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THE CENTER
for integrity in public communication

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  The Center will award grants of $500 to $15,000 each to support scholars and professionals making important contributions to knowledge, practice, or public understanding of ethics and responsibility in public communication.

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The Page Center's initiatives address important topics in communication ethics through research, teaching, and other forms of engagement with the practice. These ongoing, coordinated efforts are findings answers for current communication issues.

Initiatives

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Throughout the year, the Page Center organizes a number of outreach events that support and promote its mission, as well as engage the community in important discussions about ethics and integrity with leaders in public communications.

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Overview

The Arthur W. Page Center for Integrity in Public Communication is a research center at the Penn State College of Communications dedicated to the study and advancement of ethics and responsibility in corporate communication and other forms of public communication.

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Arthur W. Page

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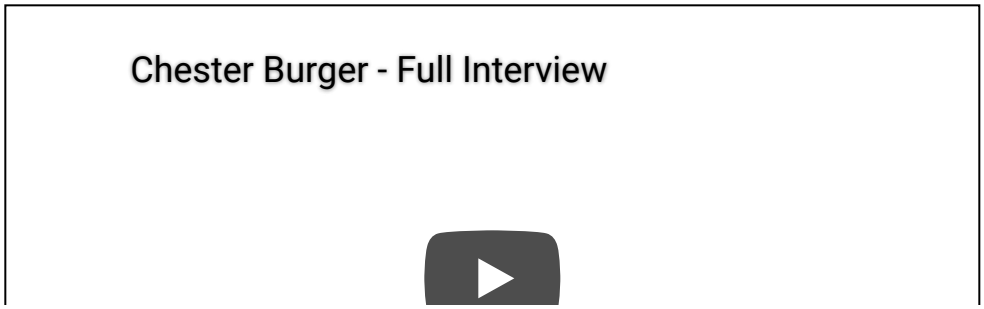
Oral Histories

Chester Burger

Full Interview



Chester Burger Biography

Chester Burger spent most of his working career in various communication fields. He began with CBS in 1941, working his way from Page Boy to become the National Manager of CBS Television News in 1955. During the 1960's civil rights campaigns, he served as an officer in the National Urban League and was a founder of the Black Executive Exchange Program.

Burger was a consultant to AT&T and other Bell companies for 20 years and became an honorary member in the Telephone Pioneers of America. As president of Chester Burger and Company, he provided public relations counsel to the CEO's of many of the largest corporations in America, including the American Bankers Association, Sears Roebuck, Texas Instruments, 3M and to organizations like AARP and the American Cancer Society.

In 1955, the U. S. Government awarded Burger the Medal for Outstanding Service to the United States, which he proudly displays in his home in New York City. Mr. Burger passed away on March 22, 2011 at the age of 90. A graduate student scholarship was created by PRSA, IPR and the Page Society, titled the Chester Burger Scholarship for Excellence in Public Relations Fund.

Scenes from Chet Burger's rooftop garden interview. Photographs taken by Andre Burger, who was visiting his grandfather in New York City.

Transcript

Interviewer: It's July 9, 2008 and we're sitting in a beautiful roof top garden in New York City, about to speak with Chester Burger and talk a little bit about his life experiences and how that all guided his life into public relations.

So you are a child of the Depression.

Burger: Yes indeed.

Interviewer: And you stated that those influences did in fact influence your work ethic and your perspective of the world. Talk a little bit about that and that era in the history of the United States. What that was like for you and how it did affect the path of your professional life?

Burger: Surely. Well, I was born, for the record January 10, 1921. I grew up in Brooklyn in Flatbush and I would say we lived in a characteristically middle class house. My father was a professional lawyer. And during the depression, which for us must have started about 1930 perhaps '31, gradually my father's income went down and down and down and down and finally it disappeared. And my memories of childhood, essentially, many, many occasions, a lot, going hungry, not having enough food to eat. And having no coal to burn in the furnace downstairs, (that was before the days of oil heat, everybody had a coal furnace.) But we had no money for coal, so all through the winter we were cold. I remember I have one memory of my mother turning on the kitchen oven and opening the oven door to let the heat come out. We as little children sat by the oven to get warm. So those were my memories that dominated my childhood. I think it is interesting that America was such a different place. First of all, our situation was not unique at all. Everybody was going through it. Everybody was going through it. And it went on year, after year, after year. And we finally lost our house in 1940. We were put out on the street. My father couldn't pay the mortgage. He wasn't any different, better or worse, than anybody else. There were a lot of them. And so I had entered Brooklyn College, which was a public free college in those days. I had gone two years and I had to drop out of school to go to work. And I got a job. The only job I could get was as an office boy in a law firm in the downtown Wall Street area. My salary was $14 a week. And an interesting thing that very few people seem to be aware of today; before World War II there was no five-day week in America. It was a 5 and a half-day week. And every office in America was open from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Saturdays. So my $14 was for a five and a half day week. Well I was there for a year. And then at the end of the year, the managing partner called me in and he said well if you don't want to be a lawyer, there's absolutely no point in your working in a law firm. So I am going to send you to one of our clients. And he sent me over to CBS, and they hired me as a pageboy. We wore a uniform. Pageboys wore uniforms, and our job was really two things, one was, three things. Run errands, get coffee for the secretaries, or handle the crowds who lined up when they came for a radio broadcast. And my salary there was $15 a week. And so I came to CBS in June of 1941. And then when Pearl Harbor came in December of that year, the War Department (as it was then called,) asked the broadcasting networks not to sign off, to stop broadcasting at 1 a.m., which was the national practice, but to stay on the air all night. You know why? Because the radio beams that were emanating from the transmitters were the signals that the airplanes used to locate where they were, and they used to hone in on New York. So CBS decided, instead of signing off at 1 a.m., they would stay on the air all night until 6:30 a.m., which was the normal sign on time in those days. So I got promoted and was made a program assistant for $20 a week to work all night on the all-night program. We just played records all night long. Then as the war came in December of '41, also they began losing people to the draft, to the armed services and in somewhere in December of '42, I was promoted and made assistant manager of international operations at CBS and my salary was $25 a week. And that's what I was doing when I was drafted into the Army in December of 1942, and I was in the service for 3 ½ years, almost 3 1/2 years.

Interviewer: After the Army, what happened then?

Burger: After the war, I came back, and I happened to be in the right place at the right time. CBS was just setting up the television operations. I remember one meeting we had in our studios in Grand Central Station in New York, where the entire television staff, not only the program producers, everybody, the secretaries, everybody, the total staff was 22 people and we met in the boss' office. It was a very tiny operation, and what it meant was I got hired in television news, which was just being set up then, and my title, the first title they gave me was "visualizer." I was supposed to figure out how to tell the news, show the news visually on television, because all they had at that time was the idea of a guy sitting in front of a microphone and talking to the camera. I think the significant thing for me in this incident was I make the point that I never voluntarily chose anything. The reason I was in the law firm in the beginning was it was the only job I could get. The reason I ended up at, began at, CBS was that he sent me there. The reason I ended up in television news was they happened to put me there. I never at that point made a conscious choice as to my career, and the concept of the 21st century, where young people coming out of college make choices, make decisions, just didn't exist for my generation, for most people. We took whatever we could get and that's what happened to me. Well I was at CBS over 13 years, and I ended up as national manger of television news for CBS. And I was running the operation. It was a marvelous opportunity for me, but it never would have happened, never would have happened, if television had been important. Television was so unimportant in those days that kids like me, kids, I was 25 then, had opportunities because the people we used to refer to privately as "the big people," meaning the names, the famous names of broadcasting, none of them wanted anything to do with television. It was kids' stuff, as they say. I entered television in March of 1946 and Ed Murrow, for instance, didn't' come into it until '51. It was too unimportant to bother with. Don Hewitt, who later became distinguished as the creator and the producer and the director of 60 Minutes, came in about a year later. And while he had some very modest military journalism experience, he really wasn't qualified either. But he was there. My recollection is that Don Hewitt, within a few months of the time he came, showed such brilliance and such incredible freshness and imagination and vitality, it was very clear right away that he was almost a generation ahead of us in terms of ability and vision. And the fact that he created 60 Minutes, when he finally retired in his 80s, was so respected and liked by everybody that he worked with, was quite a tribute not only to his great ability but to the fact that kids like him, like me at that time, had an opportunity we wouldn't have had, had it been an important media.

Interviewer: Did you make a conscious effort to try to move the audience, which was a listening audience, they were all with radio; did you consciously try to determine how to pull that audience into the television world?

Burger: No, we didn't' know how many, how large the audience was, but the best figure that was used in 1946 was that there were 3,000 television sets in New York City, all of which had been sold before World War II. Nobody knew how many of them were still in use or working. My first television set, that I went out and bought when I got into television, had a 3 x 5 inch picture. And the budgets were so limited at that time by the networks. We had an arrangement; CBS was on the air one night a week. My recollection, (again my memory may fail me,) but my recollection was that it was probably from 7 or 7:30 until 10 o'clock at night. That was all for the whole week. And NBC was on, as I recall, Thursday night the same length of time. The other channel was DuMont, which no longer exists, which was on Saturday night at that same length of time. And then over a period of years between 1946 and let's say 1951 approximately, gradually as the money became available and people began buying sets, we gradually expanded our broadcasting schedule until it was all the time. But everything was new. I'll tell you an interesting story. When I was first given the problem, how do you show the news visually, we used to have a diagram taped up on our office wall that showed the rectangle of the television picture with an oval egg shaped oval drawn within the rectangle. And we were told anything of vital information that you wanted to communicate, keep it within the egg shape because everybody's set was differently tuned and anything outside the egg shape and the corners might be cropped off in the home set. You wouldn't, people wouldn't' see it. Then we had the problem of maps. And the problem was that if you used any existing map, the resolution, the detailing of the television cameras was so poor at that time that if we took a printed map and showed it on the screen, people couldn't' make out what it was. So we had the problem of designing maps, and that was a problem that I tackled.

When I had the problem of showing map information on television because of the poor quality of the television cameras, I flashed back to an experience I had in the Army earlier. In 1943, General Marshall, who was Chief of Staff of the Army during the war, realized that soldiers didn't' know anything about why they were in the war,

why they were fighting. They didn't know anything about geography. In 1943 and '44, the main fighting of the war was on the Russian front at Stalingrad. But these soldiers didn't know where Russia was. They didn't know where Stalingrad was. I had been assigned at that point to the Information and Education program, and my job was, once a week during a ten-minute break, to tell soldiers what was going on in the war because we had no access to newspapers or radio during our battle training. And so I discovered soldiers didn't know anything about the geography, and I began experimenting with maps. I found a sign painter in the company, and I had him draw very simple maps. "Here's where America is and here's where Europe is and here's where Russia is. And here's what's going on."

So here it is now, the war is over, and I am back at CBS and all of a sudden this experience I had in the war in the Army, all of a sudden has relevance, and a value, and I used it to develop maps that could be seen and understood on the television screen. Simple maps.

Now the level of technology in 1946 was so primitive. Let me describe it. A real thing that happened, it sounds unbelievable. We were unable technically to move an arrow across a map. You wouldn't believe it, but there was no way we could figure out how to move an arrow. And finally what happened was that one of the engineers developed something using prisms on the principle that if anything was black, the insensitive cameras wouldn't pick it up. So if you had a white arrow held by a black covered hand the camera wouldn't show the hand. It would only show the white arrow and the hand could move across the map, and it would show the moving arrow. So they built an elaborate machine for this. It was called a Bretzicon. It was all finished and ready to use, and I was assigned to move the arrow. Whereupon, a fight developed on the set of the television studio; the fight was that the stagehands union said, "He can't do that. That kid can't use this arrow. This is stage equipment. We have to use, remember the Union has to use it." The company said no how do you know what the news is? They needed somebody who knows the news. And the Electricians Union said, "Wait a minute. That uses electric light bulbs. That's an electrical piece of equipment. That's not stage equipment. That's electrical equipment. We want a member of the Electricians Electrical Workers Union Local 3 to use it, excuse me, Local 1212." Well, they never did agree, and they all agreed that they wouldn't' let a non-union member move the arrow so the machine after it was built was never ever used to that day, and it was many years before a moving arrow appeared on the television news programs.

Interviewer: That's amazing. Okay so you've had all these wonderful experiences. How did you get into public relations?

Burger: How I got in was that I was fired from CBS. I had been there, as I said, over 13 years, and that's the way they do things. I won't go into the whole story, but all my successors were fired likewise, and I was fired and I needed a job. And once again, I didn't have much choice because television was so small at the end of 1954 I just couldn't find a job in the other television stations. So in desperation, I reached the bottom of the barrel, which I had no respect for, and that was public relations. And I went to all the public relations firms I could find in the phone book, and I said, "You know this new television thing is important, you ought to have a television department. And I could set it up for you." And I thought one of them seemed to be interested, and they kept calling me back for interviews, and I thought I was going to get hired by this firm, and finally they said, "Look, we're not really interested in television, but you seem to be very persuasive. Would you be interested in coming to work for us to get new business?" And I didn't know how to sell any services; I had never sold anything in my life. And I certainly didn't know anything about public relations, except the junk that editors received from publicity firms. That's why my opinion was so negative. But I had no choice, so I took the job, and I went to work and eight years later, I was president of the McCann Erickson's Public Relations firm called Communications Counselors, which at that time was one of the biggest in the world.

Interviewer: I know there's a story when you worked at that firm to develop new business. You struggled a little bit at the beginning. You found it difficult to actually find new business for this company but then you began to listen to the clients.

Burger: Well, yes Cinda, that was a very powerful lesson in my life. I would go out and they would arrange appointments for me with various corporations and I would tell them what a great PR firm this was. The wonderful things they would do and could do for them. And I really was getting nowhere. And I wasn't making

any progress at all. Then I began to discover that if you want to sell public relations services to a corporation you had better know something about their business and their business problems. They weren't interested in public relations problems. They were interested in business problems. And I didn't know anything about business. Well, as I began, if I would have an appointment let's say, with, I am thinking of one case, an industrial company that made ball bearings. And I didn't' know anything about ball bearings. I didn't' know what they did or why they were important in industry, etc. and as I gradually began digging into it, I found it intensely interesting. And I found that I began to suspect where some of their problems might be in selling ball bearings. And when I would go to see a corporation, then I started asking them questions. And I discovered that people loved to be asked questions and love to tell about their business and their work and I leaned an awful lot. And I discovered in the process that that was the key to making a sale. That if you asked enough questions that you genuinely, not falsely, but if you genuinely learned what the problems of a company were, you could figure out (knowing something about public relations,) where they fit it in and where they might help solve those problems. And so I began getting clients. And I got an awful lot of major corporations as clients for the firm, yes.

Interviewer: Now I know that you met Jesse Bell and you had a friendly relationship with him for a while and I believe eventually you wrote a manual for his department and he was with AT & T. And although it seems as though there was a chance that you might have known Arthur Page you never really overlapped your time.

Burger: No, Arthur Page retired from AT & T Company right after the war, roughly 1946 or '47 something like that. And it was in January of 1955 that, after I left CBS, that I began working for the AT & T Company as a consultant. And the way it happened was Jesse Bell. Jesse G. Bell was a member of the public relations department at the AT & T Company and he said to me one day, "You know we're building this television network for you guys. We don't know anything about how you are using it, could you tell us, help us? Let us understand what you are doing."

Well he was, he was a fatherly type of a fellow. He had been with the company many years, and he was very nice to me. And I began showing him around and showing him some of the problems that we were having in television, and he began using me as an advisor to the AT & T Company. He would have me meet some of the senior people; the chairman, the president, and I would answer their questions. And finally in, I think it was my recollection, it was September of '55 he asked me to write a manual for them. And it was called Telephone News on Television. And it told how you could tell the telephone story using this new medium that they were actually physically building for the networks. And that manual was, it turned out, copyrighted by AT & T in 1955 and it became the first corporate manual in existence using public relations techniques for a corporation. I worked with the AT & T chairmen and president for 33 years until the day I retired in 1988. It was, I believe, the longest continuing relationship with any "supplier" they ever had. And the extraordinary thing to me, Cinda, was that in all those 33 years, I never had a contract with them. Never had a piece of paper with them. Nothing. The chairman or the president would call me up and say, "Hey, we got a problem we'd like to talk to you about. Come on down." And we'd go down and talk and discuss whatever it was, and at the end of the month I'd send them a bill for the time, and they never questioned it. Just paid it. And that went on that way for 33 years, pretty extraordinary. And I would say, my self-perception may not be the way they would see me, but in my self-perception was that my real value that I had to the A T & T company was not that I knew television, but that I had learned the telephone business intimately so thoroughly, very, very thoroughly. I knew what their problems were in great depth. I remember many a time for instance, in those days, when they were cutting over to the new electronic central offices, I would be in the office at midnight when they went out there to make the switch. It was so much that I knew in great depth about the business, and that's something I had learned in public relations, when I had to learn how to ask questions and learn the value of knowing a business.

Interviewer: Good.

Burger: See, I think public relations people working for a corporation who are really expert in public relations, but have a superficial knowledge of their own business, I think they are handicapping themselves. I mean, I used to go out with installers; I used to go out with service people, just to get a sense of what it was like. What they were doing and it was invaluable because in many cases I found I knew more about the business than the particular person that I was working with at first off. That's what I was really proud of.

Interviewer: You also, I believe, were impressed with the transparency of AT & T and I was just wondering if at the time when you were there if any reference was ever made to Arthur Page and his values and integrity and if it was just the culture of AT & T and your influence and Page. Just because you had the same ethical standards; that kind of business attitude just has continued.

Burger: I don't think, -- my memory at age past 87 is not that good, -- but I don't think I remember ever hearing Arthur Page's name mentioned in all the years I was there. It might have been but I don't remember it. But I do remember this was really, remember, my first corporate exposure, and I was struck. That was where I got my education in business ethics and I'll tell you a little about it. One day one of the chairman or the president (I don't remember who,) asked me if I would help out some young fellow down in the PR department who was having some problem that I happened to be familiar with. My relationship with AT & T didn't depend on my relationship with this young man. It depended on my relationship with the top. But I went down and I met this fellow and I liked him and I helped him with the problem. He was 25 years old. He was not experienced. And I really hit it up with the fellow. I liked him. So at Christmas time, I sent him as a nice gesture a year's subscription of the National Geographic Magazine, which at that time was $17 for the year. Well I just meant it out of goodwill. I wasn't going to get anything from this fellow. But a couple weeks later I get a letter from him saying that he had received and noticed the gift and he said AT & T has a policy prohibiting us from receiving any gifts from anyone with whom we do business, so would I please cancel the subscription and send him a letter, a copy of my letter canceling it, for the file for the record. Well, that was the way of the ethics of the AT & T Company. That's how careful they were. And the early 50s somewhere around then maybe the mid 50s there was a journalist who had in later years became a friend of mine, Joseph Goulden, wrote a book called Monopoly about AT & T, attacking AT & T as a monopoly and all the terrible things they did. But in the whole book there was only one or two petty little nothings of corruption which really had happened but they were out of a million employees. He could only find a couple of little nothings. And that said something about the character of the corporation.

What I think was the significance of Arthur Page, which certainly influenced my whole life, was that he said was a corporation's reputation comes from 90 percent of what it does and 10 percent of what it says. And he said if there's a disparity between the two, it's the 90 percent that counts, not the 10 percent. Well, the sad thing to me that's happened in public relations by and large with honorable exceptions is that public relations people think of themselves primarily as communicators, and they are very skilled at it. They know how to communicate a message. But that's the 10 percent. I never had, never Cinda, I never had any involvement with publicity of any kind. We never even in my firm in later years we haven't talked about that. We never had anything to do with publicity. There's noting wrong with it. I am just saying we didn't' have that experience. We never wrote a speech. We never wrote a news release. What we were involved in was what we hoped would be the 90 percent. That is to say what was the policy of the company in the first place and did it deserve public support. Now, I think that public relations today ignores, too often ignores, the 90 percent and pays attention just to the 10 percent of saying it. For example in the Enron scandals, it turned out the public relations people might have been good communicators. They weren't involved in any of the decisions. They had nothing to do with the decision. In the case of Wal-mart, which is a company that I have to say I admire a great deal, I don't' know what part the public relations firm is playing in any of this or in all of this, but I think the significant thing about Wal-mart trying to change its reputation is the changes in policies, changes in the things they are doing, not in what they are saying. They don't' say very much, but in the way they are treating their employees, the healthcare policies, and so on and so forth. I think that's good public relations. And I think that's the Arthur Page idea.

Interviewer: Well, I know in 1983 you had talked about the fact that you believe that the corporate executives really didn't understand the purpose and the responsibilities of their public relations departments, and now we are sitting 25 years later. Do you see a change coming or are we still stuck in that same…

Burger: I think it's much worse now than it was in 1980. Much worse. I think the public relations people by and large thought that the words public relations had become synonymous with "spin" and didn't' want the words. But the word communications was the way the budgets were and marketing was where the budgets were. So they changed their titles and they changed, they positioned themselves voluntarily as the "expert communicators." But the effect of that is quite apparent. It downgraded the function in the corporation. It is just

a service function rather than a management function. And if you look at a great corporation like General Electric for instance, there isn't even a single public relations executive in the top management. Not one, and then they wonder why though they've had very good financial performance, why the stock has done so poorly over the years and why the shareholders lack trust and confidence in the management. Well the answer is I think, that public relations is not the same as communications. Communications is part of it but it's the 10 percent of it, not the 90 percent. And General Electric's concept, they've done some wonderful things they haven't even bothered to communicate them. There's nobody is worrying about the relationship between the right policy and the right communication.

Interviewer: Oh, okay you had a common thread in a lot of your writings and your speeches about social problems and the lack of the PR executives taking responsibility to influence and inform corporate policy. You've been a bit of a maverick in this area, and I was just wondering, has the industry made any headway now at this point 2008 in this, in changing that corporate consciousness?

Burger: First of all, let me say that you couldn't grow up in the Depression and not be affected by a social awareness. And obviously that's where I got mine. Experiencing it, not reading about it. Feeling it. The second part of your question, has the PR industry gone anywhere with social awareness? In terms of corporate policy, I think most PR people have withdrawn from the area completely and abandoned it to the communications function. I mentioned Wal-mart as a good example of a company that is doing something about it. I think there are quite a number of companies that are changing, that have changed policies to be socially more sensitive. When the corporations failed to change their policies, the law, forced by public opinion, changed it for them. I'll give you an example. 1950, when I was running the assignment desk at CBS Television News, I hired what we then would have called a Negro, now African American, employee to work on the assignment desk for assigning stories. Very well qualified guy. Well afterwards, I was called in by the employment director and I was balled out like I will never forget and I was told that the company was stuck. They couldn't' fire him now but they didn't want him in the first place and why did I hire him and if I ever did anything like that again I'd be fired. Well that was characteristic of the employment policies of most corporations in that period, and utilities across the country. The exclusions varied. They were always, I mean they always excluded African Americans, but many of them excluded Catholics. Some of them excluded Jews. Some excluded Protestants, and it was different everywhere, but there were all kinds of rules like that. Public opinion finally came not to tolerate this any more, and the law changed it for them. But I don't think public relations people played any role in that at all. I don't think public relations people were sensitive to those things at all. Now maybe I am doing an injustice but very few companies that have shown leadership in that respect. But it didn't come from the public relations people. It came from marketing people who said hey, if we do so and so, we'll sell more products or something like that.

Interviewer: Talk a little bit about your activities and influence in the National Urban League.

Burger: Well for many years, many years, I was a director. I forgot whether I was called a trustee or director of the National Urban League. And I worked very closely with Whitney Young, and Whitney Young was one of the really great Civil Rights leaders. He has been shown already on a postage stamp. And there were many questions of policy we used to talk about where we could finally reach conclusions and recommendations.

The Urban League was not a political organization. It was a social agency. It was intended to help train people for jobs and so on and so on. Well, finally when the Civil Rights Act was passed, a number of corporations came to the Urban League and they said, "Well look, now we'll hire Negroes in that context. You send us candidates and we'll hire them if they are qualified." Well the fact was there were very few qualified Negroes because they had been excluded from all the training programs in the universities and so on. The Urban League came up with a wonderful idea. A woman named Nancy Lane of the National Urban League came up with the idea of something called the Black Executive Exchange Program. Here's what it was; these are the details I may be wrong about, because it's a long time ago. But the substance is accurate. Let's say that in that period, in the mid '60s, IBM might have had let's just say half of a dozen black professional computer experts. Very few in any case, but they had some. Nancy Lane went to IBM. She said, "Would you help us out and lend us one of these people for one week only to speak at a black historically what we now call historically black college?" So IBM was very decent and they said sure. So this computer expert would go down, let's say to Morehouse College or to any of the black colleges and spend one week there in residence as a visiting professor-in-residence and for

three days a week maybe he would lecture to classes about the computer. Not talking about Civil Rights he'd talk about the computer. Start teaching an introduction to the computer. And then the last couple of days of the week, he would be there to answer any questions from the students. Well this influenced an awful lot of careers of young people who never would have thought of it because the careers had been closed to them up to that point. And the Urban League expanded this program over a period of years to a couple of dozen colleges, hundreds and hundreds of visiting professors, none of whom were paid or given anything except a certificate of appreciation, and it was a wonderful program. I was very proud that I was one of the people who helped start it.

Interviewer: Wonderful. Well tell us a little bit about the founding of the Chester Burger Company.

Burger: Well, there was a period in my life, Cinda, between the time I left McCann Erickson or Communications Counselors as our name was, when I was hired as president of one of their clients, a company at that time called Office Temporaries, which in 1963 was one of the largest in the industry. And I ran that company okay for a couple of years. And then on December 1, 1964, I decided to open my firm, my own firm. I had the idea, (I didn't know whether it would work,) that I was going to try to earn a living selling advice to corporations, public relations advice to corporations, but not doing publicity. I wasn't qualified to do publicity. I really didn't' know it. And at that time I had as a friend, a pretty close friend, John Hill who was the founder of Hill and Knowlton, who was really more than a generation older than me. He was quite in advanced years then. But he was a good friend and he said to me that he had tried the same thing in 1927, when he started Hill and Knowlton. He had hoped to found a firm selling advice to corporations about what their public relations policies should be and he said he failed at it. Because when he gave advice that they liked and accepted, they then said to him, "All right. You go ahead and implement it. We have no resources to implement it." And John Hill soon found that the money to be made in public relations was in the implementation, not in the advice. That's why it became such a fine big firm. Well I did succeed at it, and my firm was always a little firm. We were never more than 25-26 people at the very peak I think. But we were advisors to dozens and dozens and dozens of big corporations, Sears Roebuck, 3M, Texas Instruments, Metropolitan Life, all of them, and American Bankers Association. All we did was discuss problems and suggest how to handle them. That was half of our business. The other half wasn't so well known and that was, if a company went to a big PR firm and had a problem that the PR firm had no experience in handling privately, the PR firm would come to us and ask our advice. And we were advisors to almost all of the major PR firms for about 25 years. Then finally in 1988, I retired. Sold the firm to my partners, to one of them, and they ran it into the ground in two years and it was dead.

Interviewer: Well, when it was vital and alive, did you have a mission statement or anything that was written down, a code of ethics?

Burger: No, no. We had none; we were not bureaucratic. We had about maybe, I am trying to remember, at the most six or eight senior people, approximately, and they would just go out and talk to a CEO about a problem and they all had years and years of good experience, and they had good judgment. They had very good judgment. And we were involved in, I would say, a very large percentage of the major corporate problems facing corporate America during all those years. We were even advisors to the AARP. We were advisors to the American Cancer Society. Not just for once, but for years, for many years.

Interviewer: When you hired those individuals, what things were you looking for?

Burger: Well, first of all I didn't hire them. They were all partners. Most of them as I recall, shared ownership of the firm with me. They were really my partners. Jim Arnold, Ed Gottlieb, some of the others. Jim Lukaszewski, they were pretty senior people. And what I sought first of all was, I would say, openness and an integrity that they had credibility. They were trustworthy and that they had a lot of good judgment and experience and they were not know-it- alls or self-important. They could talk quietly from experience rather than boasting how good they were.

Interviewer: What was the biggest challenge that you have faced in your life?

Burger: I will generalize, and then I'll give you an example. I think the hardest thing for anybody in life, certainly anybody in public relations or among management consultants, is to tell the truth to power. It's very,

very hard. I had an experience just a couple of weeks ago that I'll tell you about. For about 12 years (I don't know 11, 12, 13 years now,) I've been officially an advisor to the Secretary of the Air Force, the Office of Public Affairs. And about a month ago The New York Times came out with a front-page news story as follows. By suing the government under the Freedom of Information Act, they had achieved, rather acquired documents that showed as follows; the Pentagon, the top officials of the Pentagon had been briefing retired Generals who were serving as commentators on military affairs to the television news programs. And according to the documents that The New York Times uncovered as a result of its litigation, this information was not accurate. Some of it was untruthful. Essentially, they said how great everything was, covering up some of the failures. And the Generals, according to the documents that were produced, knew it at the time that it was false. And nevertheless, these commentators went on the air on all the channels talking about this, parroting of the Pentagon line, and there it was. The Times revealed it. Afterwards, I was asked by somebody connected with the military, what did I think of it all? And I was really troubled because the truth was; I thought it was an outrage. What the Pentagon had done was not telling the truth. Truth, I would say, is that the military are exhausted from this war. The men are worn out. The equipment is worn out. The money is gone. The services are short of everything, and that there is no military solution to the present war. I felt that it was, first of all disgraceful that the Pentagon had not told the truth, a truthful balanced picture. The second thing was, the Generals hadn't told the truth, why were they employed? They were all employed by military contractors. Now there's nothing wrong with that. It's perfectly okay. They have expertise in combat. The problem is that it should be disclosed because if they were to criticize any Pentagon activity or policy, they would lose their value to their employer and therefore they'd lose their employment. That should have been disclosed. If it had been disclosed, it would have been nothing wrong with it. The third failure was the media. The media should have investigated and found out that these military commentators were not impartial, honest commentators, but they were under the control effectively of the Pentagon. And if they had disclosed that, it would have been okay. If the public knew how they were, they could judge it accordingly. But they didn't. Or they didn't even bother to try to find out.

So that was my dilemma. My association with the armed forces is very close. It's very important to me in my life. It's enriched my life. And I didn't' want to lose it and I was afraid if I said what I thought, which was what I have just said to you, that they would cut me off. And so I stalled for a couple of days before I answered them. What should I do? Then I finally decided that if I couldn't tell the truth, what good was I? Or was the access to the military that important to me that I was wiling to not to tell the truth? So I told the people involved exactly how I felt. And I waited for the ax to fall on my head. Subsequently, within the following ten days, I had occasion to talk to some very senior military commanders and they all agreed with me and they all said they felt exactly the same way, that they were terribly offended by the breech of integrity, which was the essence of their character in their lives.

Interviewer: Very interesting. So feeding into this, what are the most important issues, the enduring truths that you've learned in your career?

Burger: That's a broader question than asking me about public relations, and I like it for that reason. I often think that… let me exaggerate a minute, let me put it in black and white. It really is shades of gray but let me put it in black and white. Nobody goes to bed at night worrying about Chet Burger. Maybe my wife does but that's about it. My children, I am sure, are concerned about me, but they have other concerns of their own. What I am suggesting is that the world doesn't begin or end, or is centered around me. And one of the very important lessons of my life is that when you are concerned about other people, besides yourself, you get very rich returns. You develop relationships that are beyond anything you could have hoped for. If you genuinely, I don't mean being a phony, but if you genuinely care about other people, they care about you. So I would say that's perhaps as good a lesson as any. A second lesson I think is the perspective of time. When I talk with my grandchildren of whom I have many, their life experience is shaped by only what they have known in the few years of semi-adulthood. When you look at the perspective of time and you get interested in history and realize the origins of ideas and how the wheel turns and how things change and how things come back in a different perspective, the perspective of time is very, very important to me and that's interested me so much in history. That's the reason. It helps me understand today much better.

Interviewer: That's a wonderful answer. Which of your accomplishments are you most proud of and why?

Burger: Cinda, you will laugh at this, but I will tell you frankly. The one that I think I am probably most proud of is the fact that I gave 206 blood donations. I used to give it first once a year, then I started increasing in frequency and then at the end of the year it was every eight weeks, and finally on the 206th time I fainted. Just psychological shock and they said, "Well you've given enough. That's enough." But it really to me was what I am saying to you is, I got great pride in having a feeling that I helped other people and that's wonderful because other people helped me. I would say the other thing was when the government gave me that "Medal for Outstanding Service to the United States." That meant a lot to me.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that you would want to talk about that we haven't covered, anything that you might want to say to the new and future PR professionals?

Burger: Honesty. Everybody believes in honesty. Nobody believes in dishonesty, but I think that with public relations people, corporate people it's overwhelmingly important. Because your credibility that is most important PR people tend to worry how they are going to get their messages noticed. Whereas the real problem is not getting them noticed, the real problem is why should anybody believe them. During World War II, the United States government followed a policy of absolute truth. They didn't tell everything. There were lots of secrets. But what they did tell was the truth. For example, during the terrible, I guess it was 1944 the terrible war and the battles of Iwo Jima, I think there were 30,000 Americans killed or wounded in that terrible battle on that little island. They always told the truth. Exactly what was going on, and the result was that when the government asked people for sacrifices, people believed the government and believed they were really needed and gave them. People supported the government wholeheartedly not just because it was the right war, but because the government had high credibility. I think when an institution whether a corporation or the government tries to spin to make things look better than they really are, they really end up hurting themselves terribly. Because once they lose credibility as our government in many ways has lost credibility, it takes years and years and years before people will trust them again. So I think that's a key thing. I think there is a second point I want to make a little differently. People who are seeing this interview whatever, whenever or whatever, are going to have children and grandchildren. And I think that my life was negatively shaped by the fact that I didn't' know anything about lots of careers because there was nobody in my family who was in those careers. I was limited to what I knew about life in the family circle, which was constricted as most families are constricted. When you see the enormous wealth of opportunities that are out there, the new fields, the new opportunities, you simply do not learn those within the family. And I think that this whole business of broadening in college, and in life and trying new things is such a key point to success because otherwise family after family -- you know and I know -- people follow the same general cultural pattern as their parents. We see it in our own family in, in many respects.

Interviewer: Well I want to thank you very, very much for spending some time with us. And letting us have such a wonderful view and a wonderful environment for this interview. Thank you very much.

Burger: Thank you too.

[end of interview]

Chester Burger

- Full Interview

Segmented by Topic

- Characteristics/Qualities of PR Professionals
- Arthur Page/Principles/Society/Center
- PR Agency or Corporate PR/Outsourcing
- Transition to Corporate World
- Ethical Leadership/Corporate CEO Responsibility
- Trust/Credibility

- Ethical Decisionmaking/Behavior
- Challenges/Accomplishments
- Marketing/Advertising/Branding

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