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StoryCorps interview with Todd Diacon

Kent State University

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Hi there.

So we know you from his introduction as the senior vice president of academic affairs and Provost but I'd like to dig a little deeper and find out who you are and what where you started before you became a member of Kent State faculty at Kent State. So first to start off our softball question. Where were you born.

Well before I answer that let me say that this morning I bought my tickets for an amount of payroll.

I was born in the vast metropolis of Wellington Kansas City which is a town of about 5000 people on the Kansas Oklahoma border. It's in the county that at one time grew more than any other county in the United States so it's an extremely rural farming area of Kansas.

That's awesome.

And so what was your childhood like.

Pretty idyllic a lot of sports.

You know it's not like in Wellington Kansas that you went to the museum because we didn't really have museums. It's not like you follow classical music or the theater so much because there's so much available so a lot of playing on your own.

It was kind of that stereotypical middle class rural upbringing where you just left the house and around dinnertime your mother yelled out and you came home for dinner. So it was it was a childhood that was marred by playing and sports and and also work. So everybody in my family my brothers and I have two brothers. We always had paid jobs. I started working for pay it in sixth grade and I've never not had a paying job since I was in sixth grade.

So yeah it was pretty great. It was great. It was a great place and a great time. And of the fine life I actually grew up on a farm. How can horses right next to this beautiful place.
So high.

What do you think that you were going to be when you grew up.

So I'm probably one of those oddballs that always knew what I wanted to do and not always but pretty early on understood that I wanted to be a historian and I can actually sort of identify a moment where I figured that out.

So pointedly I should say that I had this very interesting grandmother who was for 40 years a elementary school principal in the panhandle of Oklahoma. Really another very small town and she raised her two daughters on her own because her husband died when they were just very young. And so she had a pretty large impact on my life and she was very well-read and very well traveled individual and I think probably because I grew up listening to stories from her and she would read me stories. So I was really interested in history and I remember you know when you lived in Wellington going to Wichita was the big deal. Yeah probably city about the same size of Akron and I remember going to the Macy's and it was the first time I'd ever seen a bookstore or a book section in a store and I remember finding and buying this book on the history of World War One and I read it and that was probably in 6th grade that I pretty much figured out in sixth grade that I wanted to be a historian.

Sixth grade was a good year so I'm guessing did you enjoy school when you when you were growing up was it.

Yeah I enjoyed aspects of school. Yeah I enjoyed school. You know I think I enjoyed some courses better than others wasn't particularly good in mathematics so I struggled in that area.

A lot of school in a small town at least where I grew up but when I grew up revolved around sports and so basically you went to school so that you could then go play sports or school. So that was a lot of it.

Although I was also in all the plays I was in every school play in high school.

That's awesome yeah. In the right place.
So you said you have two brothers so growing up were you the mischievous one or were you usually the one that was beaten up because I'm the youngest.

[00:04:24]
So you know we were hassled a lot and I was not I wasn't the mischievous one.

[00:04:31]
Really my. My older brother was the most GVs when I was I was pretty mischievous but in comparison to him My parents were so tired of dealing with my other friends that I kind of got left alone and I could be mischievous and I get caught.

[00:04:48]
That's the place to be. Yeah.

[00:04:51]
So what do you think growing up and now you consider like your strengths and your weaknesses to be.

[00:04:59]
Well I think it's they kind of are the mirror image of one another so if I were if I would just say what I thought were the markers of what somebody from Kansas was like when I grew up. I think those would be both strengths and weaknesses on the strength side you know really strong work ethic. You just can't grow up where I grew up and not have a strong work ethic cause you were either you were either growing up and working on a farm or you were working for a farmer. Everybody works so you know I was a I peeled potatoes for the Kentucky Fried Chicken. I was a carhop at Sonic. I was the delivery boy for a mom and pop drugstore worked on my uncle's farm. So I think a strong work ethic I think also a pretty early for two reasons are real early strength and commitment to diversity. So I grew up in this little tiny town in Kansas. But it was exceptionally diverse town because about a third to half the population was Hispanic American. It was the regional track headquarters for the Santa Fe Railroad and a lot of those employees were Mexican American. And so and my father was the small town doctor and so a lot of his patients were Mexican American families and so I just really grew up in a Hispanic culture very early on. So I think a lot of commitment to diversity for that reason and my grandmother is was very active in the Quaker church and the Quakers had a real commitment to social justice and diversity and worldliness. And I got that from her as well. I think the witnesses one of them and I think it applies to Ohio as well as I think Kansans are really bad about bragging on themselves and talking about themselves and so and that's OK because you know it's really the proof is in the pudding. But at some point when you move beyond your small town in Kansas or your small town in Ohio you know when you're trying to get a job in New York City or you're trying to make your way through graduate school at the University of Wisconsin you're going to be up against people that are from a culture that's far more about telling people who you are and being very comfortable about asserting your successes. And I learned I think I learned it took me about halfway through my M.A. and Ph.D. program at the University of Wisconsin that I'm going to have to step it up and start bragging on myself some because I was going into these interviews for fellowships for jobs where people were much more comfortable with an adept at telling their story fairly quickly than I
was. So I would say one of my weaknesses has always been to more forcefully assert my accomplishments and who I am because I think Ohioans are a lot like that as well. I love Ohio for that reason. But sometimes you have these great Ohioans and they do great work. But it's like you can't get them to tell you about it because it's seen as bragging. So I think that's a weakness.

[00:08:00]
OK.

[00:08:01]
Now think that as bragging like I understand that fully because we I mean as a theater major we have to be able to market ourselves right off the bat as soon as you walk into an interview you've got to be able to put it all out there.

[00:08:15]
But coming from a small town also it's it's interesting to see how you know people will look at that you know so I think that that's also a weakness of mine that I've had to grow out of being more involved in theater.

[00:08:34]
And I think once I got to college it was like really prevalent because right then and there is competition and it's heady yeah yeah yeah and I think you come up against some assumptions and even stereotype so I can remember the first day of my first graduate school course in history at the University of Wisconsin and maybe we were in a seminar with 12 people and we ran around the room introducing ourselves like who we were and that sort of thing. First person is like well I'm such and such and I did my I just finished my bachelor's degree at Harvard and actually grew up in Bolivia because my father was the U.S. ambassador to Bolivia and you know I wrote my senior thesis at Harvard on you know the creation of the banana industry in Guatemala in the 1950s and next person well I graduated from Dartmouth and I lived in Spain for two years and everyone was like that and then they got to me and I was like well I'm from Wellington Kansas. I graduated from Southwestern College in Winfield Kansas Southwestern College didn't have any courses in Latin American history. That's where I got my Ph.D. and so this is literally my first course in Latin American history and I think I did fine. Did really well. But when I was on the job market I noticed in a letter of reference that one of my professors referred to me as a diamond in the rough and I think the only reason he did that just because you know he was from Yale and he grew up in New York City and it's like well you couldn't really be a superstar coming from Wellington Kansas. But he's smart he works hard. So I'll call him a diamond in the rough. So I think you do. You know that was one of those stereotypes that I think I had to work against.

[00:10:17]
Yeah.

[00:10:18]
So what motivates you. Now what pushes you to rise to your passion.
Yeah I get a lot of satisfaction from helping other people succeed. And I think you have to want to do that in where I am now so when I was a professor certainly I got a lot of satisfaction out of helping my students succeed. But then I was also engaged in creative activity and writing books so so I could control that and I could produce that success. But once I became an administrator really that's what it's all about. It's almost 100 percent about facilitating the success of others so I suspect others have heard me say this but one of my great joys is meeting Kent State students early on in their career and then watching them make their way through the university and then doing great things afterward. So I think facilitating the success of others is really my great passion.

That's amazing. So.

Now this is where I get a little interesting.

But if resources were absolutely unlimited what one skill would you love to master.

Yeah Ashleigh that's pretty easy for me. I'd like to be able to play musical instruments here at exactly zero musical ends and I'm always extremely envious of people that can do that.

So yeah if I could wake up tomorrow and just pick up a guitar and I had the good fortune of in my office a few months ago meeting Joe Walsh and if I could play like Joe Walsh that would be a beautiful thing.

So is picking up the guitar is that your number one instrument is that no drums guitar drums and guitar do that.

I'd be a happy camper. So it's the most adventurous thing you've done.

Wow jeez that's interesting.

The first thing that popped into my head was riding a donkey up a mountain and Jordan a couple of years ago with my cello if Antone who is our associate provost for global education. So I've never written a donkey before I'd written a book. It's a very steep mountain. Yeah we didn't really think it through either
when we ran the donkeys and it was probably halfway up that we thought wow maybe we bit off more than we can chew but it was really great because once we got to the top of the mountain we had this amazing view.

[00:12:43]
So that was adventurous but it wasn't premeditated in that sense. Yeah I don't know when I was right after I graduated from college I moved to Guatemala.

[00:12:57]
And you know I was so naive I didn't even know Guatemala was in the middle of a civil war at that time so I moved there to learn Spanish and lived with a great family had a great experience. But it was turned out to be a bit of an adventure because because they were under military dictatorship and they were in the middle of a civil war at that time. So that was in retrospect that was pretty adventurous.

[00:13:21]
Yeah. How heavy was that on you. Oh I don't know.

[00:13:25]
It's something I don't know when I was 20 I think 21 I don't know how reflective I was at 21. I mean you'd hear gunshots at night and you'd see a lot of armed people during the day and pretty sensationalistic headlines in the newspapers. But I think it's more upon reflection that I realize I was in a pretty delicate situation.

[00:13:49]
You have wow. Yeah.

[00:13:51]
So what's the one thing that's on your bucket list. That's one thing that you got to do that you haven't had to get to learn to play guitar Ali Joe.

[00:14:01]
That would be on my bucket list.

[00:14:04]
One thing I got to do you know I don't do anything about this really but I have this real. It's almost really just in terms of reading but I have this real desire to live off the grid. So like you know have a house that has no.

[00:14:23]
It's totally powered by solar energy or and or whatever. I guess that would be a bucket list thing would be live in zero energy.
Finally you have been in a lake in Colorado that early on in my career I lived for a year with my brother and we lived in a one room cabin that was handbill had a composting toilet.

Not to get too much. So maybe something like that. Yeah yeah.

So if you could turn any activity anything into an Olympic sport what would you have a great chance of getting a gold medal.

Well I mean again this is a total exaggeration but I was a pretty good swimmer actually so I swam competitively and never got to the Olympic caliber. But I think that would be the closest I could ever say to obtaining great success. I think swimming although it's funny because I swam so much growing up that I can hardly stand to look at a pool indoor pool now.

I'm like going into outdoor pools but that smell of chlorine in me and I swam a lot from the time I was about four till the time I was about 20 I swam seven hours a day.

So. Oh yeah. Beaches are great and just not on my bucket list because I go to them fairly regularly. So yeah.

So what do you think would be the first question after waking up from being cryogenically frozen for a hundred years that I would have.

Like I wake up wake up right that chamber what's playing at Port House theater.

Good question. Yeah that would probably come to mind.

I don't know.

Gosh I don't know. I suppose I should say something like. Have they cured cancer. But I don't know. I think it would be more like what's for lunch.
We probably wouldn't really even understand that you'd been out for 100 years or so. Or. Or maybe it would be I don't know if you've ever seen that Woody Allen movie Sleeper where they go into the future into the hands on it with hundreds of years into the future and it turns out that everything we thought now is bad for you is good for you. So I'd be like our Twinkies.

Good for you.

You know why I say so what are you most proud of.

Well see that's hard for Kanzen answer because you don't think in those terms. I think any parent is proud when their children are a child does something well. And so our son has had has is an architect in New Orleans and he's having good success as an architect in New Orleans and that's really gratifying to travel down to New Orleans and just remember he was the lead architect on the renovation of a house in the French Quarter so he took us there and showed us what he had done. He was he was part of a team that took a warehouse and turned it into a restaurant. We went and ate at the restaurant so that's kind of cool to look around and he tells you about the projects he was doing and the decisions he made and. Then he was Lee was part of a team that renovated a home in New Orleans that was featured in dwell magazine in December. And his name is in there.

So I'm proud of our son's accomplishments. So there's you know a memory throughout your lifetime that you'd love to hold on to forever for the rest like until the end of time yeah.

I mean I don't want to get modeling here. But actually this is I thought about this very recently. So two weeks ago my oldest brother died he had a brain tumor. And so yeah it was very sad but at his service I talked about this middies memories I had of him and actually my favorite memory was so we lived together for a year in northwest Arkansas and he was our mountains and he was kind of a hippie doctor. He was he was a radiologist physician but he was still kind of a hippie and he drove around in a Volkswagen and aunts and there was a lake Beaver Lake in northwest Arkansas it's a pretty ideal place and on Sundays we'd leave this little one room cabin and we drive in his watch wagon to this lake and you know it be 100 degrees and the windows would be down because Volkswagen bugs didn't have air conditioning. He loved to go over one long hill and go and put it in neutral and go as fast as he could to the bottom to see how much the next side he could get.
And I just remembered how much fun that was and I remember just the smells and the heat coming in through the windows and the smell of the grasses and the summertime and yeah that's a nice comforting memory here.

[00:19:15]
So what do you feel is the now.

[00:19:21]
I know as an educator you can take this however you like but what do you feel is the biggest issue or problem that we face in that society today.

[00:19:38]
Yeah I mean right now right now I would say it's the tension between freedom of speech and a sense of security. So I think you know freedom of speech is the law of the land and and and that we have to have it and we will have it on the other hand you know if you have people on your campus or in your community spewing things that are really hate filled that's difficult as well. So I think that's a real challenge and I was unexpectedly moved by the night before last by the episode of the Ken Burns Vietnam series that featured Kent State and really in the context of escalating disagreements and violence and what happens when that runs out of control. So I think that tension between freedom of speech and protecting each other's security interacting in a civil fashion when you disagree. That's a real challenge right now in the United States. Absolutely.

[00:20:46]
So what do you what do you feel as a nationwide or a world event that you'll remember or that stands out to you that has some type of significant now meaning to you.

[00:21:02]
Yeah that's pretty easy for me both because of the event itself and then what happened afterwards so on 9/11 I was the I was the chair of the history department at the University of Tennessee and my administrative assistant our offices were connected with a doorway and the door was always always open and she had back then she had one of these little tiny like three inch portable TVs. And I remember her yelling out Hey Dr. Dyken I think you better come in here and look at this. And so I walked in there and we were she said some little plane or something flew into one of the world towers and she had it turned on and we were watching it and right at that moment the second plane hit the other tower. It was like oh my god we're under attack. That's when we both we just both looked at each other and said Oh my God we're under attack. And so I mean that's obviously seared in my mind.

[00:21:52]
And then it's also seared in my mind because her son at that time it just was just graduating high school and he joined the Army you know moved by the events he joined the Army and I think three years later he was killed in Iraq. So that's a real that's a real. That was a real powerful event for me.
So yeah so are the accomplishments that you've made with you know the lifestyle that you've had what is a great description of how you would like to be remembered.

Well again man that's so anticancer to even think that people would remember you years would be an honor.

So I think I guess on the low end that I didn't screw it up. So on the low end of being remembered at least it didn't make things worse. And then on the higher end that he that I added value and made things better. I would I would feel comfortable as people said that there is a pretty good history of Kent State University and I'm embarrassed to say in the moment I can't remember the author's name. He's a retired faculty member. It's really a history of Kent State University presidents. And it's interesting to see how he sort of analyzes each Kent State President and how how probably how we remember people changes over time. So I don't know that at any one moment how I would be remembered would be the same way I'd be remembered 20 years after that.

But if you know if I in some small way contributed to make Kent State or the or anything else better I'd be comforted that would be comforting to know.

So do you feel that you've hit a or there was a moment that was kind of a defining moment in your success and that brought you to where you are. Do you think that that's still yet to come.

Well gee both I guess.

I do actually remember one success. And I just because I remember closing my door in my office and sort of jumping up and down and yelling.

So I was awarded the prize for the best book on Brazilian history. And that book was a lot of fun to write but it was really hard to write and it was a real labor of love but it was a real labor and and it was also a hard book to write because about a third way through I developed this writer's block and I just got stuck.

I couldn't just couldn't make any headway into it and I wake up and kind of in this cold sweats at night about what the hell I'm never going to get this book written and.
And so in the end by the way I was just able to convince myself that I wasn't writing a book and that I was just writing a series of journal articles and that's how I got through at the same time Bill Clinton was running for president and and I've just drawn a blank on his name who was his adviser that said it's just the economy stupid.

Like all Carville James Carville said the economy stupid. So focus on the economy.

And I remember one day writing on a piece of paper and taping it up above my computer it's just the story stupid. So it was a great story it was about the construction of the first telegraph line in the Amazon. So it is a great story and I just had to capture the magic of that story.

So I'm telling you all that because. And the first I took one of the chapters and submitted it to a journal for publication as an article and it got rejected and it got trashed by the anonymous reviewers.

I was like Oh great. You know I've been working on this book now for three years and it's a piece of crap. But I really soldiered through that. I produced this book and then it won the prize. And I just remember getting that e-mail message.

And I opened it up and it says you have won the war Endeen prize. And I close my and I was like Yeah I was next to my administrative assistant. So I closed the door and I started screaming and jumping up and down. It was a great Craigmile right moment.

So what's one thing that you would like to do or that you see in the future. You know I a large Vlas always a large contribution or you know something significant that you'd like to do. Cat oh here it can't. Oh yeah.

Keep the College of the arts under control.

That would be a key. Yeah you know it's not outside of can I was thinking about this this morning.

And that is you know at some point as a society we've got to start taking care of the people that are less fortunate because I was listening to the you know regardless of your politics so regardless of your politics and I was listening to the coverage of the proposed tax reforms and it was like at some point you're only as good as your least fortunate. So I don't know if someday if I could figure out a way to make a sustained
meaningful contribution to helping the lives of people that are less fortunate. I mean a lot of it is. I mean I was really fortunate right both my parents went to college. Now they were both dirt poor so my father was the first of his generation to go to college. He still we still have the shoeshine box that he had as a child because he contributed the family income by being shoeshine boy. But I grew up with educated parents and I never wanted for anything and there was never a question of would I go to college. It was which college would I go to. So so I really you know I had a pretty straightforward glide path to the career that I ended up succeeding in. But that not everybody is born with those advantages so it just strikes me that regardless of your station in life at some level we really are only as good as our least fortunate individuals in society least fortunate in terms of their access to material benefits or cultural benefits or health benefits.

Gosh I mean we're at Kent State we have a good health plan. Can you imagine like being sick and the other day we were we were renting a storage facility and the person that was working at the desk of the storage facility had probably torn ligaments in her knee but badly hurt or need the night before and was hobbling around and she doesn't have health insurance. Well my wife and I were like well you're going to go see a doctor you're going to get that fixed and she was like you don't really know what to do because I don't have health insurance so I mean it was pathetic. But the least we could do is we went home and I had a knee brace and I got the neighbor. So we have to have for some reason that cane you know why we had a cane but we had a cane and I took the cane in the knee brace tour so so if I could somehow make a meaningful impact on that aspect that would be a great greater.

[00:29:24]
Well I do have to say though except they're right in front of me.

[00:29:30]
Those are some awesome socks. Thank you. Those are pretty cool.

[00:29:36]
Well thank you for worse meeting with me and you know talking to all of you. Thank you Miles for giving us this exhibit giving us this experience and I hope to see you break a leg.

[00:29:49]
Thank you. I'm glad you're coming to the show. Banks.

[00:29:53]
Oh well thank you my.