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**(Years of Service: 1968 - 1996)**

### **Acknowledgements and Introduction:**

**JB:** *I would like to thank Dr. Bob Comas for allowing the visit at his home in July 2014. I also express thanks to Dr. Morgan Kiper Riechel for conducting this interview. Dr. Comas' interview offers the history of our field from a dedicated and respected counselor educator. Dr. Comas served the counseling field for 28 years in various leadership capacities. He and Dr. Jean Cecil were on the forefront of Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) accreditation standards (see selected publications below). This interview offers a glimpse of his contributions. In October 2014, in a follow-up dialogue, I asked questions to add a personal perspective to the initial interview. The following information reflects excerpts from both interviews. This version was reviewed and approved by Dr. Comas, prior to publication.*

**MKR:** *What is it like being a counselor educator?*

**RC:** It was a delightful experience all the way through. I entered counselor education as a professor in 1968 at the University of Alabama. Things were very different at that point and the field was just being established. What we did as counselor educators then is probably quite different from what is done now. I think all of my life up until that point in time was spent preparing me to be a counselor educator.

I was born during the Great Depression in 1934 and my mother decided, thanks be to God and God agreed, that I was going to be a teacher. So she put the shed room in place for my classroom, and I taught everything in site until I actually went to school at age 6.

As I think about the counseling profession and how I feel about it, I have come to this conclusion. I believe that what we did early on in the 1960's was to tell the story about the purpose of counseling and particularly counseling in the schools.

I think that the University of Alabama had one of the first programs, one of the early ones to be recognized and developed. We were trying to develop counseling as a profession and to establish the school to where what would be accomplished for the students. A major part of our job then, maybe not now, was recruiting students in terms of personality and background to work as counselors in the field.

So, I was recruiting students and preparing them to be effective in schools. How did that go with

accomplishing these goals? I think that this will be repetitive because I think that we do the things that we do and when we think we are good at them we do them over and over. So I have always been involved with as many professional activities as possible. I did not stop learning when I finished my Ph.D. at the University of North Carolina. Instead, I drew on every professional organization that I could join that was appropriate for me. I also went to every meeting that was sponsored by those organizations (at the state, regional, and national levels). That seemed important to me. I not only attended those professional meetings, but after a few years at the university, I never attended one where I did not have a presentation of some kind. Sometimes Dr. Jean Cecil, who was an academic in school counseling, and I would do presentations together. One time at one of the Southern Association of Counselor Education and Supervision (SACES) meetings we had six presentations to do. We ran from one to another and that was probably overkill [laughs].

**MKR:** *Thank goodness they limit it at SACES to two presentations, six presentations is quite a few.*

**RC:** Right. As I joined those professional counseling associations and participated in them through the years, I was fortunate enough to be selected and to hold leadership positions in those. I think that is important. I chaired many committees regionally and nationally and that continued to contribute to my professional development. For example, I was asked to serve on the board of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA). I was on that board for about 3 years and served one of those years as secretary. Later, I was president of the Alabama Counseling and Guidance Association (now Alabama Counseling Association [ALCA]). I may have contributed to these organizations, but I actually learned more from the experiences than I contributed. As I said I contributed programs and workshops everywhere. Looking back, I guess one of the most important professional experiences I had was after the CACREP Board was established. I was appointed as a member of that board and served on that board for a total of 6 years. I was secretary for a few years, vice chair for the last two, and I would have been chair the last year that was by design, but I had a more important family obligation. My daughter had a need for me to help her with my first grandchild. So, I resigned from the CACREP Board to help take care of Jordan, who is in that picture you see, and is now in nursing school, so it must have been for the best. Another thing to add, I worked diligently with local associations and local counselors. I have a Curriculum Vita (CV) that is 66 pages long to verify all the things I have shared. I think that is what it was like being a counselor educator when I first started.

**MKR:** *Can you tell me about when you began your career at the University of Alabama?*

**RC:** I can. I came here in 1968, and these were the beginning years in counselor education, especially in school counseling. I finished my master's degree at Duke in 1959 and was a public school counselor in Burlington, NC for one year. I decided that maybe life offered something besides education. I got a job as personnel manager in a southern company located in Nashville, TN at the time. Then, I was a personnel manager in a shoe plant in Iuka, MS for one year. Looking back, I think that my preparation for the University of Alabama happened while I worked in these different settings. So, as a professor at the University of Alabama, I did a lot of different things.

After I returned to the university, I completed my degree in Counseling and Guidance at the University of North Carolina in 1968. I was also hired at the University of Alabama in 1968 and continued that experience for 28 years. I worked as a counselor educator at the University of

Alabama from 1968 until 1996. I was fortunate enough, or unfortunate enough to be called out to do other things with the university. I spent about 10 years as Assistant Dean of the Graduate School, working with the graduate students. During that time, I also kept my half-time position in Counselor Education. At some point in the early 1970's Dr. Roger Sayers, who was the Acting Vice President of the University of Alabama, asked me to take a year off from my Counselor Education appointment and to enroll in the American Council of Education (ACE, 2014) as an intern, which was a training program. I did not know at that time that it would move me back to being Assistant Dean to the Graduate School. But mainly, my career was as a counselor educator for the University of Alabama. That was my first love.

**MKR:** *Is there anything else that you can tell us about the beginning years in counselor education at UA?*

**RC:** Let me think about that. The process was to reintroduce guidance and counseling to the community in general. We were conscious and conscientious of the work we were establishing because we wanted quality counseling preparation programs. A large part of our jobs at that time was going into the schools to recruit students who would be appropriate for a counseling background. So, we took the story out every way that we could. I taught introductory courses all over the state. I taught from Andalusia to Gadsden. I taught night courses in Fayette. There were many different places that I traveled across the state. It is strange to think that at that time there was so much interest in the field; it was not unusual in the summer time to have as many as 80 students from different fields in our classes.

**MKR:** *These were people who were teachers in the local school systems?*

**RC:** They were teachers who were interested in counseling, but they were not all going to be counselors. They were interested enough to take that course. I always took that as an opportunity to tell the story for them to take back to others. We were looking for students who would be appropriate for our field.

As I said, I guess one of the things that I did throughout my academic career is that I tried to take responsibility in as many of the organizations as I could, not just on campus, but other places, too. It was almost overkill. We presented programs to different settings, and we spent a lot of the time working with the local schools and counselors and teachers when they needed it. We were also fortunate when I first came to the University because funds were available from the National Defense of Education Act (NDEA; 1958). Many of our counseling students were paid stipends to get the counseling degree. So, we would have them on campus at the University of Alabama. The students were able to complete a master's degree in counseling in one year (i.e., four courses in the first summer term, one course each fall and spring term, and then four courses in the second summer term). This was a very fortunate time to be in counselor education.

**MKR:** *I'm fascinated with you talking about the beginnings of the field, especially school counseling in the state and how foundational your work was in setting up the profession in this state. It is interesting to hear how this created an impact around the country. Is there anything else you could add?*

**RC:** I think that as I continued to expand my interests to serve and present outside of the state,

the influence was recognized. For example, what was called APGA at that time and then later ACA and serving on the CACREP board gave us an opportunity to tell the story of our progress.

I cannot think of any profession that I would have liked any better than being a counselor educator. Maybe, if I would have continued teaching, I would have liked that as well. My undergraduate background was history. But, I realized that I needed a career that was more suitable for my personality. Counseling and Counselor Education became my means of fulfilling the goals for my life.

**MKR:** *When you talk about taking the story of counselor education and school counseling across the country what were some of the challenges that came up? What were maybe some competing models or ideas about what professional school counseling was or should be at that time?*

**RC:** I think many people outside our field did not have a clue about what counseling was about. So the role of the counselor was important to communicate. This was not always easy to do. I never missed an opportunity to tell that counseling story wherever I went. I thought about my work with students and the pleasure I received from the experiences. I hope this is true, but I do not think I ever had difficulty as a counselor educator dealing with students.

**MKR:** *Tell me about the relationships that you developed with your students.*

**RC:** I really enjoyed my relationships with my students. As I said, I do not think I ever had a student that I could not figure out a way to deal with. I thought some of them would have been more appropriate in other fields, and I would actively suggest that and try to help them find another field.

I tried to model the position of counselor. I encouraged students I taught to be as involved in professional organizations as I was in state, regional, and national levels. I encouraged students to attend the conferences, and to present and learn from the opportunities to attend those programs. I often took students with me to conferences when we presented together. So it was not something I did by myself, it was something I took them with me and we took part in those activities together. That was the kind of way that I worked with students in those days. After they graduated, I continued to maintain contact with them. I would meet with them at the different meetings and conferences. It was an on-going relationship, and I did not just send them on their way.

**MKR:** *If you could bring back anything from the profession from the past three decades what would it be?*

**RC:** I have thought about that and I may be wrong, but I think at the beginning of the profession we were really concerned with the teaching aspect of the program - having quality courses and providing a great experience for the students in the classrooms. To add, once we were out working as counselors and counselor educators, we continued to tell the counseling story as we went to our different settings. So, I would be sure to emphasize teaching as an important service. I may be wrong, but I think that there has been a major shift of interest to research. I think that is important, but to me that is secondary to the teaching and service aspects.

**RC:** How do you feel about that since you've been in counselor education?

**MKR:** *That is a really good question because I am just starting my career. I see my research as complimentary to my teaching and that it helps be a better educator. But, I do agree that one of the most important things we do is to prepare our students to enter the field and that is not just a matter of teaching the curriculum, but it is also modeling.*

**MKR:** *Thank you for your time, Dr. Comas.*

**RC:** Thank you.

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*Several months after the initial interview, I asked Dr. Comas to elaborate about his early years and his personal life. He offered the following information.*

**JB:** *I want to ask you a few questions about your life prior to your becoming a counselor. Where were you born and what was in like during your early life?*

**RC:** I was born in a very small town in South Georgia on December 14, 1934. I was the first child for Ruth and Reno Comas, and I might add the first male child in our family for many years. This was not a bad place to be born in South Georgia! Since it was the heart of a very bad depression, my parents lived with the parents of my Father. The meager income was earned by my Mother, who worked as a clerk in a dime store. My Father worked as clerk in a grocery store and my Grandmother was a seamstress. She made clothes for the few women in town who had enough money to pay her. My Grandfather sat on the porch dressed in a suit and rocked in a very large chair. His ancestors were Catalanians from Northeastern Spain, so he did not think he had to work! My Father had dropped out of school in elementary school, and my Mother was valedictorian of her high school graduation class. In fact, as a high school student she was the selected student to serve as a tutor for the athletes in the school. She taught them algebra and French!

At every phase of my early life the emphasis was on the importance of academic achievement, so that became the motivating factor and remains so until now. That factor enabled me later in life to complete an undergraduate degree at Mercer University in Macon, GA. My first job after college was as a junior high school teacher in Albany, GA. Upon completion of one year of teaching, I was drafted to serve in the Army. I served for two years as a clerk typist in an office with civilian secretaries in the post headquarters at Fort Lee, VA. I had a great time and made some friends that are still my friends. Following the army experience, I returned to my teaching job in Albany for one year.

**JB:** *What were some early influences in your life? What were some influences in early adulthood in your life?*

**RC:** As the first child and grandchild in my family, my parents and grandparents created an environment that provided very affectionate and supportive relationships throughout my life! The primary emphasis was on academic achievement, so that has been the primary motivating factor in my life! That goal has continued throughout graduation from high school and has

continued as I completed a master's degree (Duke University) and a doctorate (University of North Carolina). I was fortunate enough to receive a two-year graduate assistantship to pay for Duke and to be hired as an instructor at UNC while I completed my doctorate. My primary career has been to serve as a professor of Counselor Education at The University of Alabama from 1968 until retirement in 1996. During that timespan, I also served for periods of time as the Assistant Dean of the Graduate School, Administrative Assistant in the Office of Academic Affairs, and an intern for one year in the American Council on Education. Throughout my life, academic achievement has been a strong motivating factor.

**JB:** *As you reflect back on your family, tell me more.*

**RC:** Early influences in my life have been described earlier. Rewards for achievement in academic areas were valued and have continued to be motivating factors in my life. These goals in adulthood have continued to be important to me. However, my primary goals in the years following my marriage to Joan have centered on my relationship with her and our two children. Joan and I had former marriages before our marriage, so I was fortunate enough to marry Joan and acquire two wonderful children: Michael Scott and Shannon Elizabeth. Scott was eight years old and Shannon was four years old when we married. After 42 years of marriage, we still focus on the high quality of our relationship and our relationship with our children, their spouses, and our grandchildren. These relationships have given and continue to give meaning to our lives. As a result of these meaningful relationships with each other our lives have meaning at a very level! What more could one ask for in life?

**JB:** *It has been a few months since we interviewed you. Would there be any other thoughts you would like to add to this interview?*

**RC:** I continue to value the rewards I have experienced as a teacher, a counselor, a counselor educator, a husband, a father, and a grandfather. Enjoying the accomplishments of my students and members of my family have given meaning to my life. These positive feelings, as I view my life, continue to provide me with a joyful feeling about life on a daily basis.

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