

KENNETH BEACHLER

February 23, 2001

Jeff Charnley,
interviewer

Charnley: Today is Friday, February 23rd, the year 2001. We're in East Lansing, Michigan. I'm Jeff Charnley, along with Dr. Christine Birdwell, interviewing Kenneth Beachler for the MSU Oral History Project for the sesquicentennial.

Mr. Beachler, you can see we've got a tape recorder here. Do you give us permission to record this interview?

Beachler: Yes, of course.

Charnley: I'd like to start first with some questions about your personal and professional background. Where did you grow up, and where did you go to high school?

Beachler: I grew up in Eastern Michigan in the Mount Clemens area and then pretty much in the Ionia-Belding-Greenville area near Grand Rapids. I consider myself a West Michigan native. My parents built a new home between Belding and Greenville when I was a sophomore in high school, and I just could not go to Greenville for my last two years, so I stayed in Belding. My younger brother, who was four years younger, graduated Greenville, so we're a split family.

Charnley: What year did you graduate high school?

Beachler: 1953.

Charnley: What did you do after you graduated from high school?

Beachler: I knew when I graduated high school that I was going to Chicago to study privately, singing and theater and ultimately dance. These were letters of introduction by my high school singing teacher. Because I knew that, I did not really do a college preparatory curriculum. I specialized in extracurricular activities my last two years of high school. I did go to Interlocken, which changed my life. It let me know that I wasn't the only baritone soloist in the world. So it prepared me a bit more for Chicago, but I had planned to be a professional actor and that was it, so I went to Chicago to get under way.

Two years after I was in Chicago--I auditioned all the time--I took music theory, music harmony from my vocal coach. I coached with her twice a week vocally, plus my harmony and music theory lessons. I had a singing lesson every Sunday evening at WGM- TV, and I had acting classes three times a week to begin with, ultimately every day. And I didn't start out with dance; I added an interpretive dance. I studied at the Fine Arts Building on North Michigan Avenue in Chicago.

I had heard about Northwestern University, but I wasn't really interested in that, and also some of my teachers also taught at Goodman Theater, but I was told to avoid that because it was the rubber-stamp school of acting that Goodman taught, and, besides, they were passé. So I never thought too much about Goodman Theater until the last fifteen years when they're so great. I auditioned all the time. My second year and into my third year I was on tour with a

show for school assemblies for nine months, and I thought it was about time I started getting paid for all of the money I'd invested in lessons. I had turned twenty on the road. I went out at nineteen.

Charnley: Who was your high drama teacher that was influential?

Beachler: I didn't really have a drama teacher in high school. They passed that around as to who would be directing productions in the gymnasium with the stage on one side. I had, I think, a very influential band director, Raymond Kindig, whom I still see. He lives in Owosso, and his wife, Barbara, was our choral director for only one year. But they both imprinted on me a great love of music, and I keep telling them that today. They're very proud. They come to Lansing and see some of our productions.

Charnley: What was Interlochen like in the early 1950s?

Beachler: It was just as it began. Dr. Joseph Maddy was roaming around the campus. It was all his; he was the king. I actually did All-State, but two weeks of vocal coaching, as I said, changed my life. I thought if I ever were going to go to college, I certainly would go to the University of Michigan, because most of the vocal faculty was from the U of M. I also had been a cheerleader in high school, and there were, I think, three of us guys and maybe three women, and we would go to Ann Arbor for cheerleading clinics because, well, they were all men but they did gymnastics and tumbling, and they taught us funny songs about MSU. I knew I'd never be

here. “Moo, moo, MSU, where the cows roam the campus all day, where seldom is heard an intelligent word, and the athletes all get high pay,” that to the tune of “Home on the Range.”

So I was very, very pro U of M, but I didn’t think I was going there. I didn’t have any bad feelings about Michigan State. As a matter of fact, Michigan State was very much in our family’s conscience because of the Extension Service, and my mother was involved in the small towns in Michigan, and that was Michigan State.

So I was three and a half years in Chicago, including the nine months on tour. I was back home briefly for some minor surgery. The draft was certainly on. I was twenty-one; I had turned twenty on the road. I went back into summer stock in Marengo, Illinois, that summer and back into classes in the fall. I was home that fall around Thanksgiving, had some minor surgery and recuperating, and I thought the draft was hanging over my head, maybe I should enlist and get it over with, and then I’ll go to New York, thinking that since I’d been out on the road, I probably had gotten all Chicago could teach me.

At twenty-one you have a very inflated ego, and I had no reason to doubt it. I had wonderful teachers in Chicago. I had two different acting teachers. I had two singing teachers in high school privately. It was my second singing teacher who had the experience of studying in Chicago, auditioning for Rodgers and Hammerstein in New York, and it was she who put me on the trajectory to go to Chicago and then on to New York.

Charnley: And who was that?

Beachler: Her name was Geraldine Bocker [phonetic].

Charnley: Your Army career, what happened in that?

Beachler: Well, I went to all the recruiters and found out that the Navy was four years, the Air Force was four years. I didn't touch the Marines; I didn't think I was Marine material. The Army said, "We've got several different programs. We've got a six-year program," and I thought, "Oh, lord." But they said, "It's two years of active duty and four years of reserve service." Regular Army is three years, which meant you'd probably still have a reserve obligation. And the Air Force said four years active duty plus some reserve time. And I thought, well, actually, if I did the Army two years active duty and the four years, I knew there'd be an obligation; I could probably go to New York and drill at a reserve center in New York, and it would be a little income. So I took the Army. I discussed it with my parents, had already signed the papers, but I went home and asked them what they thought, and the bottom line was they thought that maybe I should wait.

So I said, "Well, I can't. I'm leaving in two weeks." Then I had to tell my teachers in Chicago that I was taking two years off. They were very nice, although disappointed, because I didn't realize at that time that whether or not it's a university teacher or a private teacher, they have invested time, talent, interest, and encouragement in you, and they don't like you all of a sudden to say, "I'm going to do something else for a while, but I'll be back. You can wait for me." But I did that.

Six months after I was in the Army, after basic training at Fort Carson, Colorado, the Army--it's said the military always trained for the last war they fought, so I went out to Fort Carson, Colorado, in January of 1957, and did cold-winter training just like they used in Korea, which was pretty much drawn down by that time, but it was before Vietnam.

I then went to signal school at Fort Gordon, Georgia, where spring came and it was ninety-five degrees, and right from there I was shipped out to Germany. A lot of my colleagues, my classmates at signal school, were being sent to Korea, and I thought I probably was going to Korea. But there were a couple of us sent to the United States Army in Europe.

So six months later I was in Germany, and there all sorts of doors and windows opened, including the opportunity to work with Special Services in addition to my signal unit. We did, in the eighteen months I was there, six theater productions, all of which toured. I was a touring kid; I'd been out on the road eight months so --

Birdwell: You knew the road.

Beachler: I knew what it took. I knew it meant staying up late and getting up early and, of course, I was in the Army. I was transferred over to Special Services, but the deal was, first of all, I found out--I didn't know this until I went in the service, but I was an organist.

My singing teacher, the last private singing teacher, was also our Methodist Church organist. So she thought it would be nice, since I'd had basic piano, if I would learn to play the organ so she could solo at church and I would play for her. There also was some question about what the nature of the relationship really was, and so the choir would just look at us fascinated as I sat at the organ playing for her singing some exquisite--she really had a wonderful voice--and the church attendance grew, because we were sort of an item. And that's how I spent my sixteenth and into my seventeenth years. So I've forgotten how I went back to her, but--oh, I had not touched the organ when I was in Chicago.

But when I was shipped out for basic training at Fort Carson, they asked at one of musters if anybody had any familiarity with a keyboard, because we had all these chapels at Fort Carson, Colorado. I didn't raise my hand right away; as a matter of fact, I didn't raise my hand at all. But I got to the orderly room a little bit later that day, and they said, "In looking through your records, we see that you've had performing arts training in Chicago. Do you, by any chance, play a keyboard?"

And I said, "Well, sort of. I'm a singer. I don't consider myself a pianist, and I have had a little organ solo."

They said, "We have two services for you every Sunday. We will pay you."

And I thought, "Pay?"

And also the nice thing about basic training--I mean, I did do KP, I did rake the gravel in my early days, but I got a pass to be able to go whatever chapel was closest and practice, because they knew I needed to practice. I could play hymns but, you know, the special music. So it was kind of nice. I got out of some bad detail, and I felt, well, that's that.

Then I went to signal school and got immediately called out when I reported in, saying, "We need an organist at the hospital chapel, and they have services every afternoon at five." Well, I was off duty at four. They also paid, and I spent a lot of time at the hospital chapel. I really felt good because people would come in for meditation, even when there weren't services, and you felt like you were helping people get well. So that was nice. So I thought, well, that's that.

I go to Germany and your records precede you, and so I was offered right away the organist post at the base chapel. In Germany they called them caserns. They said, "We have somebody covering the chapel, but he is at another Army post," and so I was the organist at that

chapel. And they did not only Sundays, but holidays and other special events and Easter and Good Friday afternoon and all of that.

But when it came up that the headquarters area wanted to pull me over for Special Services, my battalion commander said, “Well, he can go, but he’s got to be here on Sunday morning and at the special things, and he has to be here to be paid the last day of every month.” And so I did that, and I got promoted.

We took our shows back to the little post service club, and so I had a very good relationship with my company in the battalion, even though they only saw me on Sundays and once a month. And when we had to go to the field and qualify for our weapons, the headquarters area gave me a sedan to drive, so I didn’t even have to stay in the tent. That was good. I’d done all of this, but there’s no reason to keep repeating it. So the Army offered all kinds of opportunities.

I also found out that they had a little civic theater, and it was comprised of officers, their wives, their daughters, some enlisted people, some people who worked for the Army who were German, and some Army school civilian people, teachers. So it was a nice little group of people. They said, “You can go over and audition. They’re going to do *Blithe Spirit*.” This was, like my second day there, and I auditioned, and they cast me in the lead. And then so we started rehearsals and then this director--I don’t know where they found him--but he got mad at somebody and stomped out. So they said, “Well, you have lots of experience and more than the rest of us, so you can play the lead and direct *Blithe Spirit* and arrange to do all the touring out of your office,” because we went to four service clubs and then we would go further out.

We took a lot of our shows, almost all of our plays, out to the East German border and played Army posts that were pretty much lookout posts but where they were restricted to that

post. I mean, if they got leave, they had to go a hundred miles away; they couldn't ever go into town. So we did a lot of nice work there. I loved that. And we did also some musical revues. So I met a lot of friends.

Charnley: Did you have any connection with USO at that time?

Beachler: To this extent, through the courtesy of the USO, the Catholic University Players came. I was there two summers and two winters, I think. I missed a season because I was really there a little over a year and a half. So at Catholic University Players and late the last summer of my year there, the MSU Players came by, and they had two light comedies in repertory. I was their nominal host, because that was my job with the Special Services offices, to be a coordinator of the incoming talent. We had Gary Crosby up in Mannheim and he did some shows. We had Elvis Presley up near Frankfurt, but the deal was Elvis didn't want to do any soldier shows. He was released to go back and maybe record a little bit, but he pretty much just wanted to soldier. He didn't want to be a star. So I never actually saw Elvis. He was just outside of Frankfurt in, it's Freiburg or Fribourg. It was Freiburg. Fribourg is where the cathedral is. Freiburg is a little place of St. Frankfurt. So we didn't see him around there, even though we were up at the Frankfurt Playhouse quite a bit, and it was there that I saw Van Cliburn, who had just won the Tchaikovsky competition in Moscow. I didn't realize that we would become friends later on. I didn't get the chance to speak with him then.

It was because of the MSU Players--by this time, I'd had enough friends who had graduated college, mostly officers, but a couple of enlisted friends, they'd been drafted. They were out of college and they got drafted, one who now lives in California from Chicago and

another California guy. Everybody said, “You really should go to college. Not that you’re boring, but because it certifies that you have been through some sort of--it’s all private, so--“

Birdwell: That’s your union card.

Beachler: So I thought, well, where would I like to go? Well, maybe Northwestern. So I wrote to Northwestern. I wrote to the University of Michigan. I thought, gee, it would be nice to go the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. That’s only in London, and I’d get to stay in Europe. So actually I went up and auditioned there through some friends in the U.S. Army Historical Division. I was received beautifully and taken to a very long lunch, and I auditioned, but the bottom line was, I was considered a foreigner and they had no tuition help for foreigners. There wasn’t any program like that, and I didn’t have G.I. bill.

So once the Embassy Players came, I wrote to Michigan State, and a week later they wrote me back, and they said, “Okay, we want veterans at Michigan State. We have all of these programs. If you qualify, there’s aid for tuition. We have a new College of Communication Arts,” which at that time, I believe, incorporated theater.

Birdwell: It did, for a while.

Beachler: For a while. It was in Arts and Letters; it is in Arts and Letters, but it was in Communication Arts. So I was quite impressed. I got back in early February, and I applied to Michigan State. I just knew, looking at the programs--at Michigan I would have been in the School of Music. At Northwestern it would cost me ten times the fees I was looking at, although

I ultimately became very, very respecting of Northwestern and its programs through some of our mutual friends, Christine.

I came down here to audition. I went to Grand Rapids and auditioned for a show, their Summer Circle Theater, and got cast in the lead of *Pal Joey*. My director was an MSU alum, and he said, “Oh, you’re going to love Michigan State. When I was there, I worked as an announcer at WKAR. So what I’d like to is, I know the station manager, I’ll call and it’d be nice to have you go down and audition.” So we did this right after my musical closed, which I think was in July.

I met the new station manager, but the chief announcer at WKAR was Dick Estelle, and he said, “We can audition you this afternoon. We have a pretty tough audition, so we’ll give you some time to look over the copy.”

It was a newscast and a weather forecast and a couple of public service announcements and then lists of classical composers, because WKAR did three programs of classical music. The AM and FM stations were combined. The FM station stayed on until ten o’clock at night, where they did Concert Hall. So I did that. I was really not very good at French composers, but I’d just come from a year and a half of Germany. I certainly could say Mozart and Brahms and Beethoven without saying “Bay-TO-ven.” Besides, in Chicago I’d been training as an announcer by both of my acting teachers. So I could actually do commercials. WKAR didn’t ask me to do a commercial. So I did.

Dick Estelle said to me after the audition, “Well, you have a very theatrical voice. For instance, we have the feeling that you’d dramatize the news.” He has this beautiful voice. He also trained in Chicago at the Columbia School of Broadcasting. He was impressed that I was a Chicago kid as well. But he said, “For example, you said this one line, ‘And when the police

arrived on the scene of the accident, all of the parties were dead [hushed].’ We don’t do it that way. ‘All the parties were dead. And the weather forecast.’” So he said, “You’re are pretty good, and we’d like to have you start right way.”

This is in July. I wasn’t going to be a student until September, and I said, “Well, Mr. Estelle, I don’t have any student number. I mean, I’m sort of in limbo.”

And he said, “Well, we’ll start with the registrar and all of that to see.”

So in August, I came down. A month before I started as a student, I started my shifts at WKAR as a student announcer. I had to stay someplace and find a room for a few weeks, and then I could move, because you had to live in a dormitory, in a residence hall.

The other amusing thing is my being a veteran meant that I could only live with other veterans. They wouldn’t mix veterans with incoming freshmen.

Birdwell: Corruption?

Beachler: Yes, because we’d seen the world, plus veterans, you know, and besides, I was of legal age, and East Lansing was dry and so they worried about our influence. So I had veterans in my Bryan Hall room at a complex at Brody all that first year. It was a sort of parade of different veterans because they didn’t really stay.

But by the end of one year, I got a letter. I had not taken college prep. My advisor, who was a theater department professor, they didn’t know what to do with me. He said, “Why don’t you do me a favor. You’ve done more shows than most incoming freshmen, so don’t do any shows for two years. Work on your studies. Get a grade point.” Because, you see, you’re going to rehearsal, and they do a play a term and you’d get into rehearsal and the studies go by the

board and you don't go to the library." So I pretty much respected--he was a wonderful man, Professor Don Buell [phonetic], who loved Broadway and did some programs for WKAR, radio and also the television station.

So I didn't any shows at Michigan State my freshman and sophomore years, but I maintained my relationship in Grand Rapids, so I was in Grand Rapids every summer. Then unfortunately, the spring term, because we were still on quarters, Professor Buell died unexpectedly. It just was when Michigan State was starting up again maybe about starting the Arena Theater, and I love theater in the round. So I did audition for the first play in the Arena Theater the last term of my sophomore year, got in that, and thus began a whole bunch of appearances at Michigan State.

I got a letter from the Honors College, "Congratulations. We're very impressed with your grade point average, and we'd love to have you join." I got another letter saying, "Congratulations. You're receiving a board of trustees tuition scholarship plus a Hinman [phonetic] broadcasting scholarship for your other expenses."

I said I didn't have G.I. Bill, but my mom had said, "I'll continue working while you complete college." She had gone to Argonbright [phonetic] Business College in Battle Creek, and my father had had some college, but they didn't have four-year college graduates in the immediate family. So it was important to them, more so than me, and especially it was important to them because they thought this kid that was going to waste his life in theater. I was actually to go get a four-year degree.

So it certainly helped when Michigan State came through with the scholarships, and I still feel indebted to both the Hinman scholarship and the board of trustees. I just got the board trustees my sophomore year, but it was a big help, and I was working. And I loved broadcasting.

In my sophomore year also, I was called by a local commercial station. They'd been listening to me on WKAR, and they offered me a staff announcer job in commercial radio with air shows that would accommodate my studying. It was just east of East Lansing, out by Meridian Road. It was then called WSWM; today it's WFMK. I made arrangements to buy an old used car so I could get out there.

By this time I was living off campus, and it worked out really well. I ended up being there three and a half years, but I left WKAR on very good terms. It wasn't that I said, "Okay, so long." I was very grateful to Dick Estelle and to the other people there. And I'd learned a lot, and I loved the station. I wasn't too wild about all of the consumer information programs that we did, but mostly I didn't have anything to do with Veterans Affairs, even though I was a veteran, or the Homemaker's Hour, which was fifteen minutes, or Hymns You Loved, which was another fifteen minutes in the morning, or Strings in the Morning, which was generally one Handel Concerto Grosso, that was a fifteen-minute program. We had The Radio Scrapbook, which was Dick Estelle for many years, and we had a sort of--WKAR AM has a daylight license, so as the sun came up earlier, we did a morning program, and I would do that, called Dawn's Salute. We didn't salute the dawn in October, November, December, January, or February, but we saluted the dawn the rest of the year.

So I'm out at WSWM. I graduated, and Michigan State invited me to join their new performing arts company, which was an acting company primarily, and I was honored by that. But I made the mistake of not giving up my broadcasting responsibilities. By this time I was salaried at WSWM, working for one of their major non-profit sponsors, producing a lot of programming. So I came in that first year as a grad student, and I was cast in two shows, one of

which was going to tour, and I had all my broadcast responsibilities, and I kind of burned out in that very first year.

I talked with the head of the theater department. I said, "I think this is wrong. Broadcasting is my great love. As much as I'd like the degree, a master's or M.F.A., whatever it was to be, in theater, I think I'm just not an academic." I made another mistake like I did in high school, thinking this is not the way to go, I'm not going to be around here anyway, so I withdrew. I did one play and it toured and I didn't actually go in the second play. I left in that first quarter.

Birdwell: Which year is this now?

Beachler: It was 1963 in the fall. I was here fall of '63.

Birdwell: It was *Gaslight*.

Beachler: No, I had done *Angel Street* in my senior year in the fall and *Of Thee I Sing* in the spring.

Birdwell: I saw you in both of them.

Beachler: Leads in both. I was very, very grateful. I loved the folks here on campus, and they gave me lots of opportunities. You know, mentioning *Angel Street* and *Of Thee I Sing*, it looks like we did pop things, but I did Pirandello, Bertold Brecht, you know, Jean Anouilh, a lot of

things that I would never have the chance to do, and later on through Summer Circle even more that I never would have done anyplace.

So, anyway, I left the theater department and the performing arts company in its inception and devoted myself to full-time broadcasting. Then I got a call from WKAR, Dick Estelle, again, and he said, “Ken, we have just been authorized to create a new position here, that of music programming director. What we would like to do, as you know, is pull the FM station away from the AM and give it its own identity and to make it a totally different service from AM.”

I said, “Well, would this music programming director still be responsible for the AM programs, hymns in the morning, whatever it was in the afternoon?” He said, “Yes, but, you know, whatever else.” So I really jumped at that chance.

So I bade farewell in September of 1964 to commercial radio, came back here, and started planning what ultimately became a public information and fine arts format for the FM station. They’d make it very clear, “There’s no budget to do this, but we are acquiring some new equipment and what we can do is give the FM station the old equipment,” because the priority was WKAR AM. That was the traditional service, and it had been the second or third radio station in the state, the AM station.

So we could create this other FM format. We could expand our hours, but certainly not past midnight. No, we couldn’t be stereo, because we didn’t have any turntables that would play stereo, much less control boards that would transmit it and the transmitter and all of this. So it was like going to a yard sale and collecting. And they said, “And by the way, we can’t add any additional personnel, but you can use some more students.”

So we did actually is planned the format for a station that would be on the air each day from 6 a.m. to midnight seven days a week, except for finals. We did a Classics by Request Saturday night program during finals four times a year because we had four quarters.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Beachler: We certainly did hire additional students, and I just had breakfast with one of them last week. He's now a director of the U.S. Mint in Washington, D.C. He went from WKAR as a student announcer, where they loaned him. They said, "You can have some of Jay Johnson's time." Jay didn't know anything about classical music, but all the announcers would come to me and we would go through the lists and almost everything was recorded. Very little was live. The records were spun live, we hoped by somebody who could read the record labels.

I was very proud of some of our engineers who had never done classical music, but they knew what the list was. If the labels were confusing, they'd write all over the LP and just send it back to me. But most of the time the right music got played with the right announcements. Some of my students were Steve Meuche, who today is head of radio and television, and Jay Johnson, who is now with the U.S. Mint. He went on to become an elected state representative from Wisconsin. He was [unclear] much television and media from here, but now he loves his job at the U.S. Mint. He's, by the way, pushing gold dollar coins. That's his great love. Anyway, he says, "I will never forget the opportunity you gave me to announce classical music at WKAR." I said, "Jay, when was this?" He said, "Well, it was in the sixties." So, anyway, I was very proud of what happened.

Ultimately we were able to get some additional equipment. I was also doing television here by that time, but at no expense. I mean, nobody paid me to do television, but for WKAR-TV, once they split away from the old Channel Ten liaison. So I did a lot of recital programs for Dr. Donald Pash [phonetic], mostly classic stuff, and because that went out across the country, I started getting offers.

The most serious one came in 1970 from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. They had a new telecommunications building and equipment to dream of that included both radio and television, and they had ten satellite stations around the state of Nebraska. I did go out to Lincoln. They flew me out. They interviewed me. They were interviewing, I don't know, two or three people. They called me up and said, "We want you."

I said, "But, you know, I'm not really a television producer. I've done talent."

"No, we have producers. We need people with vision. It seems that you would do not just classics but, you know, folk music and, you know, people who live in Nebraska." And that did appeal to me.

I think I talked with WKAR. I talked with Dick Estelle, and I said, "Dick, I have this offer." And I started making some arrangements to leave, and I got a call from the provost at the Michigan State at that time, who said, "We understand you have a job offer." This was John Cantlon. And he said, "We have another job in mind for you at Michigan State, so don't accept it. Don't accept this offer. Give us a couple of days, and we'll come back to you."

So I called Nebraska and I said, "Well, there's something going on, and I'm not quite sure what it is, but I need a few days."

It turned out that they had me in mind as a successor to the director of the Lecture Concert Series, which was the presenting offer at Michigan State. I was surprised to hear that,

because I'd been on the advisory for the Lecture Concert Series as a student, and I went to a lot of the events, but it didn't occur to me that my predecessor was thinking of retiring.

Birdwell: Is this Wilson Paul?

Beachler: It was Dr. Wilson Paul. As it turns out, he didn't know he was thinking of retiring either. So it made it very, very difficult, and what the university did is appoint me an associate for nine months and gave me an office in Kellogg Center so we could do an orderly progression.

Now, let me be very clear. The reason he was retiring from his post was that he was turning sixty-five, and it was Michigan State's policy that administrators had to relinquish their posts at sixty-five. They could stick around and might even have office space, whatever. So I will say it wasn't really the best way to do it. It put a strain on relations with Dr. and Mrs. Paul and me for maybe three years total, and then we became wonderful friends. Dr. Paul is gone, but Mrs. Paul are still very good friends, so we communicate several times a year. They became very big fans of mine.

But, really, I probably had done as much at WKAR as it was then possible to do, given our resources, both human and equipment resources. I was very proud that in--I think there have been two or three successors as music program director there--that (A), they either went stereo, (B) they went around the clock, and they added many—National Public Radio really came to the fore. I don't know if they're more or less original programming there than they did when I was there, but because of the services available, all of which costs lots of money, which we didn't have.

I found out very soon after I came into the Lecture Concert Series that the new president at that time, Dr. Clifton [R.] Wharton [Jr.], felt that the university auditorium could be replaced by something better. There had been talk on campus apparently around since the early to mid-1950s. This is when the auditorium would be twelve to fifteen years old. There were people that realized that it was not suitable for all things. It was a great improvement on the old gymnasium on campus or there were performances done in what is now IM Sports Circle, Dem Hall. There is an armory that used to be before Dem Hall that traditionally--because professional performances were recorded as having taken place on this campus from the year 1912. So there was a long history, and this is all written. We have a first seventy-five years' history published, which I'd be very happy to share with you. Archives has it.

So it became very clear that one of the reasons that they picked a youngish kind of guy--I guess I would have been around thirty--with a public image, because of my broadcasting, is that in order to do a new facility, to get a new facility here, and to convince the right people that such a facility would be feasible, because it wasn't anywhere near the list of priorities of what Michigan State wanted to have in the early 1970s--they wanted a Soil Science Building, they wanted additions to the plant pathology, soil science, biophysics, biochemistry, the whole science complex, certainly the College of Business, the College of Engineering. All of these were way, way, way ahead, plus there was a need for a basketball arena and also a hockey arena when we started all of this.

So I guess they picked me because they knew I would speak and maybe I could join the team of people who'd be willing to do this. But what I had to do was continue the tradition of presenting at the university auditorium, which we did. Within my first three years we had formed a team to go look at other performing arts facilities, primarily on college campuses but

some that were city and university facilities. So ultimately our committee looked at around twenty-six venues.

We had a wonderful committee. Our new vice president for development, Les Scott, the head of the School of Music, Jim Niblock, the chair of the Department of Theater, Frank Rutledge, a professor in the College of Business but who was in business correspondence and I figured a real esthetician, she's the last person who taught business students how to write letters-- they don't teach that anymore, I don't know that they teach that anyplace, but Dr. Ann Garrison. And Mrs. Wharton, Dolores Wharton. And, of course, this idea was a joint idea of Dr. and Mrs. Wharton.

One of the things they were to say later that impressed them about Michigan State is they thought that the FM station was a very credible fine arts station for a campus like this, and in a way it reminded me, because it was the most important thing in my life, coming up with that new format. It took the most creative energy, even more, I would say, at the time than planning the big hoo-hah that became Wharton Center [for Performing Arts]. It wasn't called that until it was under construction. But obviously we were very grateful to the Whartons for placing the project in the way of all of the other priorities so it became something that many people wanted to get out of the way, get it done, get it built, get it so we can go on and do what we want to do. And that's what's happening still today. It's all coming in.

It went through a lot of different lives, a lot of different design plans. What you see at Wharton Center today is not the facility, anywhere near the facility that was initially designed. It is not sitting where it was supposed to be placed, the footprint, even on the real estate that it's on, and, of course, most of the science people didn't want Wharton Center in their neighborhood, and the School of Veterinary Medicine most assuredly did not want it there.

Bergwell: They can't move over there then, can they?

Beachler: See, they saw it as land that was for expansion, and it was one of nine sites that were selected. Dr. Wharton ultimately made the choice of the site.

Bergwell: Where were some of the others?

Beachler: My very favorite and one that Mrs. Wharton liked a lot, they knew that they had to redevelop the intersection of Farm Lane and Shaw Lane. We see some of this going on now, and that the old pavilion would come down. And so they thought what they would do is make that a very big traffic circle. From the moment you get south of the Farm Lane bridge, it was going to go into this great traffic roundabout, and in the middle of it they were going to build a round performing arts center and build it up in the air. So it would go up maybe five or six stories, and it would look very much like Grady Gammage Auditorium at Arizona State University. The circle would be so big that it also would contain parking and tunnels and a lot of stairways going up, because you couldn't actually go into the lobby until the second or third level. That was one very, very innovative idea.

I thought it was a horrible idea and that it was really in the way of traffic, rather than complementing. But, you know, you keep hearing--I just went to a meeting two days ago about the future of Michigan State, twenty years and where things are going to be located, and everybody says, "Well, we want this to be a pedestrian-friendly, vehicle-available place with lots

of green space and where cars aren't running over our students like you do on Grand River Avenue." Everybody wants that, but the designs they come up with are awful.

Well, six of the designs were right next to one of the railroad tracks that crosses the campus. I've talked to the city of Lansing about this. They want to put a new performing arts space right next to the downtown railroad tracks. It's actually further east than the baseball stadium. You know, the trains go through by Clara's all the time. But, you see, at Michigan State, even though we ended up with this site bordered by Shaw Lane and Bogue Street, the railroad tracks are a block away. But they said, "Well, for the big concert hall, we're going to turn it so its back actually faces Owen graduate dorm, and it will be sealed off from any ambient noise of the railroad trains." The truth of the matter is, since they moved it down across before they started construction, and they did it like in a month before they started construction, they moved it down to the other end of the block, put the long curtain brick wall facing the Vet Med, and so with trains going by behind Vet Med, all can be heard and the train whistles over on house right of the Great Hall. It never should have happened.

Bergwell: It just bounces off, doesn't it?

Beachler: Oh, yes. It's a great acoustical chamber. So there are little, nit-picky things.

But I will say, my career at Michigan State and my feeling that I'm still giving back for all I got, because here I was, a kid that didn't plan to go to college. I did not take college prep, and yet a year after I was here, I was considered an intellectual in the Honors College and a student leader. And because I was student leader, I was president of the Senior Men's Honorary Excalibur. I was in student government. See, I wasn't doing shows, so I did this other. They

brought out student leaders all the time for university functions, so Dr. Gordon Sabine and Mr. Jim Jenison and Dr. John [A.] Hannah, I mean, I was doing a gig a week for something, recruiting students, thanking alumni donors, potential donors. They weren't doing a lot with donations, but they did for the Ralph Young Fund, because athletics had their fundraising already going.

Like today, I had a cold, and I was supposed to go to the Union Building and stand at a block S in my blazer with my Excalibur, and about four o'clock I called Dr. Sabine up and I said, "I'm really miserable. I'm just going to go to bed. I've got a test in the morning." So I lay down. The phone rings. It's Dr. Sabine. He says, "I don't care how you feel. Put on that blazer. Get over to the Union. Stand in the block S. You don't need to stay for dinner. You can go home and go to bed, but you've got to be here." And so I went. There's no question, right?

But then it was Dr. John Hannah, and, of course, Dr. Hannah was succeeded by Clifton Wharton, but in between we had--

Bergwell: All those guys.

Beachler: Yes, we had Pauline and Walter Adams. Walter was a great public figure on our campus, and while I didn't have any real relationship with him, I was at WKAR at that time.

When Dr. Wharton came in, I still was at WKAR. I began to work more closely. We planned not only architecture, but possible fundraising projects, like an initial kickoff concert, which turned out to be Tony and L_____ in 1975. We had a design for the Performing Arts Center in late 1974. We raised money. We raised money. We were to raise 12 million of the 17 million-dollar enrichment program, which, as a s_____, was to also benefit three other programs

for people who said, “Oh, I don’t want to give to performing arts. I’d never come. I’d never use it.” Most of the people that said that ultimately had kids performing at Wharton Center or had other reasons. They came to hear the Barbershoppers at the Lansing Symphony. I can only think of one couple that made good on their word. They made sure that they never came to Wharton Center, and they sat in the front row of the Lecture Concert Series at the auditorium, and when this new place opened, they never entered it. I knew it was because they sat in the front row in the university auditorium, and everybody knew they were there.

Birdwell: I know, but you certainly couldn’t hear anything in the auditorium.

Beachler: Then, to our horror, Dr. Wharton announced that he was going to State University of New York to be chancellor of the system. I thought, “The gig is up.”

Then Dr. [Edgar L.] Harden, who replaced him first as acting president, called me the first day he was in office. He said, “Come over tomorrow afternoon at four.” He had been co-chair of the Mid-Michigan fundraising effort for our facilities along with Mrs. Howard Stoddard, Jennie. He said, “Come over tomorrow afternoon at four. We’ve got to come up with a plan to finish this. I’m going to tell you what I think about it. You tell me what you can do.” I was heartened, and I was over in his office the next day.

The next day he said, “I’m going to pull in Dr. Hannah. He’s around, and we’ll raise the rest of the money and get this thing out of the way so that the university can get on with the other projects that are important.” So that was his strategy. I have to say today, as I’ve said for years, without Dr. Edgar Harden there would be no Performing Arts Center there, regardless of what it was named, because he just had a commitment to it.

By the time it was in what was now named Wharton Center--it was the State Center for Performing Arts--and people complained that it sounded like it was in a Soviet republic gulag, just located on south campus, the State Center for Performing Arts, and we've got the state Russian orchestra, and, you know.

Anyway,. Dr. Harden had been succeeded by Dr. [M.] Cecil Mackey, and in one of my first encounters with Dr. Mackey, he made it very clear to me. He said, "You know, Michigan State can't afford this performing arts center. I am supposed to look very objectively at all the programs and things. I want you to understand that Mrs. Mackey and I are great supporters of the arts, but as a university activity, I have to say that this is at the bottom of my priorities. I know it's under construction. I've checked with different people, and there's no way that they could just finish the construction and then put it on ice and open it maybe a couple of years later or when the economy was better, whatever. You must know that the project doesn't have my wholehearted support."

One of the things we had done is we had moved the reporting line a couple of different times, what was the Lecture Concert Series. We'd moved it out of Lifelong Education, Continuing Education, over to Arts and Letters. At this point it still was in Arts and Letters, and the dean of Arts and Letters called me and he said, "I guess it's time. We're going to post the position." See, the question was how was it going to be run. So then they brought in a deal with that. Like, they didn't ever want to deal with where are people going to park, because they didn't want to build a parking ramp.

Birdwell: Is this Sullivan? When Sullivan was the dean?

Beachler: No. He had been succeeded by Alan Hollingsworth. And so they brought in two consultants to look at the project, one from the University of Illinois, one from the University of Iowa. And they said, “No, you have to have a managing department for a building like this,” because with the auditorium classroom assignment did the space, I mean, for Lecture Concert Series and commencements and all of that. Grounds did all the setup. Physical plant through custodial services. Actually, custodial services pretty much ran the building. It’s not that I didn’t like them. It’s just that they were--and there was really no parking to really think about over at the auditorium. People parked wherever they could find, and there weren’t any gated lots anyway.

I got a call from Dr. Hollingsworth who said, “Well, the consultants have made their recommendations, and we are going to have an administrator for a department. So we’re going to post the job nationally, and if you’d like to apply, you’re more than welcome.” I want to point out, I never had actually applied for a job. I was brought here by friends a couple of months before I was student to audition at WKAR, which, in a way, was applying for a job. I was offered to start right away, and ever after that going to WSWM, coming back to WKAR as program music director, being tapped what was director of the Lecture Concert Series. I’d never applied for any of these jobs.

Birdwell: Right. They came to you.

Beachler: They came to me. And it was the university pretty much said, “This one.”

Birdwell: It must have been a wonderful feeling.

Beachler: It was. So all of a sudden I was faced with applying for a job. But I was also involved in getting the job description together. But you have to do research; I didn't do that myself. So I did apply for it. I also was well aware, because of the twenty-six places that we had visited and because of my associations of concert managers and presenters, both what was the professional--this is the people who run Carnegie Hall and Kennedy Center and the series at the auditorium in Chicago and that was one group, and the other was colleges and universities--that almost, I think, no one who had ever been in a project planning new facilities had ever been chosen to run it. They either have heart attacks and died, they were fired, but they were never chosen. So I was well aware it would be odds on if I were selected.

Then I got a call. I did apply and I got another call from Dean Hollingsworth, and he said, "Well, three people from our college have applied for the position, and I wondered, will you do me a draft letter endorsing all three for my signature, please?"

So I wrote a letter recommending on his behalf Dr. John Baldwin, Mr. Dennis Burke from the School of Music, and Mr. Kenneth Beachler from the Lecture Concert Series, all of equal abilities but with subspecialties in there for the dean's signature.

I thought, "I think he's just really torturing me," but a few years later I was sent a copy of the letter which I wrote for his signature, and there it was, speaking very highly of all three of us. I guess I didn't do the job that I should have for John and Dennis, but it was a sort of bittersweet. One of the things--actually Dr. Mackey really told me this, one of his assistants did say that Dr. Mackey was hopeful that they would bring in somebody from outside because he wanted to make sure that his own people were in charge. So Dr. Mackey doesn't find you his first choice.

Now, this is very strange because Cecil and Clara Mackey and I have been very good friends, and would I trust them? Yes, I would trust them. But it's the politics. It's the time when these happen. Also, it's how you perceive it. And I've always felt that if you feel it's the right thing to do, even though it may be wrong, I mean, it may not put you in the best light, you have to go with what you think is the right thing to do. And I feel that's been my relationship with Dr. Mackey and certainly with his successor John [A.] DiBiaggio, who I have to say, was a delight, and, as much as Dr. and Mrs.--Dr. Mackey was in the Great Hall of the Wharton Center the day that he announced that he was leaving as president. We had a pianist that night, and I thought, I'm sure Clara and Cecil Mackey will be in their seats, and indeed they were. He wasn't warmly admired on campus, but he did do the job he was supposed to do, all except for he couldn't help but open Wharton Center and nobody took more of an interest in it.

But John DiBiaggio, especially a little after he was here and he found himself a single man, was with us every night. We loved it. And he could say, "Ken, this Empire Brass Quintet, get them here in residence." And I thought, "You don't understand. You've got to work through the School of Music," like we did the Juilliard Quartet. And the Juilliard, of course, that was a wonderful combination of Dean Richard Sullivan and the School of Music, Dr. Niblock.

Birdwell: Well, Cecil Mackey came to all the theater things, and he was the only president that ever did. He even went to the arena. He went to the outdoor theater.

Beachler: Right. Dr. Hannah went to the touring Broadway productions in the auditorium, just as Governor William Milliken did, and, as a matter of fact, Wharton Center had opened by the

time that Governor Blanchard was in, that he came to the musicals as well. Some governors come and some don't. Some presidents do and some don't, but Dr. Hannah did.

Of course, with the dedication of Wharton Center and in its first month, we had something like five symphony orchestras, and I'm sure John Hannah thought, "Aren't they ever going to do anything but symphony orchestras?" And, by the way, we developed a very cordial, close relationship in his last years, very, because I wanted to record the remarks he made at the groundbreaking. He said things about the importance of the performing arts to students and people on campus and people in the community that I had never heard him say before, and he wasn't using a script. To John Hannah, he felt that his obligation to arts and culture had pretty much been met by opening Oakland University, which was an MSU satellite campus, in an area of wealth and culture, with the Meadowbrook Music Festival, the Meadowbrook School of Music, the Meadowbrook Theater. You know, I felt that, too, but I thought that means Michigan State, I mean, we have so many other things we're known for.

I think today, though, Wharton Center is one of the things we're known for, one of the many good things. It's a great facility. I mean, where else--I didn't bring *Phantom of the Opera* because I didn't want to make enemies of the School of Music and the theater department, the Commencement Committee, because the eleven weeks it was there pretty much tied up everything. But it set records and as the *State Journal* kept pointing out, the grosses at Wharton Center for *Phantom of the Opera*, a million dollars a week, exceed anything it's ever done before anyway, because, see, Broadway theaters are smaller. But the great thing is working with all the presidents over the years.

I was gone by the time [M.] Peter McPherson got here, but it's strange, we have probably worked three or four dedication ceremonies. I remember the Armed Forces alumni and we did

the new flag pole, lighted flag pole, in front of the alumni chapel. So I'm emcee in uniform and Peter McPherson is our keynote speaker. And we worked a couple of other gigs. A benefit for Kresge Art Museum I also worked with him, and also the rededication of the Honors College building. So I have very cordial relationships with him. I'm not sure that he knows who I am, but he knows I was somebody who's been around here a long time. Plus, we were both in school at the same time. I just never met him. He graduated in '63 from Michigan State, when I did.

Charnley: So you continued your reserve commitment to the military?

Beachler: Well, yes.

Charnley: How has that changed?

Beachler: To my amazement, after I graduated from Michigan State and came back to WKAR as music program director, two naval people in the guise of two university professors came to see me. They were Roland Baker, a director of the museum, and Maynard Miller, who had climbed Mount Everest and he was a geologist here in our natural sciences department. I knew them because they came to WKAR and did interviews and all of that, but they also were reserve science research officers.

They said, "We have a little unit, a research unit, that meets here on campus, and we have a slot for a public affairs officer. We got out the qualifications and you meet all the qualifications. You have, (A), prior military experience. You have, (B), a college degree, and,

(C), you're in media, and we'd like to nominate you for direct commission as a naval public affairs officer.

I said, "Oh, thank you very much, but I have my honorable discharge. Only one summer did I have to go to Grayling and do two weeks with the Army. I have evolved. Of course, I loved my two years with the Army, and I owe the Army the fact that I came to Michigan State." But, anyway, I said, "No, thank you. No, thank you."

And they would call me up and say, "You'll get some more material."

"No, thank you."

"Well, why don't you come to one of our drills?" And so I did, and they had fascinating speakers. They had Milton Rokeach talking about leadership psychology. They weren't all science either, and I really liked them. So I gave in and sent in some papers, and the Navy sent me some more papers, and I sent those in.

This went on nine months, and all of a sudden I get a call that I'm to report for my direct commissioning ceremony in Detroit at the Naval Recruiting Headquarters in Detroit, and thinking that I'd be commissioned and then come back here and be part of the, it was Office of Naval Research--

[Begin Tape 2, Side 1]

Charnley: When the tape ended, you were talking about your direct commissioning ceremony.

Beachler: Yes. It was a very moving ceremony, and I was commissioned an ensign in the naval reserve and immediately promoted to lieutenant jaygee because of my time in the Army. So I

thought, “Well, I’m going to like the Navy.” I had reported already to Great Lakes to get all the uniforms, and I had to buy them. But I thought, they’re really great uniforms, officer uniforms. And then I was assigned to a public affairs company drilling in Detroit the same amount of times that the science research unit drilled at Michigan State. I said, “I think there’s some mistake. I’m going to drill on campus at Michigan State. That’s why I joined.”

And they said, “No, no, no, no. They should have told you this.”

So I drilled in downtown Detroit, both at Brodhead Naval Reserve Center and at the recruiting station and some other building from 1968 to 1980. In 1980 we moved out to Southfield, which was about thirty minutes closer, and I stayed in Southfield commanding a public affairs unit. Of course, the nature of the reserve changed in the unified reserve and active-duty people. I thought, well, I’ll stay with it as long as it’s, (A), I feel like I’m contributing something, and, (B), as long as it’s interesting to me.

Well, I’ve been on ships for two weeks at a time, aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers. I have been all over Washington, Norfolk, Boston, California. I wanted to go to Hawaii, but they didn’t send me there. Then I was transferred to a NATO unit which drilled in Battle Creek rather than Detroit, so it was even closer, but all of the duty was in Brussels, Belgium, with NATO. This was a unit directly in support of the representative of Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic, Europe. So I was at NATO Headquarters, and these were more extended duties, more like three weeks at a time. I was probably at NATO in Brussels four or five times and then in London the rest of the time. It was great duty.

Then I felt, well, maybe I’ve been in this a long time. Maybe this was going to be it. And I was tapped to command another public affairs unit attached to the Chicago Midwest Information Office. It was while I was there that I got the call-up for [Operation] Desert Storm

in '91 and told to report to my mobilization site for further assignment, and the understanding was I was going to Saudi Arabia. And I was running Wharton Center.

This was the first time. I mean, you know you've got to be ready to go, and actually you're anxious to go. That's part of what your training is, but it does make it difficult for your full-time job, although Michigan State has a great reputation for supporting its many people who have served in Guard and Reserve. This isn't a problem. If you go away for a month, then you get paid and your military pay is less than your university pay, and the university will ask for your paperwork and they will make up the difference. They don't pay you again. But if you go out when you're on vacation, you do get paid.

So, anyway, I waited in Chicago at the Navy Office of Information. I was certainly working twenty-four hours a day because Desert Shield had turned into Desert Storm. This was February of 1991. The deputy in that office was already in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The director was there, but the director said, "If we get another call, you're going because you're my deputy now, because my wife is going to have a baby any day, and this is the human element."

I said, "Fine." But, you know, that war lasted about ten days, and I still was awaiting orders to go, but Washington was waiting to see what the need was. And I knew two or three of my colleagues in other units, some of whom I'd worked with, captains--by this time I was a Navy captain--which is the equivalent of full colonel. I was an Army private, a PFC.

Charnley: Acting as a colonel.

Beachler: Yes. So it was incredible. But the thing of it is, both the Army and the Navy liked me, and I was always very grateful for that. Well, it turned out that I did get orders, and the

orders ordered me to go home. So I had to go up to Great Lakes and outprocess. I went home after two and a half weeks in Chicago, and the [unclear] at Wharton Center said, "Nice going on the war." Lansing Rotary--I'm a Rotarian--gave me a welcome-home with pennants and gifts, and they gave me a citation. I have it framed. It's for a meritorious service aboard USS *Michigan Avenue*, because I was right across the Art Institute at 55 East [unclear] around the corner from Symphony Hall. And I was. I stayed at Great Lakes.

At that time I joined the media training team at USN-TV, which is a very good program. We train people from all over the country, mostly naval personnel, and that has evolved to another media training team based in Sacramento, California, which I'm still on. I've been twice in the last three or four months and I'll go again within the next month to San Francisco.

Charnley: Are you still [unclear]?

Beachler: I retired. I retired because you reach a--

Bergwell: With a big party.

Beachler: Yes. A golden age. I didn't want lots of cannons and, you know, twenty-one-gun salutes. After all, I was a public affairs officer, not a destroyer driver. But they did give me a wild, wild dinner at Great Lakes, which was fun. And then they said, "Since our media training is all in civilian clothes, we'll just call you whenever we need you." So I've been back, I think, maybe three times to go at Great Lakes and do that. Plus, they pull me in Washington, D.C., to do ceremonial occasions, retirements. I've done two retirements at Great Lakes, another one

aboard the Great Lakes cruise ship, the Navy Pier in Chicago, and Navy Memorial in Washington. A year ago June, I was invited--they can't order me because I've retired--to do Fleet Week in New York. So I was there seven days. They didn't actually pay me for the seven days, but now I am drawing retirement and I feel I am being paid. And it was very nice duty and I got to see seven productions on Broadway. So I didn't work every minute, as you can see.

Birdwell: One thing I wanted to ask you about, though, we sort of slid past it, was the Arts Billboard thing. I'm speaking of things not here anymore, so to speak, you know, and I think that was important community outreach sort of thing.

Beachler: Actually, Arts Billboard was the second generation of the Saturday radio program. When the new format for WKAR FM went on in March 1965, one of the programs I wanted to add, even though I'd have to do it myself, like the morning program and like Listeners' Choice and other things, the on-the-air hosting, is I wanted a program that would talk about new recordings and why they were important. It also implied to the listening public that we were adding lots of new stuff. Actually, the only things we were acquiring in those early days was what record companies sent us, and they were kind of stingy, and it was rare that we got to buy anything.

So I got my buddy, Gilbert Hanson, who had a huge record collection, to do this program with me on Saturday, and we called it Recent Acquisitions. We pushed the truth a little bit, because Gilbert bought all of these unusual Czech composers, and he would come in and we'd talk about them. He knew so much about music. The nice thing about Gilbert is that he wasn't a snob. There was no composer that he felt was beneath listening to for what the composer is,

whether it's Ferdi Grofe or Beethoven or Karl Haydn's Soleur, any of them. So he was a delight. So for the years that I was music program director of WKAR FM, that is, '65 to '70, the program was called Recent Acquisitions.

Because Gilbert went to a lot of things, and because in those days I had doing some theater in the area, like *Dark of the Moon* was one of the early ones at the Alchemist [?] Barn Theater, and *The Little Foxes*, which you were in, Christine. That was in the late 1960s. Gilbert would say, "Well, tell us about the play you're directing." So we talked about some things going on in the area. Downtown Dr. David Mattel [phonetic] formed a new community chorus to sing with the Lansing Symphony Orchestra, and we talked about that. So we talked about new recordings and we talked about events.

Well, when I got this new job as a presenter and was leaving WKAR, (A), I wasn't going to see what WKAR got in as records, because I was physically not going to be there. What we couldn't do at Recent Acquisitions and have it all be Gilbert's music, because you'd never hear it again. So for about eight or nine months we went off the air, and a lot of people said, "We miss you on Saturdays. You know, that's when we do our housecleaning or we rake the yard and we take you out in the yard." So we came up with this idea, and WKAR also said the person who replaced me wanted to extend a hand to me, and he said, "Ken, if you want to keep that Saturday slot, I mean, we really don't have anything else to do."

And I said, "Well, maybe we could do a program that just focuses on events going on, because, you know, in the community and on campus there's so much." And I asked Gilbert, thinking he thought that five years of that was probably plenty. But I asked Gilbert, who was a special education teacher in Lansing, an MSU grad, I know that he had two master's degrees from Michigan State, and a great music lover, if he would like to come back and do a program

where we just talked about performance and some interviews and things like that. And then as I realized, since I was going to be presenter, as I came into that, I could invite some of the artists or do some telephone interviews.

So we went back on the air in, I think it probably was early 1971, and we called it Arts Billboard. That became even more popular than Recent Acquisitions, because we talked about high school productions. We helped fundraise. Fundraising started during that time. Gilbert dressed up as somebody called K.A.R. Bach. He created this whole new persona, this eighteenth-century man, and he appeared at malls as K.A.R. Bach. We had so much fun, and it really kept us very close to the music department, the theater department, but also to the Alchemist Barn Theater and then ultimately Riverwalk and all of the things, certainly symphony, and we ended up with twenty-three years of broadcast experience, which was a little bit longer than Ma Perkins had been on the radio.

The reason we ended them was because, let's see, we were on until 1988--Gilbert was moving away. He had thought he was moving away before, and I was able to keep the programs going, even though I had drill weekends once a month for the Navy. But when he moved away this time, he was going to move to the Upper Peninsula. He had moved once to Hawaii but didn't stay very long. He moved once to Florida and didn't stay very long. But the Upper Peninsula, and I couldn't figure this out, really--I went to the program director at WKAR, and I said, "Gilbert's going to be gone, but maybe there's somebody on staff or someone you know who would like to cover the program. I'll be involved."

They said, "Well, you know, maybe it's time, because no one wants to work Saturdays in the middle of the day, of our regular staff. Maybe it is time." And I thought, I wouldn't feel bad about it. So. But you know what? It's not infrequent that on a Saturday morning I'll be up

doing something at home or running an errand, and I think, “I got to--what am I supposed to be doing something,” and the something I really should be at WKAR at the Com Arts Building at least by 11:30 with materials and my files. You just do it so long, there’s a vacuum there. And people still ask, “Any chance you’re going to go back on Saturdays?” “No, I don’t think so.”

But I have never quite given up broadcasting. I still do Lansing Symphony’s announcements for all their concerts and their subscription series, and I’m heard on what is now WFMK, but was WSWM. It’s all owned by Radio One. And WJIM AM and FM, and I know lots of colleagues in broadcasting. So I still am doing commercial radio. I don’t do truck sales or yard sales or anything like that, but if it’s the right client, I do it. I do a lot of voice-over narrations for video presentations, for the aerospace industry, Jet Dye Barnes [phonetic] Aerospace, Spartan Motors, you know, road-building equipment, heavy equipment. I do a lot of industrial stuff, which I was trained to do as a seventeen-year-old kid in Chicago.

Birdwell: [unclear].

Beachler: Yes. Right. I do a lot of emcee work. I’m house emcee with the Lansing Concert Band. A week ago Saturday, I was with the Custer Band at Dart [phonetic]. We have had played Wharton Center. The neat thing about playing Wharton Center, not only is it with the Lansing Concert Band for the children’s concerts, but I’ve appeared with the theater department in *Romeo and Juliet* as Juliet’s daddy. That was kind of fun, playing the festival stage.

Birdwell: In the North Theater?

Beachler: Yes, they keep exhuming me for summer theater, and this summer the plan is I'm doing all three plays and then going to Mackin Island. I don't know. We hope he lived to do it when you listen to this. But the bookends of doing three Summer Circles is I start rehearsal next week, in another week, for the Roger Robeck [phonetic] play at Riverwalk. That plays April 5th to 15th. Then I'm going to Washington, D.C. No Navy business, but a Navy colleague is coming here from England, and Colonial Williamsburg after that. Then I come back. Then I go into rehearsal for Summer Circle. I complete that and go into rehearsal for a master class, also at Riverwalk Theater, which plays in August. So this is a five-show year.

We've already done the revival of *Sophisticated Ladies*, which we did last summer at the Spotlight Theater. And then Lansing Community College asked us to revive it for a one-weekend run in January. We did, and it was even more wonderful than it was out in Grand Ledge. And the neat thing is everybody in it had Michigan State University ties. They either were graduates or they were either alumni. One happened to be director of the Spartan Marching Band, John Madden. He was our third trumpet. Both the trombones, one is in the Marching Band department. Another one is an undergraduate. John Dale Smith is a masters in piano. He was our bandleader. But everybody there had a relationship, and all the cast. Three of the singers were graduates of the School of Music, and the fourth, Sunny Wilkinson, is married to Ron Newman, professor here. So it had a nice MSU ring to it. That's not the sole criteria of how I cast shows.

I feel that Michigan State gave me so much, and then I've always wanted to give back, like I think I've given back to my country. They gave me all kinds of opportunities, including the motivation to go to college. I've tried to give back to my state through seven years as vice chair of the State Arts Council, and that was looking like a lifetime assignment. I thought, no,

what I really to do, I want to do, I want to direct and do theater. Plus I've got other little projects. So I've given back to my state, and I keep thinking I've given back to my university, but it can never be enough.

Charnley: In looking back at your career here at Michigan State and even as a student, what would you say is maybe the most important?

Beachler: The most important thing I was able to accomplish at Michigan State?

Charnley: Or anything that you feel is, in your work or--

Beachler: The most important thing that I've done at Michigan State is be in a position to influence the lives of students. I really appreciate the support faculty. I appreciate the wonderful professors I had. I appreciate the administrators who made it possible for me to do the things I've done. But the most important thing that I've done, I mentioned Jay Johnson, who learned to pronounce classical composers, but we have students working for us who worked for us at Wharton Center. Students have always been the key, and I was one myself.

Now, you try to tell students today, "I was once like you," but they perceive you as this old character. But we have made it possible. We have at least ten or twelve people working in arts administration around the country who trained with us, either as grad students in our office, graphics people, our usher corps, with Wharton Center Housing and Food, our food services, and we hear from them. We hear from them.

I was emceeding a Lansing Concert Band concert at Wharton Center this fall, and our guest artists with the concert band were three men and a tenor. One of the three men was in our usher corps. He told the audience, he said, “You know, it wasn’t that many years ago,” because they’re all now alum, he said, “I used to be working for Mr. Beachler in the usher corps, and tonight I’m very happy to say he’s working for us.”

But it’s been that kind of relationship, and I hear it all the time. Christmas cards, you know, from kids that, now, some of them aren’t really working show business, so to speak, but a lot of them are. I know a lot of them learned their public relations, their community relations, their serving the public through working with us, whether they were radio announcers or people working for us. So I feel, and I’m sure both of us as professors feel, that there are those students who’ve made it all worthwhile, and ultimately it satisfies you. So that’s it.

I mean, what other guy has the opportunity to act in a production with students who are freshmen and sophomores and grad students? You know, it was great last summer when I did *Winterset*. And when I came back to do sound for the recent Shakespeare play, three of the people involved said, “Oh, a cast party at Beachler’s.” It just sounded, and I thought, do you do a cast party for *Comedy of Errors*? Well, we’ve got to wait for that. But, you know, they’re great friends.

Birdwell: He played an awful gangster last summer, too. Really a villain.

Beachler: Yes. Yes. It’s sort of like my media training. I play a hostile television program host, but this Trock [phonetic] in *Winterset* is, I hope, cast against type, as we say.

Birdwell: How are you doing for voice and everything? Because we did think about talking about your directing and acting in the area, not just MSU but the theaters around--

Beachler: Yes, I think if I don't go on and on, and I won't, we can continue with that.

Birdwell: That's fine.

Beachler: Yes, yes. It's better to do it now.

Birdwell: Yes, I wasn't sure when you had to leave.

Beachler: I just have to go home and get my uniform out, as tonight is the ROTC Ball, and because I'm in the Armed Forces Alumni, I was invited, the Navy Ball.

Birdwell: Where are they?

Beachler: The ROTC Ball is at Kellogg Center tonight.

Birdwell: Well, you don't have to drive miles and miles then.

Beachler: No, not to Battle Creek or Detroit, which I do.

Birdwell: Well, tell us about the directing that you did with Riverwalk and the Barn and the Spotlight and, what have I left out? Around here, I mean.

Beachler: Okay, around here, just Midland Center for the Arts and Grand Rapids Circle Theater. I didn't know it. It's sort of like finding out I was an organist. But I got into the army and they said, "Well, you direct this play and be in it." And then I directed some more plays, and I was feeling more and more confident and realized that you don't just tell actors what to do. It's a team effort.

So I got out of the army. I went to Grand Rapids and auditioned, was in *Pal Joey*. I'm down here. I can't do any shows at Michigan State. The next year or two Grand Rapids Summer Circle Theater asked me to direct. So I started directing back in Grand Rapids. I graduated here in '63. I used to go--for instance, what became the Barn Theater used to be Community Circle Players, that little warehouse downtown--

Birdwell: It's down on Saginaw.

Beachler: Right. Then called Oakland. And because I was used to going to things, even as a student I went to not the Lecture Concert Series but symphony. I was used to going. So I went to see Community Circle Players, and I went to see some Civic Players things, too. I'm not quite sure when it happened, but it was after Community Circle. I'd moved to the Barn Theater. But someone, I wish I could name a name, but asked me if I'd consider directing during the season. And it seems to me, Christine, that the first thing I directed there was *The Little Foxes*.

Birdwell: Really?

Beachler: Yes. I was thinking it was *Dark of the Moon*, but in looking through my records recently--

Birdwell: No, *Dark of the Moon* is after, but I thought you had directed other things.

Beachler: No, I think it started there, and--

Charnley: And you were in that play.

Birdwell: Oh, it was wonderful.

Beachler: Yes, she created a character that anybody who saw it still remembers. Yes. Yes.

Birdwell: He was an excellent director for that show. It was just super, and for Darvinon [phonetic], too.

Beachler: Right. It was a very good cast. We have worked together a lot over the years. So actually it was the Barn Theater. With the old Lecture Concert Series I could do a show maybe in midwinter or maybe the first show of the fall, where I could go into rehearsal before fall term began, like late September. Once Wharton Center opened, then I couldn't do any directing anymore, so to speak, but I had done by that time maybe a dozen shows at the Barn. I had not

directed for LCC yet, although now I've done that. Boar's Head Theater always talked to me about directing especially if I retired from Wharton Center. But what they offered me until two nights ago was acting. But two nights ago I got the call from John Peakes. He says, "We desperately need you to take over the spring production. I was going to do it." I said, "John, I have five shows to do between now and August. I cannot do it." So I have been asked.

Birdwell: Well, what did he want you to do?

Beachler: The spring musical. I forget what they're doing.

Birdwell: Oh, yes, yes, yes. *Sincerely Patsy Kline*.

Beachler: Yes, *Sincerely Patsy Kline*, a show I don't know and I'd have to read it. But, anyway, so I've had, I think, a very good relationship with Community Circle at Oakam's Barn. But once Riverwalk opened, I was really kind of busy with Wharton Center by then, and it took a while before I could actually work something out. Then all of a sudden it's two shows in one season, because I got cast as an actor the same season I was directing. But what I think we have here in Lansing is that I would rather there be twenty-four good directors and that you're one of them rather than to have very few where it's either your show or it's going to be awful.

I keep learning every time I do a show with Frank Rutledge, because in a way he--I'd already been directing but I learned a lot about directing from Frank. And I certainly am able to work with other directors very well, too. But it's that relationship that you pass on. Then some

people who've acted for me are directing as well. So this is all knowledge you process and pass along, ideally. But I love working in the community.

I never thought that I'd be here longer than four years, because Lansing had never been a particular--I'm from the Grand Rapids area, and I was sure I'd be living in Chicago, New York, and in subsequent years I thought, you know, San Diego, Seattle, Boston. But the truth of the matter is I'm so busy here, I don't have the time to plan to move away, and, furthermore, if I want to go some place, you can go. Right? So, and I'm not ruined here. So I really like working with theater in the community. And we've got a lot of talented people, and more come on the scene all the time.

I just held auditions and I needed two boys twelve years old. We had probably seven or eight people, boys, of different ages. I thought we'd have to go to fourteen. One was twenty-three actually but said he can play fourteen. One said he's fifteen; he can easily play fourteen. It's what you hear in their voices that makes the difference. Plus, one had a mustache. But we had boys, three or four, eleven, and two or three, twelve, then the fifteen and the nineteen and the twenty-four. We've got two that are eleven and twelve who are just ideal for it. I mean, they're actors. They don't just read--they can read, by the way. I've had kids audition for me who said, "Mr. Beachler, I can't read," and I think, "Why didn't your parents think about this?", when we were auditioning for J.B. out at the Spotlight Theater.

We've had a very good run at the Spotlight Theater as well. Len Klug [phonetic] has really given me carte blanche over the years. I'm saddened that they don't plan to continue summer shows out there on a regular basis, but the truth of the matter is the physical plant needs a lot of work, and maybe they're going to do that. So we'll see.

But, no, I like directing, and I don't know how many shows I've done with you, Christine, over the years, but we've done together Summer Circle theater out in front of Fairchild Theater. We've done--

Birdwell: *Crawling Arnold*, we did *Crawling Arnold*.

Beachler: *Crawling Arnold*, yes, where she was my social worker, and I was a regressive adult man who had gone to playing the child because he got attention. The social worker, he liked to have her visit because he was all over here in this neediness. And, Christine, it was in the nineties when we did that. We were so wet.

Birdwell: Oh, yes. Ken rained sweat, but his sweat didn't smell.

Beachler: Great. Well, what we smelled of was insect repellent because the mosquitoes come out in full. So, anyway,--

Birdwell: You should talk about the other play that was with that. I can remember you leaping onto this truck.

Beachler: I had to run--

[Begin Tape 2, Side 2]

Birdwell: --and as soon as you say it, I will remember it.

Charnley: You're talking on the tape that you're talking about your work together in plays?

Birdwell: Right.

Beachler: Well, Summer Circle has allowed us to do some of the wildest stuff. Summer circle has been in Dem Hall, out in front of the Fairchild Theater and Kresge Courtyard, and it's been a couple of different locations. On the lawn south of the university auditorium, and there actually is in the new design a kind of Greek theater in that area proposed. But some of the wild things we've done, and they all haven't been avant garde wild, but some of them have just been unusual things. Summer Fair you would not think of as Summer Fair, but along with this *Crawling Arnold*, which was a play by Jules Pfeiffer, a cartoonist, that Christine and I did, and there was a mommy and a daddy. Everybody was named by what I called them in my regressive behavior.

There was a play by Sam Shepard called *La Turista*, and *La Turista* is, for those who have done much traveling, if you go south of the border, *la turista* is a condition you get if you drink the water. And actually I think that was a good title for this play. It was in two acts. A lot of the audience never saw the final act because they'd already had an intermission.

They loved *Crawling Arnold*. They laughed and roared. So then this other play begin, and they think, "What on earth is going on?" And then there's another intermission, and the second act begins and you realize in time what they're doing now took place before the act you just saw. So he's turned time on us, plus you can't understand what any of the relationships are. Finally it just goes absolutely berserk, and the character I played, Kent, goes crazy. Now, you

have to remember that he's going to come back to do what he did in act one with his wife-girlfriend, whatever she was. But there's a ritual they go through, and actually Christine was supposed to be part of this voodoo witch doctor and his sidekick, and Christine was supposed to be the sidekick, like she was the social worker in the first one. But once she found out that they were bring out two roosters and chop their heads off and let the blood drip over me to cure me, she said, "Wait a minute."

Christine, we were still rehearsing in the scene shop. We were well before it, and you said one night, "Frank, I don't want to do this. I want to do other plays, but I don't like the cruelty aspect. I have problems with the--." It was more of an ethical, it was almost because it was, you know, when I met her, she was the spouse of an ordained minister. She wasn't your typical minister's wife, but she was. And so she was having problems with the fact that the play mocked ritual curing faith, plus we were killing. And I thought, "Good for her." I mean, I can understand it. I don't know who--they got a stage hand or somebody to do it, plus the roosters were pre-sent on their way. So when we actually did the play, they just hung there with their wings, you know, you pick them up by the feet, and then we couldn't find anything that really chop their heads off. They actually tried rubber chickens, too, you know, big joke, and they would bounce off. No.

Birdwell: It would bounce on the stage floor.

Beachler: It was horrible, and we were supposed to be--and then in the very end I run from the stage through the crowd up the steps to the front of Kresge Art Museum, back across, and on the wall, there's a wall that goes along between the street and the plaza, between Kresge and

Fairchild, all along the wall, and at the end of the wall there was a pick-up truck parked, which was our director's truck. I would jump on the truck bed, climb up on the hood on the cab top, slide down the windshield off the hood, fortunately there was no hood ornament, onto the ground, run back up on the stage, and jump through the scenery. The scenery was made of plastic, which would then collapse and bury me inside all this plastic, and the other character stage, and I was talking all the time, and Old Doc, who did all the rituals, was also talking all the time.

The first night we did it, the dew had come early, and I got up to the top of the cab and slid. I just slid off the whole front end of the truck. But it was a real test of my endurance to be able to run, scream the lines, and do all this jumping. It's the most physical thing I've ever done, and I think my director, who was Frank Rutledge, just kind of took it all for granted. You know, "Beachler--"

Birdwell: Right. He'll do it.

Beachler: "I'll say jump, and you'll say, 'How high?'" and I think he still feels that way. So, anyway, but I love the theater. My card today simply says "Ken Beachler, Actor, Director." It doesn't have "Captain, Retired, U.S. Navy Reserve." It doesn't have anything emeritus. Actually I do have, the university of board of trustees gave me a title, so I am director emeritus of performing arts facilities and programs and senior consultant. Now, we all know the longer a title, the less it means, so it doesn't really. But I'm very pleased that as I left Wharton Center, there is an endowed apprenticeship program in arts administration for students, which I think is great, and the advisory council funded that. It's nice to leave with something that implies it's

going on to students. But in my lifetime I actually have had the hands-on knowledge that has gone to students.

Charnley: Thank you on behalf of the project for your insights. I appreciate the time you've spent. Thank you.

[End of interview]

Index

Adams, Pauline, 25
 Adams, Walter, 25
 Arts Billboard, 37, 39

 Baker, Roland, 32
 Baldwin, John, 29
 Beachler, Kenneth, 29
 Blanchard, Governor, 30
 Bocker, Geraldine, 4
 Bryan Hall, 12
 Buell, Don, 13
 Burke, Dennis, 29

 Cantlon, John, 18

 DiBiaggio, John A., 29

 Estelle, Dick, 11, 12, 14, 16, 18

 Garrison, Ann, 21

 Hannah, John A., 24, 26, 30
 Hanson, Gilbert, 37
 Harden, Edgar L., 26
 Hollingsworth, Alan, 27, 29
 Honors College, 13, 24
 Honors College Building, 31

 Jenison, Jim, 24
 Johnson, Jay, 17, 42

 Kellogg Center, 19, 44
 Kendig, Raymond, 3

 Mackey, Clara, 29
 Mackey, M. Cecil, 26, 29, 30
 Madden, John, 41
 Maddy, Joseph, 3
 Mattel, David, 38
 McPherson, M. Peter, 31
 Miller, Maynard, 32
 Milliken, William, 30
 Muchet, Steve, 17

 Newman, Ron, 41
 Niblack, Jim, 21, 30

 Oakland University, 31

 Pash, Donald, 18
 Paul, Wilson, 19

Rutledge, Jim, 21, 47, 52

Sabine, Gordon, 24

Scott, Les, 21

Smith, John Dale, 41

Stoddard, Jenny, 26

Sullivan, Richard, 30

University of Michigan, 3

WFMK, 14, 40

Wharton Center for Performing Arts, 21, 22, 26, 30

Wharton, Clifton R., Jr., 20, 21, 22, 24, 25

Wharton, Dolores, 21, 22

Wilkinson, Sunny, 41

WJIM, 40

WKAR, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 25, 28, 32, 37, 38, 39

WKAR-TV, 18

WSWM, 14, 28, 40