or we need to take that word out of our title." I felt very strongly about that. So, we struggled through that first year and we had the hottest player on the LPGA tour as the winner in Nancy Lopez. I will never forget, and I can't, because I was so new to it all, I couldn't understand why Phil Spengler was in tears when she won. She was women's golf at that point in time, and I thought, "That's Nancy Lopez. What's he so emotional about?" (both laugh) I was no naïve of the whole stratosphere at that point. But, we not only paid the bills, but we gave a humble $6,000 to charity.

DePue: Before that time you had not actually been able to make any donations to charity?

Wheeler: Unh uh, unh uh.

DePue: There was no up-front commitment.

Wheeler: Oh no, no, no. That is sheer death for a golf tournament and I have seen it happen time and time again. A very, very successful tournament out in Hershey, Pennsylvania, they were forced to make a quarter of a million dollars commitment to charity. This was a few years ago. And it killed the golf tournament. Our situation was, the bottom line will create the charitable dollars and we will not know until the books are closed for that year what its going to be.

DePue: What charities did you focus on?

Wheeler: Those years, it was St. John's Hospital, I think it was, and maybe Friends of Memorial. It was the two hospitals within some of their structure. So I think they each got $3,000 and I was so excited I cried. I was so excited.

DePue: That was the part that impacted you, was that you were finally able to get some money to the charities.

Wheeler: It was my favorite day every year. It was worth all the sweat, blood and tears every year.

DePue: Big events bring in some press?

Wheeler: Yes. We always did that. We always, we had to, we had. We had to pat ourselves on the back and say, "Look what we've done," because it was such a negative before that.

DePue: Was there some particular types of charities that the organization preferred to donate to?

Wheeler: Not back then. They didn't give it a lot of thought. We didn't really start looking at it until the later years as we watched the dollars growing. I went back to the board and I said, "You know, we ought to start looking at possibilities of enlarging what we're doing with our charitable dollars." And that's when the ad hoc charities review committee was founded, but that's much down the road.

DePue: Okay. So we'll get to that down the road.

Wheeler: Down the road. I don't want to get ahead of you, Mark.

DePue: You know how structured I am.

Wheeler: I do know that.

DePue: We're two people who know how to organize and put things together here.

Wheeler: I think you're much more organized than I am.

DePue: No, you're proving to me that's not the case. This is a whale of an effort that you've inherited and you kind of walked in and, you mentioned yourself, to a certain extent, very naïve about what it is that you're walking into.

Wheeler: Oh, oh, oh, my poor husband. You know, I would come home and I would be cross-eyed. I'd say, "What have I done? What have I done?"

DePue: Did you find it hard walking in and the family all depends on you and turning off all the concerns that you had before?

Wheeler: Oh, it never left me. You know, it was always right there, on the tip of my tongue. I can remember one anniversary. We went out to dinner. Bill always had to ask me, because our wedding anniversary is August 21, which normally was advance week for the tournament, so it was coming right up to the Labor

Day weekend. He would call me and ask me very politely if we could possibly go to dinner. And everywhere I went in the community, people wanted to talk to me about the golf tournament. That was a given. So this one night we walk into the old Black Angus and Gino Petrilli was a great golfer, one of the owners, and he always wanted to talk golf and he came over. Before we got out of the car, Bill says, "Could we please not talk about golf tonight?" We got in, no sooner got seated, here comes Gino. He wants to talk about the tournament. I looked at him and I said, "Gino, I have had a request that we not discuss the tournament tonight, and I'm going to honor that." So, it was that bad, or that good, you know, it was good that people cared. They wanted to know what was going on. Gino played in the pro-ams for many years. So, you know, you don't want to just turn your back on those people.

DePue: I bet you thrived in going out in the community and running into all those people who wanted to talk about it. As much as it might get old?

Wheeler: I was always very positive. Once we got through those first couple of years, then I've got to tell you, Mark, after that, after that first year and that $50,000 contribution by John Homeier and we gave $6,000 to charity, when I budgeted for 1981, it was zeros across-the-board.

DePue: You start from scratch.

Wheeler: And I did that for many years.

DePue: Can I dare ask you what your salary was in those first few years?

Wheeler: When I started it was $16,000 a year.

DePue: Okay.

Wheeler: And they, I didn't have a car that was going to take all the beating, so the tournament helped get me a decent vehicle so I could drive into central Illinois, and so, that was it, $16,000.

DePue: And a little bit of money for some transportation expenses.

Wheeler: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: Where was the office?

Wheeler: The office was downstairs with the big desk at the Wanless office building for a long time. I'm trying to remember how many years we were there, but the next place we moved to was to Mr. Sapp's Fairhills Mall and in the basement. We didn't have any money for rent. I mean, come on, we're trying to keep the purses going, we're trying to pay the things we have to pay. I'm out beg, borrowing buckets for caddie buckets and anything else I can possibly not spend money on. So Mr. Sapp said that he would give us some space in

Fairhills Mall. It was down, way down in their lower level. I was down there, and by that time I had, I can't tell you the year, Mark, but by that time I had part-time help in the summer. At that stage, I couldn't possibly keep it together by myself. So I'm thinking this is probably the mid-80s, maybe '87.

I was getting ready for a board meeting and I had all the new board apparel. That was another one of my responsibilities. I had to order all the apparel that was needed, not only for the board, which they paid for themselves, but also for the volunteers, which they also paid for themselves. So I had all this clothing ready to go to disseminate to the board members and there was a horrible rain storm and the water came up in my lower level office so much that I had to put garbage bags over my slacks and shoes to get out, it was that bad. And, as a result of that, there was a tremendous amount of mold growing in that area and I am horribly allergic to mold and I developed these brain-killer headaches. I couldn't work in that atmosphere any longer. So another board member, a great supporter, he was the 1979 tournament chairman, Joe Victor, said, "Well, I've got the old Thrifty office building offices empty. We'll put you up there." Again, at no cost to the tournament. So, we moved again (chuckles) and I stayed there in that building until a year before I left the tournament.

DePue: Were, in both of these scenarios, were they also picking up utilities expenses and telephones?

Wheeler: We had no expenses whatsoever. Not telephone, no, we paid our own telephone, but no utilities.

DePue: Okay, and whatever meager office supplies you could scrape together, a fax machine and a copy machine.

Wheeler: A fax machine? (DePue laughs) Not back then, are you kidding me? One of the office supply people, a really, really nice gentleman, gave me an electric typewriter and I was so excited that I had an electric typewriter. In those days you used the white-out, you know.

DePue: Yeah. Carbon paper.

Wheeler: Every time you went to see somebody, you had to make a proposal, so it was a matter of developing the sales pieces and put something in writing. The one thing I learned early, early on in selling the pro-am that was so critical back in those days, absolutely dead-end critical for the purse, was to sell out the pro-am. We had to find 224 people that would put up whatever the dollar amount was that year to create the purse. That was a must. So, I came up with this idea, Over the years I had observed that people were going to say they were going to play in the pro-am and they didn't put any dollars on the table. I said to the board, "You know, this can't go on." I had situations where I would run into somebody on the street. A lot of work was done on the street. I

would run into someone say, in August, and I say, "Now, you told me you were going to play in the pro-am and I put you down on the committed list." "Oh, I forgot to call you and tell you, I'm going on vacation." Whoops, there goes another one. So, I suggested and it was accepted that money talks and if you put your name on the commitment list, you would make a down payment.

DePue: Then they seemed to stay with it after that?

Wheeler: And instead of saying, "You need $600 today," you could pay it out over the course of the year from your commitment time. We didn't care how they did that. Send it in. We'll credit you and go on. But the most crazy story in this whole pro-am situation was, again, Joe Victor came to me and said, "I know this guy from southern Illinois and he wants to play in the pro-am, but he's not a friend of mine and I'm not speaking for him," and he put me in touch with the gentleman. He was always going to come up and pay us some money. He didn't come up and he didn't come up and I kept calling him. "I'll be there." Yah, yah, yah. I had not yet introduced the commitment, okay? So, he wanted to negotiate with me a couple days before the pro-am. He was still coming, but could I knock the price down. I said, "No, that's not possible." Joe Victor kept saying, "Not my friend. Do what you need to do." So he walked into my tournament office at the Rail about 5:30 the night of the pairings party. That means we were going to the governor's mansion to draw the players. The amateurs all come for the party.

DePue: That's how you find out who you're playing with.

Wheeler: That's how you find out. And it's always a big party, usually two hours long, lots of cocktails and hors d'oeuvres and I would get all the hors d'oeuvres donated by the restaurants in Springfield. George Bauer was a great help to us back in those days. He walks in my office and he peels off, I believe it was $600, and he had on a tattle-tale gray yellow shirt and the most washed out madras plaid golf pants you have ever seen in your life. And I thought, "Oh, my, I am taking this man's children's food money." I felt badly taking his money, but he was there to go to the party and he was going to play in the pro-am. He goes to the pairings party and he drew Nancy Lopez.

DePue: That's the grand prize.

Wheeler: I didn't feel badly after that. If his kids didn't eat for months it wasn't my fault. (both chuckle)

DePue: Were there a lot of women or a growing number of women in the pro-am?

Wheeler: No, not back then, not at all. There weren't any women playing in the pro-am back then.

DePue: Were some of these guys putting their ego on the line, hoping they could win against these ladies?

Wheeler: Oh, without a doubt! After some years, some men had been out and played in the pro-am for several years and then I go back to see them and you could tell it was an ego thing, because the women were out driving him, so they weren't going to go out there and be humiliated We lost people to that, without a doubt.

DePue: Well, there's a dynamic you don't have to face when it's the men's tour, do you?

Wheeler: Exactly.

DePue: What I wanted to do for the rest of the time today, is to spend a little bit more focus on that second year, because you wrote a marvelous, what I would call in the Army an after action report.

Wheeler: That's exactly what it was.

DePue: And you spelled out all the different things that you were dealing with and I thought it would be a very good way to kind of dissect the tournament and exactly what all goes into putting one of these things on, as much as we've already talked about other things.

Wheeler: Have you got some questions or are you going to give me my copy back? (laughs)

DePue: I've got your copy. (Wheeler laughs) I'll give that to you afterwards. Kind of go down the list and just in the order that you put in the after action report. Recruiting players. What went on in recruiting the players?

Wheeler: Very important part of my job, which grew and grew and grew over the years. In recruiting players, first of all, you had to meet them when they were at your tournament, make them know you, be as helpful to them that they'll have good feelings about you and the event that they're at. Then, as the year progresses, you watch a commitment sheet start to come in that Nancy Lopez is coming and Pat Bradley's coming, yada, yada, yada, down the list, then all of a sudden you realize, "Well, I don't quite have enough of the name players that I want." So, you make plans and you fly away and you go to another tournament and you go up to those players and plead your case. I did it for twenty-seven years.

DePue: How far in advance would you need to do this, to land the big names?

Wheeler: Well, you know, back in those days, they weren't as focused on the whole year as they are now. Now a player will go in in January and, of course, they all have agents and they work with their agent and they figure out their potential schedule. You may or may not be on that. Certainly, a player may intend to come in January and something happens that they're not going to

come in August. Back in those days, we wouldn't really see it until maybe August and get a feeling for what was going on.

DePue: You had to be on pins and needles waiting for that list to develop.

Wheeler: Worse than that. You know, if you're going to draw the gallery, you have to have the stars. I can remember a time, and I wish I could remember the year, but he has become my very, very good friend over the years, and that's Dave Kane, the sports writer, who has become the Rail Classic guru as far as sports reporting.

DePue: He writes for the [State] Journal-Register.

Wheeler: He writes for the Journal-Register and has for all of my time at the tournament and that's (laughs), I think it was my second, maybe third year. It was his first year of employment with the J-R. I had gotten the final field, which you get on Monday of tournament week, back then. Now you get it a week before that, which gives you even a little more time to nip on some ankles, but it wasn't that way back then. I got the field late Friday night and it was really bad. We have learned over the years not to call it top ten; we'd call them featured players, because there are a lot of players that aren't in the top ten on the money list, who are still featured players. I only had two of the top ten and I was very upset. Saturday morning, I went back out to the office. It was just me and I was at my desk and I was in tears. I had worked so hard and why are they doing this. The purse is good. One of the big problems back then was they went from Springfield to Portland, Oregon, which back then wasn't easy. So we were always caught up in that travel and it exists today. So I got up to go to the clubhouse to get, oh, probably a coke. I don't drink coffee, so it wasn't something hot in the morning, it was something cold, and the field was lying on my desk. When I walked in my empty office, Dave Kane was going through my desk looking for the field and there wasn't a hair on his head when he left that office. (both laugh) I was so mad. I was so mad.

DePue: Let's talk a little bit about what it is that draws people to a place like Springfield, Illinois, and the problems you had with that versus some of the other major venues, I would think.

Wheeler: Obviously, we weren't a major; those are the tournaments that get all the players that are eligible to be in a field, and we weren't a major market or a major media area. It was hard to get in and out of Springfield, especially if the travel schedule was as difficult as Springfield to Portland, which hurt us a lot, because Portland came on board in the early 70s and, beautiful golf course, they had a sponsor and we had this fledgling golf course, with no trees, no houses. So all these things fit in, plus, a player might come and play a golf course once and say, "It doesn't fit my eye." "It doesn't fit my game." So you have those. Late in the season you have injuries; you know, my

mother's sick. There's a variety of reasons why you could lose a name player the day before they have to show up for any myriad of reasons.

DePue: But there is some loyalty involved here, too, for the people who kept coming back year after year, what are the things that they were telling you?

Wheeler: And there were some that weren't loyal that I thought should be. I thought that any champion should return to the scene of that win. Any and all champions should return, and we've had many first-time champions and one specifically went on to a great career and I very rarely could get her back here and it aggravated me to death. I thought, "It was your first win here." And when you see the video, you're going to see she jumps into her caddy's arms. It was Rosie Jones. I don't mind saying who it was because I was nipping on her heels all the time to get her back here.

Recruiting was real, but you're right. Nancy Lopez felt a great allegiance to this golf tournament, but there's an aside there. Nancy and Betsy King, who's a three-time champion, Nancy's a two-time champion, and that is that they established family relationships. When they come to Springfield they, for some reason, have hooked up with a family and it becomes a real thing. That family follows them year-round. They stay with them every year when they come to Springfield, so, that helps a lot. And when Annika Sorenstam started staying with this couple out at the golf course, I thought, "Boy, we've got her now." Wrong. (laughs) It didn't quite work out the way I planned.

DePue: Did you find it hard to separate yourself from success or failure on that, that if somebody doesn't come, this is a personal offense?

Wheeler: Oh, I took it very personally. (laughs) And I knew all the reasons, I knew the reasons, but I took it very personally. But the better I got to know the players, like when I was on the national LPGA tournament sponsors board for five years, it was a great avenue for me to get closer on a one-on-one basis. When they're playing in a golf tournament, you know, people couldn't understand why the players didn't want to come and hang out at the pairings party and drink all evening. My position was, "This is their job. They're going to entertain you with their skills on the golf course." I didn't have that same feeling that they had to come and schmooze. The other thing that we were able to do in those first years was hold down the expenses that many other tournaments were spending a hundred percent more than we were. Pairings parties. Dinners. I knew people that were spending twenty, twenty-five, thirty thousand dollars on a pairings party and I was doing it for less than five, because I got almost everything donated.

DePue: We heard that's the advantage, also, being in a smaller market area that restaurants and everything else just tended to be a little cheaper.

Wheeler: Absolutely. Well, not only cheaper, but more giving, more giving. If you could have seen some of the pairings parties we had at the Governor's mansion, it was absolutely amazing. We'd get all these different restaurants and they'd come and put their signs up. It was a great time.

DePue: I attempted to say something about the use of the Governor's mansion.

Wheeler: Oh, well, let's just not.

DePue: We'll move on from that.

Wheeler: We had wonderful support from the governors.

DePue: One of the things that you also addressed in this document was the set-up of the committees. You've addressed that a little bit, but were you surprised by how complicated this operation got the first couple of years you were in it?

Wheeler: Yeah, I think so, and also getting them in that mindset.

DePue: Them being the board of directors?

Wheeler: The vice chairs. First you have to identify the vice chairs and, as I got to know people, I could recommend to the tournament chairman who I thought would fit in these slots. Back in those years I attended every meeting, every committee meeting, every board meeting. I attended every board meeting for twenty-seven years, but I attended all the committee meetings. And then when Executive Sports would come in, they sat down with all the committees that were critical to the on-course performance, leader board operators, walking scorers. Critical, critical, critical to be a walking scorer. Then we also had little kids that would carry the standards with the three players names and they all had to be trained. You know, it was big.

DePue: And you'd like to have total, absolute control over these volunteers and that's the last thing you have, I would think.

Wheeler: But you know, that really wasn't my job. Tournament chairman I also looked at as the head volunteer. I had to deal with the issues of something going wrong within that structure, but you'd be surprised, once we got it cracking, it was pretty much, "Go away, Sandy," which was fine with me. I had other things to take care of.

DePue: But I suspect you were also something of the match maker finding that volunteer and putting them in the right job.

Wheeler: Or saying, "That's not the right person for that job." You know, that happened, too.

DePue: And not the most pleasant thing for you.

Wheeler: No, and because word would get out that, maybe, that name was being tossed around and hurting somebody's feelings.

DePue: Especially volunteers.

Wheeler: Oh, oh!

DePue: What about fund raising. When did you start and how much of your time was spent on that?

Wheeler: (Sigh) Hard. From November to June, one hundred percent of my time, considering developing the materials, the printed materials that we needed, supervising all the printing and actually getting out on the street and starting a door-to-door identifying potential, you know, when you're in a city that state government and tourism are the two major industries, you haven't got a lot of places to turn for big money.

DePue: I don't know if you recall, that particular year you were successful in getting a government grant.

Wheeler: Yes.

DePue: A tourism grant.

Wheeler: Yes. And that was something totally and absolutely strange to me, and also we learned to be a grant writer. As a matter of fact, many, many years later, at a TSA meeting, they had me give a seminar on how to write a grant. For tourism boards, like in a community, uh-uh, normally not. We've been very fortunate here. State tourism where we're trying to teach them to go to state boards and get it and it was very limited what they would do and you had to put their name on, you know, the Department of Commerce and Community Affairs. They did bumper stickers for us. I don't think they did the brochure back then. They did some signage at the golf course. And that was a big deal, a very, very big deal, and we kept it for a few years, but it dwindled. It depends on whose sitting in the seat. (both laugh)

DePue: Well, how about that.

Wheeler: How about that.

DePue: How wide a net did you cast, especially in those early years?

Wheeler: It was pretty obvious to me early on that if the tournament was going to survive, we would have to move into central Illinois and embrace the central Illinois community, and in doing that, we need to embrace the possibility that we would be giving charitable dollars in those communities. Ultimately that's what happened.

DePue: So the Decaturs and the Bloomingtons and Peorias, Champaign, would it go that far?

Wheeler: Yeah. U of I women's athletics. And at the same time we seated board members in those communities, so we did everything we could to make them involved. But we didn't just go say, okay, we're in Peoria, who do you want. We did our own research, our ad hoc charities review committee looked at things, but that didn't happen in these early years that we're talking about. This is as the dollars grew.

DePue: What was in it for the people who were donating money, the businesses and the organizations?

Wheeler: You know, Mark, it's funny you should use that word, because I didn't use that word. A donation to me was something that was given to us that we didn't have to pay for. When we sold things, (DePue laughs) which is what we did, in their world of IRS, there were certain dollars that they could claim because they received no goods for those dollars. But basically, they would purchase something from the golf tournament that would ultimately create charitable dollars, and we are a 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization, which is still in existence today.

DePue: But I'm assuming a lot of it was name rights, if you will, that their name was prominently displayed someplace.

Wheeler: Their name would go into the, we would put all the pro-am players names in a pairings sheet, no, in a book, that's not it either, there it is. When we would print these books, you would find all the sponsors. You would find all the names of the pro-am players, we would have a letter from the Governor, a letter from State Farm president, etc., but they got that. They got their names listed. It would also be up on the major score board at the Rail, so there was a lot of exposure. Sometimes it was an individual, and lots of times it was corporations. As far as the dollar amount was the same, this is your category, this is where you go. Like when Bill and I bought a Pro Am every year, it had our name there.

DePue: So the bulk of the year, until you get close to the tournament itself, that's what its all about.

Wheeler: But in the meantime while you're doing that, you're talking to the tent and bleacher people about what we want, what its going to cost, you're always working towards that final move to the golf course in August, which is an exciting time after a whole year of chasing the almighty dollar.

DePue: You can finally see this thing come to fruition.

Wheeler: Absolutely. You know we have to find out do we need new rope, do we need more stakes, this is ongoing, to say nothing of board meetings, making

speeches. I did a lot of speechifying back in those days, you know, trying to sell my belief in what we were doing and I think we got the job done.

DePue: In publicizing the tournament itself, you just mentioned that you're giving a lot of speeches. The board had it in their mind that you're the public face of the Rail Golf Classic?

Wheeler: It happened that way. It wasn't of my design. It was, I said in those first couple of years, I was talking about the tournament when nobody else wanted to because they were so afraid that it wasn't going to go, you know.

DePue: Sandy's coming, quick, run out the back door.

Wheeler: Everybody run, yeah, she's got her hand out again. But, yes, and I think the fact that I had my public persona that I had for many years worked well for the golf tournament. A lot of people that were involved weren't comfortable dealing with the media. As much as I would say the tournament chairman should be out front, the president should be out front, the media came to me and over the years that created a little ill will at times, but I couldn't do anything about it. It was not something that I pursued, I was pursued.

DePue: And I can see that would lead to possibly some tension with some people.

Wheeler: You might say that.

DePue: And maybe we should just leave it at that.

Wheeler: We won't mention any names. (laughs)

DePue: One of the things you certainly addressed in this document was the volunteer force and how important that was. I think we've talked about that quite a bit already.

Wheeler: I want to go on this record saying that the volunteers are the heart and soul of the golf tournament. Without every one of them over all these years, it would not exist today. They are the true champions.

DePue: The numbers themselves are rather staggering. When you first started doing this, how many volunteers do you have?

Wheeler: Oh, I think there was probably five or six hundred.

DePue: That's just amazing to me that there's many.

Wheeler: And now its twelve hundred.

DePue: Yeah, okay, twelve hundred. That's astounding.

Wheeler: On a good day. Mark, they come out in the rain, lightening, they will come. They will not stay home and say, "I can't go out there." "I'm a volunteer for the Rail Classic. I've got to get out there." Unbelievable.

DePue: It almost has a feel of it's a family for you, isn't it?

Wheeler: It is. It is. You know, in those beginning years we had such a good time, such a good time. We were all pulling in the same direction, everybody was. The bigger you get, the higher you fly, that doesn't always remain the same.

DePue: Contributions from the community. You mentioned that and you've already talked quite a bit about that, but I know it was your philosophy, you mention it here, you mention it in the document itself, you didn't want to pay a nickel for something you could squeeze out of the community.

Wheeler: Hey, I was rubbing nickels together from day one and this is a silly story. I needed nine caddy buckets. Now you probably don't know what a caddy bucket is. You do know what a caddy bucket is.

DePue: Yeah.

Wheeler: Okay. So you put one at every other hole with water in it so the caddies can wash their towel that they need to keep the clubs and golf balls clean. I didn't know what a caddy bucket was. (both laugh) So, I thought, well, I'm not going to buy a bucket. I'm going to go to a hardware store and ask them to donate nine buckets. I talked to this wonderful gentleman at a Farm and Home store and pleaded my case. He had some ill will with somebody back in the beginning days of the tournament and he decided that some of the money was going into that gentleman's pockets and as much as he wanted to give me those buckets, he couldn't bring himself to do it. It was twenty-seven dollars worth of buckets. I remember that like it was yesterday. (both laugh) I mean, those are things that you run into and, believe me, I spent an hour with that man. I said, "That's the way it was. Can we talk about the way it is?"

That's what I had to do with George Bunn at Bunn-O-Matic. I did go in and see him and when I finally got an appointment with him, he wanted to see what I was made of, so he made an appointment with me at eight o'clock on a Monday morning, 8:00 a.m. (DePue laughs) And I thought, "Oh, okay." I told Phil I was going. I say, "I'm going." He says, "You're going to be sorry." So I went in there. I had two years of wins under my belt. Two years of money given to charities, all the bills had been paid and we were moving on. I walked in at 7:30. I was sitting there when he walked in. George Reagan Bunn. He took me to his office at Bunn-O-Matic and as God as my witness, Mark, it's as big as this studio, and way in the back, there's an industrial metal desk with a laminated top. Now we're talking Bunn-O-Matic, worldwide Bunn-O-Matic, and his chair was a generic desk chair that had no back, so he had to sit up really, really straight. All the rest of the chairs in this

room were lined up against this wall and I'm thinking, "What am I. . .?" So, I went and got a chair and I planted myself in front of his desk and he was the only person outside of the board of directors that I ever took a copy of my budget on a sales call. The only person, because, number one, he was George Bunn, brother of Jake Bunn, and I cared that he saw that we had turned it around, and the only way I could do that was to put it in front of him. So he rankled on me for about thirty minutes (laughs) before he got finished, and I said, "Now Mr. Bunn, I know, I know that's the way it was. Can I tell you the way it is?" I laid the budgets down, showed him, we talked some more. He walked me all the way out to the car and I had a check for five thousand dollars in my pocket.

DePue: Wow.

Wheeler: That's a true story.

DePue: So that has to be one of the highlights of your entire experience.

Wheeler: I have never forgotten it. It was great and they have been with us to this day.

DePue: Was it the board of directors' philosophy that you go out in the community and scrape like this, or was it kind of an added benefit, that was something you brought?

Wheeler: Well, I think that they did it somewhat, but I took it to a whole new level, you know, didn't pay for the typewriter, didn't pay for this, didn't pay for that. I mean, if I could plead the case of the tournament to help us get to the next level, and you'd be surprised how few people said no--except for the twenty-seven dollars worth of buckets.

DePue: Well, you need to be a salesman, and that leads us to the next one here.

Wheeler: Okay.

DePue: Publicity, because I think these things obviously go hand-in-hand, fund raising and getting the right kind of publicity. How much of your job dealt with that? And dealing with the press?

Wheeler: I dealt with the press pretty much at my own volition, when we had something to say. We weren't in the business of calling frivolous news conferences. We would do them when we had something to say. Obviously, in the fall, when we gave money to charity, we would bring the media in and that would always be attended by the charities and the volunteers would come and it was always a great day for the tournament. Then things settled down. Now, if something significant happened in the course of the next six months, or something happened with the LPGA that they wanted a comment, then we would deal with that, but, I feel like we've always had a great relationship. The thing that was most difficult in the early days was the way that they

would take the negative about the quality of the field. You know, why can't the Rail get, why doesn't that happen? I learned to suggest that the tour wasn't one or two people; that it is a tour and you never know what's going to happen. That was always very, very tough to get through. That other thing was the national media and dealing with the LPGA. They would not put a title sponsor's name in an article. They would say, now this is before we had a title sponsor, but I'm going to use this tournament as an example: At a tournament in Springfield, Illinois, or at a LPGA tournament in Springfield, Illinois, thus and thus and thus happened. They wouldn't say: At the State Farm Classic in Springfield.

DePue: Did they see that as a matter of professional ethics?

Wheeler: Yes. It was a battle the LPGA fought for many, many, many years that we finally have done better over the years, but it's ongoing, just to get them to mention anything corporate. But when we got the Coca-Cola sponsor for the pro-am, that was news, but you deal with the national media, you've got a whole different ball of wax.

DePue: I'm sure that the expectation of these people, these organizations that are laying out major money to sponsor something, that's their expectation, isn't it?

Wheeler: Amen. And a lot of other things, but we'll get to that when we start talking about what came in the 90s.

DePue: Okay. While we're in this neighborhood, talk about the relationship you had with the LPGA, especially those first couple of years. How helpful? How much were they in the way?

Wheeler: They weren't in the way and they weren't necessarily very helpful. Executive Sports was more help. I think the LPGA at that point relied on organizations like Ken Young and Executive Sports to teach the tournaments how to do what they do. LPGA didn't have people like that. They had field staff. They would have the field officials that give the rulings and they travel from tournament to tournament and when they come in advance week, oh yes, that's when you start the kowtowing, because they have a list of: Have you done this? Have you done that? Do you have the garbage boxes? Do you have the liners? About five or six pages of: Have you got it? Did you do it? I mean, that was back then, too.

DePue: Did you travel to any of their corporate meetings, have any direct relations in that respect?

Wheeler: No, because, I didn't tell you my first year as executive director I was hired one week in 1979 and next week I was on a plane going to Las Vegas with Phil Spengler and Bill Marriott for my first tournament sponsors meeting. (both laugh) What am I doing? What *am* I doing? But that was how I first

met the LPGA and didn't have a lot of dealings with them. The beginning of the tournament season your purse is set, everything's done, but lucky for me, lucky, lucky for me, Betsy Rawls, who has become a dear, dear friend of mine, was on the LPGA field staff. When she retired from being a world class winner, she joined the LPGA and was running the field staff. She came in my first year and she was so much help and she knew how hard I'd struggled to get there and it rained two of the four days.

DePue: Oh, wow.

Wheeler: I can remember Phil Spengler had one of the first RVs that Springfield had every seen and we had brought it in and parked it up by the little Lincoln house. I can remember sitting in that little RV and Betsy was in there with me and I'm bawling, "How much money do we have to pay if we don't play the whole thing?" It was the worst conversation I think I ever had at that, no ever in my twenty-seven years, because back then they hadn't made any rulings about if you play so many days you pay so much and if you get so much in you pay the whole purse. None of that stuff existed back then. That year I actually stood out in the rain and cried so nobody could see me cry. My first tournament. Yeah, I was known as the bawl baby. (laughs)

DePue: You have every ounce of your emotion was tied up in the tournament.

Wheeler: Without a doubt.

DePue: Now I've heard it mentioned that the Rail is one of the, I shouldn't call it, the State Farm Classic is one of the longest tournaments to stop here now, it's the longest running.

Wheeler: And let me tell you what the difference is.

DePue: But there are tournaments in the 1950s.

Wheeler: They weren't, they aren't still around.

DePue: So like a lot of other businesses, they go out of business.

Wheeler: Absolutely. We're coming up to thirty-four years.

DePue: It is the longest running continuous tournament?

Wheeler: Yes.

DePue: Not even the majors?

Wheeler: The U. S. Open is not. The longest running regular event. It's not a major. It's not the LPGA championship. The U. S. Open is run by the USGA; that's not even an LPGA golf tournament. So you take those two out of the

equation, Portland, Oregon, was, I think 1972. However, they have not been official money all these years. They took five years out and played a team championship, which is not legal USGA golf. So they were five years, now the players still got paid, but it was not official money. We've been paying official money for thirty-three years, going on thirty-four.

DePue: Well, that is amazing considering that it had been around for twenty years before. What were the things that caused these other places to go belly-up, if you will?

Wheeler: Lots of reasons. One of the biggest is the president of XYZ Candy loves golf, loves women's golf. "I'm going to sponsor a LPGA tournament." Three years down the road, when the president of XYZ Candy moves on and the new president comes in and he loves tennis, and that's a fact, Mark, that is, it is an emotional buy. Back then you just never knew from year-to-year. LPGA had no standardized contracts for sponsorship. Believe it or not, you all had to go out on your own and try to figure it out. A lot of title sponsorships, the title sponsor for X amount of money would literally take over the whole pro-am, would make the tournament pay for the $50,000 pairings party and all the stuff out of their budget. But, in that title money, they figured they were due a whale of a lot of advertising, name of the tournament, let's say sixty percent of the pro-am, on-course advertising, which can be sold otherwise. So, a title sponsor can be good, or can be very, very, very difficult. Not bad, difficult.

DePue: I was just thinking about what's going on in the corporate world in America today. A lot of corporations that are widely known names and suddenly they are bankrupt, they're out of business.

Wheeler: And as I said, there's not only the emotional buy at the top of the helm, there is the economy and we hit snags along the way, but in my twenty-seven years, I lost money one year and it was devastating to me. One out of twenty-seven tournaments.

DePue: You've mentioned this quite a bit already, but the importance of Executive Sports in providing that framework in which around you could be successful in running the tournament.

Wheeler: And their go-to person, you could call during the year and ask questions concerning the physical presentation of the golf tournament.

DePue: Did you establish some long-term relationships there? Did you see the same crew arrive every year, for example?

Wheeler: Executive Sports was run by a retired FBI agent, a guy by the name of John Montgomery, Sr., and if you saw this great big barrel-chested gentleman, you'd expect him to pull out that weapon at any time. He was a whale of a guy and his partner was Jack Nicklaus, the Jack Nicklaus. They were buddies.

Fishing buddies, hunting buddies, the whole nine yards. Don't ask me how that came together, but that's what they were. John came in December, after they'd hired me and Phil Spengler had found him—I don't know, there again, Phil had his finger in more areas than I ever thought of at that point-in-time—and met with him and came up with what they would charge us and I'd have to go back and look, I've got budgets, I'd have to go and look what that first one was, but I can tell you that in order for us to continue to grow, that man did not raise his price until he and I were together at Pat Bradley's Hall of Fame evening in Boston. We were standing there having a cocktail and he kind of took me behind the pillar and said, "You think maybe we could get a little increase in what you've been paying us?" (both laugh) I clinked his glass and I said, "John, I think we can do that." I mean, he was an unbelievable supporter. He just past away this year.

DePue: That's an amazing story, because he's in it as a business, he wants to make money on it, and he's taking a chance on this little golf tournament in the middle of the country.

Wheeler: Absolutely. Absolutely. In the middle of a cornfield. He was a remarkable gentleman and a dear friend. He hired young men, usually from southern universities who came out and did the physical work. I remember one year he said, you had a main guy and then you had a couple others that worked with the main man, and this young John Subers, big, tall, good looking kid from Florida State University, a football player. He said, "Would you consider teaching John how to be the leader, the director?" I said, "Bring him on. If he can survive me, he's on his way." John is now a successful tournament director on the PGA tour. It was a wonderful time, and I'll never forget when he left and it was his last tournament with us, everybody was crying. As a matter of fact, John and I went behind one of the trailers and cried together. But those were the kinds of relationships.

DePue: That's what made you stick around for all those years.

Wheeler: Well, you know, there was the plum waiting out there, the title sponsor.

DePue: That's for the next episode.

Wheeler: I know. There were two plums, title sponsor and television.

DePue: The next thing you had on this report is something else you've talked about quite a bit, and that's the importance of the pro-am side of the tournament.

Wheeler: Critical. You start selling pro-am slots before you try to sell anything else. As a matter of fact, we finally got a little bit smarter and put up a board at the awards dinner; people could go up and sign up for next year, but then I would call them or write to them and say, "Where's your $200 deposit, please?" But you figure 224 amateurs is what you need. You have a full field in the morning and a full field in the afternoon. They get special credentials for the

tournament. They get what we call a tee gift, which was very, very, very small in the beginning years; that increased over the years as we got different sponsors. But they didn't do it for the tee gift. They loved having the tickets and they loved the parties, but walking those fairways with the professionals, that's what it's all about.

DePue: How about the professionals? Did the professionals like that? Were there some that really warmed up to it more than others?

Wheeler: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. The players were more agreeable, back then. Today you'll find more not quite so friendly, but, if you could draw a Nancy Lopez, a JoAnne Carner, a Rosie Jones. I remember the year Laura Davies came. I made it a goal of mine. I had worked so hard to get Laura Davies to this tournament and she's always the last minute. She comes in, she runs in, she throws her shoes on and races off for the golf course. Try and get a chance to even say hello, but I was playing in the pro-am. We were going down opposing fairways. I told my team, "Go on without me. I have to go over and welcome Laura." So I went under the ropes and went over and the team standing there is Laura's; I'm welcoming her, thanking her, hugging her, and I looked at the guys and I said, "So, are you having a good time?" They said, "Oh, it's great. She drives and we all pull out our wedges." (both laugh) One year she set the course record, shooting a sixty-two. We always thought her name was going to be on the tournament, but she never quite made it.

DePue: One of the things you mention in this, also, was the importance of getting new partners and branching out and going into communities like Decatur and Peoria.

Wheeler: We were very successful. When you do that, you're looking for somebody that's going to open the door, alright? With Archer Daniels Midland there was this connection that had that connection that got me in to Archer Daniels Midland, who was a big sponsor for a lot of years until, you know, the door revolved and, but you have to know somebody.

DePue: That's a major corporation that you won't find in Springfield at that time.

Wheeler: No, no, and we had to go there. And they were before we had a title sponsor at the $25,000 level. But you never knew from year to year. We didn't do extended contracts then. We'd say, okay, this is 1984, you know.

DePue: Because those corporations want to see if you are successful and if it's worth their money as well, I'm sure.

Wheeler: If their clients are happy.

DePue: We're drawing close to the end of this session, but I want to give you enough time to talk about this next issue, and this was concessions. I don't know if

you remember that year, but apparently you had some problems with the concessions.

Wheeler: Yeah, that was a rough time for me. Now, in all honesty, my predecessor was a great personality, a great outgoing guy and a very active president of the American Business Club (ABC). He was AMBUC of the Year and all this good stuff. The concessions and pro-am dinner, way back in those first two years, were in a tent at the golf course, and the dinner was prepared by ABC members. Well, the word was from the day I was hired that I had taken Lenny's job. Nothing could have been further from the truth, but the good old boys, swigging their beers, thought that I had done something to cause Lenny to leave to get his job. Absolutely not a word of truth. Lenny was long gone before the tournament was over, that's how difficult it was inside. They didn't treat me very nicely. I mean, this one gentleman one night really, really ripped into me and called me a few rotten names and, it was painful, it was very, very painful, but I stuck to it. We hung in and eventually over the years had a great relationship.

DePue: So you continued to work with ABC afterwards?

Wheeler: Uh huh, uh huh.

DePue: And the thing they were providing for the tournament was concessions throughout the entire tournament operation?

Wheeler: We didn't have any on-course concessions. They were all right there in the one big tent. I have to tell you that most of the board members were members of ABC. I think it is important that I say that, so yes, we continued on. It was just, how thick is my skin. It wasn't very thick at that point in time.

DePue: Even with all that theater work. I mean there's always rejection going on.

Wheeler: Oh, this was ugly. (laughs)

DePue: Hadn't encountered that before, huh?

Wheeler: No, no. I really hadn't. But, like I said, they'd been working all day in the sun and they'd had a few brewskis and that happened. It was a painful segment of my relationship with them, but long gone and over and forgotten.

DePue: There's just a couple other things that just kind of wraps this up. Parking. Parking at the Rail was always a problem, I would think.

Wheeler: No, not a problem. The Rail had the best parking of any professional golf tournament. So many places where they played people had to be bused in; there was no parking near the golf course. Here we had this huge field out there and for years we didn't charge and we didn't have a parking committee, but that was soon changed. One year we actually parked out back off of

seventeen lake and we moved out there for a reason—Mark and I can't remember why, but once we got it organized, again, while I was always looking for revenue, we started charging to park, because their tickets were only ten bucks. So parking, and eventually turned that whole big committee over to a charity that got the money. We were in a position to do that, which was great.

DePue: I want to close this series of questions with a quote, and this is a very short quote. You start off this way and you wrote that you wanted to thank the board right from the beginning of this document, you wanted to thank the board for their almost total support and, am I reading too much in there?

Wheeler: (laughs)

DePue: And am I reading too much in there that word "almost" got included?

Wheeler: No, no. You know, there's always a couple naysayers and the second year after the first and second successes were under their belts and we were going to move on, they decided that I would just be the marketing entity of the tournament and they would run the event and that I would have nothing to do with it. I told them that would sign my walking papers, because you can't work that hard all year long, you see, and that wasn't what I signed on for, and they were saying that. I said, "That's not what I signed on for."

DePue: It doesn't sound practical in the first place, if I might venture an opinion on that.

Wheeler: Well, I was dealing with an all male board and they loved the golfing aspect and not the marketing aspect .Once I let the word out that that was fine, that's fine, I'll move on, but if you take the tournament proper away, the operations go with me, I'm gone. And I meant it.

DePue: And they didn't, obviously.

Wheeler: No, they didn't.

DePue: This is the last question for today.

Wheeler: Okay.

DePue: My last question is, after that second year, you're starting to be successful, you're giving money to charities, you're more than breaking even now. What were you thoughts about returning to that acting career.

Wheeler: Ooooh boy, did I want to do that.

DePue: Still?

Wheeler: Yeah. That doesn't go away. I was born with that talent and I would do it tomorrow if it were feasible at this stage in our lives. But you know, it's like I told you earlier, they set the hook. I mean, it was all working and it felt good and we were giving money to charity. If we hadn't accomplished that goal, I would have been hard-put to go on and they would have been hard-put to go on, but I personally would have been hard-put to go on, because that meant everything to me.

DePue: So you had no intention of walking away and returning to the stage or the theater?

Wheeler: No, but I wanted to.

DePue: Well that wasn't the answer I'd expected, so that's why we ask the questions, I guess.

Wheeler: (laughs)

DePue: Sandy, it's been fascinating talking to you to get an inside view of this.I It's like a lot of other things, you know, from the outside, well. it looks so darn simple. You just throw this thing together and it happens, and it's anything but.

Wheeler: It's not a golf outing. Occasionally people would say, "How's your golf outing?" and my hair would stand on end. (both laugh)

DePue: Until next time, Sandy, thank you very much.

(end of interview #2 #3 continues)

Interview with Sandy Wheeler
FM-V-L-2008-070

Interview # 3: January 22, 2009
Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Good afternoon. Today is Thursday, the twenty-second of January, 2009. My name is Mark DePue. I'm a volunteer with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and today we're doing the third session with Sandy Wheeler. If you'll recall, the first session dealt with Sandy's early life and quite a bit about her theatrical career and the myriad of other jobs that she had while living in Springfield. Part two of that interview was about her first couple of years setting up the Rail Golf Classic as the…

Wheeler: Executive Director.

DePue: Executive Director. I wanted to make sure I got that right.

Wheeler: Yeah, that's it.

DePue: We had a fascinating discussion about that. This session we want to focus on, okay, you had twenty-seven years, so we only have twenty-five more years to cover in here, Sandy.

Wheeler: (laughs) We can handle it.

DePue: Yeah, we can handle it. I did want to cover all of that and we plan to have one more session after this—just to let the audience know—where we actually go out to the Rail Golf Course.

Wheeler: And sing two choruses of "Memories." (laughs)

DePue: Well, you can, I'm not.

Wheeler: (laughs)

DePue: Okay, let's start with a background question for you, because when we left off we were talking about a document that you had written after the second year, I believe.

Wheeler: Uh, huh.

DePue: It kind of put some perspective on the myriad responsibilities that anybody putting together something as ambitious as a golf tournament has to deal with. But draw back from that and tell us, Sandy, what your long-range goals were at that time.

Wheeler: Well, survival was number one on the list because those first two years were just a test to see if the tournament could survive in Springfield, in a community of a hundred thousand where state government and tourism were the major industries. So, you know, getting sponsors to believe that this tournament could be successful, could give money to charity, so survival and money for charity were the initial goals that I had. Knowing full well that down the road, with the way purses go on the tour that you were always going to need more money to pay the players, which meant an increase in the purse. It was always a challenge where that money was going to come from.

DePue: Were you optimistic?

Wheeler: Ahh, I was terribly optimistic and terribly hard-headed that it was going to happen. (laughs) That's just the way it was.

DePue: You mean, failure just wasn't an option ?

Wheeler: Failure was not an option. That's exactly.

DePue: Well, I really butchered that. I'm sorry.

Wheeler: Well, that's okay, but that first-time gift, the fifty thousand, got us off the bubble, allowed us to see the first tournament in black numbers vis-à-vis red, losing money, and first giving money to charities. That was big, big, big for me, because the name of the organization, the not-for-profit organization, was Rail Charity Golf Classic. That's the not-for-profit group that was dedicated to raising money for charity. So, I was saying, "We either need to fulfill this goal or we need to change our name."

DePue: Tell us a little bit about your management style.

Wheeler: Well, I didn't have to manage much those early years, it was just me in the office. There was so much to learn from operations to and, and developing brochures and credit pieces. I had never done any of these things. I, I was flying by the seat of my pants. And, you know, I could refer back to what they had, but you know that you need to figure a way to make it better. Figuring out a marketing scheme, oh my gosh, or doing a budget. I didn't

know anything about budgeting a golf tournament. Thank God we had board members that were willing to help me along in that issue, but I've got to tell you, that I probably didn't let go of that advice for three or four years because it made me very, very nervous. And then you can start referring to what happened the year before and you look at increases in cost and hopefully you know what you're doing. But, like any budget, the income has to match the expenses, and in our case, had to best expenses and still have money for charity. That was a very frightening place for me.

DePue: Were you primarily the person doing the books then?

Wheeler: Oh, yes. I was doing the marketing and doing the books. But we also had a volunteer, my dear friend Cornelia Hodges, stepped in and donated her services to help me along. She actually kept the official books from the records that I provided for her.

DePue: Then I would assume you had an auditor come in and check the books.

Wheeler: You know, we didn't have an auditor for years. We didn't. That came when we got bigger, when we were really out there.

DePue: Somebody decided you needed to do that just to protect yourself?

Wheeler: Absolutely.

DePue: Here's the chance for you now to reflect on your own abilities. I want you to tell us what you think the strengths and skills that you had that went into the job which made it successful.

Wheeler: Well, determination, belief in the project. I thought that the golf tournament was the best thing that Springfield had seen in a long, long, long time. I loved the idea that it was dedicated to charity and at that point when I stepped in was not doing anything for charity. I was very focused and very determined. On the other side of the coin, I have some great secretarial skills, so I could organize and handle detail. And my ability to communicate I think helped me a lot. My time in radio and television and meeting with people and performing, you know, I would talk to a audience of a thousand like I'm talking to you today. That's just the way I am. And I think that's helped me a lot in going in and meeting strangers and asking them to please, please, please help the golf tournament. I mean, that was, and believe me, Mark, those first two years it was eight days a week, twenty-eight hours a day. I ate it, I slept it, I breathed it, and I think that determination was one of my greatest assets.

DePue: How about short-comings, the things you would have liked to be able to do better?

Wheeler: I think possibly my straightforwardness that was misinterpreted as toughness, was something that did not serve me well, especially as the years went on. What I am, what I put forward, is not always what's in my heart.

DePue: Toughness, stubborn?

Wheeler: Not stubborn. Only when I thought I was right about something, I would fight for what I thought was right for the golf tournament.

DePue: Was that how some perceived you, then?

Wheeler: Yeah.

DePue: Hard-headed?

Wheeler: Oh, yeah. (laughs) There you're getting them both in, stubborn and hard-headed.

DePue: Well, they kind of go together.

Wheeler: Well, you know what, you had to be to do what I was doing. It was certainly not for the weak of spirit. All there had been before was failure and so I had the challenge to take this event, that I knew nothing about, and try to make it function, try to make it viable. Again, trying to give money to charity, but being an asset to the community.

DePue: You touched on this a little bit, especially in the last interview, but let me ask it in a different way. Do you think a lot of the people who were evaluating you, in part the board because they had to, and that was their responsibility, were they evaluating your performance as the manager, the executive director, as a woman or as a manager?

Wheeler: I don't know the answer to that. I don't know. I know one of the issues that we had early on was once we had a couple of successful events under our belt, the board—or maybe the executive committee—decided that I would do all the grunt work, raise all the money, run the office, do everything, but that they would take the operations of the tournament upon themselves and I would not be involved. That's when I planted myself, because it was something to look forward to after the day-to-day hard work of looking for the almighty dollar, actually moving to the Rail and seeing it evolve and being involved with all the volunteers and that was the part that drove me all year long.

DePue: Was there a point in time when you realized: I have arrived. The tournament has arrived. We've gotten there.

Wheeler: Oh, no, no, no. We knew, I knew, that to have the long-term survival we had to have a title sponsor and without that, there would be a wall that we would run into and that would be no more money. No more money to see the purses

go. As a matter of fact, I went to Japan twice in the 80s seeking the almighty title sponsor, as a guest of the Japanese.

DePue: They invited you?

Wheeler: Absolutely.

DePue: What we want to do here for the next bit is to talk about the history of the golf tournament, and as we go through that, part of what we're going to be talking about, of course, is that quest for a title sponsor.

Wheeler: Tough stuff. (laughs)

DePue: Tough stuff. So, let's go back to 1980.

Wheeler: First tournament.

DePue: Nancy Lopez. Her share that year was $15,000

Wheeler: $15,000. The purse was $100,000, which was the largest purse on the LPGA tour when it was founded in 1976, but it stayed at $100,000.

DePue: And her cut of that was $15,000.

Wheeler: Yeah. (laughs)

DePue: At that time that was quite a stretch.

Wheeler: (laughs) Yeah. Well, you know, we didn't so much then think of it as only $15,000. For the LPGA, a growing organization only fifty years old, it was a nice purse, a nice $15,000 check. I don't know whether I told you this story or not, but as little as I knew about golf and the tour, that first tournament was a very difficult time because it rained. I remember Phil Spengler—who was the guiding force in putting me in the executive director's chair—when Nancy won, he was in tears and I thought, "What's that all about?" Well, I hadn't been paying any attention, but she was just tearing it up on the tour and winning everything, so the fact that she came to Springfield, Illinois and won our event was really big.

DePue: The face of women's golf at the time.

Wheeler: Yes, absolutely, and what a charmer she's been all these years.

DePue: And a real supporter.

Wheeler: Of this tournament? Absolutely!

DePue: I think we have a picture of Nancy that we can go to now somewhere in this process, and while we're…

Wheeler: There she is, there she is.

DePue: You told me before I should be asking you about ecology.

Wheeler: (laughs) Well, that first tournament in 1980 that Nancy won was a switch between the former operations organization that the tournament hired to a new operations organization called Executive Sports. And their philosophy in assisting a golf tournament was entirely different than Ken Young and Associates. So we followed their guidance and did everything we were supposed to do, but somebody forgot to tell us that Mr. Young and his crew also took care of the garbage, which is called ecology. So, after the first day of the tournament, somebody says to me, and I think it was somebody with Executive Sports, they said, "Whose doing ecology?" And I kind of got a blank look on my face and I said, "Well, I don't know."

DePue: And you're thinking, "I wonder what they're talking about."

Wheeler: I just… I was so lost, but come to find out, that we needed somebody, or somebodies, to go out and collect all the trash from the trash boxes . They have liners in them and you pull the liners and take it back to the dumpster, of which back in those years there was only one. And so, my husband Bill and my eldest son Lee got up at four o'clock every morning, we were at the golf course by five, and they went around and did the ecology the whole run of the tournament.

DePue: Did he get a little extra on his allowance that time?

Wheeler: (laughs) No, no, but that was one of many jobs that my husband and my son had done over the years.

DePue: Maybe this is a good time to interject how much a family affair this was for all of you.

Wheeler: It had to be, because I was so totally encompassed in the whole picture, and especially tournament week, it got to the point that Bill and I decided that we needed to stay in the hotel where the players stayed, because I couldn't go home at night a somebody wanted to know where their clothes were for school tomorrow. You know, "Did you do this, Mom?" "What's for dinner?" You can't operate at that level, so we always moved into the hotel and stayed there tournament week, which helped me a lot. But Lee ran the practice range. Lee did ecology. I'm not remembering, oh, he did radio reporting, and, of course, he played in the Pro-Am many, many times. Bill did ecology, was a walking reporter. As a matter of fact, you just had JoAnne Carner's picture up there and there's a great story about JoAnne's Carner's second win. It poured and poured and poured and we knew it was going to pour before they teed off. Bill had drawn Carner. The walking reporters were able to draw the players, who they were going to go with. You always want your top six players, back in those days, to have a walking reporter so that score could go

right to the scoring trailer and you knew exactly who was leading the tournament within those who had a possibility of winning.

Before he went, he said, "If it starts to rain, please bring me an umbrella." It started to rain, it started to pour. I was running all over the golf course taking towels to the caddies to try and keep the players playing, and I was soaked to the skin. I stopped for a second and I thought, "Oh, my. I forgot Bill." He's out there with JoAnne Carner. Of course she was dry because she had an umbrella and rain suit and her caddie had all the dry towels. So I grabbed an umbrella and I go tearing out there. I was coming down ten, eleven fairway and I pulled up under the ropes and he looked at me and his hair was all hanging down, he was drenched, and he said, "Never mind." (both laugh) That's a very true story. I was in the proverbial dog house, but that's what happened.

My oldest sister Sharon helped me in the office as a volunteer. Crackerjack secretary, secretarial skills. She helped me a couple of years in the office, which was great. Our eldest daughter was in New York pursuing her acting and dancing career and she came home the first year that we had built our first sky box on the back of the bleachers. I said, "Liz, I need a hostess up there. I need somebody up there, so this is going to be some VIP entertaining." And it was cold as the devil and Liz didn't have anything but shorts with her and I've still got pictures of her up there freezing in that little sky box. It wasn't enclosed at all. It was just kind of like that.

DePue: But otherwise a good trooper.

Wheeler: Oh, quite a trooper. Bradley Michael has done everything and anything that momma ever needed. He's our youngest son and the latter years always helped me with moving, helping me move my personal stuff. Let's see, who have I forgotten? Missy has never worked on the tournament. Out of state, out of state. I mean, they come home to enjoy it, but haven't been involved as volunteers, but I think we've had it. Oh, my sister, my youngest sister and my brother-in-law were chairmen of the standard bearer committee for years. That's a big, big job. You have to recruit kids to carry the standard. Now a standard is that pole with a little dough board on top that shows what the threesome is, what their score is for the tournament and where they are today. So, to get that many kids to go out with every three-some is quite a challenge and they did a great, great job.

DePue: And then to get them to do exactly what you want them to do.

Wheeler: Well, you know, over the years, we've had some kids get out there and say, "This is too much," and they just lay down in the fairway. (laughs) It's true. We have an age differential now. We look and, hopefully, and have had adults over the years.

DePue: Let's go back to those early years again, 1981. You've already mentioned their names, JoAnne Carner wins for the first time, and you already talked about winning again the next year in 1982.

Wheeler: Yeah.

DePue: And quite a personality.

Wheeler: One of the great personalities of the LPGA tour. So much fun and they always stayed next door to us in the hotel, so Don and JoAnne, her husband Don and JoAnne would come over to see us. Now, that's a good picture of.

DePue: She had a nickname, didn't she?

Wheeler: Big Momma. Big Momma. And she'd talk to the gallery. She'd have fun. She'd stick her golf club up in the air or twirl it. I mean she was just a joy to be around. Probably the worst thing that happened was there was an event, a situation here in Springfield that ended quite unhappily; and JoAnne and Don, she came back and defended, and that was the last we saw of JoAnne Carner.

DePue: And you don't want to go into any detail on that?

Wheeler: Well, it was unfortunate. We'd had a really, really great day at the golf course. It was Saturday. And the sun was bright. It was like perfect golf weather, maybe eighty, eighty-five degrees, you know, and just bright and the sky was so blue and we'd had a perfect day. JoAnne and Don were loaned a car from one of the agencies here in Springfield. That's before we had a lot of cars to move around. The laws in Florida and Illinois at that time were different. You could have an open beer in a car in Florida, but not in Illinois. And they were coming up from the golf course, going past the Ethnic Festival as we know is a really, really big event, and they always put extra patrols out there during that time.

DePue: It is always out at the fairgrounds.

Wheeler: Out at the fairgrounds, yes. And I guess Don was speeding, which doesn't surprise me, and probably wasn't thinking a thing about it, probably didn't eventsee what the speed limit was here. That's all I could imagine.

DePue: I would guess they're feeling pretty good. She just won the tournament, right?

Wheeler: No. This is Saturday. She hadn't won the tournament. We just had a little ceremony honoring her because she was such a great champion for us, and she was leading again. So, they got stopped. And Don Carner—you had to know Don to appreciate him. I've got to tell you that Don and JoAnne were like this, they were together all the time. He supported her amateur career; they eventually got married and wherever she went, he went. That was the way it

was. The loved to fish, they owned a big boat down in Florida, and that was it. We got to know them quite well. Don is a bit of a character and everybody knew it. So I guess Don got a little huffy with the young woman that stopped them. Come to find out later that she was a rookie, a sheriff's deputy, and Don probably got a little huffy and she looked in the car and JoAnne was sitting there with a cup in her hand and the young lady asked if that was beer. And Don said, "Yes, is that a problem?" And she said, "Well, that's illegal." So Don told JoAnne to pour it out. Unfortunately, as the law goes, that's obstruction of justice and thereby hangs the tale. It got pretty ugly before the weekend was over and it was heartbreaking to us.

DePue: Did you get personally involved in this?

Wheeler: Oh, absolutely. We had decided that we were all going to go back to the hotel where we had a hospitality suite. It was a great day. Let's go up, put our feet up and have a cool drink.

DePue: Some refreshments.

Wheeler: Some refreshments, yes, liquid refreshments. I went into my office to tell folks that I was leaving and the phone rang. As we do in the tournament office, anybody picks it up, so I picked it up and said, "Rail Charity Golf Classic." She had a very, very deep voice. I heard, "Uh, Sandy." I said, "Oh, hi JoAnne." I mean, you couldn't miss her voice. She said, "Uh, we've got a problem." And I said, "For crying out loud, did the hotel lock you out of your room? What's the problem? We'll take care of it." "We're in jail." Well, I thought I was going to drop dead and my mind was ruined and I made probably one of the more intelligent statements I've ever made in my life. I said, "Stay right where you are." (laughs) "We'll be right there." As if they could go somewhere. (laughs) But, I didn't find out which jail they were in, whether the county or the city, I was so flabbergasted. There went our happy time in the hotel and it took the air out of our sails. JoAnne did stay in and won the tournament and came back and defended the next year. But that was that. It's much too long to tell you how the whole weekend evolved.

DePue: They eventually were released on bail, I would assume?

Wheeler: Oh yeah, immediately.

DePue: It says something about her as a player that even after that she goes on and wins the tournament.

Wheeler: Exactly. And we were very, very, very proud of her, and I have to tell you that at that point in time on Saturday night we had terrific support from the media. We knew that this was something that was an unhappy light on the golf tournament and certainly on JoAnne and Don and we thought it would be appropriate if we could keep it quiet. My husband, who has been in media for forty plus years started making the calls to the press suggesting and asking if

they could just keep the lid on it and everybody agreed to do that with the concession that it was all or not. Everybody was going to keep a lid on it or everybody was going to tell it and he was quite successful in getting that done. It wasn't until later Sunday night and some announcer decided that he was going to stir up the pot and it got pretty bad before the night was over. I was on the phone with the sheriff and I was on the phone with Don and I was so tired because we were up until three o'clock in the morning Saturday night. My husband's job, real job, throughout the tournament was to make me go to bed no matter what was going on in the hospitality suite. You have to get some sleep, because I was up at five, on my way to the golf course. And that night, Sunday night, he said at nine o'clock, "You're going to bed," which I did. I was sound asleep and he wakes me up and says, "Don Carner's here. You've got to talk to him." Don came back because this announcer said that they were going to come out to the golf course and arrest him on Monday. The rest of that story is that at midnight I had to get up and tell JoAnne that they were not coming, that it was over. That gentleman didn't do us a favor. He made it much more difficult than it needed to be. JoAnne's concern was should I get Don out of town on a rail? It got that ugly, it really did. And it was unfortunate because everybody loved JoAnne and what she brought to the golf tournament. We remained friends and lots of times when we'd meet up at parties over the years, we'd talk and I'd tell her every time, because I'd probably had a couple of toddies, that I'd never gotten over it, her not coming back, and a couple of times I was in tears, because she meant so much to the gallery.

DePue: Does that mean that your last day of the tournament was normally Labor Day as well?

Wheeler: Yes, in those years, and Mark, I can't really remember, but we were switching back and forth. We started out as a seventy-two hole golf tournament and then we thought maybe we can do better, get more players if we go to fifty-four holes. It was always a field question. How can we attract the most, the best. For years it was just can we get a full field? That was a big issue. Where we were positioned on the schedule was a big issue because it was Portland, Oregon, from Springfield, and that was never easy. And Portland was a very, very popular golf tournament on a great golf course and we were a fledgling golf tournament on a fledgling golf course.

DePue: In the middle of nowhere.

Wheeler: In the middle of the prairie, that's right. In the middle of the prairie and St. Louis and Chicago and which way do we go?

DePue: How did you end up choosing those days? That happened before you got there, but how did they arrive at that weekend?

Wheeler: Mr. Sapp and Mr. Bunn in meeting with the LPGA said let's go with Labor Day weekend and maybe we can attach ourselves to the Jerry Lewis Muscular Dystrophy telecast, which was the first name of the tournament.

DePue: I think we did talk about that.

Wheeler: We did talk about that, yeah.

DePue: 1983 Lauri Merton? Lauri Peterson?

Wheeler: Lauri Peterson.

DePue: She wins in a playoff. Is that the first playoff that you had?

Wheeler: Yes, and it was two rookies and I can't remember, Sue, no, it wasn't Sue Ertl. I can see this little girl's face. She was dark-headed, not very tall. I can't remember, but the sky was dark. There was a storm looming and I can remember that Larry Wells and Frank Yender were co-tournament chairmen that year and we had a one-hole playoff and I can tell you that when Lauri sank that putt, the thunder and the lightning took off and the pouring rain. We ended up all a bunch of drowned rats in the tent having the awards ceremony. She was a rookie. That was her first win.

DePue: But having that end in a playoff, was that a positive thing in terms of publicity and generating some excitement?

Wheeler: Oh sure, oh sure, absolutely. When you've got a tie and go out and play a few more holes, that's a very, very good deal. The only time that ever happened that made me really unhappy was when Dottie Pepper tied with Helen Dobson and Dottie Pepper was a very good friend of mine, a wonderful player, just somebody you want to win your golf tournament, a big name, and here comes a rookie from England that nobody knew by the name of Helen Dobson, very sweet young lady, beat Dottie in a five hole playoff. That was the first year of the State Farm title classic.

DePue: My guess, though, Sandy, is that you can't let on to anybody that you have a favorite.

Wheeler: Oh no, absolutely not. I have always been a proponent, no matter what I say here, I have always been a proponent that it's a tour and it's a position I took when we would have two of the top ten or three of the top ten and I was upset not for me, I was upset because the top names draw the biggest gallery, which meant more money for charity. This is something I tried to impress upon the media when they wanted to hammer on us because we only had two of this and three of that, it's a tour, folks, it's a tour.

DePue: Moving along, 1984, Cindy Hill, but that also was a year, from what I've read, Mary Beth Zimmerman hit eight straight birdies out on the course.

Wheeler: Well, that was quite a record and one of our deans of sports reporting, Coley Cowan, was out on the golf course following Mary Beth because she's from Hillsboro.

DePue: A good Illinois girl.

Wheeler: A good Illinois girl and Coley was out there trying to get the story and it's birdie, birdie, birdie. He radios back to the media area. He says, "Does anybody know what's going on out here?" (both laugh) Those were his words, so it was really something and it was the beginning of her career. But yes, and that was a nine holes record she held for a very long time.

DePue: But the other amazing thing is she didn't end up winning the tourney that year.

Wheeler: No, no.

DePue: Cindy Hill did.

Wheeler: That's right, and that was Cindy Hill's only win and, again, came out of nowhere, didn't have a big name and Cindy Hill is one of our champions that just kind of faded from the picture. I don't know where she is, what she's doing. She was a very quiet sweet girl and the win was big and I think it stunned her (laughs) but that was it. She came back and defended and probably played a few years after that, but her career was not lengthy.

DePue: And it was that year, I know that you donated $34,500 to charity.

Wheeler: Wow. That was pretty exciting.

DePue: And that's a big leap from what you started at.

Wheeler: Yeah, six thousand, that was the first year, and to get to five figures was pretty exciting and that's when we decided to start making some noise about what we were doing for charities. Making the community realize we weren't only presenting professional golf, that we were doing something good for those in need. The dollars were growing for charity and we started thinking that we needed to take a careful look. Should just two organizations be getting it or should we start expanding our horizons as far as charitable contributions were concerned.

DePue: What were the two organizations?

Wheeler: St. John's and Memorial.

DePue: And after that then you started to expand the number of charities you gave to.

Wheeler: Yes.

DePue: Or that year itself?

Wheeler: No, I don't know that it was that year, Mark. I can't really remember. I made a recommendation to the executive committee that we should put together an ad hoc committee that each year would review, because people were starting to ask us and that we should take a look at it. And there was a very interesting process and sometimes a very heart-rendering process. I mean, we heard some really sad stories.

DePue: Who came up with the idea of using media day to take the players out to some of the charities, to visit some of the charities that were benefitting from this?

Wheeler: Me. (laughs) Guilty.

DePue: Was that something that other tournaments were doing?

Wheeler: No, but I can tell you that after we started it, some tournaments are doing it. I felt that it was important that they see what they were creating in the community with their play, with their ability to attract galleries that created the sponsorships and the dollars that ultimately would go to charity.

DePue: Did you get some feedback from the players?

Wheeler: Oh, always got a note from the player that said I had no idea. I remember Nancy Lopez's second win in '92, we took her up to St. John's NICU [Neonatal Intensive Care Unit] where the money was going to go that year, and got pictures of her holding a little, tiny preemie and they felt good about it. Used to take them over to United Cerebral Palsy and they'd actually go in the play room. We started their first Leko-Tekprogram, way back when. The Leko-Tek is toys that help children with disabilities learn to play. They're developed just to learn coordination and so we'd take the players over there and they'd get on the floor and play with the kids; some of them had cerebral palsy, some of them were Down Syndrome, and that was always a big day.

DePue: Did you take all of the players with you?

Wheeler: Every defending champion. Media day is when you bring the defending champion back into the city, treat the media to a day of golf. You go on the charity tour in the morning, then we have a luncheon and a news conference and then the media and the board of directors and some of the committee chairs go out and play golf. As the years went on, we didn't ask the player to stay and play golf. They would want to be compensated for that and we didn't feel that it was necessary. They were there, they did their thing, they did the media visit, they made the charity visit. We used to fly them commercially, but as years went on, our good friend Dick Levi at Levi, Ray and Shoup always provided his private plane. I would fly out and pick up the defending champion and bring her back in, get her settled in the hotel for the night and

the next day we'd meet at nine in the morning and probably visit four charities and then go to the rest.

DePue: When was the media day in relation to the actual tournament?

Wheeler: Well, you wanted to have some news. We'd usually do it in July. The only thing I can say about that is, it was always hotter than the dickens and hot in the tent. In my years, we only lost one media day and that was the first year that Nancy, in 1981, and it poured and poured and poured. So here I am, the rookie executive director trying to figure out how we're going to rearrange everything. Well, we did, because the Hilton helped us tremendously and we held everything down at the Hilton, except they didn't get to play golf, but that's the only media day that ever got rained out.

DePue: Was it a matter of a contract that the winner would have to sign acknowledging that if they did win the tournament they would have to come back for the media day?

Wheeler: They don't have to, but it's an honor and I will say that it was easier in the eighties and early nineties than it has been as the tour has grown and the demands on the players are more. But I think the only person, as I recall, the only person who hasn't been to the annual media day was Annika Sorenstam after she won in 2006.

DePue: That's a pretty darned good record.

Wheeler: That's a pretty darned good record and hurrah for the players that made that commitment. It's great, because they are not reimbursed for anything. You provide their travel. You provide their accommodations. But they're not pocketing anything.

DePue: Is this true for most tournaments out there as well?

Wheeler: Yes. But when Annika had won so many tournaments, it got to the point where she couldn't possibly do that many media days and that kind of set the tone for some players following her lead, but thank God that hasn't happened here.

DePue: 1985was the next year. That's a big year. That's the tenth anniversary.

Wheeler: Oh, wow.

DePue: In my respect, the tournament has arrived. You've made ten years. But some other interesting things happened that year. Betsy King won.

Wheeler: Yeah.

DePue: But that's also the year that you landed another big coup, isn't it?

Wheeler: (laughs)

DePue: I know we've got some pictures of that.

Wheeler: I think we do have some pictures of that. I think we're going to see Bob Hope. With the help of John Homeier, who knew somebody, that knew somebody, that knew his manager out at his golf tournament in California, we probably worked on that for about six months getting a commitment from him, and he cut his fee down tremendously. He flew in a private jet and I went out to the airport to meet him in a limousine that was donated, was a contribution. I was always working that, even ten years later, where you donate the limo, and sure, enough, that guy was pretty excited to go pick up Bob Hope. It was a delightful time. I went to rehearsal with him at the Convention Center. My son Lee, who is quite the musician, was in charge of putting the orchestra together for Hope and so that was quite a nervous time, you know. He was a very young man and here he is with this responsibility, but he knew all the musicians and it worked beautifully. So we were in there in the afternoon and all of a sudden, Bob and I were sitting on the bleachers over to the side. They were rehearsing the music and going through some other stuff. The door opened to the floor of the Convention Center and in starts strolling the World War II veterans. Something I hadn't even thought about. But the door was not locked. It could have been. He could have insisted that the doors be locked, but he didn't. So in they start strolling and it was like old home week and one of the most touching things I've ever seen. "Remember when you were at so and so?" "Oh, I remember that."

It was wonderful and I was so glad to be there and see that. Having no idea later down the road that we'd be working with World War II things, and I had no camera there. There was no media there and I thought what a story this would be. But they got wind of it and they talked about it.

That was also the year of the volunteer. Well, it wasn't the year of the volunteer. We wanted to give a volunteer award that year and there was a woman, if there was ever anybody that was as excited as me about the Rail Charity Golf Classic on a day in and day out basis, it was Nancy McCabe. So we had a plaque done for her and took her up on stage with Bob Hope and all the past champions that were with us in the audience that night and there she is, there's my darling Nancy.

DePue: That's a great picture.

Wheeler: Well, there's Lauri Merten and Beth Daniel and Sandra Palmer, the first champion, and, I don't know what I have on (laughs).

DePue: You were talking in that picture, Sandy.

Wheeler: I was talking to Bob and I was telling him about Nancy. She was a darling and she was a good golfer. She was a good amateur golfer and I loved her to pieces. We just lost her a couple years ago; she lived to be eighty years old.

DePue: And, of course, Bob Hope himself was such a champion, not just for the veterans, but for golf.

Wheeler: Oh, for golf. He had just written a new book, which I have my own autographed copy, and we actually he sat out at an umbrella table at the golf course before he played in the pro-am and people lined up with their books and he signed autographs for everybody. Then it was time for him to play in the pro-am. And again, it was so, so very hot and his manager was there that I had talked with so much and, of course, they had their own golf cart. Their tee time was at hand and I watched his manager drive the golf cart under the ropes, somebody would hold the rope, and I thought he was going to drive right up on the tee. I almost had a stroke. You don't drive on the tee. You stay in the long grass, okay? I thought, "Oh, my God, what's he doing?" But he stopped. Bob got out and there was the Governor and Phil Spengler and John Homeier. Hope hit the first drive and that was great. He hit a good one, not long, but I'll tell you, straight. He was eighty years old, for heaven sakes. Thompson was next. Governor Thompson was not a golfer at all, but he came out in some really good looking—I'm laughing—golf pants.

DePue: I think we saw a picture of those.

Wheeler: Yeah, I think we saw (laughing). He hit a very errant drive and Hope looked at him and he said, "Don't worry, Governor, it's still in your state." (DePue laughs) And then the other people hit and off they went. I walked a few holes with them and it was great, great fun. He had done his show the night before at the convention center and probably the saddest thing for me was that we couldn't fill that convention center. A stormy night was coming and the commissioner then, John Laupheimer, asked me if I would mind if he left and he got a plane out of Springfield to go to his next stop, whatever that was and I kind of pouted a little bit and he says, "Okay, Sandy, I'll stay." So he stayed and before he left, he gave me a hug and he said, "I have seen Bob Hope more times than I can remember and tonight was the funniest I have ever seen him." So those who took the time to come, spend a few bucks to see one of the greatest entertainers of all times, were well rewarded.

DePue: Of course, one of his trademarks was being able to personalize his humor for that event, that particular crowd. I'm sure that was one of the reasons he found him so funny.

Wheeler: Oh, well, he was great, he was great.

DePue: I did want to ask you: when he was meeting all these veterans, did you get a sense that, "Okay, here we go again."

Wheeler: Oh, not at all. I got a sense of pure joy. He was happy to see them. Not at all, nor did he say, "Let's cut this off. I've got to go do this." Nope. He sat there. He talked to everyone that came in. And if he needed to rehearse, it didn't matter. They were the important ones. It was fascinating, Mark.

DePue: So that would suggest that as far as he was concerned, that was one of the highlights of his life.

Wheeler: Ah, there's no doubt about it in my humble estimation.

DePue: So a very memorable year. The purse that year was $27,500. It's starting to move up now.

Wheeler: Was it? (laughs) Okay. What was the top money?

DePue: Well, that's what the top money was, I guess.

Wheeler: Oh, sure, twenty-seven five, yeah.

DePue: And $185,000 was the total purse.

Wheeler: Gosh, we were getting close to that two hundred thousand mark.

DePue: Yeah. You're moving up.

Wheeler: And still doing it without a title sponsor. However, I think I may have mentioned this before: we were able to create money inside the golf tournament by selling sponsorships of special events, getting soda underwriters, getting beer sponsors. All these things happened within, but we still didn't have that big check at the top that was going to help us jump to the next level. We were blessed to have guy from Texas move to Springfield who was with Coca-Cola, came from Houston, came from the Houston Golf Association, which is one of the best PGA organizations in the country on the PGA tour. Curtis Tillett, and I think we've got a picture of Curtis in one of the magazines that will come up sometime, said that, you know, we need to get Coca-Cola involved and so, not only were they the soft drink sponsor, they sponsored the pro-am for a few years, and that gave us the impetus to realize that we could sell these sponsorships. After that, one of the banks took it on for a few years and then when that bank left us, then we had a co-sponsorship between IBM and LRS, so we kept that ball rolling and that was in the $25,000 range, which, we didn't see a lot of checks that big back in those years. I used to say in those beginning years that I'd get up every November 1 and start rubbing our nickels together, because what we had was zeroes across-the-board.

DePue: So twenty-five thousand was reason to celebrate, I would think.

Wheeler: Oh, yes, and probably one that I was not very well celebrated for was the first time I went to Milwaukee and got a beer sponsor. And, of course, everybody wants Budweiser or Miller or all those great things and the one I could get to put up the twenty-five grand was—I don't know if I should say it or not—Pabst Blue Ribbon, and I took a terrible hammering by my beer drinking board members

DePue: You mean they weren't Pabst drinkers?

Wheeler: Oh, no. But they knew the mission and they put up with it, but they gave me an awful hard time for many years because I had a great contact with Pabst. He was a great guy and he kept that ball rolling for a long time and that was big, big money to us.

DePue: Well, considering the alternative, well, there's no sponsor or there's…

Wheeler: Yeah, I mean, they had no argument at all. We just brought home a check for $25,000 and I walked into the Pabst brewery absolutely cold and met this gentleman, absolutely cold. I've got a tournament and you need to do it.

DePue: Maybe it helped that you're a good German girl and your dad used to run a bar.

Wheeler: (laughs) Yeah.

DePue: I don't suppose that came up in the discussion, did it?

Wheeler: No, no, well, it might have. (DePue laughs) I know that my father handled Pabst Blue Ribbon. There's no doubt in my mind.

DePue: Let's move on here, 1986, Betsy wins again, so '85 and '86, Betsy King wins. And that was the sponsorship year that you got Pabst Blue Ribbon that you just talked about. '87, Rosie Jones.

Wheeler: That was a big win. She beat Nancy Lopez and it was her first win, so I can still see her running across the green and jumping into her caddie's arms and him twirling her around. Oh, we saw a lot of that over the years, but Rosie, she's very slightly built and she literally flew through the air. And she subsequently became a very big star on the tour.

DePue: Well it didn't hurt then, you've got this upcoming star against the legend of the game.

Wheeler: And a very gracious second place finisher. She was probably as excited for Rosie as Rosie was for Rosie. That was just Nancy.

DePue: That says a lot about her, doesn't it?

Wheeler: One thing about Rosie I wish could have been different was she didn't feel the allegiance to the tournament that I felt a past champion should feel, but that's my personal feeling, that if you took top money out of a golf tournament, that you should feel that it would help that tournament if I would go back on a regular basis. Not ever year, but maybe every other year. Rosie's somebody that I had to work on. She came back and defended, but as her career grew in stature, we saw less and less of her, which was very painful to me. I couldn't believe it.

DePue: Was that attitude of loyalty to particular tournaments something that most of the tournament players would develop as part of the professional unwritten ethics?

Wheeler: Well, look at Betsy King. Now, certainly, she didn't just win twice. She's the only three-time champion of the golf tournament, and she came back every year. Now what really helped that scenario, and it helps in other situations, too, is she developed a family relationship with Mr. Sapp's daughter and son-in-law and throughout her career stayed with them, the Collins, Bill and Lois. As a matter of fact, I don't the year she was leading or not, but, oh, I remember, it was the year that we lost the pro-am to rain. We're over there trying to deal with the fact that we are not going to be able to play the Rail that day. We could not get up Club House Drive. It was under water. The media was going crazy. The pro-am players were calling. We're on the air telling people to stay away, you know, we'll make some announcements. In the meantime, I'm on the phone with Lacey Brooks at the Holiday Inn, I'm on the phone with the Convention and Visitors' Bureau, or the convention center. I'm on the phone trying to move all these events that are supposed to happen at the golf course, with the exception of the play, to other venues, and I get a phone call from Bill Collins, where Betsy is staying. They're on their way to the hospital because Betsy has just sliced her finger with a bagel cutter. I believe she was defending that year. So, in the middle of that, we've got that.

DePue: That can't be good for your golf swing, either.

Wheeler: Well, you know, she was able to play the tournament and, I believe it was this finger, I think it was the middle finger, but she played. She didn't withdraw. Now, a lot of players probably would have withdrawn with an injury, but that particular year was one that I remember every detail, because, if I ever, and I wrote a letter to the editor about a community that came together to save some very important events. Lacey Brooks, for one of the things I had to ask him was, because we had, at that point in time, all kinds of liquid refreshment sponsors, and could we bring all of those liquids into Holiday Inn East and their big, we actually wanted to do it poolside where they had all the games and stuff. And he said, "Let me get back to you on that." Obviously, he called the insurance company and then he said, "I have to know from your insurance company." So, now I'm calling Bill Collins again. Bill Collins had all the insurance. And so we got all that worked out and I said, "Now, can

you feed four hundred people, four to five hundred people lunch, a sandwich buffet?" They got all that put together. In the meantime, we're talking to the convention center about the Pork Producers being able to bring in their grills and their, what's that called, their steak, the pork.

DePue: Pork loin?

Wheeler: No no, it's got a special name. I can't remember it, but it will come, the tape's rolling. They were very popular. They had just come out and they were like this big around and this thick and the Pork Producers actually brought their own people in, the farmers, they provided the pork and grilled them and served them. So we had to find a place in the convention center where we could do the dinner. So after I got all these things rolling, I took the committee and, I think Mike Durr was chairman, tournament chairman that year, and I took Mike and couple of other board members and I said, "Now, this is the event you've got." And then I took three more and I said, "This is the event you've got." I took the other three and said, "You've got the convention center." It was up to them to work out all the logistics. Then, of course, the players didn't get to play golf, so all the pros came out to the Holiday Inn and gave lessons, talked, autographed. We got their pro-am pictures taken.

And Beth Daniel was giving a swing instruction. She had a microphone and everything and she said, "Sandy, come up here." Now, you've got to remember, I wasn't much of a golfer back then and I'm still not, but it was worse and Beth gave me a five iron and told me to take a swing and then she showed me a couple of things and she said take another swing and I did and she says, "I've got it." She says, "Take a week off and quit." (DePue laughs) The place just went up for grabs. (laughs) Nancy Lopez was there, my good friend Jo Ann Washam, Beth, Betsy—no Betsy didn't make it because she was at the hospital getting stitches. But that was a great day. And Pat Bradley was there, two-time champion. I mean, they all rose to the occasion.

DePue: You mentioned that these players would come and they'd stay with the same families oftentimes.

Wheeler: Yes. Local housing is very, very important, especially for the rookies that weren't making the big bucks, if fifteen thousand could be called making the big bucks.

DePue: I'm dying to know how you matched the people up in the first place.

Wheeler: Well, a player would sign up, either call the office or fill out a form for what we call local housing. And we would have a local housing chairman and there were prerequisites. They had to have their own bedroom, their own bathroom. Back in the early days, that family also had to provide transportation and bring the players back and forth, because we only had a handful of transportation

cars and they only ran back and forth to the hotels, actually the Hilton, only one hotel. So, if you were staying someplace else, if you hadn't rented a car or whatever, you were out of luck. Sometimes the player would say, "Can I bring my dog?" or "Can I bring my caddie?" or "Can I bring my husband?" Those were all things the committee worked out. Sometimes a family would take two players. Now, Betsy just happened, I believe, to get paired with the Collins family. They may have known her ahead of time. I don't know that. But it lasted for thirty years.

DePue: It sounds like whatever that relationship was, that was vitally important to bringing back the following year as well?

Wheeler: Absolutely. We always thought that we had a good hook with Annika because she also established a great relationship with a family here that also had a condo at the Rail, as the Collins' did. But that didn't work out. (laughs) She came back a few times, but not enough.

DePue: Where were we? I think we got up to 1988. That was the third win for Betsy.

And so it was '85, 86', skipping a year to '88.

Wheeler: Called her King of the Rail. (laughs) And why not?

DePue: And then 1989 is Beth Daniel.

Wheeler: Beth's first win, one of two. She also, I believe, won back-to-back. She was a big star. Beth had some really serious back problems early in her career that we really thought were career-ending. She got that straightened out and became quite a force on the LPGA tour. We were so proud, to have her as a champion and she went on to a fabulous career and is now announcing. She's doing some media work.

DePue: Now, just to refresh your memory, that was the year that you guys had to move inside for the pro-am.

Wheeler: Okay.

DePue: And the total purse that year was now up to $250,000.

Wheeler: Oh, wow!

DePue: And her cut was $45,000.

Wheeler: Hey!!

DePue: I think we're getting into serious money now.

Wheeler: (laughs) And still no title sponsor. I know I sound like a broken record, but I don't think anybody can really appreciate how important getting a serious chunk of money was at that point in time. At the same time, we were developing special events. We were starting to build sky boxes that were a marketing entity, something that we could generate more money, giving sponsors more exposure for their company, because every sky box had a sign in front of it as to who was there. So, even though we were able to raise prices, charge for parking and try to keep the ticket prices reasonable, you were always looking at the bottom line. Our goal in those early years was to try to have the tournament in the bank, in other words, have the expenses in the bank before the gate. However, that didn't happen, and the gate was very, very critical. And a lot of the LPGA and other tournaments didn't understand why we weren't giving away flushes of tickets. Now that's what happened before my time. I was told that anybody's desk drawer, business desk drawer in Springfield would open up and tickets to the tournament would fall out. So, we, the board and I, that shut down immediately and that was one of John Homeier's things about giving us the fifty thousand was, stop giving all the tickets away. So the gate became very critical and tournaments with title sponsors didn't need the gate. We desperately needed it. And it wasn't until many years down the line that we were able to get expenses paid before we opened, but we still charged at the gate.

DePue: I'm thinking, though, that there's quite a balancing act, because I'm sure the motivation for handing out all those free tickets to begin with was to fill up the galleries, to get people to show up so it wouldn't be embarrassing for the players and everybody else if you had an empty golf course.

Wheeler: I don't know. I wasn't there. I don't know what that was all about, but I think that if you bought a pro-am, or you bought a $250 package, you got fifty or seventy-five tickets. Well that just doesn't make any sense. But, it was so new to all of them and the LPGA didn't come in and tell them how. There was no book to show them, you do it this way. All they cared about was that the purse money was there, that their clients were being paid.

DePue: So you and the board got to fly this thing by the seat of your pants.

Wheeler: Without a doubt.

DePue: Let's get back to our timeline here. 1990, Beth won for the second year. '91, Pat Bradley.

Wheeler: That was her second win.

DePue: And a $60,000 purse for her.

Wheeler: Yeah.

DePue: That's substantial.

Wheeler: That was also one of the times that we had to delay and play on the next day.

DePue: I think this is also important, then. You told me the story before that you went from $300,000 to $400,000.

Wheeler: Oh, was the year we did that?

DePue: Tell us about that. Because you still don't have a title sponsor.

Wheeler: No. And your rule of thumb is—this was my rule of thumb—to try to stay competitive with the tournaments that surround you. I don't care what they played for in February and March and April. We start looking at purses in mid-June through July, up to and after our tournament to see how we fit in the purse picture. So, I'm doing my homework and I realize that purses are really starting to soar around us, and I said to the executive committee, "We really, really need a hundred thousand dollar purse increase. We need to get to four hundred thousand." So we decided to make that commitment to the LPGA for the schedule. And I can remember going to the tournament sponsors' meeting in October and I don't know if I was still on their board then or not, but the schedule was out and it showed us at four hundred thousand. All my friends wanted to know: "Who'd you get?" "Don't have anybody." "How are you going to do it?" "Don't know.'

I came back home and we developed what we called a corporate caddie.I It was the first time we employed an agency to help us put a presentation together and they actually drew a little cartoonish caddie with the golf bag and that was our corporate caddie. In other words, the caddie would help carry the money load to help us get better. And we invited all the presidents, CEOs, leaders to a cocktail party and every businessman that came in got a loose-leaf notebook with their name on it, the name of their company and inside was the whole program. This was what we need; we did a presentation and told them why we needed it and our goal was to get four $25,000 sponsors. And we came out of there that night with four, which was totally amazing.

DePue: What would have happened had you not achieved that?

Wheeler: I don't know, maybe I wouldn't have had a job next year (both laugh). I don't know, but it was a big leap. Actually, we had those sponsors right up until the big date time.

DePue: We're getting closer to that. 1991, Laura Davies wins. She plays a record ten under…

Wheeler: No, Laura never won.

DePue: I'm sorry.

Wheeler: She set the course record. Pat Bradley won.

DePue: And Laura Davies played a ten under par during that tournament.

Wheeler: That's right, and set a record. That was the year that we had to hold it over a day and I can remember there were only five or six players that had to come back the next day that had a possibility of winning and Pat won. I can remember on the green, and we had quite a few people out there. We certainly didn't have a huge gallery. It was a work day. She got on her cell phone. Whenever Pat won a golf tournament, her mother would ring a cow bell hanging out on their back porch. She'd no sooner got through with all the presentations and out came the cell phone and she said, "You can ring that bell, mama." (laughs)

DePue: Did you know what she was talking about at the time?

Wheeler: Oh, sure. Pat's a great champion, good friend. Actually, I had the good fortune of going to three Hall of Fame investitures. I went to Nancy Lopez, which was at Tiffany's in New York City. I went to…

DePue: She doesn't seem like a Tiffany's girl.

Wheeler: Well, the LPGA didn't quite know what they were doing then either, so (both laugh) they had it at Tiffany's. As a matter of fact, my daughter Liz was living and working in New York then and we were interviewed, I believe, on CNN about being there. Nancy was so surprised she gave me a big hug and said it was like having her mother there, which was really something.

DePue: Wow.

Wheeler: When Liz was living in Boston, I went out and stayed with her and went to Pat Bradley's (1991 Hall of Fame investiture) in Boston and got to meet all of her wonderful brothers and her mother and that was a great night. I also went to Beth Daniel's in South Carolina. So, those things were very neat and full of happy memories.

DePue: I suspect you remember, then, who won in 1992.

Wheeler: Uh huh. My good friend Nancy Lopez.

DePue: Was that a special win for her after so many years?

Wheeler: Oh, was it ever. She was so excited. She, too, ran across the green, the putter went flying and she ran across the green and came down on her leg wrong and had to be taken to the hospital. (laughs) Oh, she was so happy. You get to that stage of the game when you wonder when the next wins were going to come and the fact that it happened at the Rail she had been so faithful to over the years. There was never a time that I called Nancy and asked her to help me

that she didn't respond. I think I've told you all those stories in prior tapings, but she's unique. I think I may have said this too, but Nancy Lopez was one of the stars of the LPGA that deserved every accolade that came her way because of what she gives back, and continues to give back to this day. She's a unique individual.

DePue: We're finally up to the point we've been alluding to a lot here—1992.

Wheeler: Da-da-da-da (laughs).

DePue: Before we talk about the tournament that year, I think we need to talk about the accomplishment of landing a title sponsor.

Wheeler: Well, you know, you asked me when we started this particular interview about what my goals were. We were approaching my very important heart's desire for the Rail Charity Classic and that was a title sponsor, knowing full well that is what it is going to take to get into the next century, maybe. You know, in 1991, we had a board member from Bloomington, who just happened to be my husband's second cousin. I sang at her wedding (laughs).

DePue: None of that hurts.

Wheeler: Her husband Glenn worked at State Farm and Brenda said, "You know Sandy, you need to come up and meet Bruce Callis." I said, "Hey, got car, will travel anywhere, anytime, set it up. I'm always willing to meet anybody." So they set it up and Brenda and I met with Mr. Callis, who was vice president and was over marketing. So that was the area that we wanted to talk about, marketing State Farm for sponsorship of the tournament. And yes, he was well aware of the tournament and he had about twelve reasons why they would not take on the title and maybe one reason why they might. And then that next year, he sent Bob Pickerell, who was a State Farm regional fellow based here in Springfield and he started buying up inventory. Now, as I think I explained before, inventory is pro-am tickets, advertising and it was actually 1991 and '92 Bob Pickerell came to our office looking at things State Farm could do. The second time I met with Bruce in the fall of 1992, he was down to about eight reasons why they might not and four reasons why they might, so we were going in that direction. In1993, we got the sense that things were really moving along and Bob was again in our office and Bruce was wanting to see what we might be looking for.

Now, the LPGA had no standardized concept for title sponsorship of an LPGA golf tournament. Again, the seat of our pants. What can we put together? Knowing full well, that if we could make it all those years without State Farm, that what we needed was purse boost. But, if we didn't ask them for the purse, we couldn't give them all the pro-ams. Many title sponsors take the bulk of the pro-ams, whereas the pro-ams to us put the purse together. So, it was a balancing act. What do we need to go forward? What can we give

them? So I'm playing with all these numbers and all these different inventory items and to see Bruce in October again, with the first look at what we thought was going to happen. When I left there that day, there were eleven reasons why they might and one reason why they might not.
Now to understand this whole process, State Farm was doing their marketing research. They move very deliberately, and this was something that I learned to appreciate throughout the years I was fortunate enough to work with them.

There were three top executives that had to sign off on this. Bruce was the forward moving youngest of them and he felt it was going to be a good, good fit for State Farm, especially when they were addressing marketing to women. Next you're invited to make a presentation to a board table of executives, State Farm executives that, you folks can't see this room, but it was as big as this room, a big square table, and there they all sat. I took the chairman of the board who was Jack Clark, publisher of the newspaper, and the president of the board, Bill Foster, my beloved friend who is no longer with us, and Curtis Tillett, who I believe was tournament chairman.

Curtis came up with the idea that we should have these T-shirts made. So, we even got the publisher of the *State Journal-Register* to put on this T-shirt over his shirt and tie and we all had trench coats, so when we went in, we all lined up and we flashed them, opened our trench coats and it said, "State Farm Rail Classic" and that just set the tone. I mean, they laughed, they clapped, I'll never forget it. There we stood, flashing all the executives of State Farm. That was a real trial by fire for me, because my dear friends on the executive committee left me to answer all the questions that were coming our way and I remember at one point I said, "You know, gentlemen, you can chime in anytime." And Jack says, "You're doing just fine. Keep it up." Well, after we got all the questions answered, Bruce asked the final question. Remember, this is November. He said, "When do we have to make this decision?" Of course, in the back of my mind I'm saying, You've been three years trying to make this decision. I hope we're closer than that. But bottom line and the facts were that the LPGA comes out with its schedule of events for the next year in December.

DePue: At which time the purse is announced?

Wheeler: Yes. So I had to explain to them that if you want the benefits of a full year's worth of advertising, you're going to be in *Golf Week*, you're going to be in *Golf Digest,* you're going to be in *Golf World,* you're going to be in *Golf News*, it's going to say State Farm Rail Classic. If we don't do that, they will not go back and rename it. It will be the Rail Charity Classic. So that gave them a timeline and we all left feeling pretty good.

In the meantime, Dottie Pepper called me personally and asked me if I would come to her Player of the Year luncheon in New York. And again, Liz was in New York. It was an excuse for me to go visit my daughter and be

with Dottie, because her parents weren't there. I flew to New York for lunch and I flew home, I mean, it was a one day and I got back into the office the next morning and my secretary then, my assistant, was a former school teacher, Kay LaRossa, and she had drawn this big poster board with the State Farm logo on it. She drew it. Free hand. It was in red and white. And it said, "How does it feel to be insured by the very best?"

DePue: (laughs)

Wheeler: Yeah. You never saw anybody cry like I cried. Scared her to death. I mean, I went to pieces. She kept saying, "What's wrong? What's wrong?" I said, "You don't get it Kay."

DePue: It felt pretty darned good, huh?

Wheeler: Oh my gosh, I was a basket case. She said, "He wants you to call because they want to talk about the fee." And I thought, Boy, I have pared this fee the best I can, giving them the inventory and things that they should have that were taken out of our ability to market because of the big package. I can't go any lower." She said, "He's going to call you. He's gone somewhere. He's going to call you next week." So I had a whole week to worry, but I had pretty much made up my mind by the time he called and I just told him we couldn't. Really, the price at this point was non-negotiable." And we had to have…

DePue: What was the price on the tournament?

Wheeler: I believe, now don't hold me to this, but I believe it was $325,000.

DePue: That's what they would have to put up to be the title sponsor?

Wheeler: Yes. And you have to understand what goes into that and it wasn't a one year deal, Mark, because it doesn't make any sense to change your whole look, new logos, new stationery, new everything for one year.

DePue: But I would guess that $325,000 was for a one year commitment. I mean, that wasn't to be stretched over several years.

Wheeler: Three years, but we negotiated the purse every year. They were responsible for the purse increases, so we moved it to $500,000 the first year and Nancy Lopez was defending. And I will never, ever forget, Charlie Meacham was the commissioner then. We did this big cocktail party at Christmastime to make the announcement because, after we got the November commitment, the logo had to be designed, everything had to be put together. Bruce Callis was very close to Governor Edgar then, and they were talking about TV immediately, which was like a blow to me, because I thought, Well, we'll get the title sponsors, but TV will come later. And all of a sudden, Bruce is immediately asking me about TV. I had Larry Crillo who is an Emmy-

winning NBC producer fly in that night. I'd know Larry for years because he was doing a lot of golf across the tour, and he said, "I have never seen anything in my life like Sandy Wheeler did with that announcement of the title sponsor. She had the governor. She had…" He said it was unbelievable, and it was. It was such a joyous night. The ballroom was full. It was Christmastime. The commissioner was Charlie Meacham.

DePue: The commissioner of?

Wheeler: The LPGA. When it was his turn to talk, he stood up and he said. "You must understand, we have just brought a Fortune 500 company to the LPGA family. Anybody that's got State Farm for a title sponsor and Nancy Lopez defending is on a roll." And the place went up for grabs. I have never grinned so much in my life and so many hugs. We rolled the thing back so they could see. We had the old logo and then we turned it back, because it was still under wraps. This was something that we wanted to keep under wraps. It was a really, really big deal.

DePue: Pretty good Christmas that year, it sounds like.

Wheeler: Oh, my. And I got to start working with professionals in producing brochures—you know, you're not going to do my little fly by night brochures when you're talking with State Farm. Bruce put at my disposal their…

DePue: This is what you go to now, right?

Wheeler: That's a good example of something that we did over the years. First class. I had their artists and this picture that's here behind me was shot after Bruce died and their media department took this in, this is know as the Bruce Callis trophy now, because after we lost Bruce, we all wanted him never to be forgotten within the tournament, so it's the Bruce Callis trophy and they would bring in live flowers and shoot this. This is the type of thing that State Farm did—first class all the way. And we felt a responsibility to honor our commitment to them by slowly but surely bringing the Rail up to a first class tournament, and I think we succeeded.

DePue: Talk about that evolution, because you've mentioned it to me "off line," if you will (Wheeler laughs) about some of the additions, some of the benefits of having that kind of relationship in terms of how it looked out on the golf course itself.

Wheeler: I was always very concerned about how we looked, the physical presentation. I cared a lot about that, but there were also things I thought would enhance our look, but there was no way we were going to expend the money to put those things out that were just purely aesthetic. So, after we got the whole ball rolling, Bruce asked me one day, "What's your heart's desire? What have you always wanted for the golf tournament that you don't have?"

DePue: Boy that's a great question that you don't expect.

Wheeler: I'm telling you. No, no. I have another really neat story about this, too. I said, "I have always wanted a float in the lake off of seventeen." There's a big lake out there and I wanted something out there. So, they built a big, beautiful float and before I left we had three floats in three lakes at the Rail and they got designers and brought in people to build it. But the neatest part every year, was State Farm employees came in and put it in the lake and got their waders on, or not their waders; they were in mud up to their neck. I mean it, that ops crew that State Farm provided for us was such a treasure. Number one, they were such great personalities and so much fun and it was all for one and one for all every year.

Well, the first few years the coordinator was the same person and then we started moving to different people. As a matter of fact, funny story. The first year we had media day when State Farm was coming in, Bill Foster had the coordinator that I had been working with; she was riding with Foz and he made a quick turn and threw her out of the golf cart. (DePue laughs) I'm going, "Oh, Lord, now we're killing the staff." They were hands off when it came to the running of the golf tournament. It was, "What can we do for you?" I know for a fact that title sponsors across the tour over the years would take the bulk of the pro-ams and that wasn't what we could do to keep their price that they were comfortable with, that we were comfortable with. They never asked for anything. They never asked to see a budget, but our budget was on record. If they had wanted, they could have gone to the State of Illinois and looked; by then we were being audited. Bruce never said, "Bring me your budget. I want to look at it." Nobody did. It was the most amazing experience. But after that first year, he called me and said, "I just want to thank you for teaching us how to be a title sponsor." That was absolutely the way they were, and such a blessing for a tournament to be able to run its own show and sixty miles away is a company saying, "Here's my hand. What can we do to help?" And it was that way every year I was there.

DePue: Was that the other story that you wanted to mention?

Wheeler: Yes.

DePue: That's pretty special.

Wheeler: It was touching.

DePue: I'm sure you're thinking, "You're thinking us?"

Wheeler: Uh, huh. Bruce was the most accessible CEO. I don't care where he was, if I had an issue and wanted to speak with him, they would call him. He called me from Hawaii one night and we chatted just like he was sitting in the living room with me. That's just the way he was. When we lost him at age fifty-nine, it was a terrible, terrible blow, to State Farm, to his tournament family,

and that's what we considered ourselves. State Farm and the tournament has been a family for a lot of years and we pray that will go on for a lot of years. That's when we developed the Bruce Callis scholarship and then we name the trophy, the trophy forever, as long as it is, it will be the Bruce Callis trophy. State Farm asked me what we thought we wanted, and Bruce Callis on that trophy meant everything.

Now that's another thing that they provide. They provide the trophy. They provide the plaques. The things they do for the tournament outside the title sponsorship contract is overwhelming and amazing. You know, here we were trying to hold our pro-am costs down, not raising our ticket prices, but as you know, and everybody knows that's in business. The costs were still going up and it became time to ask State Farm for the purse and that was a toughie.

DePue: To take the whole purse?

Wheeler: Uh, huh, but I did it.

DePue: How many years were you into the relationship?

Wheeler: It was when the purse was a million dollars, so we had been a half a million over the years. I can't tell you what year it was. I think it was three years before I left, as a matter of fact. But every year I would talk to the vice president of media, and he would call me and say, "How much do you want?" (laughs) And I said, "Well, I haven't done my review yet." But he was the greatest guy and they accepted my interpretation of where we needed to be and it was a wonderful relationship for me personally. I miss them all tremendously. But they're still friends.

DePue: When did Bruce pass away?

Wheeler: He was fifty-nine years old and it was the year that he was named to the business leaders for the LPGA. I could look in the media guide and tell you. Oh, it's on here. I can't see it but, can you see it?

DePue: Yes.

Wheeler: It will tell you the year. It says, "Remembering Bruce".

DePue: Ninety-eight, maybe?

Wheeler: This was a gift from State Farm and it's a golf green with a diamond and I don't take it off. He was my mentor. He was my hero and I'll never forget him.

DePue: That's '93. A big year, an important year.

Wheeler: Oh, and it was so much fun to see it come together like that.

DePue: I started by asking you, "When do you feel like you arrived?" I'm thinking that maybe 1993 you had a certain sense of that.

Wheeler: More than that, because my long-term goals were both title sponsor, but then the ever elusive television. You know, when can we hit Springfield on TV. I talked to my friends, my counterparts, my peers about having television. They say nah, nah, nah, nah. Really, it's not all that it's cut out to be, there are problems.

DePue: Are you talking about other …

Wheeler: Other events, yeah, they're in tournament business. I'd say, "Oh, I really, really want television." And they'd say, "Ah, you know, once they come in, they're going to run your show, you're not going to like it." Well, Bruce says

DePue: That sounds to me somewhat self-serving on their part.

Wheeler: (laughs) Well, a little bit, but, come to find out over the years, that is very true. And I know we're not going to talk about that today, but it had a lot to do with date changes. So, when Bruce said, "We're thinking about putting together a cable channel hook-up, not ESPN, or not network. What can you do to help?" That's when I brought Larry Cirillo in and that started the ball rolling. The next thing I know, we not only had a title sponsor, but we're on the air the first year. And I, of course, sat there and bawled when we hit the air. I'm known as the bawl baby of the LPGA. Old tough me. See what I'm saying? So, he brings this to us and I'm thinking, "I've got it, now where do I go from here?" Really, I mean, it called for reestablishing goals, because everything I had hoped and dreamed for this golf tournament was there. Now was it there for just three years? We had a two year option on the three years, which was immediately picked up and once we got into the first option year, we started going forward and eventually, I said, "Well, let's cut out the option years. Let's just make it a five year." It wasn't for quite a while until we had to start moving from the top. Here's the purse increases, but we were also needing more operational money, so what was on the initial contract was never quite the way it was because they were always there to help.

DePue: There's always new challenges, aren't there?.

Wheeler: Yes. Yes.

DePue: Let's move on. 1994, and I'm afraid I'm going to pronounce this name incorrectly, Barb Mucha.

Wheeler: Mucha. She was a young lady that was thinking about that summer quitting the tour. Then she thought, no, I think I'll just go play Springfield. I'm not going to go until I go play Springfield.

DePue: She'd been there before.

Wheeler: Yeah. (laughs) And she was so stunned to win. When I was hugging her, she didn't recognize me and she says, "Oh, it's Sandy." (laughs) It was a resurgence of her career. She is one neat woman. Barb was a great champion for us and you know, Bruce always took time to sit down with the champions and I think that was 1998. I'm thinking about what's on here. Barb won in '94 and I believe Bruce was sick then. He was sick for over a year and a half before. It was pancreatic [cancer]. But, she was a delight. I'll tell you the one that was. I don't want to jump ahead. Where are we going from here?

DePue: (laughs) Just jump ahead. We'll track back.

Wheeler: I'm thinking about when Mary Beth Zimmerman won, it's got to be in there somewhere.

DePue: She was the next year, 1995.

Wheeler: Ah, ha. See, I thought so. Now that was a really neat story. Here she holds the eight-hole scoring record on the tour and her father had just been through colon cancer surgery. Now remember, she's a central Illinois girl. She's from Hillsboro. Her father was also a retired State Farm executive.

DePue: Perfect.

Wheeler: I'm not sure what his level was, but he was State Farm. She was State Farm, obviously. I don't know who she was tied with—I'm trying to think—but we went into playoff hole and the way we do it is, when you're in a playoff hole and you're going out on the golf course. Yeah, because Bruce was sick then because he ran him around like a crazy man from hole to hole. He was in my cart. We went out and we played, we usually play eighteen over again, the finishing hole, and then you go out and you play seventeen and eighteen. We got out to seventeen and I can see who that other person is, but I'm not going there because I'm looking at Mary Beth's putt and I'm thinking, "Seventeen downhill slider, par three." I mean, going right down towards the water was her putt, and a slider, meaning that it had to take a curve to get in the hole. And she sank that putt and it was **unbelievable**. First of all that she would even come and play. I mean, her dad was just out of, and she had decided and she's been interviewed about this, but it was something she could do for her dad, and it was televised. She'd never played the tournament where her dad wasn't there, but he was there watching it on television, so it was a big, big time and I'm racing Bruce out with the trophy and getting it, for TV. Any other time we would have taken everybody back to the eighteenth green, which we did, too, and did it for the gallery, but TV isn't going to do that for you. You've got to take the trophy, take the personnel out there, do it there, TV cameras go off, then you get in the carts and race back up to the eighteenth green and do it all over again, every year. If you had to do something else, and it was all a timing thing. You know, are they going to

hold over if we're in play off and that was always your desire. So, lots of fun things with TV.

DePue: That was also the twentieth anniversary.

Wheeler: That was the year of the volunteer.

DePue: The year of the volunteer. Weren't you honored that year as well?

Wheeler: Yeah. That was very nice. We had a logo contest throughout central Illinois. I said, "Let's let some other people send in some ideas for an anniversary logo." The one we picked was an agency out of Decatur and we gave them advertising and tickets and stuff. They didn't get paid anything. It was just a twentieth anniversary, the year of the volunteer. I wasn't a volunteer, but my tournament and the LPGA honored me greatly.

DePue: Did they surprise you?

Wheeler: Oh, my, did they surprise me. I mean, the tournament gave me a Waterford crystal champagne bucket. They gave me a check for a million dollars that they made sure said, "You're One in a Million", don't take it to cash. And then they also gave me a framed poster of Pearl Sinn who had won the year before. She wrote this very sweet message and she was there to give it to me. Lots of hugs and pictures. That was at the volunteer party that night. On the eighteenth green the next day, the LPGA commissioner, who was then Ty Votaw, and the LPGA gave me my Rolex. It is engraved on the back, it says, "Twenty great years at the LPGA." It was very, very special.

DePue: Practically everything you're wearing has a lot of significance with it.

Wheeler: Yeah. How can I leave it after all these years? I mean, it's just part of me.

DePue: We need to move on.

Wheeler: Okay.

DePue: 1996, Michelle McGann.

Wheeler: Michelle McGann.

DePue: '97 was Cindy Figg-Currier.

Wheeler: First win for Cindy and I think we've got a picture of Cindy with Bill Foster who was chairman of the board. Bill Foster was one of the great heroes of the tournament, went through all the chairs and at this point was chairman of the board and stayed that for some time. Cindy Figg-Currier is one of the great personalities. I'm trying to remember her nickname. Her nickname was Trash Queen, because she could get up and down from anywhere on the golf course.

That's was the players called her, the Trash Queen. (laughs) You know, Big Mamma, Trash Queen, they all had nicknames.

DePue: She doesn't look like Trash Queen.

Wheeler: Oh, she's a darling person, with two little, beautiful little girls. It was always fun when the players would come with their kids and that grew more over the years. At one point we were required to provide child care and that has continued.

DePue: 1977—I did want to mention—$600,000 for the total purse and $90,000 for her—not a bad cut.

Wheeler: No, not at all.

DePue: Even in today's dollars that wasn't a bad cut.

Wheeler: (laughs) I'm trying to remember when we went back to seventy-two holes, but any way you crack it, three or four rounds of golf—not a bad way to go.

DePue: We've got about fifteen minutes left, so we need to race through the rest of these here.

Wheeler: Okay, all right.

DePue: And there's so much more to talk about here. 1998. Pearl Sinn won, and I know we've got a picture of Pearl here we can show.

Wheeler: Yeah. She's a sweetheart, darling girl.

DePue: I think it's also got Mi Hyun Kim, because here's when the nature of the players change and you've got the international players, and especially the Orientals.

Wheeler: Pearl's American-born.

DePue: She's Korean.

Wheeler: Yeah. Pearl Sinn is American-born and Mi Hyun Kim was a rookie, straight out of South Korea and could not speak a word of English. Se Ri Pak was the player that first made her mark from South Korea. Lovely young woman. As a matter of fact, the year that the LPGA honored Bruce before he passed away, Se Ri was the Rookie of the Year and we did all that in New York City at the Plaza. That was quite a year, too.

DePue: Talk a little bit more about how the player field is changing and what that meant to the tournament.

Wheeler: Kimmie, as we call her, or her nickname is Peanut, Mi Hyun Kim, could not speak a word of English. She might have been able to say hello, while we said ohio, and she had an interpreter with her. She spoke to him and he spoke in the microphone. As the year progressed I had to make plans for her media day visit with her manager and with the LPGA, because all of a sudden we're dealing with an Asian player that speaks no English; you have to figure out dates she can come, you look at her schedule, yada, yada, yada. When she came for media day, Luann Johnson, who's been on the board and tournament chairman and everything for years, kind of took it upon herself to force Kimmie to speak English. You can do it. You can do it. And as it progressed and when she came back to defend, we wouldn't let her beg off. We just really encouraged her, which was a fun thing for us. We weren't being harsh with her and she got a big kick out of it, but still she had an interpreter with her. Mark, the biggest impact of the Asian players coming on in such great numbers is that many of them are really great players and they are eligible to play in the pro-am. Now, how you know who plays in the pro-am is the top fifty-six via the current LPGA money list are eligible, are required, to play in the pro-am unless they would call our office and specifically ask to be excused, and that would be our decision.

DePue: That's where the language barrier really came to bear then?

Wheeler: Of course, because they are out on the golf course with four people, not necessarily men, men and women, who have paid upwards of a thousand dollars, some tournaments are ten thousand dollars. The LPGA championship is $22,000 per person, and they can't speak English, or, another issue that we had was some that could wouldn't. Now, that was a bigger issue with me. I know names, and I'm not going to share them, but their caddie would go to the team and say, "She's going to walk on the other side of the fairway from the team and that's where she'll stay except when you have to come together, and please don't speak to her." Now that's a problem, and I believe it's one that the LPGA is trying to address, but they certainly didn't go about it in the right way.

DePue: You're alluding to this incident that just happened this year where the LPGA for a time said, "No, you have to be able to speak English to play the tour."

Wheeler: You have, I think it was two years, to learn and then they had to go take English classes, etc.

DePue: Did they back off on that?

Wheeler: They had to. They had to. State Farm was quite vocal about the methodology that was introduced in requiring the Asians to speak English, or any foreign player to speak English.

DePue: Well, looking at the tournament field this year, the incredible diversity, Europe, Asia, South America.

Wheeler: Sweden. Oh, absolutely. Germany.

DePue: I've got to believe that you're elevating the bar in terms of the quality of the play here, as well.

Wheeler: Without a doubt. And now, the Japanese have taken fire again and we're seeing more, you know, we had two great players out of Japan, but then that kind of settled down and it just kind of slid over to South Korea. So this isn't going to go away. I just read the LPGA schedule this morning for 2009, and they have thirty-two, and I'm not remembering the exact number, but ten tournaments are going to be played internationally this year. They're going to be in Mexico. They're going to be in Thailand. They're going to be in Singapore. They're going to be in South Korea. They're going to be in England. They're going to be, what am I missing? Two in Mexico. Two in England. So there's four. France, Three point two million dollars. You know, and here again, I was looking to see what the purse levels were around us and whereby they changed dates again this year to enhance attendance. I can't see that it's going to work. Now that's just my, what I would like to think, qualified opinion.

DePue: We can talk about that in the last session.

Wheeler: Yes, we will.

DePue: And there's a lot to talk about there, I know. 1999 was Mi Hyun Kim. 2000 was Laurel Kane.

Wheeler: Uh huh.

DePue: And that's your twenty-fifth anniversary year.

Wheeler: Yeah.

DePue: Kate Golden in 2001.

Wheeler: Yeah.

DePue: Jump in here if there's a story behind, in the back here.

Wheeler: Well, Laurel Kran was also a first time winner and that's, I believe, the only tournament she won and has not extended her career. Oh, Kate Golden. She's just a honey. She's a Texas girl and she is just absolutely more fun than a barrel of monkeys. She beat—who'd she beat that year?—Annika. That was quite the story. She beat Annika. I love her, anyway.

DePue: Was there a play-off that year?

Wheeler: No, no.

DePue: Just came down to the wire.

Wheeler: She shot a lights out round and that's what it takes, especially at the Rail, they'll tell you. The Rail was known as a birdie fest.

DePue: A little bit easier golf course.

Wheeler: Uh huh. Which doesn't always work to your favor, but big greens, you've got to be a putter if you're going to win at the Rail.

DePue: 2002. Patricia…

Wheeler: Meunier-Lebouc.

DePue: Thank you very much.

Wheeler: (laughs) From France. Delightful. Her story is she got pregnant later in the fall and was expecting a baby and, actually she got pregnant in the spring and she came to media day. Patricia's claim to fame was she wears this really sassy Izod bucket hat that she turns the brim up. So, when she came to media day, we all had bucket hats with the brims turned up. Just little fun things, you know, which she got a big kick out of, but when it was time for her to come back to defend, she couldn't come because she was having trouble with her pregnancy and that was too bad and she hated it. They still just have the one little girl. They're delightful people. In fact, I had lunch with them last year when they were at the tournament.

DePue: Okay, where are we? 2003, Candie Kung.

Wheeler: Kung. Candie Kung. K-u-n-g.

DePue: I spelled that wrong.

Wheeler: Candie Kung was a wash-out. That was the only year that we lost money. I hated it. The economy was a problem that year. We had trouble selling pro-ams. We had about a three year slump in selling out the pro-am. The weather was bad throughout and now we were out of playing on Labor Day. Sunday the weatherman was telling us—we have to have on-site weather. A weatherman from Peoria that started his own business, so it was really great, but you know, we have to pay for that, and we have to put in five telephone lines. It's all relevant to the big picture and the bottom line. Got up Sunday morning and it was horrible and it was raining and I was quite the baby that day. I was so upset and they kept wanting to call the tournament and I

wouldn't let them. Give them one more hour. Give them one more hour. I can remember.

DePue: You're like Eisenhower before D-Day.

Wheeler: Yeah, well, it didn't work.. I finally gave up, went in the office and had a cry. I can see myself. We were in the LPGA office and the weatherman was there and I'm saying, "Can't we wait? Can't we wait?" Of course, we lost the telecast, we lost the final round and Candie was declared the winner after the golf course became unplayable. I can remember, we were just all drowned. We're doing the awards ceremony in the LRS Golden Rail tent, and one of the fellows from the media who had been covering the golf tournament since the beginning, from Alton, Illinois, came up to me and gave me a framed picture of me that he had, what do you call that when you put the frame around it, not the frame, it was the mat, and all the media had written me notes and I told him "This could not have come at a better time." That was my reward for that day. When the final numbers came in, we lost about $86,000.

DePue: Did that, did State Farm cover that or do you start in the hole for the next year?

Wheeler: No, it didn't start in the hole because our contract with State Farm was fifty percent at the beginning of our year and fifty percent mid-year, but I had to make it up, and I did.

DePue: Well, the next year, 2004, is Christie Kerr.

Wheeler: Christie Kerr. Big star and State Farm was ecstatic by that time. Mr. Jack North was our main man at State Farm and he was a big fan of Christie. He was really, really excited. Her mother was there.

DePue: A good year is 2004.

Wheeler: Yes.

DePue: That brings us up to 2005 and we're not going to talk about 2005.

Wheeler: Okay.

DePue: We'll save that for when we're actually on the golf course itself. We've got quite a big more to talk about.

Wheeler: Good.

DePue: It's going to be fun walking around with you and sharing your memories when we're actually on that terrain.

Wheeler: It will be fun. I'm looking forward to that. You can meet Jim Johnson who was there when they first turned the first blade of grass..

DePue: Okay, so we've got something to look forward to.

Wheeler: Yeah, we do.

DePue: Sandy, there's been some fascinating stories and it always impresses me, I think I told you up front, to me, this is important history. LPGA is an important institution. It's one of the early institutions that women were able to get involved with sports in a very public way and it's fun to hear all of the background stories.

Wheeler: (laughs)

DePue: They're much more fascinating than one would think.

Wheeler: Well, it's been a tremulous and fun twenty-seven years, I can tell you that. The ups and downs, but the highs are always better than the lows.

DePue: Okay, and with that we'll end the interview. Thank you very much and hope you stay around and check out the last session, as well.

Wheeler: See you in the spring.

(end of interview #3 #4 continues)

Interview with Sandy Wheeler
FM-V-L-2008-070
Interview # 4: July 6, 2009
Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Today is Monday, July 6, 2009. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and today, finally, Sandy Wheeler and I have managed to get out to the Rail Golf Course to do our last session of filming out here. It's a beautiful day, isn't it Sandy?

Wheeler: We thought the last filming should be at the Rail Golf Course, the site of the LPGA State Farm Classic for thirty years. As a matter of fact, the sign behind me says, "From 1976 to 2006 – 30 Years of Great Golfers Here at the Rail". Interestingly enough, and I think we mentioned this earlier, it wasn't always the State Farm Classic; it was the Jerry Lewis Muscular Dystrophy, then it was the Rail Charity Golf Classic, then it was the State Farm Rail Classic and now the State Farm Classic. It's a beautiful site, but I can tell you, that when those first players came here in 1976, they didn't see these beautiful surroundings. They didn't see the beautiful drive going up to the club house, they saw rocks, and they saw a parking lot full of rocks. And, if you think about all the players that drove up this drive over thirty years, it was amazing.

DePue: We're going to be talking to Jim Johnson here pretty soon. What is his position?

Wheeler: He's the general manager and all the years while we were here, he was the greens superintendent. As a matter of fact, he took care of everything on the golf course. So now Jim has the general managership. His wife Mary runs the office and he also oversees what's going on on the golf course.

DePue: We wanted to sit out here because you've got the sign behind you and they proudly proclaim that they are the home of the State Farm Rail Classic, 1976 to 2006.

Wheeler: Thirty years.

DePue: We've moved on. It no longer is here, but that's certainly part of their legacy and I know that they are very proud of it and you're proud of the advancements that the golf course has made while you were associated with it.

Wheeler: Well, you know, when we were first out here, there were no trees, there were twigs. The parking lot, as I said, was rocks. There were no permanent rest rooms. The ladies, the professionals, changed their shoes in the car because there was no place. There was a trailer out here and porta-potties. I mean, something you always have at the golf course, but usually the players have something better than a porta-potty. It was something that the co-owners of the course did to bring more attention to their new golf course and, hopefully, had a housing development. If you've been at the Rail recently, you know that all of those things have come true. We used to have power lines running down the eighteenth fairway. Luckily, over the years, those were buried, so they were no longer in the telecast which came to us in 1993. So, from 1993 to 2006, we were on nationwide television right here at the Rail and I don't think anybody ever expected that.

DePue: Okay, what I'd like to do next is head up to the club house and continue our filming up there, Sandy.

Wheeler: Let's go see Jim.

DePue: Okay. [As the camera pans the scenery.]

Wheeler: You're looking at the finishing hole for all of the thirty years of the LPGA playing at the Rail Golf Course. If you think about who's walking down this eighteenth hole fairway, let's think about Sandra Palmer and Pat Bradley and Betsy King and Nancy Lopez and all these wonderful stars. They were always a little concerned about what they were going to find when they got to the eighteenth green because that pin that you see to the right there, was sitting right over the bunker on the left and that was quite a shot for them to take from the fairway. Usually a two shot hole. It depends on the wind. There's always wind at the Rail, but if you see that pin flag sitting right above that bunker, you had to hit it on the screws (also known as the "sweet spot" on the golf club).

DePue: Or else you end up in the bunker.

Wheeler: Or you end up in the bunker, and there isn't a lot of green between the bunker and the back of the green. It's a large green, but not the biggest at the Rail, so, again, you've got to have a hot putter to win at the Rail.

DePue: Was this normally the eighteenth hole for the golf course?

Wheeler: Yes. Once we got television in 1993, the television producers started looking at the golf course from a standpoint of the pictures that they were shooting and they decided that the back nine was more agreeable and a better finishing area

for television. So instead of flipping nines, we flipped eights, so we could still have this wonderful finishing hole that was surrounded by sky boxes, bleachers over here, tents over here, a great place to finish the golf tournament.

DePue: You kind of got us into that, anyway, so tell us a little bit about what the golf course had to do to develop over the years because it was associated with the golf classic.

Wheeler: Well, I think Jim was very easy on himself when we were doing his interview. It was very, very detailed. The LPGA would meet with them and say, "We want the grasses on the rough to be X number of inches. We want the greens to be X seed," and they had to work for weeks ahead of time to meet the LPGA requirements. If we had weather problems or, you know, sometimes we would put a stake in the wrong place and dig into one of Jim's irrigation lines, which was never fun—and he's standing over there laughing. I remember once we did it right over there by eighteen, and, of course, all you did was stand there and yell, "Jim! We did it again." So, we learned over the years that Jim had to come and put little flag markers where we needed it. Also, in our beginning years, we had power poles down eighteen, with the wires and everything, and, thank God, Mr. Sapp one year (laughs)—did he throw that ball?

DePue: He threw the glove, he threw the club and everything.

Wheeler: Well, he's a frustrated golfer at the moment, but, anyway, they took the power lines down from eighteen, which made it just a beautiful, beautiful place to finish the tournament. And you can see, I can see all the people in the grandstands and in the sky boxes, cheering whoever it was that was going to win.

DePue: It's obviously come a long way from those pictures we looked at a little bit earlier (Wheeler laughs) with Jim, with a lone tree out there on the horizon.

Wheeler: Well I'll tell you what, they were twigs. And there weren't any cart paths like we see here now. The improvements have been fabulous and everybody enjoys playing the Rail. A Jim said, not many places can the everyday golfer go and play a golf course that the LPGA has played on the day before, so people were lined up here. They would leave the pin flags the same as they were on championship day and everybody's lined up to play. It was wonderful.

DePue: Tells us a little bit about what it took in your perspective in terms of an operations crew to make this work.

Wheeler: Well, that's a story unto itself. We needed bodies to help us and as a volunteer outfit, we had to find help where we could, I can say we were blessed, because we were blessed for probably twenty-five of my twenty-seven years as

executive director, with help from the State of Illinois Department of Corrections. We called them our Friends of the State. They came about six weeks before the tournament, once we moved into an office trailer out here, and worked with me hand in glove every day. They helped us move from our office downtown. They helped us move into the trailer office out here. They moved all of our equipment from where it was warehoused over the years. We had to move all that in and out. It was something that we could not have gotten done without them and they were happy to be out here, out in the great outdoors. They'd put stakes out. Anything we needed to have done, they could do. They worked right up to the beginning of the tournament,. Then they were off site, but every night another crew from the state fairgrounds and the Illinois Department of Corrections would come out and police the area and pick up all the debris that might be lying around. Of course, we had garbage boxes all over the golf course and porta-potties, everything that's needed for a professional golf tournament was here. It just grew every year.

DePue: What was the size of the crew that you got from them?

Wheeler: Well, it could be anywhere from six to twelve. Probably my first six years I had the same sergeant, so once he showed up, "Smitty," I'd say, "Okay, you know what to do. Go do it." And it was wonderful. And then they changed officers for me and I would have to teach them what needed to be done. I'd have to get Jim to help me mark off where we would have to fence in the practice area for the players, what we called the range, and all that snow fence came from the State of Illinois. The help we received from the state was fabulous and we never could have gotten the job done without them.

DePue: And these guys were probably happy to come out in the open like this to do this kind of work.

Wheeler: They were, and we treated them like our friends. At the end of every year when we were finished moving everything off and I had picked up the last scrap off the golf course, I treated them. I would go get pizzas and fried chicken and we'd sit on the rocks up the drive and have a picnic and they loved it. I always asked them if that's what they wanted and that's what they wanted.

DePue: I've got to ask you this question, Sandy, what were they wearing when they were out here?

Wheeler: (laughs) They were wearing their official uniforms. (both laugh) Yeah, and they weren't hard to find. (both laugh)

DePue: Tell us a little bit about the parking situation here at the Rail.

Wheeler: Let me tell you about parking at the Rail. There will never, ever be another State Farm Classic that has the parking that we've always had here at the Rail.

Most professional golf tournaments, people have to be bussed in to the golf course. Right across the main drive, all the way out there…

DePue: Where we started this morning?

Wheeler: Where we started this morning, but further out, there's a huge field and Mr. Sapp would have his people come, Jim would have his people come, and they'd mark it off for parking. And our friends with the state also had to put snow fencing all along that big huge field so the spectators couldn't walk in without paying. It was always an issue. You know, most golf tournaments don't worry about the gate or what they take in ticket sales at the gate. It was very important to us because we didn't have a title sponsor. So people sneaking in would make me crazy. (laughs) And Jim knows that.

DePue: We don't want to have you crazy.

Wheeler: No, won't work.

DePue: Okay. And a little bit about the corporate caddie program and maybe, just as important in that, transportation for the players once they hit town.

Wheeler: Well, the corporate caddie program was something that I developed when we realized we needed a big purse increase and that was always the issue. It was not what are they playing for at the beginning of the year or what are they playing for at the end of year. What are they playing for in that circle of time around us. What's the purse the week before us? What's the purse the week after us? So we look at that early in the year and we'd say, "Oh, we've got to do something." Now this is before State Farm. I went to the board and I said we really need a purse increase and it should be about a hundred thousand. You're talking about a big gulp. And so we sat down and came up with this idea that we needed four twenty-five thousand dollar sponsors. It was the one and only time that we hired an agency to help us develop a program that ended up being a corporate caddie program. We invited all the CEOs of all the businesses in Springfield to a cocktail party and we laid out the whole program. We told them why we were doing this and that we needed a hundred thousand and that we needed four twenty-five thousand dollar sponsors and when we left that night, we had them, which was most amazing. But the funniest thing was that I had a tournament sponsors meeting about a month before when all the tournament sponsors on tour would come together, we had an association, and I was telling them, that we were going to raise the purse a hundred thousand and they'd say, "Who'd you get? How are you going to do it?" I said, "I don't know. I'll figure it out when I get home." So that's exactly how it was and it was very successful. They stayed with us for a long time as a group.

DePue: And the transportation for the players once they hit town?

Wheeler: We had transportation cars and a transportation committee. You know, there were twelve hundred volunteers all segmented into committees and committee chairs and we had a transportation committee and we would go ask a car dealer, which for twenty-five of my twenty-seven years, was Giuffre Buick. Roger Sables was just absolutely fabulous. He would give us the twelve cars that we needed for the players and then, as everything got bigger, we started getting a car for all of our past champions. And they would say, you know, Betsy King, three-time champion, and put the years that she won. Every player had their own car with their name and their win on it. I even got a Buick for years, which was really nice. The last two years Buick started pulling out of providing cars for pro tournaments and that really put Roger and Giuffre in a tough spot, so we had to go out and discover some new help and we got Landmark to step up to the plate and those people have been wonderful. They've helped me tremendously. They've helped the tournament tremendously. And we just kept getting more and more and more cars. Players over the years, if you're a big star, they'd come and ask for a car even if they weren't a champion, so you always wanted to make them feel that you would do anything to help them. So if we had a car and it was somebody who was a big name but not a champion here, we'd arrange it if we could.

DePue: Okay. It always amazes me listening to you Sandy, just how involved this whole planning process was, how many moving pieces you were trying to keep track of all of the time.

Wheeler: Well, as I always said, I spent from after the tournament, which was Labor Day weekend, until we had to start moving around because of TV, which is always important. It was never quite the same and when the LPGA asked us not to play on Labor Day, that made a difference to us at the gate, because we had, for years a Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday. It was great, but then we ended up with Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday. And if you don't think not having that Monday gate didn't hurt, it did. But the LPGA calls the shots. Every time they asked us to make a change, they would say it will help you attract more players and recruiting was real and where you are in the schedule can hurt your field.

I spent all of September out there cleaning up. Then we'd have our friends in the state move us back to our permanent office space and then we'd have to get the bills paid, collect all the money. I have to say that we were blessed, because every year we would collect ninety-nine percent of the monies due us and that was very, very important to our success. And then we'd start developing the marketing materials for the next year. So then I spent the next months until mid-June marketing, selling pro-ams, selling advertising, selling anything we could find to sell. I know people talked about donations, you know, I can't give you a donation. I never looked at it that way. We're going to give you something back for your donation. It was always something that would enhance their business. And then mid-June, I'm

thinking operations. Oh, goody, I get to go back to the Rail and that was always fun for me.

DePue: Excellent. We're going to spend some more time talking about a little bit of history, that transition from the Rail to Panther Creek—you already started talking about the change of the scheduling itself. We'll get into the "whys" of that a little bit more, but before we leave this beautiful shot, what else do you want to tell me about the operations of the tournament itself?

Wheeler: Well, I think that watching it grow, needing more tents, needing more sky boxes, working hand in glove with Jim Johnson and his staff, it just grew and grew and grew and then, once we got State Farm, I was able to get things aesthetically that I always wanted, but would not spend the money. Over there in the lake, I always wanted a float.

DePue: Maybe we can get a pan shot back to the lake.

Wheeler: We're going to go over this way, Mark. I always wanted a float and Mr. Bruce Callis asked me after their first year, "What would you like?" And I said, "Oh, Bruce, I want a float. I want a big State Farm float in the lake." And I got it. Then the second year, he says, "Okay, we got the float, what do you want next?" And I said, "Oh, I've always dreamed of flags down Club House Drive with all of the countries that were represented in our field." We got the flags, and I think that Jim agrees with me that it was a beautiful site to see those flags flying. I can remember, particularly the year Princess Diana died and we had Laura Davies here, so we had the flag of Great Britain on the drive. And we went out Sunday morning and lowered their flag in honor of Princess Diana. Those are the things that went on here.

DePue: And those are the things that stay with you, the wonderful memories you have to take with you, as well. Sandy, let's go ahead and call this a wrap for this shot and we'll pick it up at our last location and talk a lot more about the history. Thank you Sandy.

Wheeler: Mr. Superintendent General Manager, can you do something about the bugs? (background talking)

DePue: Okay, Sandy, we are here at a different location on the Rail. Tell us what we're looking at now.

Wheeler: Well, you're looking at the first shot was the club house and the deck where, I've got to tell you, our spectators for the golf tournament loved to sit on that deck, because right below the deck is the putting surface, practice green, where the players would practice and right behind us is the practice range, where all the players would line up and practice hitting their long shots. And we had a situation here where we'd put all their names up. So even if you went up to the range and you didn't know what player that was, there'd be a sign and it says that's Betsy King. So, this whole area was filled with

excitement. We had concession tents over here. We had a big tent long before we had this beautiful new tent over here; we'd have a big standing tent that we'd have to rent from a company that we use for VIP entertaining and the Golden Rail.

DePue: What's the story behind the club house?

Wheeler: Well, when we first started, there wasn't a club house and I can't, that's something we probably should have asked Jim, I don't know what year the club house was built, but as far as our needs, we took over both the ladies' and the men's locker rooms because all the players needed their own locker. They had a locker room committee. They would put all the names on it. We'd have a little mail shelf in there for us that was built just for us. We had bulletin boards where we put all the notes from the LPGA and for years, the only place we had to set up food for them were in these locker rooms because in my early years all we would do was provide them with lunch. As time went on and the tour became more demanding of what we provide for the players, we had to start providing breakfast and so one year I decided we would go outside the pro shop and we put a tent out on the front lawn. That was their lounge. We had TV in there for them, we had sofas and chairs. We had round tables where they could have their meals and it became breakfast and lunch every day. So a player would go in, and the LPGA dictated to us what we had to put out for them for their buffets. If we missed something, oh, Lord, help us. They would write us up.

At the end of the year we'd get a report every year. It would say, you did this right, you did this right, you did this right, oh, by the way, you didn't do this right. So, we looked forward to getting that every year. Then, right towards the end, we negotiated with the ownership and Jim to take over the snack side of the club house which they had used for their own concessions over the years, because we needed a better situation. So we took that over and they were inside and that was really neat that we were able to do that. Feeding them was always an issue here at the Rail.

DePue: The last time we had an interview in the studio, we went through an awful lot of the history, year by year, the tournament winners, things like that. We came up to 2005. What we didn't talk about that happened in 2005 was an important decision that you were making at the time, so tell us how you came to the decision that the thirtieth anniversary would be your last year with the Rail.

Wheeler: Well, burn-out is real and things were changing within the board structure and I guess I had been around so long I thought things should be this way and maybe they thought things were going to be that way and it just seemed to be the right thing to do. We announced it in the fall of 2005, which gave the board time to look for someone new. I did want to do the thirtieth anniversary. There was no way I wasn't going to do that, because the twenty-

fifth celebration of the classic was phenomenal and I came up with some ideas that would make the thirtieth anniversary fun.

We did, of course, an off-site party. We called it The Taste of the LPGA and we asked our player friends to come in, send us a recipe and we would get the chefs in Springfield to prepare the food from the recipes that the players provided. Not all the players gave us recipes, so the chef went ahead and fixed what they wanted, but the players served it and it was a lot of fun. The ballroom at the Hilton was full and it was a great evening to celebrate thirty years of golf and charity.

DePue: So you went out with class.

Wheeler: I think so. I think it was a fun night and the last tournament was very, very, very hard for me. It was the year of the Solheim Cup, so we had things to do here at the golf course to celebrate the fact that they were leaving Springfield and going to the site of the Solheim Cup[2] to be played at Crooked Stick [Golf Club] in Carmel, Indiana. Nancy Lopez, the captain of the American team was here. The captain of the European team was here and some of the players were here and I called the LPGA. They would fly the players around to where they had to go. I said, "You don't want to fly to Indianapolis." They'd have to go to Chicago, then take a puddle jumper. I said, "Bring your big tour buses in here." And so they did.

We not only saved them a lot of money, it created a lot of fun atmosphere here because we pulled them right up on the cart deck and the Europeans were out there decorating their bus. They had all the blue and the yellow and they were just doing great things. I'm looking at the American team bus and nothing's going on. So I ran into the LRS Golden Rail, which was this tent where we had a lot of red, white and blue bunting and we had player pictures. I tore things down and went out there and decorated the bus because nobody else was doing it. At the end of tournament we had the Scottish bagpipers for the Europeans, and we also had the U of I, a small marching band, for the Americans. We brought them up eighteen—it was just, we had speeches. And by the time it was over, it was very hot that day, we had a new champion, it was Pat Hurst, and I passed out. (chuckles) They had to take me in the bus and cover me with ice. It was emotional, but I was also very hot and tired. (laughs)

DePue: Well, yet another sign that says maybe its time to step down.

Wheeler: You know, my family and my siblings, specifically, had been begging me for some time to do this because they observed the stress of what comes to fruition here every year. And I always looked pretty beat up after it. You've

[2] The **Solheim Cup** is a biennial golf tournament for professional women golfers contested by teams representing Europe and the United States. It is named after the Norwegian-American golf-club manufacturer Karsten Solheim, who was a driving force behind its creation.

got a guy sitting next to you that can tell you. (laughs) Because I would do whatever had to be done to give Jim Johnson back the Rail the way it should be and the fact that we had players in here immediately after the tournament, it was important. And, needless to say, my friends with the state were back and we worked hard. Some years it was very difficult, especially if we'd had a lot of rain. (laughs) But you would find me in a cart, picking up whatever needed to be picked up and trash bags everywhere, but we got the job done.

DePue: You've given us a good idea why it was time to move on, but was it difficult? Was it a difficult transition to be retired? I know how you like that word.

Wheeler: You know I don't like that word and here we are four years later and I'm still trying to find what it is and eventually going to. Volunteering is really important to me. I started as a volunteer here. I did fashion shows for charity. I performed at the Muni. All, all has been volunteer. One of the things that I'm doing on an annual basis is directing and producing special events for the World War II Memorial at Oak Ridge Cemetery and that's very important to me to work with those wonderful super seniors and do that.

DePue: I don't think you've told us about how and why you got involved with that project in the first place.

Wheeler: Well, (chuckles) a wonderful gentleman that just passed away sat on a board of directors with me for Gateway Foundation, which was one of the tournament charities.

DePue: Who was that?

Wheeler: Don Beck. We just lost Don about a month ago. He called me one day and told me that they were trying to raise the money to build this memorial at Oak Ridge. And I had to tell him what I had to tell a lot of people that asked me to help with fund raising for their situation, "I can't." I have to raise so much money for the golf tournament, that it just doesn't work well for the tournament, it wouldn't work well for the other situation. So I told him that I knew somebody that needed something to do and that was my retired husband. So Bill says he was commandeered, but with Bill's background in radio and my background with running news conferences and working with the media with the golf tournament, he was named to the board as director of public relations and I was the woman behind the man producing the first press conference announcing that they were going to raise the money for this and that's the way its been ever since.

The memorial is now five years old and probably one of the happier days of my life was at the dedication when there were five thousand people, veterans standing out there cheering. We had to bus people in there because there was not enough parking. We parked them at the State Fairgrounds and bused them and this is on the video of the dedication. This one veteran comes

off the bus and he looks at the camera and he says, "It's about time." That's pretty much what it's been to work with them and to see what that memorial means to them.

DePue: So, would it be right to say you've been anything but relaxed and not busy since the time of your official retirement.

Wheeler: No, we're trying to keep busy, trying to tell my husband that we don't need to do everything in lock-step. That's probably been the biggest adjustment, you know, when you've worked as many years as I did, that's been quite an adjustment.

DePue: Let's go back to the golf tournament.

Wheeler: Okay.

DePue: Because we left it at 2005. 2006 is an important year. It moves out from here to Panther Creek. Like anything in that kind of circumstance there's a story there as well, so I'm hoping you can tell us a little bit about the reasons behind that move.

Wheeler: Well, it certainly wasn't a happy time and the LPGA commissioner came to the tournament, sat down with the president and a couple other members of the executive committee and said that they would no longer play the Rail. That if the tournament remained at the Rail, the LPGA was pulling out of Springfield.

DePue: This couldn't have been a surprise to you, though.

Wheeler: Well, they'd been making noises. We knew that they wanted a better facility for the players, i.e., a country-club-style clubhouse, just all kinds of things. It all had to do with the growth of the tour and what the players expected. I can only say what Jim said earlier, and that was the players loved coming to Springfield. I remember one year a player said to me, "Coming to Springfield is like coming home and there aren't many homes out here." And that was the most beautiful thing a player ever said to me in all of my years. They also said, "We aren't an event in Springfield, we're the event." So, leaving the Rail was really, really, really tough.

From a spectator standpoint, the spectators don't have the convenience of watching several holes at once when they would come to the Rail. You could find a spot up on one of those little hills over there and maybe watch three holes, because the holes are contiguous. At Panther Creek you've got to walk the cart path in and out of the housing thing, so from a spectator standpoint, a little tougher. Facilities for the players, okay, they got what they wanted. They got a country club setting.

DePue: Panther Creek, I don't think we've mentioned, is located where?

Wheeler: Well, it's out west, whereas we are north here at the Rail. It, too, was built from a standpoint of a housing development.

DePue: Out west in Springfield.

Wheeler: In Springfield, oh yeah. It's just before you get to Chatham.

DePue: So it's on the southwest side of town?

Wheeler: I'd say that right.

DePue: Okay.

Wheeler: You know, directions are not a good thing with me. If you had a chance to talk to Jim again, he could tell you about my first two or three years out here and they'd say south and west and east. I didn't even know where the holes were. I was not a golfer when I took this job, so he'd say, "Go out to number seven," and I'd say, "What?" (laughs)

DePue: But Bloomington is the headquarters for State Farm. Why not Bloomington? Why not another town?

Wheeler: You know, this was the toughest thing to **finally** land a title sponsor, to **finally** have nationwide television, all the dreams that we ever had for this golf tournament. State Farm did not want this tournament in Bloomington. End of story. They said, "We're over-exposed in Bloomington. We don't need it." They looked at us. It was very important at that point in time to Mr. Bruce Callis that we play on a public golf course, that we were financially successful so we didn't have to look to them as many tournaments did to title sponsors to clean up the losses, and that we were giving money to charity. And we were so successful on all those fronts. So, we had everything that State Farm wanted and they had everything we wanted.

DePue: It makes for a happy marriage.

Wheeler: It was a very happy marriage. I can't tell you the attitude of their employees that would come and work with us; I told you when we were out on the golf course, the things that they would do, my little dreams for how we looked. You know, to see the flags flying down, but we also had the flags flying on the bleachers and it was, you know, it looked wonderful.

DePue: How did the players take to the move, to the change of venue?

Wheeler: Well, it's what they wanted. They have a big, fancy locker room which we did not have here at the Rail, but we certainly made do and we treated them like golden. Everything we could possibly do for them, we did, right here.

DePue: Did the tournament manage to retain all those quaint aspects that the players loved about coming back to Springfield every year?

Wheeler: No, but you have to understand, Mark, that those eligible to play on the tour changes every year and the new blood coming on were looking for more, more, more. But, when you know that a player the stature of Nancy Lopez would play here over and over and over again, and Betsy King and Pat Bradley, all Hall of Famers. They made this tournament. They made this golf course what it was and is.

DePue: Would say that this was a successful move?

Wheeler: Oh, maybe you're asking the wrong person.

DePue: (laughs) I put you on the spot here.

Wheeler: Well, from a standpoint of the facilities you know, it's all the same. I think the thing that I miss is the accessibility to the golf course for the spectators. I think that's one thing that is gone.

DePue: Has the gallery size stayed about the same or grown? That would be one measure of success, I would think.

Wheeler: Well, as always, it depends on the field. A year ago, they were in an impossible position. The tour was going from Springfield to France. And you can't get there from here. So a lot of the players did not come to Springfield. So the field last year, my successor called me up one day, almost in tears, and she said, "How does," well, it was a number that I never even dreamed of having and I had some tough field years. And I said, "Okay, it will pass. There'll be another year and it will get better." Well, changing the date for this year and going to the LPGA championship after us created a fantastic field. They had nine of the top ten. They had ninety-nine of the top one hundred. Never, never, in the history of the [Rail] tournament did we have it. It so depends on these travels. For years they went from Springfield to Portland, Oregon. Players didn't like that, so the commissioners finally got smart and tried to start putting together a travel schedule that made sense.

The spectators at Panther Creek this year saw a record set on Thursday, a record set on Friday. We had iffy weather. I'm trying to think. Saturday I was doing an event for the memorial. It was the sixty-fifth anniversary of D-Day, so we weren't out there Saturday, but the weather started going at noon. It's not just the weather in Springfield. It's the weather around central Illinois. So, it can be beautiful in Springfield and pouring in Decatur and they're not going to come, because once that twenty dollars is in the gate, there aren't any refunds. I mean, that's it. So, Sunday the weather was very iffy, but they had a big crowd and they had a big finish.

DePue: Let's go through the years. Labor Day weekend in 2006 and the winner is Annika Sorenstam. It doesn't get much batter than that does it?.

Wheeler: It doesn't.

DePue: And that year the purse for her was a hundred and ninety-five thousand dollars. Now we're talking serious money.

Wheeler: We're talking serious money. When you consider the purse in 1976 was the largest purse on the LPGA tour and it was a hundred thousand dollars. And you always think twice your purse for your expenses. The first time I saw a budget—(chuckles) another something they had to teach me, how to budget—it was a hundred and eighty thousand dollars. Now that means you had to pay the purse and pay all the expenses. The one thing that I think I talked with you about was we were everywhere with our handout, getting contributions to make it work, right down to those old caddie buckets that I told you about.

DePue: 2007. It's still Labor Day at Panther Creek. And the winner that year is Sherri Steinhauer. Anything stand out for that year.

Wheeler: No, other than Sherri Steinhauer is a delightful, delightful person, one of my best friends. We were thrilled to see her win. Her parents always came every year to the tournament from Michigan; as her folks got older, we had to provide the little electric cart so they could get around—those little personal carts. Now you would think, well there's nothing to that. You just a little thing and you plug them in. Well, it was a big issue for us, because we couldn't find a place to plug them in (laughs). Even for all the power lines that we had to run around this golf course and the TV cables and everything else, finding a place to plug in those two carts, and they had to sit outside because we didn't have any tent space for them and then it rains. Oh, the things you dealt with.

DePue: It's the nail that kept the shoe on the horse that kept the horse in the battle…

Wheeler: Exactly. Exactly.

DePue: This is an important time as well because it's after this year that the tournament started to tinker around with the dates a little bit.

Wheeler: Well, it was last year that they started with the dates and that's how they ended up with the July date that took them right before France. This year, they worked hard to find better dates and they certainly did so.

DePue: What drove the change of dates in the first place?

Wheeler: It's always television driven. You know, some of my friends—some of my counterparts that had TV over the years long before we did—would say, "Oh why do you want television? It drives your tournament." And I couldn't buy that. I thought, you know, we've got Labor Day, we've always played on Labor Day, we're not going to change.

Well, this is very important to State Farm. These are the things I learned over the years by doing. It is very important to State Farm to have the best possible exposure and we weren't always getting it with ESPN and we'd think we were all set and ESPN would find something else they wanted to do, so it was always an issue. This year, in changing the date, State Farm was actually able to put the Classic on network television, on NBC. NBC had an opening and State Farm grabbed it and ran.

DePue: You're saying in 2009.

Wheeler: 2009, absolutely.

DePue: Was it the LPGA that was driving that move as well or was it State Farm?

Wheeler: Both. The LPGA has to put a schedule together. I mean, it's right now there are no contracts anywhere. State Farm's contract was finished with this tournament. LPGA, when I left, I had all the contracts in hand. I had the contract with the Rail, I had the contract with the tour and I had the contract with State Farm. Then they signed a new one to go to Panther Creek because they wanted a three-year deal. It doesn't make sense to change everything that you do and your printing program and everything for a one year shot. It just doesn't work financially. So, they have to come together and that's the spit, wire and glue that they're dealing with now. State Farm hasn't re-signed yet because they're looking for dates. The LPGA hasn't come up with dates that will work for us tour-wise, field-wise and for Panther Creek. So, all that has to work. It was much easier to deal with the Rail in those circumstances, much easier.

DePue: Was there something about Labor Day Weekend that they wanted to steer away from?,

Wheeler: Well, this goes back maybe when we first stopped playing Labor Day. The tour had something to do with that travel-wise, but also so many State Farm employees were coming and working the tournament and State Farm was really kind of happy to get off that holiday weekend for the sake of their employees, but what are you going to say when you've got two hundred plus coming to Springfield every year, so that's how it came together.

DePue: Looking back about two or three years now, there've been two major changes in this tournament. One, obviously, the change of venue going from the Rail to Panther Creek. The other one is the change of dates. What do you think had the biggest impact?

Wheeler: You mean the change of dates on television or the move to Panther Creek?

DePue: The move to Panther Creek.

Wheeler: The move to Panther Creek was for the players, for their facilities. It's my humble opinion that the golf course isn't any easier or any harder than the Rail. I happen to be a member out there, so I know the golf course pretty well. I think it's a matter of keeping all those things together. You're not going to get Panther Creek on a holiday weekend. It's not going to happen, because that's big for the membership. I think one of the dates the LPGA put in front of the tournament for next year was Fourth of July (laughs). The club says, "That's not going to happen." So all these things have to balance and from a tournament standpoint, a great field and now we're spoiled. Having ninety-nine of one hundred is a killer. Jim and wouldn't have been here, we'd have been over the moon somewhere.

DePue: Let's continue our timelines. We talked about the change of dates. It was actually July 17 through July 20 at Panther Creek—a very hot weekend.

Wheeler: Yes. And the field was weak. I mean, there's only one way to describe it, there's no other way.

DePue: What was the big draw that weekend?

Wheeler: (sigh) Was it Lopez?

DePue: Michelle Wie was out there.

Wheeler: Oh, that's right. Michelle Wie. Michelle Wie got disqualified for not signing her scorecard after her Saturday round. She was playing and, yes, that drew a lot of people. That was her first time here. To say nothing of the fact that I had tried and tried, but she was getting all these sponsor exemptions in the big tournaments because she was such a phenom. The many times I was interviewed about Michelle Wie I said, "She's so young, when are they going to let her grow up and be a teen-ager and have fun?" So they expected a big crowd on Sunday, but once it was announced that Michelle Wie had been DQed , they didn't have such a big crowd.

DePue: And under the most peculiar of circumstances. The kind of thing that anybody who's not a golf fan can't even begin to understand.

Wheeler: Well, when a threesome finishes the round, they and their walking scorer… Now this is another committee for the golf tournament: a walking scorer walks with a threesome, marks every stroke, and the player also keeps one of her competitor's scorecards. When it's all finished, they all have to go into what we have as a scoring tent and there's three volunteers there and sitting in front of each player; the caddie is kind of hanging in the background to make sure there aren't any mistakes made, the walking scorer is sitting down at the end and they start going hole by hole and reading all the scores and they all have to say the same thing. When they finish doing that and those have been signed, they can get up and leave and then they can go out and sign their autographs and get ready for what tomorrow brings. Somehow, Michelle got

distracted, and I'm not sure how, because I was no longer privy to an inside-the-rope position (laughs). That the hardest part, not being able to get inside and get inside and…

DePue: I bet you'd love too, huh?

Wheeler: I did it this year. (DePue laughs) I had some players I had to see this year that hadn't been here in a while. Anyway, Michelle walked out of the tent without signing her official card. The volunteer caught it before she had left the area, but the fact that she walked out of that tent without signing it—end of story.

DePue: Okay. Again, I'm trying to wrap my own brain around it. It didn't make a difference to how she plays in the tournament.

Wheeler: Nope. None whatsoever. The rules are the rules.

DePue: 2009, this year, June fourth through the seventh. You already talked about the players that showed up, played at Panther Creek. The winner was Kyung Kim, a Korean. The total purse was one point seven million, a far cry from where you started.

Wheeler: Yes. Who'd have ever thought?

DePue: And her take was two hundred and fifty-five thousand dollars. But the tournament ends with a little bit of uncertainty.

Wheeler: A lot of uncertainties and I wish I could tell you now that's all been resolved, but to my knowledge it has not been yet. I know what the issues are.

DePue: To kind of elevate it above this particular tournament, what's going on ….

Wheeler: On the tour?

DePue: …with the LPGA tournament itself.

Wheeler: The economy. The LPGA has raised a lot of their interior expenses. There was always a service fee, and the service fee, along with the purse, would go to the LPGA. We also had to send them the entry fee of all the players. They would write a check to us and then we'd have to give the LPGA all the entry fees, which always hurt. The new commissioner has driven those fees from twenty-five, thirty thousand, up to a hundred thousand dollar service fees. They are always looking for purse increases, as you can see from our history, State Farm has done a tremendous job of seeing that the tournament stayed competitive, always been responsible for purse increases.

For many of my first years, we did not ask them to pay the purse, but it got to the point with expenses that I had to ask Mike Davidson, I said, "We need for you to step up to the plate and pay the purse." And we changed some

things internally that we had been charging them for, but the purse increases and increased service fees and the economy. I believe this year we've lost at least five events, one of them being a thirty-one year tournament in Corning, New York.

I e-mailed my friend Jack Benjamin and said I was so saddened to hear about them leaving tour and he e-mailed me back and said that once they got over the emotion of it, it was all dollars and cents. Charity is always a big part of what we do. It's certainly what drove me. And even in those years without a title sponsor, we were able to give nice dollars to charity and when I left, we had reach two million dollars. What Jack was saying is that with their increased fees, their charitable contributions were taking a dive and they just weren't going to do that. I understand that the tournament that's playing this weekend in Toledo is on the bubble. Oh, players love Toledo, love the golf course. The tournament in New York is gone. The tournament in Phoenix, they played without a title sponsor this year and it precedes the Nabisco tournament, which is a major on our tour. They don't have a place or a sponsor yet for next year. So we're all holding our breath here about the State Farm Classic.

DePue: What's the plan for next year?

Wheeler: There isn't any at the moment. There are no dates, there are no contracts, at the moment.

DePue: Is there a commitment for a title sponsorship?

Wheeler: I talked with my friends, the State Farm executives, and they're intent is to go on. That's all I can say about that at the moment, but it's very positive from their standpoint, if all these other things can come together.

DePue: Well one of the advantages of the very unfortunate circumstances of less tournaments each year is that it loosens up the schedule a bit, doesn't it?

Wheeler: Well, it loosens up the schedule, and also, the fewer places the players have to play, the better for you and your field. They had a week off before they came to Springfield this year. There was no playing, so they had to warm up to go to the LPGA championship. The only player that wasn't here was the number one player and so she took three weeks off to practice up for the LPGA championship and she wasn't even a factor.

Wheeler: You never know.

DePue: Well Sandy it's been an amazing experience talking to you about this. I have a few closing questions for you and I want to start with this one. We've been at this close to seven hours now. Does it seem like that? Maybe to the viewers it does, but it's flown by for me.

Wheeler: It's been great. It's been wonderful to relive my wonderful memories of the Classic.

DePue: Why do you think this was an important interview to do?

Wheeler: Springfield has been so blessed to have a professional golf tournament. There isn't anything else going on here that creates the kind of publicity that does what's been done for charity, which I'm sure is going to crest three million very soon. That's an important, important part of what we do. Our charitable contributions, as they grew, we had to find a way to spread them out, and as we were working the central Illinois region to create dollars for the classic, we also created dollars, not only for charitable dollars, not only for Springfield, but for central Illinois and even the state of Illinois. We've done some statewide charities. I can't imagine the outcry if and when this tournament leaves Springfield. We heard it when everybody thought State Farm was going to take the tournament to Bloomington. We heard it for years. They wouldn't let up. They wouldn't believe me. They wouldn't believe State Farm. They were absolutely positive. And the hue and cry on the street corner was loud and I can't imagine losing it. Springfield would be losing something very, very special.

DePue: Well, let me just express my own views as a historian, if you will, why this interview was important, to me at least. In the last forty years or so in the United States there's been an emergence of women's sports; that's been very important to our entertainment, to the future of our country in a lot of different respects. And a big part of that is golf. And a huge part of the story about the LPGA tournament is the Rail Golf Classic and now the State Farm Golf Classic. That's why I think it's important.

Wheeler: And you know, that was one of State Farm's issues. When they were investigating the market and found that women, in fact, were making insurance decisions, it all comes together. Title IX—what it did for young women in sports, and to see these young women, not only come out of the colleges, but come out of the high schools now. Michelle Wie and Paula Creamer and Morgan Pressel. None of them went to college and they came out because of Title IX and what was provided for them in the school system. And it's one of the things that the tournament did—about four years before I retired—developed bringing young female golfers in and we brought one of our champions in and we got teaching pros from all over the state of Illinois to come in and do clinics for them and it was wonderful. And as I understand it, last year they added young men to the clinic, which I thought was really neat. So, it's all part and parcel of what this classic has been able to contribute.

DePue: What do you think the most rewarding part of running this tournament was for you?

Wheeler: Charity day every year. That was when my heart would soar. I can't say that there weren't wonderful times when I would fly all over the United States and recruit players, but the bottom line was always the same, and to know that the tournament was not able to contribute dollars as a result of the bottom line before we took over. Mr. Sapp and Mr. Bunn made contributions in the name of the tournament, which was wonderful, but the tournament itself did not do that until my first year.

DePue: What was perhaps the most frustrating thing that you had to deal with year in and year out?

Wheeler: Raising all that money. (laughs) You know, I made a statement once to someone and I said, "You know, I've never sold anything in my life." And he said, "Oh, yeah, what do you do every time you walk on a stage?" So, you know, end of story. But it was fabulous to see the tournament grow and for the corporate community's respect for the tournament to grow. Everybody likes to hook their wagon to a winner. Once we could make the Classic a winner, that eased our chore.

DePue: We only have a few minutes left, Sandy, but I wanted you

Wheeler: Are you sure?

DePue: I wanted you to tell me who the most memorable personalities were. Who is at the top of the list and try to keep it short, even though we want to be diplomatic, right?

Wheeler: Absolutely. Without a doubt, Nancy Lopez, the 1980 champion—which was my first tournament. And she's been a champion of this event ever since. There was never a time, and I'm sure I mentioned this before in our in-studio interviews, there was never a time when my field was so weak I was in tears, that I would call Nancy. I remember one year I called her up and I said, "I'm quitting. I can't take this." She said, "No, you're not. I'm coming." All you needed was to let people know that Nancy was coming to join your field and the crowd grew. She's a two-time champion, spread apart. She was an '80 champion and sometime, oh, I know, she won '92 because it was the year before State Farm became title sponsor. I can remember commissioner Charlie Meacham standing up at the announcement and he said, "Anybody that's got Nancy Lopez for a defending champion and State Farm for a title sponsor is on a roll." That's exactly what Charlie Meacham said.

Betsy King, three-time champion. I'm hitting the ones that people would look for, Betsy King. A player that wasn't quite so popular because people didn't know her and she took early retirement because of a shoulder problem was Dottie Pepper. She's a honey and she was fun to watch and she was a spitfire. JoAnne Carner. Who will ever forget JoAnne Carner, Big

Mamma. Pat Bradley. The first winner of the tournament was Sandra Palmer, a Hall of Famer. Hollis Stacy. Beth Daniel won here twice.

I think one of my biggest frustrations was a big one. A person, a player, a pro, that took first place money out of a tournament and didn't support it through the years. I won't name names, but there was one in particular that really bugged me to death and it was Rosie Jones. This was her first win and I would crawl on my hands and knees and beg her to come back.

DePue: Again, we're getting close to the end. I'm going to throw one more name out there, a name of somebody who wasn't in the tournament but I know was very important. I don't need to hear your response because we talked about Bob Hope quite a bit already. (Wheeler laughs) How can we leave Bob Hope out of story? But, just some final comments to wrap up, Sandy.

Wheeler: Well, to wrap up, I want to thank you, Mark, and the Abraham Lincoln Library for placing the Rail Charity Golf Classic in the annals of history because I think it has been very important to Springfield. And I say the Rail Charity Golf Classic, because that's the corporate name that has done business as all these other names over the years. You've met some of the people that I've worked with. I wish you could have met the thousands and thousands and thousands of volunteers, because without them, there would have been no tournament. If you could see the faces of those charitable dollar recipients, the little kids from UCP, United Cerebral Palsy. You take the players in to see where their dollars were going and the pros were so pleased to be able to see what it was all about. The Rail Charity Classic is special and, again, we thank you for what you've done to remind people of the history.

DePue: Thank you very much, Sandy. Let's hope that twenty or thirty years from now there is still a golf classic and what better legacy for somebody like you who spent all those years in the trenches making it happen. Thank you very much, Sandy.

(end of final interview)