

CDC Ebola Response Oral History Project

The Reminiscences of

Jordan W. Tappero

David J. Sencer CDC Museum

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

2015

Jordan W. Tappero

Interviewed by Samuel Robson
December 11th, 2015
Atlanta, Georgia
Interview 1 of 4

CDC Ebola Response Oral History Project

Q: This is Sam Robson here with Jordan Tappero. Am I pronouncing that completely incorrectly?

Tappero: That's good. Jordan Tap-er-o is [correct], but it's Italian, so I get a lot of Tuh-pear-o's, which is what they would say throughout much of Italy.

Q: Okay, alright. Well I don't feel too bad then. Today's date is December 11th, 2015, and we are in the audio recording studio here at CDC's [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] Roybal Campus in Atlanta, Georgia. I'm interviewing Jordan as part of the Ebola [Response] Oral History Project and we'll be discussing his life and career, and especially focusing on his response to the 2014 West African Ebola epidemic. Jordan, for the record could you please state your name and your current position with CDC?

Tappero: My name is Admiral Jordan Tappero. I'm in the U.S. Public Health Service and my position is the division director for the Division of Global Health Protection and that's in the Center for Global Health. The Division of Global Health Protection is largely responsible for the Field Epidemiology Training Program, for the Global Disease

Detection Program, for implementation of the Global Health Security Agenda and for emergency response and recovery work for CDC globally.

Q: Great. Can you tell me when you were born?

Tappero: I was born on August 21st, 1957.

Q: Tell me a bit about your youth.

Tappero: Well, I was born in Omaha, Nebraska, and my father started his own heating and air conditioning company the year that I was born in Omaha. My mother was a stay-home housewife. I have three other siblings. The age range between myself and my oldest sibling is nine years and my youngest sibling seven years. So I'm in the middle in a range of sixteen years across sibs. I would say that my childhood was very typical of a Midwestern childhood in Nebraska. I spent a lot of time in the summers on farms when I was an adolescent doing soybean farming, riding motorcycles through the soybean and corn plants and playing basketball in a barn with a dirt floor. My interest in global health came from the interest of my mother in reading passionately. We had National Geographic when I was a child and I was always fascinated by the photos more than the story as a young man, but as I grew older, reading the stories with the captions. But I was always captivated by what was ever happening in Africa or in Asia or in Latin America. Those were the places that I just found the cultural distinctions that were visually

displayed to be so fascinating and I always knew in my youth that I wanted to go see these places.

I was also, I think, influenced in my youth by a number of experiences that happened throughout the sixties, as so many of us were that are of that generation. The Vietnam War played a big role in my childhood and the politics of my oldest sister who was nine years older being more liberal and my parents being more conservative and seeing that play out in their discussions in my adolescence throughout the Vietnam War. The passion that I had for space and the commitment of President [John F.] Kennedy to send us to the moon and finally the Peace Corps. I always found that this new corps of service provided globally that President Kennedy started really fit well with what I was seeing on the pages of National Geographic. So as a young man I thought there's actually things that you can do in service that would eventually be cool to be a part of.

Q: Great. Can you tell me a bit about your father?

Tappero: My father and mother are both from what's called the Quad Cities in Rock Island, Moline, Davenport, East Moline, Illinois-Iowa area on the Mississippi River. My father is the son of an Italian immigrant. My grandfather, Giovanni [B.] Tappero, came through Ellis Island. I think he was one of nine siblings, the youngest, and he was from northern Italy, north of Torino, sort of halfway between Torino and the French-Italian Alps border. So he came over as a young man and, like so many immigrant stories, it became something that in my childhood we were proud of and always heard about the

relatives and the many relatives that came to Illinois. First Pennsylvania, then Illinois. My grandfather started off doing some coal mining and eventually made his way into greenhouse work, and the owner of the greenhouse was the father of what became his wife, or my grandmother.

So a lot of history near the Mississippi River in that family, with everything from starting off, the backyard was a big clay field and they made bricks for their house, and the bricks out on the street and the bricks through the New Deal throughout much of that part of the Quad Cities came from the kiln on the property and the bricks in the backyard. When the clay ran out, they had to reinvent, so they went through things like horse and buggy delivery of ice. So they had a big sort of barn in the backyard and it was dug out so that ice brought up from the Mississippi River in winter would last long enough that it could be delivered with straw and horse and buggy throughout the years. And then after refrigeration really became big, then the family history evolved to being one where—

Q: We're going to have to—I'm sorry—pause for a second.

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