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Interviewer: Venerable Jue Fang

Interviewee: David Campbell

00:01 Venerable Jue Fang

This is Venerable Jue Fang interviewing Mr. David Campbell, the former Lord Mayor of Wollongong, on the 7th of June 2024. This recording is taking place at Nan Tien Institute, 231 Nolan Street, Unanderra, New South Wales 2526. The interview is being recorded for the State Library of New South Wales Oral History Collection and Nan Tien Temple's 30th Anniversary Oral History Project.

00:33 Venerable Jue Fang

Hello, Mr. David. (David Campbell: Hello.) Hi, how are you?

00:37 David Campbell

I'm good, I'm excited to be here. (Venerable Jue Fang: Okay.) And I can't believe it's 30 years since the temple¹ opened, and of course, a couple of years before that negotiation, planning and construction took place. (Venerable Jue Fang: Yeah.) I'm fortunate to have an association with the temple from the beginning.

00:58 David Campbell

Um, you know, my name is David Campbell and I was on Wollongong City Council between 1987 and 1999. Um, the planning took place before I became a Lord Mayor. I was a Lord Mayor of Wollongong between 1991 and 1999.

01:15 David Campbell

So, as a council, as an alderman in the late 80s, I was involved in some of the early decision-making, but then some of the construction processes and Opening took place when I was a Lord Mayor. Um, and so, to reflect on that, to have the opportunity to reflect on that in this conversation, in the context of an oral history, a formal official oral history, is pretty exciting for me.

01:43 Venerable Jue Fang

Thank you so much. I think we are all very excited to have you here as well because we are sure that you will be able to tell us the side of the story that is quite different from the monastics or the temple side. So, can I just ask you, you just did a short self-introduction, and I was just wondering how much involved are you with the planning and also the building of the temple?

¹ Nan Tien Temple, located in Berkeley, New South Wales, is one of the branch temples of Fo Guang Shan. It is the largest Buddhist temple in the southern hemisphere and has served as a significant cultural bridge and tourist attraction since its opening in October 1995.

02:12 David Campbell

Certainly, I was involved in some of the decision-making to accept the temple as part of the community and say, "Yes, we want to go ahead with this." Um, the final negotiation was undertaken by Council's staff.

02:28 David Campbell

The detailed assessment of planning instruments and development application were done by the Council's staff, but with a clear endorsement by the elected Council representatives, and by that, given that those people are democratically elected, there's a clear endorsement by the community that this was a sensible thing to do, an exciting thing to do for Wollongong.

02:57 David Campbell

So, a little hands-off in the detail, but my role as part of the decision-making process is something that I'm quite proud of when I reflect on what's occurred over those 30 years.

03:10 Venerable Jue Fang

Could you share with us what was the process like? Was there any anyone who actually objected to that? And also, we were also interested to know why did the Wollongong City Council, why was it so open-minded to invite an organisation from overseas, from quite a different culture and religion, to come here to build such a big temple?

03:35 David Campbell

Sure, I think the last part of the question, the Council was open to it because the community is a multicultural community since, particularly since the Second World War, with displaced people from Eastern Europe, from Europe generally. And then, subsequently, wave after wave of migrants, refugees, all came and settled in Wollongong, and they brought their culture, their religion, their food, they brought all those things to Wollongong.

04:08 David Campbell

So, we were a culturally diverse community, a multicultural community in the language of the day, and to have another culture and another religion see an opportunity to prosper in Wollongong was something that the elected councillors and the broader community were, in some ways, a little blasé about because it wasn't particularly new, it was different, a different culture, but it wasn't new because we've been through it on many occasions.

04:38 David Campbell

We've ended up with a much much larger structure than those other cultures perhaps, but nevertheless, the community is an extremely tolerant community, and we wanted to make sure that people are welcome here.

04:59 David Campbell

Um, people from all over the world have built families here, they've built physically the community, they've built the society and the culture that we know, and to have that culturally and linguistically diverse community is very exciting.

05:18 David Campbell

Um, the challenges along the way, I don't think there were particularly any, there were some people in the community as always with change, who were a bit sceptical, a bit nervous, a bit unsure, um, not to dwell on it, but they were one of the Christian religions who didn't quite see eye to eye with what was going on here. And I could remember a conversation with one of the senior representatives of that particular Christian religion and said to them, hang on, we want to welcome some people from overseas, and you don't see that as being Christian.

05:55 David Campbell

Um, that ended the conversation, I guess, but overall, I think the community generally saw an opportunity to welcome others, an opportunity to have a point of difference and that's certainly the case today.

06:09 Venerable Jue Fang

Yeah, so the construction started in 1992 with the groundbreaking and the official Opening was in 1995. Construction was about three years, that was pretty fast. Could you share with us, what actually went through during the construction or what happened during the Opening Ceremony?

06:31 David Campbell

I'm fortunate to have been here at the groundbreaking ceremony at construction as the Lord Mayor and I can still remember breaking the soil, you know, in that ceremony. And so that's, that's vivid in my mind.

06:49 David Campbell

Most of us went away and left construction to construction. Let people get on with the job of constructing it, and then came back, I guess, for the official Opening, which was a very big day and a very exciting day.

07:05 David Campbell

Personally, I can remember having worked with a Chinese friend for a couple of weeks beforehand to have written in phonetic English some words of greeting in Chinese and said something like, good afternoon and welcome to the city of Wollongong, it's great to have you here, something like that.

07:26 David Campbell

Um, very rough phonetic Chinese and the crowd were very appreciative of that. I can still remember that vividly. I can remember being here with my mother-in-law, who was quite elderly, so an elderly Christian woman who was, who came with my wife and I, and she was excited to be part of.

07:48 David Campbell

Um, part of the site is leased to the temple and the council agreed to a lease of \$2² for 99 years or something like that. And when the Federal Minister for Immigration, Senator of the Honourable Nick Bolkus at the time, pulled a \$2 coin out of his pocket and said, "Here, I'm paying the rent for you".

08:09 David Campbell

So that was somewhat memorable as well. My very dear friend, Bob Carr, who was a Premier of New South Wales, was also here at the official ceremony and spoke, as Bob always says, eloquently about the importance of, of understanding in New South Wales.

08:28 David Campbell

The Grand Master³, of course, I can still remember him just with his wisdom, his calm wisdom, his calm determination, talking to so many people. Um, and that's a highlight for me, the fact that he was here. And, as I said, just spoke with that calm wisdom and calm demeanour that he had.

08:56 David Campbell

Um, I guess the other thing about the Opening was there were so many devotees here, so many people from New South Wales, but also from around the world. And just to chat to some of those people in that context was rewarding, encouraging and thrilling.

09:13 David Campbell

Just a big celebration, as I recall, the weather did the right thing. So, it was a beautiful sunshining day, showing off the temple to its, to its special vantage, but also showing off Wollongong to its special vantage as well.

² A slip of the tongue. Here should be \$1 per year with a total lease of 99 years.

³ Born in 1927 in Jiangdu, Jiangsu Province, China, Venerable Master Hsing Yun was the founder of Fo Guang Shan (Buddha's Light Mountain) Buddhist Order and dedicated his life to propagating Humanistic Buddhism. He passed away at the age of 97, on February 5, 2023.

09:27 Venerable Jue Fang

Thank you. So, what impact do you think the temple has had on the cultural identity of Wollongong?

09:36 David Campbell

There's no doubt that the temple has, has added strongly to the cultural identity of Wollongong. As I said a little earlier, you know, there are cultures from all over the world here, and they mix and learn from each other and work with each other, occasionally a bit of tension, but that's how relationships work as well.

10:00 David Campbell

But the temple itself has, has drawn attention to Wollongong by what it does, importantly, by how it looks and where it sits. So, people from around the country know that Wollongong is a place of acceptance, a place of welcome, and that's one of the significant things that the temple had in terms of Wollongong's cultural identity, is saying to others, people are welcome here.

10:36 David Campbell

I think it, um, it would be my interpretation of that. Yeah.

10:40 Venerable Jue Fang

Okay. So, would that be, it has been 30 years, more than 30 years since you came into contact with Fo Guang Shan⁴, with Nan Tien Temple. And is there any significant moment or event that something that really strikes you or you remember?

10:58 David Campbell

Without a doubt, the Opening is something I remember. Then the announcement and the commitment to the Institute⁵, I think, is something that, that stands out. So, the conception, construction and Opening of the temple itself stands out.

11:21 David Campbell

Um, the concept, as I mentioned, welcome, a minute ago, the welcoming environment stands out; the expansion of Fo Guang Shan body's establishment of the Institute, I think, stands out for me. And to learn in the community of the people who have benefited by studying at the Institute is, is pretty exciting also.

⁴ Founded in 1967 by Venerable Master Hsing Yun, Fo Guang Shan is a global Buddhist Order headquartered in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, with over 300 branch monasteries around the world.

⁵ Nan Tien Institute (NTI), founded by Venerable Master Hsing Yun, is the first higher education institution in Australia that combines centuries of Buddhist wisdom with modern holistic studies. <https://www.nantien.edu.au/>

11:51 Venerable Jue Fang

Yeah, what about the people?

11:55 David Campbell

Um, a number of the devotees I've met, probably lost contact with in a more recent time, but earlier on, was able to be in contact with and learn from them. Um, some of the nuns who I've met have been extremely interesting people, in very interesting backgrounds, significant contributions to your organisation, and then we see them also out in the community.

12:34 David Campbell

So, they're contributing to the community as well, um, in a...again in a calm, but participatory way they're contributing, in a visible way.

12:49 Venerable Jue Fang

Yeah, okay. What future role would you envision for the Nan Tien Temple to Wollongong?

12:58 David Campbell

Well, I think, to date, well let me say up front, from my perspective as a lifelong resident of Wollongong, I think the city is richer for the temple being here. I'm grateful for the opportunity I've had personally to be associated with it, but I celebrate as a member of the community, not so much a former leader of the community, but as a member of the community, I celebrate the fact that the temple is here physically and spiritually and for the contribution that it brings.

13:31 David Campbell

I mean, as I look out the window at the moment, there's a group of school children walking down the front stairs of the temple. And the fact that you know, looking at them, they're probably in primary school, they are having the opportunity to visit this complex, I think, broadens their mind, and that's good.

13:51 David Campbell

So, and there are so many about celebrating that sort of contribution. So, I just want to put on record my personal thanks that the temple is here, that the, that the organisation is here and the contribution it makes.

14:04 David Campbell

What's it going to do in the future? I probably think more of the same, but as everything changes, as the world changes, the temple, its Venerables, its devotees, they will change as well. Um, you know, the fundamental principles are what brings them together, what

teaches, what is taught here, what is practised here, will stay the same, but it'll happen in a different way as the community changes and society changes.

14:40 David Campbell

Um, I think the Institute probably will play a continuing role and a bigger role. There's a lot of resource there. Um, so I see a strong future for the temple in our community. I don't have a crystal ball to know how that will, will grow, but I've got confidence there'll be a strong future, and I look forward to it.

15:06 David Campbell

I don't know if I got 30 years left in me, but maybe, but I'll see what happens in the next 30 years.

15:12 Venerable Jue Fang

Thank you. So, our founder Venerable Master Hsing Yun passed away last year. (David Campbell: Yes.) So, I was just wondering if you had any personal contact with him?

15:24 David Campbell

My contact was limited to a couple of visits he had here when I was the Lord Mayor. I was fortunate enough to visit Fo Guang Shan headquarters in Taiwan, but he was travelling and so I didn't get to see him that time.

15:41 David Campbell

So, I had a couple of personal meetings with him, most notably the one at the, at the Opening. But I just always saw him as a calm and wise person, but at the same time, his sense of strength about him, this, um, this personality that was quite modest, but a personality which had and a person who had a direction, had a view, who had a clichéd world vision if you like, and associated with that, a determination to see that vision through.

16:24 David Campbell

Um, and he certainly, certainly drove the establishment of Nan Tien with that determination and that vision, I think. And I remember him talking about a lotus floating on a pond. Um, I think at the Opening, he made that as part of his speech, he made that a focus of his speech, talking about the temple as being the lotus floating on a pond.

16:54 David Campbell

And in some ways, I guess, that describes to me him. You know, a lotus is just calm and reflective, but strong enough to survive as it floats in any environment. So yeah, a bit of,

a bit of an analogy there, but my memory of him is just that, just a calm, respectful, intelligent, determined individual.

17:23 Venerable Jue Fang

Is there anything else you would like to add to this interview?

17:26 David Campbell

Um, I think, I think I've probably covered what I wanted to say. I mean that important part, I said a minute ago of, you know, just a personal thanks for the establishment and the ongoing commitment because my community, the one that's nurtured me for my whole life, is better for Nan Tien being here.

17:48 Venerable Jue Fang

Thank you very much. Thank you.

17:49 David Campbell

Pleasure. (Venerable Jue Fang: Thank you.)