

UHCL 30th Birthday Oral History Project

Interviewee: Richard K. (Rick) Sykes
Interviewer: Gay E. Carter
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Transcriber: Shelly Henley Kelly

Carter: This is Gay Carter interviewing Richard Sykes for the UHCL 30th Birthday oral history project. Today is Saturday, April 30, 2005. So for the record, would you please state your name and where you live.

Sykes: My name is Rick Sykes and I live in Clear Lake City.

Carter: What years were you here at the university?

Sykes: I was a student here from 1979 to December 1984. I was a night student and I got a degree in computer systems design.

Carter: What attracted you to this university? What made you decide to come here?

Sykes: I was working at the time for McDonnell Douglas, a local aerospace contractor. I had a bachelor's degree in aerospace engineering. I could see people getting laid off from time to time, so I thought it would probably be a good idea to have something else in my back pocket. So I got a degree in – I was really interested in computer science. I decided that it would be a good idea. It was just real convenient being so close. At the time the McDonnell Douglas offices were just around the corner.

Carter: Was that when they were literally right around the corner down there? Off of Space Center?

Sykes: The ABCB buildings.

Carter: I remember that.

Sykes: Yeah. I don't remember precisely when I graduated. If I recall, we eventually moved to the seven-story building there on Space Center. I believe I was still working there when I graduated. At any rate, I was never very far away. I used to live in apartments almost between here and there, right on the corner of Space Center and Bay Area. It was quite convenient and it was very enjoyable.

Carter: That's good. What challenges did you find when you came here?

Sykes: I'm not sure if it's just the difference between working on a bachelors degree and working on my master degree, or whether it's a difference in the schools. My bachelor's degree was, like I say, aerospace engineering from Texas A&M. My masters degree, here, it seemed like there was a lot less busy work. It seemed like we were a lot more focused on learning specifically what we needed to learn as opposed to simply proving that we had what it takes to be taught. I think that may be the difference between a bachelors and masters degree. In 36 hours they just don't have the time to spend on getting off the subject at all.

I was just about to say one of the things interesting about walking around here today is that I see Dr. Dickerson and Dr. Collins—I saw him just outside the door—and Dr. McKay, and many of the professors that I took classes from are still teaching here. If you recall I said I started here in 1979, so that's....many years ago.

Carter: Some time ago, yes.

Sykes: Many years. Twenty-six years. So that's a long time for them to be here. It's a credit to them to still do that. I've often thought that teaching is a very noble profession. I felt like the teachers here went the extra mile.

Carter: You've mentioned Dr. Dickerson, Collins and McKay. Were other professors....?

Sykes: Oh yes, Dr. Husband, I think is still here. Dr. Leibfried. I don't know if he's still here. He was a few years ago. I've talked to him. [thinking] I'm sure there are others, the names just don't come to me at this point.

Carter: I understand. How about the staff, going through admissions, or the library?

Sykes: Back at that time of course, it was all very... everything was manual. There was none of this, I don't think they had telephone registration until after I graduated. I came back in 1991 or 1992 and took a class in cryptography. Then in 1995 I came back for a semester and took three classes. I'd just been laid off and I was looking for work outside of aerospace and they were teaching three classes that I thought would be useful to me as skills to aid my job search. So while I was looking for work I went ahead and took classes. Fortunately found a position about two weeks after I got out of those classes, so it couldn't have worked out better.

Carter: That's great. What events did you participate in on campus?

Sykes: Not really anything. I was working full-time and going to school at night. That took up most of my time.

Carter: How has attending UHCL changed your life or affected your life?

Sykes: It's changed it much for the better in the sense that I now work as a computer systems administrator for MD Anderson Cancer facility. I have the dubious achievement of having degrees from [Texas] A&M and UH [University of Houston], and now I work for UT [University of Texas].

Carter: You're just running the gamut.

Sykes: I haven't yet tied into Rice, but that's about the only of former Southwest Conference, except for Baylor I guess. It's kind of interesting. I worked in aerospace for twenty-four years, and the last five or six years I worked more in computers than in engineering. Then, there was another layoff and I found myself looking for work, and I ended up hooking up with MD Anderson, so now I ride the bus two hours a day.

Carter: Do you participate in anything now that you've left, with the Alumni Association?

Sykes: Not really, unfortunately, again because I'm spending two hours on the road everyday, and working eight hours, and lunch. It's turned into an 11-hour day now and there's just not much time for anything.

Carter: What special memories do you have of the university?

Sykes: What I remember is the joy when I would finally... when the light went on. A lot of the stuff that I was studying was - you could memorize it and you could do the problems, but to really understand it, all of a sudden there's just that like I say the light comes on moment. When that happens, there's just a real - I don't know the proper word to say, but if you ever have that feeling you'll want to seek it again.

Carter: I like that. That's very good. What would you like to see UHCL accomplish in the future?

Sykes: Actually, one of the reasons I'm here today, is that I was – truthfully I guess it wasn't just University of Houston-Clear Lake, but as I grew up I had several really good teachers. One in high school that I remember, and several when I was working on my bachelors and quite a few here at UH. So I'm thinking that when I get ready for retirement, that teaching might not be a bad thing. So I was hoping to run into some of my old profs and see if they could give me any pointers.

Carter: And did you?

Sykes: I haven't yet. I was about to corral Dr. Collins.

Carter: When we corralled you. Anything else that you'd like to add as you've been walking around today and rekindling memories?

Sykes: The things that's amazing to me is that while I've noticed a few changes, it's amazing how much has not changed as well. It seems very familiar to me. It seems like I've just walked out the other day and here it is 21 years later.

Carter: That would be one thing. you said you came back in the [19]90's.

Sykes: That's true.

Carter: What differences did you see from when you had been here before?

Sykes: Not really. Not very many. The thing that was amazing to me is that all of the same professors, I don't remember, but all the professors that I had taken classes from before were there, were here in the [19]90s. In fact it's kind of

funny, because Dr. Hopkins, another one of the teachers who taught me, I actually ended up working for him after a few, couple of years later at Lockheed.

Carter: Really?

Sykes: I mean not directly. He was pretty high in management, and I was a pretty low level employee, but technically he was in my management chain. That was kind of neat, because I was one of his star pupils in the class. So having a friend in high management was pretty good. I guess in that sense the old rubbing elbows with people is not a bad thing either.

To tell you the truth, that's something else that probably ought to be mentioned, he taught a class called Information Theory, Information Encoding Theory. When I saw it on my curriculum I was like, well what's this? I didn't understand what it was. I didn't understand why I needed to take it. It was just something that I needed to take in order to get a degree. Since I took that class, rarely a week goes by that I don't think about it. It was a pretty big turning point in my life, because the things that were taught in that class were pretty fundamental. It just really struck a chord. As I said, it's something that I still think about today. That was interesting too. Getting a broad education as opposed to just... sometimes people know what you need to take, you don't always know. You may think you're pretty well educated, but sometimes someone else has a good idea.

Carter: Very good. Anything else you'd like to tell?

Sykes: I can't think of anything.

Carter: You probably will five minutes later.

Sykes: Sure. Absolutely.

Carter: Well, Richard thank you so much. I think we've covered most of the questions. Did you say what degree? You said when you graduated.

Sykes: Yes, I graduated in December 1984 with a degree in Computer Systems Design, a master of science in Computer Systems Design. I've taken, I guess, 12 hours since here.

Carter: Well, thank you so much for stopping by today.

Sykes: Thank you.

[End of recording]