

An SfAA Oral History Interview with Robert M. Wulff

How the Praxis Award was Created

John van Willigen [ant101@uky.edu] SfAA Oral History Project, Chair University of Kentucky

At the 2011 annual meeting of the SfAA in Seattle, the Washington Association for Professional Anthropologists organized a panel as an observation of the 30th anniversary of the Praxis Award. Since the first award in 1981, WAPA has recognized outstanding achievement in translating anthropological knowledge into action. Further information about WAPA and the Praxis Award can be found at the WAPA web site. This interview taps the knowledge and viewpoints of Robert M. Wulff who originally designed the award and was one of the principals in achieving its promise. He served as president of WAPA in 1980 - 1981. Wulff received his PhD in anthropology from University of California, Los Angeles in urban anthropology in which he focused on planning and housing. He uses his training in anthropology as a senior vice president at the B. F. Saul Company real estate management and investment firm, head- quartered in Washington, D. C. The interview and editing for accuracy and continuity were done by John van Willigen. The transcript and audio recording are archived in the SfAA collection at the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky Libraries.

WULFF: I maintained the identity [as an anthropologist when I started to work in Washington] because I was proud of it and I thought it had, as I said, there's problem-solving abilities so [soon after arriving in D. C.] I found out about WAPA [Washington Association of Professional Anthropologists]. I went to a WAPA meeting in early 1978. It had just been formed by the fellow at Catholic [University of America]. I'm going to think of his name in a minute.

VAN WILLIGEN: Conrad Reining.

WULFF: Connie Reining. Yes. I'll never forget the first meeting because I had high expectations and it was out in some suburban university—I forgot the name of it. A little private Catholic university and it was kind of a bland room and it was filled with 8 or 10 people and most of them were people who were unemployed, had a PhD couldn't get a job in teaching, were very bitter and pissed off and had only become applied anthropologists because they had no other choice.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes.

WULFF: As opposed to people like myself, and I did feel a little superior I have to admit, who had a job in government—by choice, I wanted to be there. And I was disappointed by this because I thought I was going to find people like myself. And I did. I found people like myself, but I found a lot of other people who were there for different reasons. In my own mind I said, “WAPA could be so much more.” And I'm thinking to myself there's got to be a lot of anthropologists like me in town. After all, this is the corporate headquarters of the federal government. The grand papa of social science research. I mean most of it gets funded out of Washington one way or another. There's got to be a lot of us here. I just need to find them. So I said, “I'll go out and you know I'll—as a membership director kind of thing, go and out and try to find these people and talk them into joining WAPA.” As much for my own benefit as WAPA's because I just wanted to meet these people. I was blown away by what I found. I thought I'd find 30-40 people max. I found 99. I wish it had been 100. I delayed—we turned it into a directory, and I delayed for two months trying to find the 100th anthropologist. Ninety-nine successful practitioners of anthropology in Washington.

VAN WILLIGEN: And they were mostly working for?

WULFF: I've got the directory and I laid it all out by subject area and organization.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes.

WULFF: Most of them were in the federal government. Many, of course, in non-profits. But many in the private sector. For profit, private sector and all through government. Almost every executive branch agency was represented. Many in Congress. A lot of commissions and study areas. The depth of talent and the breath of talent was unbelievable and these were all [full-time practitioners]—no students, no faculty, no part-time people. I was very rigid in my criteria. I wanted people who were making a living as an anthropologist in government and industry.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes.

WULFF: And so there were some hard feelings about people who didn't get into the directory. Some faculty members who were doing applied research wanted to be in it. I said “No, it's not what this is. Make your own directory. You're not in this directory.” So I made this directory and we published it and I have a copy here and blew everybody away. I'm saying, “This is huge. This is critical. This is probably more anthropologists than anywhere else in the world. This is a critical mass that is unique.

We've got to be able to do something with this. This is pretty amazing." And a lot of them ended up joining WAPA which really took WAPA off. Before that happened, WAPA was a little, sort of, tiny group, and two years later it had 250 members from around the country because we published the directory and sold it for \$4.50 in 1981. I decided we needed a way to sell it because this is a way to make money for WAPA so we put a little tag line on the cover as a way to entice people to buy it. What did I do with it? [Looking for it in his documents.] Here it is. So it wasn't just a directory of practicing, it was a--oh yeah, here you go [reading]-- "Directory of Practicing Anthropologists in the Nation's Capital. Tap into a network of Anthropologists that can provide access to Washington's contracts, grants and employment." So we're going "Ah! Now they'll buy it." And it worked. We sold a ton of them. So it sort of raised everybody's consciousness level about WAPA and Washington and people joined from all over and then a lot of people from Washington joined and it really changed the nature of WAPA. It also interestingly changed how anthropologists saw themselves in Washington. Most of these people didn't know the other ones existed.

VAN WILLIGEN: Right.

WULFF: At AID I think there were 14 anthropologists at the time. I don't think there's that many now. I haven't talked to Joan Atherton in a while. Most of--I think three knew about each other and they formed their own little group as a result of this brown bag lunch group where they all met and started talking as anthropologists inside AID. Other little subgroups started too as everybody became aware of all the anthropologists. So it was--calling it a watershed is too extreme, but it changed the game in Washington--at least for a while. And so I'm thrilled because I'm finding people who are like me. All of them don't quite think like me in the sense that they didn't wear anthropology on their sleeve, but they were doing anthropology in a professional practitioner role.

VAN WILLIGEN: This is real interesting. And so it's in this context that the Praxis Award was developed and what was your original thinking about the point of the Praxis Award?

WULFF: Very specific.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes.

WULFF: I did the Praxis Award work for one reason only. I wanted to start anthropology down the path to create a professional practice arm within the

discipline.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes.

WULFF: I felt we could over time [establish a professional practice arm in anthro], it would, take a long time, we could be like [the] architects. We could be like an urban planner. Maybe even be like a lawyer. I mean things are on a spectrum of professional expertise. And we have the skills and the knowledge if we could find a way to focus it. So I said to myself, "Why don't we have this?"

VAN WILLIGEN: Uh-hm.

WULFF: Well one reason is that the people who are actually making a living as professional practitioners, they're not really professional yet, because there is no profession of practicing anthropology. And let me give you my definition of profession because that's important—which I learned at School of Architecture & Planning cause I'm saying to myself while I'm there I said, "How are these guys doing this? How did they get themselves to a position where they could make a living as an architect? Or are they making a living as a planner? Or as me, as an anthropologist? I can't make a living selling my anthropology. I can do it, but I can't sell it." And it was three things. The most important one was they had clients who would pay money for a set aside of problems that the architect or the planner [who] had specific unique skills could solve. So there are clients, a problem set aside, and unique skills to solve those problems. And the client recognized that and so if you break your leg, you know to go to a doctor. If you break the law, you know to go to an attorney. But that's what professionals do. They isolate—they find a problem set, they make sure that no one else can solve that problem set, except with their knowledge, then they restrict access to the knowledge, and if they're really smart, they certify so that they create a monopoly and exclude people. Those are the really successful professions.

VAN WILLIGEN: Right.

WULFF: Okay. I had a very clear model of what a profession should be—a practice profession. And I said how do we move anthropology in that direction? And I thought the simplest way to start would be to find people who are doing this and get their stories.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes.

WULFF: And find out how they're doing it. And over time with a bunch of case studies, we could build up what are we selling that's unique. Who are the clients that are most likely to buy? We could figure out how to best position ourselves in the problem-solving world to isolate our own set aside of problems, skills, and clients.

VAN WILLIGEN: So one aspect of [the Praxis Award planning] was that it was a way of collecting the stories?

WULFF: Case studies are the whole reason. It was number one to collect the case studies, but number two, the real problem was getting those people to tell their stories.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes.

WULFF: Because they had no incentive to do that.

VAN WILLIGEN: Right.

WULFF: They were not rewarded for coming to anthro meetings and giving lectures or being in seminars because their job promotion [wasn't dependent on such activities]. Publishing wasn't benefiting—in fact, they were looked upon as weird if they published in many cases. So these people were hidden. When I created the directory, I was literally networking this underworld of anthropologists in Washington because they didn't know each other, they didn't advertise who they were, and they certainly weren't bragging about all the things they were doing with their anthropology knowledge. Many of them, you had to convince them because some of them would say “Well, I'm not an anthropologist anymore. Why do I want to join WAPA.” I'd say “Well, what do you do?” I'd say “Here's why you're an anthropologist.” And you would almost have to remind them. I was proselytizing. So I said we've got to bring these people out of the woods and tell their story and I only want the best ones and I want them only in a certain way because I have an idea of how this should happen. I thought, “How am I going to do this? Well, what do they respond to?” Money, right? That's simple. So we'll give a prize. And that means we have to have an award. We have to create an award with a prize. Well I only want certain people to come out of the woods. Some of the people I don't want to come out of the woods because they are not good models for what I want the [practice] discipline to become.” So I wrote a set of guidelines and then I wrote a set of—well, I'll show you. A set of questions you had to answer to get the reward.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes.

WULFF: The questions would be judged by a jury that we would pick. Right? So those questions and those guidelines were very carefully crafted to get the people out of the woods I wanted and who did I want? Well, I wanted them to have a client. If they didn't have a client, I didn't want to hear from them. So one of the very first questions [in the entry form] is "Who's the client?" And, if the people couldn't answer that question, well they probably weren't going to win the award and that was fine with me.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes.

WULFF: The other question was, "What was your role? Tell us what you did as an anthropologist?"—"As an anthropologist, what was your role?" And then the third most important question—there were 10 questions, but these were the three key. "What was the anthropological difference?" That is, if you had not been involved, how would the project had been different and how did you make it better? How did the outcome benefit from anthropological knowledge and your participation?" That to me was just as important as the client because the other part of my version of a professional practice arm was clients and then a set aside of problems and skills and the anthropological difference question was sort of my way of starting a list of those unique anthropological skills.

VAN WILLIGEN: So it was the award was also a research tool...

WULFF: Exactly.

VAN WILLIGEN: ...because you wanted to find out what in fact it was.

WULFF: Yeah. You're successful. How are you doing it? What are you selling? Who are you selling it to and why is it working?

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes.

WULFF: And why is anthropology [uniquely useful]—could an attorney have done the same thing? Could a sociologist have done the same thing? And if the answer is yes, than I wasn't very interested, because it didn't add to my cause.

VAN WILLIGEN: Right–right–right.

WULFF: So I had these documents that I worked very hard on. This was 1980. I had just become President of WAPA and so I'm thinking we have to call the award something and somebody has to sponsor it. It can't be Bob Wulff's award for practicing anthropology. It probably wouldn't have gotten very far. So I'm thinking maybe SfAA, maybe AAA, and I'm thinking to myself because I had just been through this with PA—with Practicing Anthropology. I was the founding editor of Practicing Anthropology while in my last year at South Florida in 1977 and there was a huge battle with SfAA on who would control it because we brought them the idea. “We” being a couple of us at South Florida brought the idea to SfAA, and said “We think this is good idea. Would you give us a seed money grant to do it and run it out of South Florida?” SfAA said “We'll give you money, but it's going to published under our monogram.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes.

WULFF: And we battled and negotiated and negotiated and finally we walked away because we felt they would take it over. I had that in the back of my mind and I thought I don't want to go to SfAA or AAA because they'll try to take the award over and I lose control. I had a very precise goal here so I'm thinking well maybe WAPA hadn't really achieved national distinction yet, but I said maybe WAPA should do it. So I talked with the board and they agreed. We still didn't have a name and I had used “practicing” with Practicing Anthropology so I couldn't do that even though I liked it. And I'm looking, looking and looking and I'm reading this book, one of my mentors was a man named John Friedman who was a sort of Marxist planner out of UCLA.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes.

WULFF: A very brilliant man.

VAN WILLIGEN: Right.

WULFF: And John had just written a book and in the introduction was the word praxis. And, of course, it has a very clear Marxist meaning. A dialectic and—but I loved the word and I looked it up in the Oxford English Dictionary, the big thick one, and the Greek root is knowledge into action. [Snaps fingers]. That's it. That's what we're all about here. If we're going to create this professional practice arm, it's knowledge

into action and practice means knowledge into action. So we're going to call it a Praxis Award.

VAN WILLIGEN: It has a narrower meaning in Marxism and a broader meaning prior to its—

WULFF: Yes, and I was worried that people would see that and not enter because they thought it was some sort of Marxist award or something so I called up John and I said "John, I'm thinking of doing this. What do you think? Are people going view it as Marxist award? He said "No, I don't think so. Most people don't really know Marxism that well. And the ones that do will be flattered. Marxists are easily flattered these days. They don't get much." I said, "Okay John, you're my sample of one. I'll go with Praxis." So I went with Praxis. So we had an award. We went with \$200 and WAPA was going to sponsor it and I said "Well, I can't do this myself. This is a very long-term labor-intensive effort. I need help." So I looked around WAPA and I decided to recruit two people and in my mind they had to be articulate and practitioners and successful and hardworking and I picked Shirley Fiske and Carol Tyson. I sent them a letter saying I've got this idea and I sent them all the guidelines and the form, the entry form that I had already worked out and I said, "Let's meet. You guys look at this and if you're in, let's do it. Let's do the first one in 1981." This was April 1981. I've still got the original memo I sent out to them and notes from the meeting. In May, we all met and they said, "This is great, we're in." So we started and we did the first press release in June of 1981. We worked hard to put press releases out and sent flyers to every university to stick on the bulletin board. This was pre-internet. It was primitive, very primitive. And then made tons of personal calls to people and said, "You know, I think you should enter our award competition." Oh, another important part of this was it should be self-nominating.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes.

WULFF: This was the biggest problem in [promoting] the awards because most of the anthropology awards were not self-nominating. Someone called you up and said "We'd like to nominate you for Mead Award and they did all the work. You fed them some basic information and you got the award. So even though we said [self-nominating], people didn't get it and most people won't nominate themselves. It's just not in their nature. So we figured out early on that we had to literally call people and say "We saw your work. It's really good. It fits the Praxis Award. Nominate yourself."

VAN WILLIGEN: You recruit for self-nomination?

WULFF: Yes we did. I would rather not have done that, but we just weren't getting the kind of response we wanted.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes.

WULFF: And a lot of people said "No, I don't have time." I said "Look, it's only a 10-page [entry form]. You can fill it out in a day easily." And that helped. So we got eighteen entries that first year. Really good ones.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes.

WULFF: Cause there was a, if you want to say, pent up demand. It had to be project oriented, and Shirley now believes this is not a good thing. In that I wanted case studies from this. My view was sort of like business school where it's taught through case studies.

VAN WILLIGEN: I see.

WULFF: The best way to teach practice is through case studies and so I wanted a lot of really good ones. Harvard's got a center called The Case Study Institute. All they do is generate Harvard Business School case studies which other business schools use. There's an inventory of 700 of them in all different categories. Professors pick and choose and use them in their courses. Now this was sort of my down-the-road view of this. And so I wanted project stuff. I didn't want awards for lifetime achievement because that didn't make for the case study project orientation I thought would advance the cause. So those were all the criteria that went into the award and then the rest is history. We just kept promoting it every year. And then we ran into competition from, was it the AAA or SfAA?

VAN WILLIGEN: AAA. The Kimball Award.

WULFF: The Kimball Award. Yeah. And so then we went to every other year as a way to make peace with them.

VAN WILLIGEN: I see. That's very much a lifetime achievement award though.

WULFF: It is and we told them that. They said "Well we're creating an award that competes with the Praxis Award." We looked at their criteria and we said "No it doesn't." They said "Well, we'd really like it if you'd do something different." We said "No, we'll just do it every other year." And so that solved that problem. Anyway, so then it became biennial. Which was fine.

VAN WILLIGEN: So you mentioned two people who were key players.

WULFF: Yes. Shirley Fiske and Carol Tyson. Shirley was a very outgoing successful practitioner at NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] which was a domestic agency and Carol Tyson was very successful in her own right at USAID and so I thought that was a good balance. Carol moved away within a year. She relocated.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes.

WULFF: So then it was just Shirley and I that carried on.

VAN WILLIGEN: And were there any objections to any of this by WAPA members?

WULFF: No. WAPA liked it because it gave them some visibility. I think it was very well received within WAPA. A lot of members applied for the award and we had to be very careful about that. Oh! The jury. I forgot all about the jury. At the beginning of the award, of course it had no credibility because no one had ever heard of it.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes.

WULFF: So we wanted to get credibility. We really need a jury to make sure it's objective. It just isn't Bob and Shirley picking the winner. It's going to be jury of respected practitioners both in and outside of academia and hopefully they'll be so well-known, at least some of them, that it will give credibility to the award. We'll bask in the reflected glory of our jury members.

VAN WILLIGEN: I see.

WULFF: So I called Sol Tax who I had come to know and I told him what I was doing. I said, "Would you be on the first jury? We need you for credibility." He said, "I get it. Okay I'll do it." And so I sent him the entry [form]. The 10 pages with the questions and Sol read it and wrote me back a letter and he said, "Before I agree to do it, I want to see what the material is." So I sent him the guidelines. And he said, "Well, I like

your guidelines, but your entry form seems way too restrictive to me. I'm particularly bothered by the client question." Which, of course, is the most important question. He said, "There's a lot of good work out there that doesn't have a client." And I said "Yes, but it's not the work I want to recognize because I don't think it's the work that will build the professional practice arm?" And he said, "Why do you want to build a professional practice arm?" And we chatted about that because he did the Fox project, but was basically an academic.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yeah, and there, to start at least, wasn't any clear client. It was just—the client—the initial client in the Fox Project were the graduate students that participated in it.

WULFF: Exactly. Now I couldn't say that to Sol. I mean, I respected him and I didn't want to get in an argument but I just kept saying to him "Well these are the types of projects we think will advance the practice."

VAN WILLIGEN: Right.

WULFF: And he never got that. He always said, "Nah, I don't agree with that." But he was a gentleman and he said, "I will do it because I said I would do it and I think it's a good idea in general." And, at the end, once he had rated them all, because we sent him 18 applications. When he got the score sheet, the client question was [worth] 25 points. A quarter of the [total] score was the client. He called me up and said, "You really put me in a box." I said, "Yeah I did." He said, "I'm going to do it. I'm going to do it." So at the end of it and he was very rigorous—he graded all of them, had marginal comments. He said, "This was the hardest thing I've ever done. Don't ask me to do it again." But it was the "old" up against what I thought was the "new." I had a direction I thought that [the discipline] should go and it was very different than what Sol Tax thought, and I'm sure it was very different than what a lot of people like Sol Tax would have thought. Now, not only did it did not bother me. It made me think I'm on the right track. So the jury was an important part of the first award. We always called them juries. I didn't call them judges. Although sometimes in press releases we'd call them judges. We were schizophrenic about this. But they were called jurors because we wanted to be able to actually decide who won. The jury would do score sheets and then we would take all the score sheets and rank them.

VAN WILLIGEN: Oh I see.

WULFF: For the first three awards, the jury was unanimous. That same person was ranked one. So that was easy. There was no controversy. But I was always worried that here again I would lose control because I knew what I wanted. So rather than calling them judges, we'd call them the jury so that the people at WAPA, the directors of the award, could always say, "Well, the jury said this but we think the award should go to this person." As far as I know, that never happened.

VAN WILLIGEN: Uh-hm, but it could possibly happen.

WULFF: Could happen. I mean the jury doesn't know what the whole jury said. All they know is how they ranked them. We assembled all the jury sheets together and then picked the winner.

VAN WILLIGEN: I see. Has the process of, of course, you're less involved in it now—

WULFF: Yeah.

VAN WILLIGEN: —and so you may not know, but the process of recruiting submissions, has that changed?

WULFF: Well, I think over the years some of the directors became less aggressive about going out and recruiting people and relied simply upon sending out press releases and flyers and the internet and hoping that people would on their own nominate themselves and that led I think to a period where there were fewer self-nomination that we would have liked.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes.

WULFF: But that's changed. Charlie Cheney took over the awards several years ago and he's very, very aggressive about finding people and cajoling them.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes. One of the things that occurred to me that was important was to make the discipline itself more aware of this kind of anthropology and so the dissemination process of the awards, the work behind the awards, the people associated with the work behind the awards, I thought was especially important. I mean, there is this encouraging effect too that is also important.

WULFF: Yeah.

VAN WILLIGEN: You know when you award the individual and he or she will feel better about what they're doing. WULFF: Right. Right.

VAN WILLIGEN: And do more of it.

WULFF: Yes. Yeah.

VAN WILLIGEN: But the impact on the discipline is another dimension of it that I think is really important especially given your preamble about all of this and so what are your thoughts and experiences associated with dissemination? WULFF: I think it's the one failure in my mind in that I thought we would advance the cause of a professional practice arm in a lot of ways. One was pulling people out of the woods and then recognizing them but then it was important to feed that back into the discipline. Feed those success stories, those case studies back into the discipline not only just because it gives people role models, but we would hopefully create case studies that would be used to train anthropologists at the university level.

VAN WILLIGEN: Right.

WULFF: And we failed there. By this time I would have thought that we would had 50, 60, 70 high quality case studies from praxis, and all we have are 12 that Shirley and I published in the book Anthropological Praxis.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes.

WULFF: And that's just because I got lazy and generating good case studies is really hard. You've got to spend full-time almost doing it.

VAN WILLIGEN: There has to be a consistency formatting and the materials that people submit are inconsistent and then some are short and others are detailed and the detail is not interesting sometimes. This is a complicated process where it looks like their writing it, but in fact you have to slave over data.

WULFF: You've done this. You must have done this, because you have exactly have pinned down how difficult it is and I didn't really understand. I understood it was difficult but it became far more rigorous and difficult than I thought and I just simply didn't have the time. So that never happened. So that to me is a big disappointment.

VAN WILLIGEN: You envisioned more of these books.

WULFF: Or simply independently produced case studies that people could buy, professors could buy. For example, here's a group of cases in international development. Here's a group in nutrition. Here's a group, you know, that they could pull off the shelf and feed into their courses. That I thought would be invaluable.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes.

WULFF: Not only to the professor, but of course to the student that would learn from this.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes.

WULFF: And we didn't generate that and I don't know how to do that except to find enough money to pay someone to just work full-time at it. I'm disappointed in that lacking, but can't do everything.

VAN WILLIGEN: I don't know if you'll feel comfortable answering this question, but do you have cases or awards that you thought were really on the money? You know, personal favorites?

WULFF: Yeah I do. And I have some that I thought, "Why did they rank it that way." But in fact, funny, my favorite one is the one we gave last year.

VAN WILLIGEN: Uh-hm.

WULFF: The Associated Press for the group out of Baltimore, anthropologists doing marketing research in application changed the way the Associated Press delivers news on the internet. The Associated Press [executive] who came to the award dinner and wrote a letter said just that. "These people were so brilliant and gave us information so counter-intuitive that we never could have gotten from anybody else and it changed the way we deliver news on the internet." It was mind blowing what they did.

VAN WILLIGEN: That's astounding.

WULFF: And it was classic anthropology. They did ethnographic stuff. I've always thought when you're trying to figure out what we do that is unique that other

disciplines don't do, and of course other disciplines keep stealing our stuff, beginning with the culture concept, so it's harder and harder to find unique things but anthropologists have this almost naive but valuable, firm grasp of the obvious. They see things others don't see in our own culture. And I don't know who said this first, but it's true. "If there were a school of fish and they were each a different behavioral scientist and they were swimming in the sea, the anthropologist fish would be the first one to discover they were swimming in water." It's that ability to pull back and see things that nobody else can see because of our training that these guys did with the Associated Press where everybody thought they knew how kids look and read the internet. AP changed what they did. That's my favorite one, probably because it's recent.

VAN WILLIGEN: Um--let's see.

WULFF: That should be disseminated as a case study. People would go "Wow, man, anthropology, look at that!" But, whose got the time? And the people that did it don't have the time. They use it, but they use it to get their next piece of work. They don't publish it in a way that is accessible.

VAN WILLIGEN: The Harvard Business case studies are real firms aren't they?

WULFF: Oh yes. Absolutely. In fact, it's an honor to be chosen for a Harvard case study.

VAN WILLIGEN: I see.

WULFF: They've got an assembly line. They've been doing this for 100 years and they've got a lot of money. If we could do that in anthropology, that would be nice. Half a million a year could probably do it?

VAN WILLIGEN: So, how would you summarize, looking a little bit more abstractly at the award, what are some of the changes that occurred in the way the award was done? WULFF: Actually I think the good part about it is that it's been really consistent. The entry material I wrote in 1980 has almost not changed one word.

VAN WILLIGEN: Oh I see.

WULFF: Which I think is good. I mean number one personally I like it because it suggests that my vision had some validity.

VAN WILLIGEN: Right.

WULFF: But it also means that if we ever do case study stuff, we can more easily abstract from it because the knowledge is all in the same chunks.

VAN WILLIGEN: Uh-hm.

WULFF: So that part of it, the guidelines and the entry material hasn't changed in 30 years except for a word here or a word there. The award amount has changed. Now it's a \$1000, not \$200. The way the jury is treated has changed. It's gone back and forth. The first few awards based on what I thought was the model was that they would add credibility and therefore should be publicized. At some point, I don't know exactly when, people feared that if people knew who the jury was it would influence who would enter. "Oh, that guy doesn't like me. I'm not going to enter." So they started hiding or not publicizing who the jury was and keeping it anonymous... Recruiting [applicants] has vacillated between being aggressive and not being aggressive and we've learned that you better be aggressive or you don't get good nominations.

VAN WILLIGEN: Well, some people are very prone to self-nomination than other people.

WULFF: Yes. Right.

VAN WILLIGEN: And so they might—some people, the very thing that keeps them from being aggressive, self-nominated might also relate to their effectiveness as a certain kind of practitioner.

WULFF: Yeah.

VAN WILLIGEN: It's not a random exclusion. It's very structured.

WULFF: Yes. I agree with you and we now believe we have to be more aggressive. What other changes? We used to do—the very first ones the jury graded the entry anonymously. That is, they didn't know who it was. And the 10 page entry form was filled out, but we blocked out the name when we sent it to the jury and that was my idea and I don't think it was correct, but to make sure the jurors didn't judge the person rather than the content. Now we're back to the jury knows who the person is

and everybody knows who the jurors are. So it's total transparency as opposed to hiding one or the other from each other.

VAN WILLIGEN: I see.

WULFF: And I'm a believer. I believe in the principle of transparency and if a judge feels that they can't judge someone objectively, they should excuse themselves from judging that entry for whatever reason.

VAN WILLIGEN: Sure.

WULFF: But we vacillate back and forth how much transparency there should be.

VAN WILLIGEN: And you don't have a personal program for transforming the award in any major way? I may be putting words in your mouth, but the question is about, how should it be changed in the future?

WULFF: Well, in my opinion it's still a valid set of questions to produce the kind of case study material I would want. Shirley [Fiske] has a slightly different view now. She feels that maybe the client orientation is excluding some valuable practitioner work that isn't client driven.

VAN WILLIGEN: I see.

WULFF: And she hasn't convinced me of that yet, but Shirley's a bright person whose far more knowledgeable now about what anthropologists are doing than I am and she may have a point. So we may need to rethink that. I don't think we would ever take clients out because I think they're so essential to practice but maybe we'll de-emphasize it, or find a way to build in other models of practice that aren't client-oriented. I don't even know enough about them to say what they are. She seems to think there's a whole group of public interest anthropologists who don't have clients but are doing good work.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes, I see what you mean.

WULFF: I don't know how one can make a living without clients, but I'm willing to learn about it.

VAN WILLIGEN: Someone funds public interest anthropologists.

WULFF: And then the client is the funding agency. We go around and around on this and a lot of people say "What? I don't know who my client is?" People get confused about that sometimes, particularly anthropologists, particularly if it's research-oriented. That was another thing, I don't like research-oriented work. I was trying to take anthropology in this award out of the backroom in that as academicians we are taught that research is sort of your highest and best use, and the best researchers get promoted, the best researchers get their work published and they make the most money and have the most esteem. In government and industry, researchers are backroom people paid less than everyone else and it's the administrators and regulation makers and directors who do well and are promoted. And so while I have no trouble with good research, it's absolutely invaluable and we ought to train people to do it, I want to wean anthropology away from the sort of exclusive idea that research is the end-all and be-all and we all should be good researchers. So I really liked entries that did that. That helped show another role for anthropology that wasn't just research or that brilliantly took the research and shoved it into the board room and made people look at it and change the way they worked.

VAN WILLIGEN: Uh-hm.

WULFF: So who's the client? People who do research a lot think the client is the person or people they're doing research on.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes.

WULFF: I said, "No, that's not the client." The client is who signs your check. And if they don't sign your check, they're not the client and I would always get push back from that. They'd say: "Well, I'm the client. I'm responsible." I'd say "No, you're not responsible." We would argue this. But that's my view of it.

VAN WILLIGEN: Right.

WULFF: The client is who signs your check and if you're not aware of that, you might not last long.

VAN WILLIGEN: And then there's a structural problem because the client is almost never the poor, disorganized of the world.

WULFF: Yes.

VAN WILLIGEN: It's the organized and wealthy who may be thinking on behalf of others.

WULFF: And the image of anthropologists is we have our eyes and ears down and our palm up. We're getting money from the upper classes to study the lower classes. That's sort of who we are. And I wanted to get away from that too. That we're not just a champion of the underdog. That's a valid role, but we can do a lot more than that.

VAN WILLIGEN: Yes. So do you have any parting statements?

WULFF: I don't think so. I've think I've gotten most everything off my chest. [Both laugh]

Further Reading on Cases in Practice

Paul, Benjamin. 1955. *Health, Culture and Community: Case Studies of Public Reactions to Health Programs*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Spicer, Edward H. 1952. *Human Problems in Technological Change*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Van Willigen, John, Barbara Rylko-Bauer and Ann McElroy. 1989. *Making our Research Useful: Case Studies in the Utilization of Anthropological Knowledge*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Wulff, Robert M. and Shirley J. Fiske. 1987. *Anthropological Praxis: Translating Knowledge into Action*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press

An Invitation from on the Society for Applied Anthropology Oral History Project
Readers are invited to suggest persons to be interviewed for the project to members of the Oral History Committee (Martha Bojko, Carol E. Hill, Barbara Rylko-Bauer, Don Stull and John van Willigen). I (van Willigen) can be reached at (ant101@uky.edu) or 859.269.8301. Think of the anthropologists that made a difference in places where you live and work. Often the person making the suggestion is asked to do the interview. The collection of SfAA recorded interviews and transcripts is archived in the SfAA collection at the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky Library. Their url is:

http://www.uky.edu/Libraries/libpage.php?lweb_id=11&llib_id=13

