Interview – William Donelan

Dean Pascal J. Goldschmidt M.D.: Bill, you and I have talked many, many times, and this is a great opportunity to really explain to the medical field and our colleagues how instrumental you've been to now two health systems. The first one of course was built while you developed your first career, and now the University of Miami with UHealth, and it would be great if you could retrace for us the progression of your career, because I think you're the only person I know who has done every single job that you can do at an academic medical center. So if you don't mind?

Mr. William Donelan: I'll telescope this a bit, but the time at Duke was really almost 37 years, which is pretty much most of my professional life and started really when I was a youngster in a clerical supervisory job in the faculty practice plan. It evolved from that to broader responsibilities there, then being the business manager of the Department of Medicine and then running Duke Hospital and then having a broader responsibility for the overall medical center. This over almost four decades, the last 15 years of which was really the evolution of Duke as the Duke we know today with a large integrated health system, a distinguished school of medicine, a robust faculty practice plan. And the satisfying thing to me about that was really building a culture of excellence or being part of a team that built a culture of excellence over time. You know, in institutions the aspiration for excellence is always there. The trick is to have a collective understanding of what excellence really is and accountability institutionally and individually to the commitment to excellence and to realize that it takes steady, really unending work to maintain excellence and build it forward. And so, I contrast that with the challenge that I joined you for at the University of Miami which in many respects is a much more complicated
environment than Duke. You know, it's an affiliation with a large public hospital, a culture that was highly decentralized, but many of the elements were there, pockets of excellence and all of this effort to be telescoped, whereas at Duke it was an evolution over four decades. Here the hope is to try and position the University of Miami, the Miller School of Medicine, the University of Miami Health System to grow excellence much faster and to change culture much faster than was the challenge at Duke. And I think putting the pieces together is one thing, building the infrastructures that enable faculty physicians, other caregivers, staff, and researchers to really be all that they can be -- at the risk of sounding like an Army recruiting poster -- is an important piece of what you have to do here and what we're all committed to doing. And you see things like the UCare initiative where we're really trying to deal with the culture, the transformation of culture to more of a vision and the execution of a vision of what it is that we want to be and how everybody teams together to allow that to happen. It takes the same ingredients no matter what the institution, whether here at the University of Miami, at Duke, at any of our colleague institutions of name recognition around the country. The institution has to be clear in its vision and effective in executing strategies. It has to measure things and hold itself accountable to performance against targets, and that's a lot of what the UCare initiative is. So it's building a leadership team and through that leadership team building coherence that everybody can understand and buy into in how they play a role in moving the institution forward.

**Dean Pascal J. Goldschmidt M.D.:** So, if a young, eager kid who wants to learn about what you do and how to successfully accomplish what you have now done twice, which is to build great health systems -- you know, young MBAs with a new degree in their pocket, what would you tell that individual?
Mr. William Donelan: Well, I'd tell them not to plan out their future in intervals of time increments and say, you know, "I'm going to be such and such by such and such." I think you can't be unfocused, but you have to realize that life is primarily a function of serendipity and things that happen. Try to identify good manners. Be curious. Be curious about everything. Ask questions. Wonder why. How does it work? Why does it work that way? Be willing to work hard and not worry about whether you're getting rewarded for working hard. If you work hard enough and you're effective, the rewards will come. You know, one of the things in my professional life, and I've got a long horizon now that I can look back over, that's the most satisfying is having an impact on just that kind of young person you generically described. I can look around the country and I can find people who, when they were young people, were mentored by me, who are now running big health systems, distinguished academic medical centers and so on and who still contact me for advice or to tell me about something exciting that they've done. And I think any of us, you know, faculty who teach and develop people, you certainly know this from your own experience, the most satisfying thing is not only helping an institution be, again, all that it can be but also having an impact on the identification and development of young talent and have them, either within the institution where they're developing or elsewhere as they move, go out and make a difference in the world. And that's a very satisfying thing.

Dean Pascal J. Goldschmidt M.D.: For sure. Interestingly, as it relates to UM in Miami and you, this was not your first experience with the Spanish-speaking world. My understanding is
that Myrna, your wife, has a very large family in Puerto Rico, and for a guy from North Carolina, it's not unique, but it's special. Can you tell us about this?

Mr. William Donelan: Well, it is. Myrna is in fact Puerto Rican. Spanish was her first language, but she spent a lot of her upbringing in New Jersey so she's got that Jersey girl affect as well. But she is one of 11 children. Her mother doesn't use English. She understands English well. She is like many people we know, a proud Spanish woman and her spoken English isn't all that good so she doesn't use it. So I've had to learn a pigeon version of Spanish to communicate with my mother-in-law. Myrna comes from a big family, some of it in Puerto Rico still, a lot in the New York, New Jersey area, some in Virginia. So they're distributed around. There's a lot of them. But it made, quite frankly, the move to Miami, with regard to the Latin aspects of Miami, really simple for both of us. I've grown to appreciate Latin culture through my wife and my in-laws, and she finds a lot here that's very familiar.

Dean Pascal J. Goldschmidt M.D.: And do you think that Michael would be attracted to South Florida?

Mr. William Donelan: Well, you know, that remains to be seen. Our son Michael is 24 and he is in Washington. He got a job right out of college, which was astounding in the environmental condition of the economy, when he graduated, and he's doing very well at that. And if you're a 20-something, there's hardly a better city to be in than Washington, D.C. So he's very happy right now, but he makes sure he gets down here to experience the South Florida possibilities with some regularity.
Dean Pascal J. Goldschmidt M.D.: That's great. You know, one thing that I've noticed along the years I've known you, which is now more than 10 years -- gosh, actually getting to be 12 years -- is that quality people, people who have a significant humanistic level of substance that inspires admiration, end up liking you. It's almost an interesting test, you know. It doesn't miss. Not always at first contact, sometimes it takes a little bit of time, but I've always noticed, whether it was at Duke or here, that the really great people actually love you, and quite a few of them come to me and say, "You know, if anything that you have done in South Florida is good, it's to bring this guy down here." So, I just want to know how you react to that because it's actually an interesting fact.

Mr. William Donelan: Well, the first thing it does is embarrasses me and makes me uncomfortable, but it's a nice thing to hear, and I appreciate it. I would say that, you know, we're influenced by a lot as we grow up, and I have to give credit to my mother who raised me as a single mom, as a working nurse from the time I was six months old. My father died when I was an infant. And then her parents, my maternal grandmother and grandfather, had a good bit of influence on me because there were periods of time in my growing up when I lived with them on the family dairy farm. What I learned along the way is how to put my feet in the other person's shoes, whatever the issue was. And I've always been very -- I don't know that I'm particularly empathetic, but that's a word that comes to mind. I can understand people, and I grew up without a lot. And I grew up relatively independent. I was an only child, and so, you know, all of these things kind of come in. And then over the course of my adult life I've been influenced by wonderful mentors. You know you learn something from everybody if you're paying attention.
And if people take the time to reach out and try and help you grow and develop, you take that, you sort it, you sift it and over time it becomes a part of you. And then, as you get older, you want to really do that for other people, and so it's kind of a -- I wouldn’t say it's a natural thing, but it's an acquired thing, and I can't explain it. I am who I am and there are a lot of people who influenced me to be this way.

**Dean Pascal J. Goldschmidt M.D.:** And I think that it’s of tremendous value in an environment where a lot of people are often seeking a sense of, perhaps, more security, more sturdiness to a field that many see as one in which things can happen or not, not that that's something unique to any field, but perhaps the unexpected and the stochastic aspect of events is a little bit more pronounced in medicine than in many other fields. I think that finding somebody with that level of empathy and at the same time who has seen a lot of scenarios unfolding, good and bad, can be extremely reassuring. It has always been very helpful to me, and I'm sure it's very helpful to many of my colleagues. It allows people to do things that they would not do otherwise. You were talking about excellence -- having that sturdiness in the environment in a way that is very omnipresent I think can very much facilitate the springboard for doing great things. You may not know this, but I think that that's probably the most important aspect of what you deliver in an organization. And again, quality people are very sensitive to it, respond very well to it, and it's a formidable engine to move a medical organization forward -- maybe other organizations, too, but that would be another life.

**Mr. William Donelan:** I think I'll have to come back -- I'll have to be Hindu for that. I hope I don't come back as a frog.
Dean Pascal J. Goldschmidt M.D.: Well, who knows? One of the great things about being a dean is the fact that from time to time you can sit down and say thank you to an individual for bringing something to their institution that is irreplaceable and in many ways irreversible because it does bring an opportunity that would have never been there without you. And so, on behalf of the University of Miami and the Miller School of Medicine and all of UHealth, I thank you for what you do.

Mr. William Donelan: Well, it's very gracious, and I certainly appreciate it. Thank you.