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David Duncan

David Duncan: Promoting Sustainability in Napa Wine

The Napa Valley Vintners Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Martin Meeker
in 2019

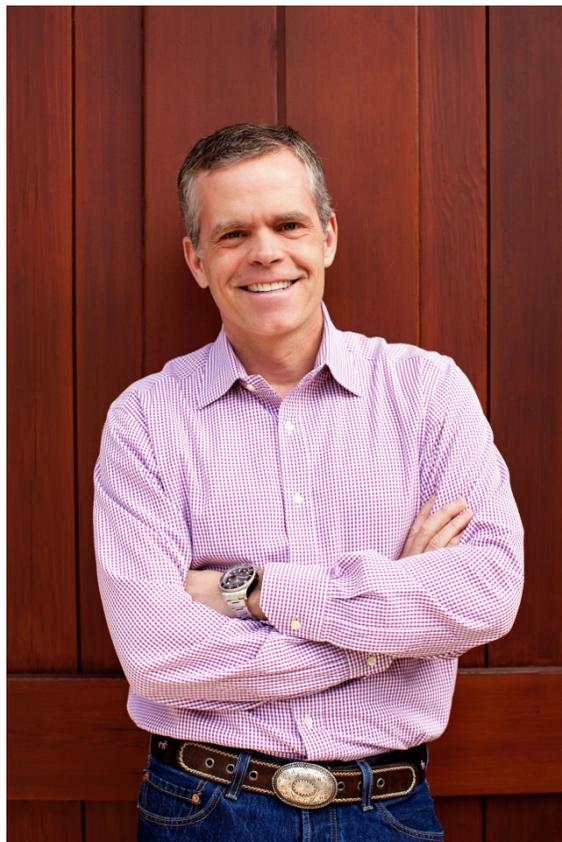
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David Duncan

Photograph courtesy of Silver Oak

David Duncan is Proprietor/Chairman & CEO of Silver Oak Cellars and Twomey Cellars. Duncan has served as Chairman of the Board of Napa Valley Vintners (2015), Chairman of Auction Napa Valley (2014) and Chairman of the Board of the St. Helena Hospital Foundation. In this interview, Mr. Duncan discusses the following topics: family background and upbringing in Colorado; the founding of Silver Oak by his father Ray Duncan and Justin Meyer; the growth and transformation of Silver Oak; participation in and leadership roles within Napa Valley Vintners; Auction Napa Valley; and Napa Green initiatives.

Table of Contents — David Duncan

Napa Valley Vintners Project History by Martin Meeker vii

Interview 1: May 15, 2019

Hour 1 1

Born on October 23, 1965 in Durango, Colorado — Duncan family history — Father’s move from Illinois to Colorado — Oil prospecting by “shaking the farmer’s hand” — Father’s start in Napa Valley; friendship with the Novaks of Spotteswood — Diamond Creek and Silver Oak wineries — Magnitude of release days — Notre Dame University a family tradition — Degree in English — MBA degree from Denver University — Thesis about Silver Oak business practices — Justin Meyer’s sale of his portion of Silver Oak and his death — Growth of Silver Oak over the years — Learning of the Napa Valley Vintners following move to California — Auction fundraising more important than party itself — Building friendships with other wine families in Napa — Duncan’s band, the Silverado Pickups — Vintners’ mission of protection, promotion, and community — Joining the board of NVV — Role of wineries large and small in NVV — Serving as Co-Chair of Auction Napa Valley — “Sweet Home Napa Valley” auction theme; 2014 Auction holds fundraising record — “Irrational generosity” and communal energy in 2014 Auction — \$2 million check to the Boys & Girls Club — Vintners subcommittees for various functions — Vintners learning from past mistakes at auctions — Uniqueness of Napa’s charity wine auction — Goal to have hundred percent of donations to go directly to causes — Elected as Chair by the Vintners Board — Working with and learning from NVV CEO Linda Reiff

Hour 2 23

Agricultural Protection Committee — Napa Valley Vintners function as a political organization, trade organization, and host of the auction — Intersection of personal challenges and community work — Direct-to-consumer element of Silver Oak sales — The Vintners lobbying efforts in D.C. — Environmentally conscious since elementary school — Initiating changes to Silver Oak’s viticultural practices; the Napa Green initiatives— Alexander Valley and Oakville wineries LEED Platinum-certified — Elements of LEED Platinum certification — Goal to have every Vintner member winery Napa Green-certified by 2020 — Variety of vineyard sources throughout Napa — Organically grown does not always mean sustainably grown — Technology improving vineyard practices and wine quality — Working with Alfredo Pedroza and Ted Hall for the Transportation Task Force — Traffic in Napa Valley — Vintners involvement in the Valley’s protection — Silver Oak employees who volunteer for the Vintners — Sentiment opposed to wineries in Napa — Seventy-fifth anniversary of the Vintners in 2019 — Interaction with Robert Mondavi — Distinctiveness of Napa Valley

Hour 3

40

High barriers to entry in the wine business — Napa a leader in sustainability, quality — Family-owned wineries outnumber those corporately-owned in Napa — Silver Oak as a family-owned winery.

Napa Valley Vintners Project History

The Napa Valley Vintners (NVV) Oral History Project was initiated in 2018 following a series of conversations between representatives of NVV and UC Berkeley's Oral History Center. In anticipation of the NVV's 75th anniversary year in 2019, the NVV agreed to sponsor an oral history project documenting the contributions of the organization to the growth and improvement of the wine industry in the United States; the establishment and protection of "Napa Valley" as a place known worldwide for the quality of its wines; and the people who made all of this possible.

The oral histories in this project were designed to be rather brief two-hour interviews; in these the narrators were asked about their interest and engagement with the wine business in general before turning the focus to their participation in and observations of the NVV. Interviews in this project are wide-ranging, touching on a number of issues and topics going back to the very beginning of the organization in 1944—in fact, two of the first project narrators were children of NVV founders (Michael Mondavi is the son of Robert Mondavi; Robin Lail is the daughter of John Daniel, Jr.). Narrators describe the growth and transformation of the organization in the 1970s and 1980s; during this time the NVV ceased being a small group of vintners who viewed the organization as a social club as much as an industry group and changed into something much more consequential. Narrators, including Bob Trincherro and John Shafer, tell how the NVV grew into a large and influential organization that impacted the law, policy, trade, and marketing of wine in the United States and abroad. Other narrators describe the organization's emerging and expanding interest in protecting the environment, limiting urban growth, preserving agricultural lands, and advocating for sustainable practices in the vineyards and cellars of Napa Valley. Key people and projects of the organization are touched upon in most interviews, with special attention paid to Auction Napa Valley, the country's premier charitable wine auction that was established in 1981 and now raises millions of dollars a year for community health and education organizations in Napa Valley.

The Napa Valley Vintners Oral History Project builds upon decades of interviews conducted by the Oral History Center that document the history of wine in California and, in some cases, the specific history of the NVV. These oral histories date back to the late 1960s and include interviews with NVV founders Louis M. Martini and Robert Mondavi, as well as Eleanor McCrae, Joseph Heitz, Dan Duckhorn, and several other NVV leaders.

Martin Meeker
Charles B. Faulhaber Director
Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library

Interview 1: May 15, 2019

01-00:00:10

Meeker: Today is May 15, 2019. This is Martin Meeker interviewing David Duncan for the Napa Valley Vintners Oral History Project. We are here in the world headquarters of Silver Oak, [laughter] in Oakville. Is this Oakville?

01-00:00:27

Duncan: Yeah, Oakville.

01-00:00:27

Meeker: Okay, we're on Oakville Cross Road, so it should be Oakville, in Oakville, California. We begin the interviews the same with everyone, and that's tell me your name and date and place of birth.

01-00:00:42

Duncan: David Duncan, October 23, Durango, Colorado.

01-00:00:47

Meeker: And that's 1965, correct?

01-00:00:49

Duncan: Nineteen sixty-five. I didn't know if I had to put that part in there. [laughter]

01-00:00:54

Meeker: Yes, you do, actually. We need to know which David Duncan we're talking about.

01-00:00:57

Duncan: Yeah, October 23, 1965.

01-00:01:00

Meeker: Tell me a little about the family that you were born into. Tell me about the Duncan family.

01-00:01:06

Duncan: So my family, the way I like to characterize it is we came from a long history of entrepreneurs. My whatever great-great-great-grandfather came over in 1840 from Ireland, and got the family in the cement business when they were building the canals in Chicago. And then I think my great-grandfather got us into the insurance business. The family opened a bank in a small town in Illinois, which is where my dad was born, and so my grandfather was a small-town banker and the insurance guy in LaSalle, Illinois. And then my dad as a child came out West to Wyoming and Colorado and fell in love with the West, and so when he got out of the Marine Corps he moved to Durango, as his sort of step out from the family, and that's how we ended up being a Colorado family.

01-00:02:03

Meeker: What kind of work did your dad do in Colorado once he got there?

01-00:02:05

Duncan:

So in the 1930s oil was discovered in Illinois, and my grandfather used to say anybody with two nickels to rub together would invest in an oil well, because it was everywhere, and they took more than a billion barrels out of the Illinois Basin in the thirties and through the sixties. So my grandfather got in the oil business a little bit, and then when my uncles and my father grew up, that's kind of what they did. So my dad went out to Durango to start the Duncan family's oil business in Durango. And then, interestingly, and very relevant to Silver Oak, is he met a Forest Service agent and started a ski area in Durango, which is called Purgatory Ski Resort, which is still there and operating today. We are not involved anymore. And so that was in 1965. The ski area actually opened just a few weeks after I was born.

01-00:03:00

Meeker:

So did your father actually go out and prospect for oil? Was he involved in that?

01-00:03:03

Duncan:

Oh, yeah, yeah, he did, and he kept doing that into—in 1968 we moved to Denver, and, interestingly, we started Silver Oak before my dad had his first decent discovery that actually made a difference. And so it's always funny to me: when things are written about my father, it always says, "Oilman Ray Duncan was the founder of Silver Oak," and in this day and age everybody thinks you've got to bring a lot of money to start a winery, but we were the opposite: we started the winery first and then had some luck in the oil business, and then, luckily, we've had some luck in the wine business, too.

01-00:03:40

Meeker:

Did he pass down any stories for you of some of those early days prospecting, and either—

01-00:03:46

Duncan:

Well, I actually worked in the oil business for fifteen years before I came here, so I know a lot of stories. [laughter]

01-00:03:51

Meeker:

Okay.

01-00:03:52

Duncan:

Yeah, and I was out there, and I was a kid growing up. But yeah, the way they used to do it is go out and shake the farmer's hand, and lease the land, and drill a well, and it's much different today. The oil and gas business has become really mining, and a financial play, not a wildcatting play. And so we're not really doing that anymore as a family, just a little bit, so—

01-00:04:16

Meeker:

Once you get the farmer to sign off, do you just go out there with a drill and see what it hits, if anything?

01-00:04:21

Duncan:

Yeah, pretty much. That's how you do it. Then you'd get into the geology, and, of course, just like everything else, science started to really catch up to the business, and so all the geology and geophysics and all that stuff is everything that I used to do, as well. I was the land guy. I was the guy going out and shaking the farmer's hand, but learned a lot about all of that, too.

01-00:04:41

Meeker:

The oil fields of Colorado are pretty far from the vineyards of Napa, conceptually, if not also geographically. How did your father end up out here?

01-00:04:50

Duncan:

Dad had a college friend, Jack Novak, whose family today owns Spottswode, and Jack and Mary Novak are actually my godparents. My dad and Jack met in college, at Notre Dame, when my dad was a sophomore and Jack was a freshman. Jack was a Southern California boy who couldn't stand South Bend and ended up leaving Notre Dame after his freshman year, but my dad and Jack really hit it off and always kept in touch. And my grandfather actually had terrible hay fever, and so during the summers he would leave Illinois and go to Southern California to get out of the allergy season. And so he kept in touch with Jack's family, and then Jack, as Jack became an adult, and so Dad and Jack Novak were always friends. So, long history, but Jack then was thinking about moving his family up here, and got interested in growing wine grapes, and called my dad, because he was a business guy that Jack thought could help out, and so my dad came out here in the spring or maybe summer of 1969, and Jack and Dad bought their first vineyard in 1970. And so it was called the Los Amigos Vineyard, which is in the Alexander Valley. It's still called Los Amigos, but it's now owned by Simi or Constellation. But it's a fun little piece of history. So we very much came to Napa Valley because of the Novak family.

01-00:06:14

And then, in 1972, my dad bought the property that we're sitting in today, which was a dairy farm. Again, distinguishing the way the world is today, this place was 250 acres, and it had been on the market for four years. There was no interest. There were no grapevines here. And so Dad bought this property in the summer of 1972, and at that time Justin Meyer, who was a reasonably well-known Brother Justin at Christian Brothers, left the order, renounced his vows, fell in love with Bonnie, and met my father, and Justin had this idea to make cabernet sauvignon, and he only wanted to make cabernet sauvignon and focus just on that. And so we claim ourselves as being the second winery to focus exclusively on cabernet sauvignon, which I think is true, which the first would be Diamond Creek. And that's how we started in 1972. And Dad and Justin shook hands and became fifty/fifty partners, and that's how we started Silver Oak.

01-00:07:27

Meeker:

What was the physical property like when your dad bought it?

01-00:07:30

Duncan:

There was a dairy barn here, which we kept on the property until 2006, when it burned down, and that was about it. This was all pastureland for the dairy cows. And we actually don't own all the vineyards around the winery anymore. Everybody always thinks our grapes come from here, but they don't; they all come from the hillsides. But that's another story. We owned Franciscan for a time, and when we sold Franciscan in 1979 these vineyards went with it. So most of the property around us now is actually owned by Constellation, as that title passed down to them. So we only own twelve acres here, yeah.

01-00:08:10

Meeker:

As you're growing up, and you're living in Colorado, and I guess doing some work related to your father's business, at what point does it become known to you that, after 1972, your father has this I guess we call it a business interest in California, Silver Oak?

01-00:08:32

Duncan:

Well, Ray and Justin were very much partners, and Justin was the face of the winery and the winemaker and the president of the winery and ran it, but they were fifty/fifty partners. So we came out here a lot when I was a kid. One of my fondest memories is when I was probably seven or eight years old, so it was maybe the first time my dad brought me here, my dad and I were driving across the Golden Gate Bridge, listening to that song, "The Streak"? Do you remember that song, "The Streak"? If you look it up, you can find it. It's easy to find on the internet.

01-00:08:58

Meeker:

Okay. [laughs]

01-00:08:59

Duncan:

And yeah, it's this funny song about streakers, which was a big deal in the early seventies. And so anyway, I'll just never forget my dad laughing so hard, and we were driving across the Golden Gate Bridge, which, of course, is a thrill any time. But as the years went on, and especially as I came of age, and now into the mid-to-late-eighties, and Silver Oak was actually starting to be a thing, we have these release days and so we would come out as a family. So by like 1990 I'd come twice a year for release day, and almost never missed one. I definitely haven't missed one in the last seventeen years. But yeah, we really would make an effort to come and be here for that day, and the family would pour, and that was a great tradition.

01-00:09:48

Meeker:

Tell me about the release day. What is it exactly?

01-00:09:50

Duncan:

It's always interesting: there was just an article in a magazine about the first cult wines, and there's not too many wineries that people have spent the night out in front of the front door to get the wine. That's us. And so the first wine

that we made that kind of got on the radar was our 1974 cab, and I think we won the 1980 or 1981 Gold Medal at the California State Fair, which in those days was like getting a hundred-point score. This was pre-Parker, and Marvin [Shanken] was printing his magazine on an eight-and-a-half-by-eleven piece of paper. And so we got a lot of attention for that, and people started tasting the wine, and they loved the wine, and Justin had come up with a really unique style and a specific way to produce our wine, which the keys are we use American oak, we age for two years in barrel, and then we age for two years in bottle before we release the wine. So part of my favorite thing is to imagine an entrepreneur coming to you today, saying, "We're going to make the '72, '73, '74, '75, and '76, five years, before we release the '72 and see if anybody will buy it." And that's exactly what Ray and Justin did. And now we're on that treadmill. It works.

01-00:11:14

In those days we used to have restauranters come up on release day, because there was a day we made the wine available, and they particularly wanted to get the magnums and three liters and six liters, the large-format bottles, but it became this tradition to come and be here, and by the late nineties we literally had a hundred people spending the night at both—we had a winery in the Alexander Valley and our winery here in Napa. And we'd have a hundred people spending the night. When I was growing up, that's how you got rock concert tickets [laughs] is you went out and spent the night. And so eventually we decided that wasn't such a good idea, but that's still the fervor that carries on today. So today we get thousands of people that come to release day, so—

01-00:12:01

Meeker:

How'd your parents teach you about wine? Was it something that was served at your dinner table at night? When did they first expose you to it?

01-00:12:08

Duncan:

I remember my dad actually had a six-liter of Cutty Sark Scotch. We had this little bar off the kitchen. And he drank that whole bottle—not all at once, over years—but that's what he kind of drank at night. He'd have his little tumblers, two fingers and ice. And so he wasn't a Francophile Bordeaux fan or Burgundy fan, or knew a lot about wine. And then when we owned Franciscan—and I was like ten, eleven, twelve years old—we actually opened a winery in Denver, a Franciscan winery, that eventually kind of got put out of business because of the laws, and as they got wind of what we were doing, they didn't like what we were doing. And so when I was kid, we'd go down there and move barrels around, and help with some of the activities there, and, again, come out here. So we weren't like the Italian families where the kids have a little wine and water at the dinner table. I was drinking two-percent milk and eating margarine with my mom's cooking. [laughter] But we always knew about it, and, again, it's just hard to remember that and think about it, but Silver Oak wasn't a brand and the same type of thing that it is today, and so it was just a nice ramp as we grew up.

01-00:13:41

Meeker:

So tell me about your education. You went to Notre Dame for university, right, same with your father?

01-00:13:47

Duncan:

Yes, and his father, so, yeah, it's a family tradition. My daughter will be there next year. Yeah, so, fun.

01-00:13:52

Meeker:

Oh, wow. Four generations. That's pretty amazing. So tell me about your college experience. When you go to college, what is it that you're thinking that you would like to do with your life at that point?

01-00:14:17

Duncan:

So, yeah, it's a funny question. I actually did think a lot about that, and was a Colorado boy in South Bend, Indiana, so school wasn't necessarily the first thing on my mind, and I really thought at that time I would be an attorney, and I wanted to go to law school. And my dad majored in philosophy and my mom majored in journalism, so I cut those two things in half and majored in English. And when I was nineteen years old, I remember thinking to myself, if I can read and write I could do anything I wanted to do. And I'd grown up with my dad, who by this time was in the ski business, the wine business, the oil business, and doing a number of other things, too. He helped to start a golf club in Colorado, and just all kinds of different things. And so I didn't ever think growing up I only had to do one thing, and by the time I was a senior I was reading thousands of pages and writing hundreds of pages each semester. And so that was a really good experience for me. And so, yeah, I graduated with an English major out of Notre Dame, and still am a voracious reader today.

01-00:15:26

Meeker:

That's great. And so then you go back to Colorado and participate in—

01-00:15:30

Duncan:

Yeah, so I moved back to Denver. I started working at the oil and gas company, which was based in Denver, straight out of college. My at-the-time girlfriend, who's now been my wife for thirty-five years, girlfriend and wife, we actually spent two months in Durango, and then I went and started work. And actually my first day of work was August 8, 1988, so it was 8/8/88. And so very quickly realized that being an English major in the business world was not such a great thing, and my wife was in medical school, and she was gone all the time, studying and working and then residency, and so I had a choice between hanging out at our local bar in Denver or going back to school, and I decided to get my business degree. So I went to the University of Denver at night. Took me three years. This was pre-internet—it's hard to believe—there were no executive MBAs; there was no online learning. I went to class for four hours, twice a week for three years, and got my business degree at DU. And once I got there, I had a really important mentor named Ron Rizzuto, and I ended up getting a major in finance, so I had to do a couple extra quarters.

DU's on the quarter system. And for my final four credit hours I had to do a project on a business, and I chose Silver Oak as that business. And so I wrote about a hundred-page thesis, and I built a financial model in Lotus 1-2-3. If somebody's watching this fifty years from now, it was pre-Excel, and Excel probably won't exist if you're watching this fifty years from now, but it was a spreadsheet program. And so I built a financial model, made a case for how you could grow a business and really think about the winery as a business, which it always was. Like I say, it wasn't a passion play for my dad. He loved Silver Oak absolutely, and as did Justin, but it was also a business, and so they wanted to be profitable and have those things that businesses have.

01-00:17:39

Anyway, so I did that paper, and after I finished that I presented it to my father and I was like, "We should think about the future of Silver Oak, and how the Meyer family and the Duncan family are going to coexist, and the second generations of those two families are not going to be best friends like you." I mean, we were great friends with the kids growing up, and still are with the Meyers. And so we ended up, in 2001, purchasing the Meyer family interest, their fifty percent, from them. So we paid them, and they exited the ownership of Silver Oak, and the Duncan family to this day is the hundred-percent owner of the winery.

01-00:18:20

Meeker:

Was that a recommendation in your thesis paper?

01-00:18:22

Duncan:

It was not necessarily in my thesis paper, but when I built the model in the future I was like, I think we could execute this plan. And Justin, unfortunately, in the late nineties started to have some health problems. He passed away when he was sixty-two, way too young. He actually died two weeks before I moved out here full-time, and so that's another story, and we can get to that if you want. And so it was really a win/win: the Meyer family got enough money to carry on, and we ended up with the winery. I always remember I was in the room at the attorney's office in Napa when we closed the deal, and a lot of paperwork to sign, and there were vineyards involved, and the winery, and all that stuff, and so there were a lot of papers to sign, a lot of legal documents. So we signed everything. Lawyers were like, "It's done, you guys are done." And Justin turned to my dad and shook his hand and said, "Good luck." [laughter] I'm not totally sure Justin thought we could carry on without him, but, like I said, I think it turned out to be a real win for the Meyer family, and it's definitely been a win for the Duncan family.

01-00:19:26

Meeker:

What were some of the points in the thesis that you've been able to act on over the years?

01-00:19:31

Duncan:

Well, one of the things, if you look at our growth as a business and as a winery, we chose, instead of sticking at a level—I maintain that Silver Oak would be a thousand dollars a bottle today if we still made five thousand cases or two thousand cases. But we just grew slowly and steadily, both in the Napa and the Alexander Valley, making about seven to eight percent, ten percent some years, more wine than we did the previous year, every year, up until we got to our use permit capacities at each winery. And the question is do you have the demand, right? So we made eleven hundred cases our first vintage in 1972; today we make about a hundred thousand. So we've grown a hundred times over fifty years. And so that was the basic thesis. In '93, '94, we were making about thirty-five thousand cases, so we've tripled in size since that time, just slowly and steadily through the years. And I think our focus has always been on delivering the promise of the quality of what's in that bottle, and we take that so seriously. And luckily people still like, [laughs] so that's a good thing.

01-00:20:50

Meeker:

On the phone call in advance, in our pre-interview, you had mentioned your father never actually lived out here full-time. What was his level of participation with the Napa Valley Vintners organization?

01-00:21:04

Duncan:

He didn't really participate too much with the Vintners organization. He never served any role. He would come to the Auction, especially in the early days, but he didn't really have an active role in the Vintners. And he was Justin's partner, and then I would say he was sort of my chairman once I moved out here. That's kind of the way I would characterize him. He was my dad and business partner, but he didn't serve in a real active role. It's more so with the winery, and making big strategic decisions, but not so much in the community, although he's been very generous with lots of different support of things that the Vintners supports, like the hospitals and Boys & Girls Club, and schools, and different things that the Vintners have done.

01-00:21:53

Meeker:

But Silver Oak was a member of the organization?

01-00:21:56

Duncan:

Silver Oak was a member of the organization, yeah.

01-00:21:57

Meeker:

When did you first learn about the organization?

01-00:22:00

Duncan:

Oh, probably almost immediately when I came here. I was living in Denver in February of 2002, and our general manager was going to retire, and so he called my dad, said, "I'm going to retire," and so we were talking about who was going to run the winery day to day. And so my dad walked into my office in Denver one day, and he goes, "I have this idea. I've got the perfect person

to run the winery.” And I was like, “Who, Dad?” And he said, “You.” And so my wife by that time was the Assistant Chief of Medicine at the University of Colorado. We had a home, and we had two kids, and my wife was pregnant, and we up and moved out to California and just really changed everything. So I really came here with a fresh start and a fresh look. And so we didn’t really know a lot of people. We knew the Novak kids, Beth and Mike, and their spouses, and they were starting to have kids, but it’s a small community, and so very quickly we learned about the Vintners. And, of course, we had come to Auction for a number of years, but you think of the Vintners as Auction when you’re from outside the Valley, but what the Vintners does when you’re inside the Valley is so much more important. Well, they’re both important.

01-00:23:17

Meeker:

Can you tell me about your early experiences going to Auction, what it was like as an attendee?

01-00:23:22

Duncan:

Well, I was blown away, because people were spending hundreds of thousands of dollars, [laughs] and now it’s millions. And it was great fun. In the late nineties, when I started going to the Auction, there were twelve hundred, fourteen hundred people in the tent, and I think I can say we changed that. I was there as that got changed, and we pared it down a little bit to have more bidders in the tent than just attendees. And so it’s still a great party and a great time, and it’s still important for our community.

01-00:23:57

Meeker:

When you were attending the auction in these early years, what was the feeling of it? Was it a celebration of Napa wines? What was the sense about why people were there?

01-00:24:12

Duncan:

Well, I can just speak for myself. For me, it was more about the party, and the fun, and the seeing everybody, and meeting all these vintners and people you’ve heard of, and celebrating the wines. That’s my honest answer. Now I think of the cause so much more, what those funds do in our community. We’ve given away \$180 million to date to all the organizations in our community, and that kind of money has a giant impact on people’s lives. So that’s so much more important to me today than the party. So I’m working on this year’s Auction, and I’m trying to think about how much money we could raise, not how much wine I can drink. [laughter]

01-00:24:57

Meeker:

When you arrived here and you’re living here, it sounds like it wasn’t a difficult negotiation with your father to get you out here, or—?

01-00:25:06

Duncan:

Well, by that time Kary and I had spent a lot of time in Napa, as we were in our twenties, and we had children kind of late, and so we used to go on walks here, and I remember walking up White Sulphur Springs Road. We were

staying at the Harvest one time, and we kind of looked at each other and we were like, if we ever could live anywhere else, we could live here. And so I think we had planted that seed in our own heads, and this was before we purchased the Meyer interest and even contemplated that. But it's such a beautiful place, and it's such a great community, so it's not—I miss some things about Colorado, but I don't miss Denver. Denver's gotten big and busy.

01-00:25:47

Meeker:

When you arrived here, how did you integrate into the community? It is a small community, and your family is probably already known in terms of Silver Oak. How do you get involved?

01-00:26:00

Duncan:

So we had two children when we moved here, and a couple months after we moved here our third was born in Napa. And so I would say that there were a couple things: one was through the school, because our oldest was three and a half when we moved here, so he started school. So he went to the Montessori School in Saint Helena, and there's a lot of wine families that go to that school, so you start to meet a lot of second-generation parents. And so we became friends very quickly with the Shafers and the Rombauers, and of course we were friends with the Novaks. And then through going to Vintners activities, being involved—I wasn't on the board for a long time, but going to Auction, just meeting people—and if you come here and you go to this grocery store, you can't help but see people. And then my wife is a dermatologist, and so she opened her medical practice in 2003 and really quickly got to know a lot of people. Everybody knows Dr. Duncan. I'm generally considered to be Dr. Duncan's husband in the Napa Valley, not the Silver Oak guy. [laughs] And then the other tangent was music. I met my friend Jeff Gargiulo, who's right down the road, and Jeff and I just hit it off very quickly and became fast friends, and so I've met a lot of people through music in Napa, because we have a lot of fun goofing around, playing music.

01-00:27:40

Meeker:

Well, you've got a band, right?

01-00:27:41

Duncan:

We have a band.

01-00:27:42

Meeker:

Tell me about that.

01-00:27:43

Duncan:

Well, yeah, so the Silverado Pickups—

01-00:27:47

Meeker:

Are you a fan of the Silversun Pickups?

01-00:27:49

Duncan:

I know, yeah, so we get confused. So the Silversun Pickups played BottleRock a couple years ago, and there was a radio interview that was—I

heard it on the internet so I know this—it was about three-and-a-half minutes long, and they spent about two minutes and twenty seconds talking about the Silverado Pickups in their radio interview, [laughter] and the confusion of the name. So that was pretty funny. So yeah, it's a bunch of guys. We're all kind of tangentially or directly involved in the wine business, and we just have a lot of fun. So we're preparing to play our seventh BottleRock this year. I think we're the only band that's played every BottleRock. I believe that is a fact. And so that's been great fun. And we do charity stuff, and try to—well, I'm just going to say what Jeff says. I know I'm on the video, but—we elevate the expectation of the band that we can't suck. [laughter] That's how good we are, so—

01-00:28:44

Meeker:

That sounds like something good to go for.

01-00:28:45

Duncan:

Yeah, it's fun.

01-00:28:46

Meeker:

You had mentioned some of the social dimensions. There was the auction and other social dimensions around the Vintners. When I've interviewed people and they talk about the long history of the Vintners, now seventy-five years old, there's that great clip of Eleanor McCrea talking about it as a men's marching and chowder society. Is that how you first encountered it, was more on the social side of the spectrum?

01-00:29:13

Duncan:

Well, certainly when you go to the annual end of harvest or holiday party, or you go to the annual meeting and there's several hundred people there, all of whom brands you basically know of, and now I know almost everybody. And so that is a big function of it. I think Robert Mondavi personified this so well, about the rising tide floats all boats, but really the Vintners were the ones who started that, were the founding fathers getting together and saying we need to promote Napa Valley as a thing, and it was so prescient and such a good idea. And so without the Vintners I think there's no Land Preserve or Ag Preserve, and without the Vintners there's no Winery Definition Ordinance. And so I think that mission of protection, as well as promotion, and then doing good in the community are all things that people getting together with a common purpose can accomplish a lot, and I think the Vintners represents that so well.

01-00:30:24

Meeker:

I believe you were first elected to the Board in 2010, correct?

01-00:30:27

Duncan:

Yes.

01-00:30:28

Meeker:

Tell me about how it was that you decided to stand for a position on the Board.

01-00:30:32

Duncan:

I had absolutely no interest in it, never thought of it, never thought of running, and Cyril Chappellet called me and said, "I'm going off the Board," because you term out after six years, "and," he said, "I think you'd be a good person to put your name in the hat." And I think my brother had run at some point and didn't get elected. And so the first office I ever ran for was junior class president, and I lost, and then the girl I lost to got caught cheating on a test and so I ended up becoming the junior class president, actually, but I won by default. So, frankly, I was a little afraid that I wouldn't win or get on the Board or whatever. Anyway, so I did, and so, yeah, Cyril's the one who twisted my arm. And then, interestingly, when I termed off a couple years or a year ago, I called Cyril back, and Cyril's now back on the Board. [laughter]

01-00:31:29

Meeker:

I don't know enough about the organization to know how somebody gets elected. Do you mount a campaign, or do you just write a blurb, and based on the blurb people either decide that you're the right guy for the job or not?

01-00:31:44

Duncan:

Yeah, I think Cyril called me because they were looking for people to serve, [laughter] but lately there's been more political action and more stuff happening in the Valley, and so there's a lot more interest in people serving. But yeah, they send out a letter to the members and said, "Here's the people who have put their name in the hat," and you choose however many seats we need to fill, usually a couple, out of four or five candidates this time.

01-00:32:11

Meeker:

Let me put it like this: when somebody casts their vote for David Duncan for a position on Board, what do you think they were casting a vote for?

01-00:32:19

Duncan:

[pause] I don't know. That's a good question. At that time I was very active in the Saint Helena Hospital Board, and with our Montessori School, and so I think—I don't know how to answer that, but I think I knew enough people that they were like, well, he's not going to mess it up. And so that would probably be the criteria by which I was elected.

01-00:32:44

Meeker:

When you joined the Board and become more active in the organization, can you tell me about the organization itself? My guess is you had started to learn a lot more about it than you previously knew, so what is it that you're learning about it at this point?

01-00:32:58

Duncan:

Yeah, they've integrated and onboarded Board members for a long time, and especially under Linda Reiff's direction. She's been there more than twenty years. So there's a process to do that, and a lot of reading, and getting up to speed on everything from the protection of the Napa name, to what Auction Napa Valley does, to how the grants work, to how the income comes in, to

where the dues go, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So there's a lot to learn, but they have a very good program in terms of getting you up to speed pretty fast. I always remember one of the things that surprised me is when I joined there were about five hundred members, when I joined the Board, and more than four hundred of those members make less than five thousand cases of wine. And so most of the wineries are quite small, and everybody charges different things for that, but in terms of total case production the vast majority of the members are pretty small, which is great, and I think something that the organization needs to serve the smaller vintners as well as some of the bigger ones. We're kind of small-to-medium-sized compared to the big ones get really big really fast, so—

01-00:34:22

Meeker:

Like the Sutter Home, for instance.

01-00:34:23

Duncan:

Yeah, yeah, or the Gallos, or the Constellation brands, so—

01-00:34:31

Meeker:

How do you think the predominance of smaller brands influences the organization?

01-00:34:40

Duncan:

Well, I think it helps those Vintner members to have Napa be the prominent thing behind the Napa Valley Vintners, that Napa is a special place, and by having all these unique, distinct brands, I think we prove that winegrowing is an art, there's different ways to do it, all comers can come. And that's what I always think about Bob Mondavi really being a promoter of Napa as a place in his era, and I think that was super special. I mean, when Silver Oaks started there really was no distinction between Napa Valley and—the Alexander Valley wasn't even an appellation. I think Napa Valley had just become an appellation. There was no sub-appellation. And so our first bottlings of Silver Oak, the first, I think, three vintages were appellated North Coast, because we were picking grapes from what's now Alexander Valley and Napa Valley, and we only had one bottling, and so we called it North Coast. We were making it here in Oakville. So times have changed a lot, and I think a lot of that is due to the efforts of the Vintners over all these years.

01-00:35:55

Meeker:

Right, and also at that point in time the laws and regulations around what's actually being put on the bottle were not as stringent as they are today.

01-00:36:04

Duncan:

Right, and the education. We didn't know the things that we know today about what we now term precision viticulture, and how site and aspect and what they call terroir is not about the dirt; it's not just about the dirt; it's about the dirt, the climate, how you plant the vines. It's about the people. And so all those things—how you tend to the vines—I think really come into play, and I

think show up in the bottle. And so that's why it's so fun to explore all these different vintners' ideas.

01-00:36:39

Meeker:

The Vintners has a number of different committees, where I imagine Board members can focus their attention on one and maybe not the other. Where were your areas of greatest interest, and where did you focus?

01-00:36:52

Duncan:

Well, I probably spent most of my time working on Auction, so that's been—I don't know if purposeful or sort of by default. I'm on the Napa Name Protection Committee still, because you just have to be a member to do that; you don't have to be a Board member. And I was Chair of the organization in 2014, so you sort of are de facto on every committee. But Auction has been the thing that I've spent probably most of my time on, which—or, wait, I was chair in '15, I guess; Auction was '14, so—

01-00:37:26

Meeker:

Okay. Well, let's talk about Auction, because, as you said, that's where a good portion of your time has been spent, but your term of chairing Auction was particularly successful and notable. So you said you've been going to Auction since '99 or so, and then you're named, I guess, Co-Chair of it in 2014.

01-00:37:53

Duncan:

Right.

01-00:37:53

Meeker:

How far in advance do you know that you're going to be Co-Chair? Is it like a year?

01-00:37:58

Duncan:

Generally more than a year, yeah, probably closer to two years. And so right now we know who the next three Chairs are going to be, and that's a little unusual, because sometimes you've got to pull teeth to get people to be Chair, because it's a lot of work to be Chair, but super rewarding. It's just such a rewarding thing to do. And so we co-chaired the auction with our friends Jeff and Valerie Gargiulo, so it was Kary and me and then Jeff and Valerie.

01-00:38:28

Meeker:

And so it was probably around 2012 you started.

01-00:38:33

Duncan:

Yeah, or maybe early 2013.

01-00:38:35

Meeker:

Okay. You've been going to the auction for a number of years. Once you learned that you're going to be Chair do you start to have ideas of things that you want to emphasize, or maybe things you want to do differently based on your history of going to the Auction?

01-00:38:50

Duncan:

Yeah, absolutely, and I think through the 2000s and up until the time we did it, and still—this is true today—the Auction really takes on the personality of the Chairs. And so we had had a series of what I would call—they were great and very successful, but a little fancier bent, and so we wanted to bring it back to fun, and because Jeff and I are both musicians we ended up calling it Sweet Home Napa Valley. And so that kind of was our theme, was sort of casual elegance, boots-and-cabernet, and it ended up being quite a successful weekend. We still hold the record five years later for the largest charity wine auction single total, which was \$18.6 million. Well, Naples is out to beat that this year, I know, in 2020. They're trying. And we want it to be beat, right? Because all that money goes to good causes. So I'm hoping we're going to beat that in a few weeks at the Wine Auction this year.

01-00:39:56

Meeker:

Can you dig into this a little bit more? The year that you hosted it, Sweet Home Napa Valley—great title for the year—how did you manifest that in actual Auction itself, everything from the décor to maybe the entertainment or something? Can you try to bring that alive?

01-00:40:16

Duncan:

Yeah, I think we try to keep it really fun and relaxed, and we had great auction lots. Jeff and Valerie are originally from Naples, Florida, and so they have a lot of friends who've been very supportive, and the second-biggest charity auction is Naples, and Jeff and Valerie were the cofounders of that. They've raised the same amount of money in half the time, so very generous people. So we built lots that their bidders wanted to buy, because Naples was very generous that year, as well as really understanding—Valerie has this wonderful phrase that she calls "irrational generosity," and so you get people to just bid just to give the money away, and our bidders are of that caliber that they can spend hundreds of thousands of dollars, or millions of dollars in some cases, on a lot. And then know that that money's going to go to something good, and I think that's really important. So we just pulled together a really neat chemistry that weekend, and had perfect weather, and great music, and really high energy in the town, and I think it paid off.

01-00:41:28

Meeker:

Is there a secret to attaining irrational generosity?

01-00:41:33

Duncan:

Yes, there are many secrets to that, and it's a long, long process. It's not something that happens that day. First of all, we try to put together lots that two people want, because it's not the bidder that is the winner; it's the underbidder that makes it happen. So if you have two people competing, it goes up and up and up, and if you don't then the lot won't go as high. So that's one thing is to try and have great lots. And then to really help people promote their lots to the bidders so that you can get this irrational generosity to it. And then just make it a fun—I think people are better in more fun,

relaxed—there’s a reason we don’t wear black tie and top hats anymore, [laughter] especially in the Napa Valley, because it’s more fun to be in jeans and a comfortable shirt, so—

01-00:42:33

Meeker:

And it might be a hundred and ten degrees, too.

01-00:42:34

Duncan:

Yeah, it might be a hundred and ten degrees.

01-00:42:36

Meeker:

Do you recall any of the premier lots that helped make it a record year?

01-00:42:43

Duncan:

Well, we had a number of doubles that year, and I would probably need to refresh myself, to tell you the truth. The one thing that happened that I do remember very distinctly was that Kieu Hoang, who was a new member at the time and now has a brand here in Napa, he came up during the Fund-and-Eat and gave a million dollars in cash, and just Fund-and-Eat, just “Here’s a million dollars for the cause.” So that kind of irrational generosity makes a big difference. And then after he did that, then everybody in the Fund-and-Eat—we set the record for the Fund-and-Eat that year, too. So of course with him giving a million dollars it gave us a great start. But people were just like, wow, that’s incredible, and so I think people that were going to give twenty-five thousand would give fifty, or if they were going to give five thousand, they’d give ten thousand. And so that kind of communal energy is something that is very real in these auctions, and people get excited about that. So with the music, the décor, with the wine, with the food, all those different things, we try and bring that into that moment.

01-00:43:55

Meeker:

What is the mechanism by which the organization communicates to both the broader organization and then maybe people who are going to be some of the big bidders at the auction about where these funds go and how they’re being used.

01-00:44:08

Duncan:

So it’s a great question, and some of our longtime bidders become quite active and knowledgeable about what the funds are doing. And a number of years ago—actually, when I was first on the Board—we started—I can’t really say I was responsible for this; it was other people, but I was in the room—but we went from trying to do everything for everybody to more focused and more meaningful, which was hard. And so we had a three-year transition period where if we were giving a grantee fifteen thousand dollars, that’s not doing that much, and so we cut down on the number of grantees, and then tried to make bigger efforts. And so when I was elected Chair of the Napa Valley Vintners Board, my first official duty—and this was super meaningful to me, because I had just finished being Chair of the Auction—was to give a check to the Boys & Girls Club in Calistoga for two million dollars. So I got to give

away the money I just helped raise as the Chair of the Board of the Vintners, and that was really neat. And all the kids that use the Boys & Girls Club were standing around, as well as, of course, the officials, and literally a big check, and it was very emotional. It wasn't my money, but still, I had had something to do with making it, and so that was really satisfying. So that's more of the effort now is to really help particularly the healthcare, working on supporting the housing needs, the Vine Trail for safety, and then kids. So those are the big buckets.

01-00:45:56

Meeker: After you present this big check to the Boys & Girls Clubs, what was it going to be used for? Did you know?

01-00:46:04

Duncan: To build a new Boys & Girls Club in Calistoga, which now is there. So it's done, finished.

01-00:46:11

Meeker: That must be pretty satisfying.

01-00:46:12

Duncan: It's very satisfying, yeah.

01-00:46:13

Meeker: Yeah. The Auction is a really large and complex event. It's not just one event but several days now, right? Could you give me a little bit behind-the-scenes picture on how it actually happens? Particularly, I interviewed Robin Lail, and she was right there for the first one, and—

01-00:46:32

Duncan: And she's working on it this year, so yeah.

01-00:46:33

Meeker: Yeah, she's working on it this year, and she described how—she was out there setting up tables and chairs [laughs] the night before, and rearranging things, and I think making flower arrangements. I suspect it's not probably like that anymore.

01-00:46:50

Duncan: Well, somebody's setting up the chairs and—[laughs] but it's not necessarily all the Vintners, yeah.

01-00:46:54

Meeker: Yeah. But there must be various subcommittees and all that kind of stuff. How does it actually happen, and what role do the Vintners play in making it happen?

01-00:47:05

Duncan: So it is a complex, big organization, and I'm one of the Co-Chairs this year, because it's all the past Chairs of the Board, so I'm doing it again, which has

been a lot of fun, especially with some of the legendary people that have come back to work on this. It's been great fun.

01-00:47:26

Meeker: Who are some of those people?

01-00:47:27

Duncan: Oh, like Bob Stiner, and, I don't know, Robin, and just there's a whole group of us. And Mike Martini, and—I'm just trying to think of everybody who's in the room. But typically it's one family executing their vision of what it should be, but then the functions that need to happen are generally the same, so you've got to have the auction, you've got to have a live lot committee, which I co-chaired this year. So we curate the lots, and get people to donate. A lot of the things that get donated, especially the trips and stuff sometimes, the trips come from one place and then we pair a vintner with it, or maybe more than one vintner. And then there's the barrel auction, so that's coordinating this year it's 112 vintners. There's somebody who chairs that. There's the silent auction; somebody chairs that. And then put their committees together: there's entertainment, which I've chaired in the past; there's the Look and Feel; there's Friday party; Saturday party. So all those functions have committees. There's the exec committee, who meets generally once a month, and then all the committee heads will meet—depends on what you're doing, but sometimes it's a couple times a month. So those are all the Vintners part of it. Then there's the staff. And so we cannot say enough about the staff. Linda, Brandy, Stacey—there's a lot of them, but it's Brandy's principal job now. And so they're amazing, and they know how it works, and they know where the pitfalls are, so somebody comes up with an idea, they're like, "Yeah, we did that five years ago. It does not work. We don't want to do that again." So I think that's a really important part is we have a world-class, quality staff that really knows how to do it, and it's never the same. It always has a little different twist to it, little different feel, and sometimes things work, sometimes things don't work so well.

01-00:49:43

Meeker: Did you have any lessons learned in terms of both things that should definitely be done again, and perhaps things that you did that you wouldn't do again?

01-00:49:54

Duncan: From chairing it?

01-00:49:54

Meeker: Yeah.

01-00:49:54

Duncan: Well, I swore I would never chair it again, but luckily there's like thirty of us so it's not too heavy of a burden. But—

01-00:50:04

Meeker: You wouldn't chair it again just because it was a huge amount of work, or—?

01-00:50:06

Duncan:

Yeah, [laughs] because it was a lot of work. And the last couple years I've sort of gone as an—I've always been involved somehow, but I'm basically going as an attendee. When another family is running it, it's easy to be critical, or super complimentary. So there's always things. There were things for us that didn't work. And so, luckily, we raised a lot of money, so that part worked.

01-00:50:37

Meeker:

What you warn people off in the future, then? What were the things that didn't work?

01-00:50:40

Duncan:

Well, the big one for the Gargiulos and us was no confetti cannons, because both Jeff and Kary got hit by a confetti cannon on the stage, and so it's—Linda's going to kill me, but, yeah, they don't think it's funny. I mean, it was a bad deal. So they were okay, but it was scary, and so I always say no confetti cannons on the stage.

01-00:51:06

Meeker:

Hit meaning when the confetti cannon launches off they were just too close to—

01-00:51:08

Duncan:

It hit. Yeah, they were aimed down, and so one of them hit Jeff and one of them hit Kary. We have it all on video. Yeah, it was not good. They were fine, but it shook 'em up pretty good.

I'd say one of the biggest variables that makes the energy of Auction one way or the other is—you already made mention of it—how hot it is. That first weekend in June can either be eighty-five during the day and just perfect or it can be 105, and when it's 105 people melt. That happens. Or in 2011 we had rain all day, and so that wasn't too great, either. Not great for the grapes, for sure. But so that's something we always try and mitigate, right? We plan for it to be hot, and if it's not then you're lucky. And so there's got to be shade. There's got to be water. You've got to have food that makes sense. You've got to have everything functioning in the tent, so the air conditioner works. And so that's actually a pretty big part of it is how the weather's going to be, which is something you obviously can't control. But I do think it has an effect every year, year by year. Last year, the live lot and lunch area was set up in a brand-new place, and they put Astroturf down to make it pretty and make it easy to walk on. Well, the Astroturf, when it's 105 like it was, heats up and becomes a heat sink, and so it was like 115 degrees where everything was. So you can't sort of peruse and hang out. So that's something I don't think they're going to do this year. [laughs] I don't think we're going to have the Astroturf out there. So we're moving the live lot display down into some shaded tree area, moving some things around. They've done work at Meadowood, which has allowed the auction to be laid out differently, which is

super helpful and very generous of the Harlan family and their partners in Meadowood.

01-00:53:09

Meeker: Right, and they've been doing it since day one, too.

01-00:53:11

Duncan: Yeah.

01-00:53:12

Meeker: Yeah, it's a pretty interesting story. Is there anything else about the Auction that we haven't covered that you would like to talk about?

01-00:53:24

Duncan: No, I don't think so. Again, I think my focus today is always on the good that it does, and I think that there's lots of charity wine auctions all over the country, all over the world, really, that we attend, and I don't think anybody does it better than Napa. Naples is different, and excellent. I love Naples, and have participated a lot, but I think the bringing together of the Vintner community to help everybody in Napa County is just something that's really unique and special.

01-00:53:58

Meeker: I'm going to be interviewing David Pearson whenever he's back in the country, and I think it was him on the phone I was speaking with that was telling me about how one thing that has been able to happen over more recent years is moving closer to a hundred percent of the actual proceeds from the auction going to the organizations, the recipient organizations.

01-00:54:23

Duncan: So that was one of the things that I was really on top of in 2014 was to try and get more—and we're trying not to do as big corporate sponsorships, so it's not Auction Napa Valley by Visa, although we have better relationships now, and really nice support from a lot of big organizations. And so I believe that our year was the first year that we had a sponsorship chair as one of the functions, and so that's been—and David has served in that role for a couple years, and so he wasn't the first one but he served in the role for a couple years. And so it's just building up slowly by slowly. Again, we're hoping to check that box this year. I don't think we're going to quite get there, but if we could say that everything in the tent goes to the charity, that's fantastic. We're really close to that.

01-00:55:25

Meeker: That's almost unheard of in American philanthropy, to be able to have that successful—

01-00:55:30

Duncan: Yeah, so if we can get the underwriting from our great friends and corporate sponsors, plus the ticket sales, that's okay for the ticket sales to go towards

paying for the party, and then have a hundred percent of the donation go to the cause. That's the goal.

01-00:55:50

Meeker:

You were elected Chair in 2015, of the organization, and my understanding is that that's not an election that's open to the membership, but rather other members of the Board.

01-00:56:01

Duncan:

That's correct, yeah. So, yeah, the Board decides who the Chair is.

01-00:56:05

Meeker:

What is the process? Is it kind of like musical chairs, or does somebody get the short straw?

01-00:56:15

Duncan:

Again, I think it varies. I'm trying to think. I was there for six Chairs being elected, and so it sort of varies in terms of sometimes people don't want to do it, or can't do it because they've got other obligations, or whatever. I'm trying to remember. I think when I was elected Chair there, I think there were three people who put their name in the hat. So we go through a process of saying, "I'm willing to serve as Chair, Vice Chair, Treasurer," the roles, and then we just do a ballot and count them up. And so that's how it works.

01-00:57:06

Meeker:

Do you have an agenda or a platform that you were hoping to execute on?

01-00:57:11

Duncan:

Well, I actually didn't really want to do it because I had just come off of doing Auction, but I was being encouraged to do it, and so of course I have this problem about saying no, so I said yes and did it. And it was interesting because in my year we got into this whole thing with the Agricultural Protection Committee, and there was a lot of politics, and it took a lot of time, more so than in what I would call a normal year, which I don't know what normal means anymore, but—

01-00:57:41

Meeker:

Well, let me get to that in a second, actually. There's a point just of clarification. And so the Auction is in June, and I believe the Chair runs basically a calendar year, so it's in the January meeting that the new Chair's—so the election probably happens sometime in the fall, I'm guessing.

01-00:57:58

Duncan:

Oh, in December, yeah.

01-00:57:59

Meeker:

In December. Oh, okay, in December.

01-00:58:00

Duncan:

Or maybe it's November. Yeah, November or December. So I had been done with Auction, you're right. There's some follow-on duties, but that winds down pretty quickly. But after you've spent eighteen months working on Auction, to then turn around and be the Chair of the Board—which isn't, frankly—everybody comes to the Board meetings, and so the big thing about being Chair is the time you spend with Linda, because you meet with Linda once a week, and you're much more involved with the staff and knowing what's going on on a day-to-day basis when you're Chair than even as a Board member, and so—

01-00:58:37

Meeker:

Well, tell me about Linda. I think I'm going to have the opportunity to interview her as part of this project—

01-00:58:43

Duncan:

You better. [laughs]

01-00:58:43

Meeker:

—which is—right. She's a name that I've wanted on the list, and we just need to get time. She's quite busy, especially at this time of year, so maybe sometime in the summer. But clearly her name comes up a lot in these interviews, and she's been a transformative leader for the organization. I think it's pretty easy to say that.

01-00:59:06

Duncan:

Absolutely.

01-00:59:07

Meeker:

So why don't you tell me about what it was like working with her much more closely when you were Chair, and what did she teach you, I guess?

01-00:59:19

Duncan:

That's a great way to put it. I think the most important thing that she taught me is that the Vintner's job is to be in the middle, and that we don't—there are things, certainly, that the organization will take a position on, but in general we're trying to find the middle ground of any differing opinion about what should happen Valley-wide. And I think Linda's excellent at that. Really, in an empathetic and authentic way, she can listen to both sides of a discussion—and this proved itself out during the APAC thing in a big way—and then trying to come up with a solution that kind of nobody likes is about where the middle ground is, or everybody likes, which is more rare. I think that is something that Linda's done a really fabulous job. Again, she has support underneath her, but there's a lot of differing opinions. From a brand standpoint, I'm not very political. I always say they drink wine on both sides of the aisle, so in 2019 all we hear about is politics every single day, and how divisive everything is, but from a brand standpoint, Silver Oak's not Republican or Democrat. We want you to enjoy wine, and then go fight and argue and have a glass of wine afterwards. And so I think that's where the

Vintners lands, too, that we're trying to do the best for the community, do the best for our members, do the best for our customers. There's a lot of different chiefs to serve, and Linda just does a fabulous job of balancing all that.

01-01:01:13

Meeker:

These weekly meetings, what is the nature of them? What kind of issues are discussed?

01-01:01:19

Duncan:

Again, I can't speak for the other chairs, but with me she used it as preparing me for things that I needed to do sort of in an official role, and making sure that I was fully up to speed, even more informed, maybe, than when you're just a Board member. And then—I hope she feels this way, too—I feel like we really developed a rapport where then she could also have a place to vent, kind of like a CEO would use their Board of Directors, or a coach, maybe, almost, to sort of say, "I've got three different ways I could approach this, and what do you think?" So we had a lot of conversations along those lines. And so that's the way I saw it, anyway.

01-01:02:12

Meeker:

You had mentioned a couple of big issues that emerged to be on your agenda when you were Chair. Can you talk about what those were, and how you addressed them as Chair?

01-01:02:25

Duncan:

Yeah, well, the biggest one was—so I was Chair during the 2015 calendar year, and in 2016 we had this vote around what ended up being called the Agricultural Protection Committee, the APAC, and—

01-01:02:40

Meeker:

I'm sorry, the Agricultural Protection—?

01-01:02:42

Duncan:

Protection Committee. There were a group of individuals who became very concerned with—well, I do have an opinion about this, [laughs] but their view was that the wine industry was cutting down trees, and it really was about one vineyard property permitting process, but then they turned it into this whole countywide-type initiative, which then, of course, has been passed in the last couple of months.

01-01:03:15

Meeker:

By the supervisors, not the voters.

01-01:03:17

Duncan:

By the supervisors, yeah, which is really aimed at trying to head off another initiative and spending a lot of money, frankly wasting a lot of time. And there's a lot of miscommunication between the two sides and all that. So that all started and really caught—I shouldn't use that euphemism anymore, but I'm going to say caught fire during 2015. So I went to a lot of meetings with the Soda Canyon people, and then trying to talk to the membership. It was

quite divisive for the membership, because some people feel very strongly that protection is all we should do, and some people feel like driving the economic engine of the Valley is all we should do. And to me, they are not separate things. You can do both. We've got the greenest winery in the Valley, according to the LEED Platinum designation we have, and so I'm fully supportive of that, but I also believe we need to drive the economic engine, so—

01-01:04:23

Meeker:

Well, there's also broader ideological differences, I think, in terms of belief in limiting government, private property rights that come up here, as well, I suspect.

01-01:04:33

Duncan:

Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. And, again, there are people who feel very strongly about that, and then people who don't think you should be able to do anything. And that's what I'm afraid of, is I think the pendulum's swinging a little bit too far right now about the tasting room visits, and I'm on the Transportation Committee, as well, and we have a lot of stats about this: the problem in the Valley is not the tourists; it's the locals; it's the commuters; it's the workers. Tourists make up less than twenty percent of the traffic. And so by limiting people's tasting rooms, you're not solving sitting on Highway 29 at three o'clock, 3:30 in the afternoon, trying to get out of the Valley. And nobody wants Highway 29 turned into a four-lane highway with exits, like it is south of Yountville, because that takes away from the rural character of the Valley. So that's one example of an issue that's a daily, prevalent thing that people think about.

01-01:05:39

Meeker:

Well, you had mentioned Linda's sage advice was to try to find a middle way, in terms of leadership and maybe problem solving. Given the very diverse and sometimes divisive perspectives of membership, and there's five hundred people who are not a cross-section of the United States in terms of net worth and perhaps also will in order to have their way—to own a winery and to create something and put it out there I think says something about someone's character and about what they want to do with their lives. How, then, do you actually institute this middle path? When you're Chair, how did you do that? What were the things that you thought about, and the processes that you followed in order to try to achieve that?

01-01:06:46

Duncan:

Well, to me, I think that's where leadership comes so much into listening, that leadership's not about telling people what to do; it's about listening to people, especially if you're leading a diverse, complicated organization like the Vintners. And the Chair of the Board is not—Linda's really the leader of the organization, but the Chair of the Board, for a year you serve that purpose, and you get a lot more phone calls, and you get a lot more attention. And so that's the main thing. I think people just want to be heard, especially if they're

on an extreme side of an issue. They probably understand that they're on an extreme side of the issue, but if you're like, "Well, I don't want to hear what you say because you're—" you can't really do that as a leader, I don't think, although our leaders today are doing that. [laughter] That's a different topic. But so for me that's the way I think I tried to—I'm sort of like that naturally, somewhat, and then Linda's very much like that, and so we made a good team, I think, in that way, so—

01-01:07:57

Meeker:

Are there any issues that you think about that that middle path really worked, that you were able to pursue that, and—?

01-01:08:07

Duncan:

Well, actually, I think the way the APAC resolved it is a pretty good example of that. I think everybody's unhappy with the result, and probably was an okay way to have it turn out. I think there are going to be individuals or other issues that are going to really challenge the foundation of Napa in terms of the Agricultural Preserve and property rights and those kinds of things. If somebody ever took something to the Supreme Court, I think that longstanding property rights are probably going to prevail over the "We don't think you should have six people at your tasting room; you should only have four," [laughs] or whatever. So that's something that concerns me, and so that's where we need to be pro-Ag Preserve, what the good things about it are, and especially as the next generation comes in, or people that don't quite have the tie to the Valley, and want to come in and make their mark, and if somebody doesn't think it's fair I think we risk people doing whatever they way. And we have some examples like that around, both in, actually, Napa and Sonoma County, and one of these days somebody's going to say, "You can't tell me what to do." And what I'm afraid of is they might be right. [laughs] So it's not really a legal standing; it's more of a philosophy. So it's a pretty interesting—I mean, it would take a lot of fighting to prove that, and nobody really wants to do that. And you don't want your brand to be out there doing that, so—

01-01:09:52

Meeker:

Well, part of maybe the bull work against more maverick players is, in fact, thinking about the Ag Preserve, and educating people about why it happened, and what its value is, and how things would be different if it didn't exist. Is that something that the Vintners does, and how do they?

01-01:10:13

Duncan:

I think they have done a good job of that from time to time. We're doing a lot of celebrating seventy-five years right now, so that comes up. I think something that's very personal and prevalent for me right now is watching PG&E cut down all these trees. So out of my backyard—and, ironically, I have pretty much the same view as Spottswoode does, because I live in Saint Helena, close to them—but there is a place that they cut down a thirty-foot swath of trees where the powerline is. It looks like a ski run. So nobody's

complaining about that, and yet we can't cut down a tree to plant a vineyard, which I basically agree with. I think if we didn't have the Ag Preserve all of the hillsides in Napa would be planted into terraced vineyards. It would look like Europe. So I'm very supportive of that, but there is—I'm trying to answer your question, but I think there is some—people aren't complaining, and PG&E doesn't care, right? They're not getting a permit to cut down the trees. They're cutting down the trees by every single powerline. It's happening everywhere. They got contractors working everywhere. And so that is an unfortunate thing. And so, I don't know, people are going to see what's fair in different ways, and I think when somebody really feels like they're being treated unfairly they're probably going to challenge what I think are really foundational parts of what Napa is all about.

01-01:11:46

Meeker:

Has there been any conversation about whether these issues are even appropriate for the Vintners to deal with?

01-01:11:55

Duncan:

So, yeah, that is a great question, and I maintained when I was Chair, and I used to talk to Linda about this—she would say we're not a political organization, because there are other organizations that are political, but we are a political—I guess I can't say "we" anymore—I'm not on the Board anymore—but as a member I believe that the Napa Valley Vintners is a political organization, because we can pull together the voices of all of our members, which represent the vast majority of vintners in the county, and hear them out, and then act on the best ideas that we can come up with. And so our function is to market the Napa Valley, the wines, protect, and then auction. But there is a political component to that, without question.

01-01:12:51

Meeker:

That's one of the things that I've learned that's so remarkable about this organization, that I think maybe some people view it as just kind of a social club for people who own vineyards. Some people might view it as like a trade organization. But its impact on so many of the key issues that are central to the present and future of Napa Valley is undeniable.

01-01:13:21

Duncan:

And it's been very long-term. It's interesting: I've never thought about the Napa Valley Vintners being a social club. When we go to those events, we have fun, we like to drink wine. When we go to those events, I never think of it as that. I really think of it as trade organization and auction. And when you go to those events you don't talk about—when you're with a group of members, you tend to talk about the issues that are surrounding the industry that are common to all of us; it's not like a social club. So that's kind of interesting characteristic.

01-01:13:58

Meeker:

I don't know how much, or if you want to talk about this, but in our pre-interview, you had mentioned that you and Linda Reiff were able to bond a bit more, because you were both going through some personal struggles in terms of your spouses. Do you want to say anything about that?

01-01:14:16

Duncan:

Well, yeah, I can. It's a fact. I don't remember the timing. So yeah, my wife was diagnosed with myelodysplastic syndrome in 2012, and underwent a bone marrow transplant, I would guess while I was or it was right after I was Chair. And then Linda's husband, Dick, had been suffering from cancer for a long time, and after Kary was done with his [sic] bone marrow transplant then Dick had his bone marrow transplant, and unfortunately didn't survive it. So we had a lot of time together, commiserating over that, because it's difficult to be the caregiver and spouse side of that; more difficult to be the patient, obviously. And so my wife, in July she'll be three years out survivor, and so that's going well, and unfortunately, we lost Dick, which was a terrible tragedy, obviously, for Linda, but really for everybody. He was a great friend and a great guy, a great vintner.

01-01:15:26

Meeker:

Can you tell me about him, your memories of him?

01-01:15:29

Duncan:

Well, he was always—well, a couple things. My memories of Dick are sort of twofold: one is that, having worked for—I always say I worked for Linda for a year. She is a bit of a force to be reckoned with, and she's a strong personality and a great lady, and Dick was just the perfect counterpoint to her, because he was always relaxed, and he was a serious guy, and he's just always so friendly. For me, who didn't grow up here—I don't feel like this as much now as I used to, but when I first met Dick, he was always so nice to me, and this is true about many people in the Valley. It tends to be, I think, a vintner thing; they're just welcoming. And so I always felt very comfortable, and he was so interested in you, and what you were doing, and what you were thinking, so just a terrific guy.

01-01:16:49

Meeker:

Thanks for sharing that. One of the things that's interesting, just in terms of me, a historian, to think about transitions, and periodization is something that I've heard—and this is in close relation to a lot of things that you were just talking about in terms of tasting rooms and everything—and that is how the distribution of wine has changed so dramatically over the last ten years, and how so many wineries now survive on direct-to-consumer sales, whether it's through wine clubs and mailing lists or whether it's through a tasting room. Can you maybe just comment on that transition, to the extent that you've seen it? I think Silver Oak is probably a little bit of a different story because I'm sure you have national distribution, but how is it that you've seen that? Is that accurate, and what has been your observation about it?

01-01:17:50

Duncan:

So, as I mentioned before, with the eighty percent of our membership being less than five thousand cases, that direct-to-consumer component is very important, and something that the Vintners have spent time on, as well as Wine Institute and other organizations. And the laws have changed dramatically. We've gone from thirteen states to now I think there's six states or something we can't ship to at all, and then various shades of grey of how it works otherwise, and some states that are totally open. And it's very important to us, as well. I do think that there is what I call the buying occasion for the consumer, so there's a reason that you'll go in and spend \$140 or \$150 on a bottle of Silver Oak in a restaurant, and then come to the winery and spend \$80 or \$125 on the same bottle of wine, depending on which one, or you go to your local wine shop, you're going over to the boss's house for dinner. And so I think that that consumer experience is something that gets a little lost sometimes, especially on some of the Vintner members, that there tends to be a focus on the collector and the person who's going to buy six bottles or twelve bottles, especially in the direct-to-consumer model, because you don't really ship people wine for them to drink at dinner that night. But this statistic still exists, that the average bottle of wine is consumed four hours after purchase, because most bottles of wine are purchased at the store and taken home or purchased at a restaurant and consumed at that meal. So that's something that I think is unfortunate with the consolidation of distribution, is it's just hard to get the attention of the distributor today if you don't have enough volume to make it worth their while.

01-01:19:50

I do believe, and I think we're really seeing this, I think the new trend is going to be what I would call the Starbucks effect. So do you remember when Starbucks was really coming up and really being on every corner, and everybody was like, "They're putting all the coffeeshops out of business"? Well, that's not actually what happened. Now there's a Starbucks on every corner, and there's Joe's Coffee, and there are chains, there's independent. Basically, what Starbucks did was it made coffee part of our culture, and so now there's room for craft coffee. You go into San Francisco, how many little funky coffee shops are there? And they all do something a little different, and they're great. So I believe that we will see, and we are seeing this in certain states, small, specific distributors that are really about these individual wines. And so that's something that's starting—they're kind of spawning out of the large distribution as individuals that don't want to work for a big corporation. As the consolidation continues, they're starting these smaller distributorships. So that's something.

01-01:20:58

The other thing is if we could actually get traction and change the law so that we could sell to trade—for Silver Oak, I don't think we would want to do that; we want to sell through distribution, because I don't want to deal with all the collections and every individual restaurant across the country. We've done it in California for thirty-five years, or forty years. So I think in the future that

there might be a better outlet, and we're starting to really see that happening now.

01-01:21:32

Meeker: You don't want to be John Shafer in 1978 driving around to wine shops in San Jose? [laughs]

01-01:21:39

Duncan: Well, yeah, that was what Justin and Bonnie were doing, and my dad in Colorado. I mean, Colorado was our second biggest state up until 2005 or 2006, when Texas took over from Colorado. But that was because my dad was selling wine to Applejack and the country clubs and the restaurants. And so it was Colorado and California; those were the two states.

01-01:22:00

Meeker: Is there a role for the Vintners to deal with these changing realities of distribution, and how consumers are getting their hands on wine?

01-01:22:12

Duncan: I think we keep on top of that, and we work closely with—The Wine Institute is the primary place that that function happens in D.C., but certainly the Vintners organizes lobbying trips to D.C. Mike Thompson, who's our local Congressman, is a great champion for us, and I think the Vintners does play a role in that.

01-01:22:35

Meeker: Let's talk a bit about the environment, and eventually get to the Napa Green story. But I'm wondering, because Silver Oak has these two LEED Platinum-certified wineries, that must come from somewhere. And my understanding is that you, as the CEO of this organization, are really the person who's pushing this into the future. But your family also has an oil background. So how is it that you come to a consciousness around—

01-01:23:14

Duncan: So we could rape and pillage and then—[laughs]

01-01:23:16

Meeker: I was trying to figure out, how do I ask this question without it sounding like that's what I'm saying—

01-01:23:22

Duncan: No, it's okay. I have to show you something. I know this isn't going to work on camera, but I'm going to show it to you anyway. I just found this and took a picture of it. So this is my Certificate of Achievement from my elementary school from 1978, so I was twelve, and it says that "This is to certify that David Duncan has freely given time, effort, and ideas to CLAW." So CLAW was our organization at school, which stood for Clean Land, Air, and Water. So I have been a card-carrying member [laughter] since the seventies. So it is something that's actually important to me. And when I guess I was in eighth grade, my dad thought it would be a good idea for me to go spend a week

working at a ranch to find out what it's like to dig ditches and have a hard day's work, which I didn't dig ditches as a kid. And so I went for a week, and I called him after the sixth day and I said, "Can I stay for another week?" And he said yes. Well, I ended up staying for like six weeks, and then he had to come drag me back to go to high school. And then I ended up working the next five summers up near Sterling, Colorado, and I lived with a family up there who was a great, amazing family to me, and loved it. I loved the outdoors. I loved working on the ranch, and learned about farming, and learned about sustainable principles, and how do you keep the cows going. You can't nuke all the weeds with Roundup if you're going to grow alfalfa and corn and all that kind of thing. So I really came to it very young.

01-01:25:26

So, fast forward to today, I think when I came out here, I was—one of the things I've always prided myself on is that there's no such thing as a stupid question, and so when I took over running the winery, I started asking a lot of questions about our viticulture practices, and it was kind of concurrent with the whole Napa Green movement, Sonoma Green movement. And so we've really embraced that, first in the vineyards, which we've been doing for almost twenty years, so we were certified sustainable—

01-01:25:57

Meeker:

What were the practices when you came out here and you started asking those questions?

01-01:26:00

Duncan:

Again, it wasn't like everybody was doing terrible things, because we're still trying to grow a plant, but a lot heavier use of Roundup, lot more use in our carbon footprint, not as much care to the vine, and really water would be—we've cut our water use, we think, by close to seventy percent, by applying technology in the vineyards. And we're growing better grapes, and we're making better wine, so there's all this benefit to it. And I don't even know if I would say it's more expensive. I mean, it's not more expensive than losing a vineyard over something, or let's say we spend a couple thousand dollars on a leaf porometer or a sap flow monitor, and therefore we irrigate that block perfectly, and we pick it, and it goes into the blend, that's less expensive than blowing it and having the wine go into bulk wine and go out the door. And so it's a good investment. It's a really good investment.

01-01:27:15

Meeker:

And when you say, "blowing it," you mean overirrigating, and the grapes become—

01-01:27:18

Duncan:

Yeah, you don't make good wine, right? Or, worse, we start to put bad wine in the bottle, which we would never do, and then the customer, they don't like it. "This doesn't taste the same." That's the worst thing you want to hear, as a vintner. "It didn't meet my expectations," especially if you've been around for

fifty years, and people have an expectation around what Silver Oak should taste like, and as long as it meets or beats, you're fine, but the minute it's like, "Hmm, it's not the same," that's not a good place to be. So when we had the fire at Oakville in 2006, and it burned down the dairy barn where we started, we had to rebuild the winery, and so at the time I really wanted to build a sustainable project, so we used recycled materials. We did a lot of work on our water system. We added the solar panels at the time. But we didn't go through the process of getting certified, because we really were responding to the fire, and, frankly, we were in a hurry. We were trying to do it as fast as we could. I think it turned out okay. We're sitting here now, but—

01-01:28:24

Meeker:

Who did you work with?

01-01:28:26

Duncan:

So the architect was Taylor Lombardo, from San Francisco, and Cello Maudru was our contractor, and we're still on speaking terms. [laughter] No, we're all great friends.

01-01:28:37

Meeker:

That's rare. That's rare.

01-01:28:37

Duncan:

Yeah, it's great. And then, sort of fast forward to the Alexander Valley facility that we just completed, as we started that process, we had the luxury of time, and so we really dove in deep on our sustainable practices, and went through the process to LEED certify the Oakville winery as an existing building, and then as we were building the new one, we did that as a new build project. So both wineries are LEED Platinum-certified, in two different categories. So I like to say that Oakville was actually the first LEED Platinum production facility in the world, to my knowledge. We've done pretty good research about that; I'm pretty sure I can make that statement. And the Alexander Valley was the first LEED Platinum winery in the new build category, so I like to say we don't have the first and second; we have the first and first. [laughs] But it's something we've really been committed to, and we needed to change some of our practices here. There was some investment to reach LEED Platinum status. And so those are things we're really proud of today.

01-01:29:49

Meeker:

For example?

01-01:29:50

Duncan:

Oh, it's a point system, so there's things around health and human happiness, the way the airflow wasn't totally adequate so we had to make some changes to that, providing natural light, providing a way for employees to get outside. Some of those things are people-oriented. Much of it is very urban, so public transportation's a big thing. Well, we don't have a bus route that drops people off too close here, and so some of those things we just couldn't get, so we had to be creative on other places that we could really make the investment, and

not a giant investment, or think about things a little bit differently in order to achieve that goal.

01-01:30:34

Meeker:

What are some of the most important elements of becoming LEED Platinum?

01-01:30:39

Duncan:

Well, I think it's mostly about energy and water, and then materials can be a function of it. In the new winery, we vetted over I think it was three or four thousand different materials that we used to be Red List-free, which the Red List is things that either the manufacturing process is harmful to people or the environment or using them in the facility can be harmful. So the obvious things are insulation, fiberglass insulation, PVC. So we tried as best we could to minimize those type of things, so our insulation's recycled denim. We didn't use fiberglass insulation. And it has this amazing sound quality to it, so, again, it's one of those things that it's like not only is it recycled material and not something you would think of, but it actually works better, probably. And so there are just endless lists of things that we did. And then our solar panels, the water system, all those things are things that we took very seriously, and that we want to share with the industry.

01-01:32:01

Actually, speaking of vintners, I was super inspired by Sierra Nevada, and Ken Grossman came and gave a keynote address at one of our annual meetings, which must have been about 2012. We could verify that. And so I went up and I met Ken afterwards, and he had just finished building a LEED Platinum brewery in North Carolina, and so he was sharing that story with us. And I said, if he can do it with beer, I can do it with wine. And then he was amazingly helpful, so we took our whole team up to Chico, and the original brewery is like a factory of sustainable practices and a mad scientist factory. There's all these different things that he's tried. And, unfortunately, the day we went I was ill and I didn't go, [laughter] but the team went, and they came back full of ideas. So that was actually at an NVV meeting that I really—that put rocket fuel in me in terms of we can do this, we can get this done. And so we have a similar attitude that we're trying to share with industry, some of the practices that we've done, particularly at the Alexander Valley Winery, because that was, again, a little different than what we were able to achieve in Oakville. And so we've toured tons of different vintners, and anybody that's doing a new project is coming to see, and I hope they'll take it a step up from where we went.

01-01:33:38

Meeker:

So the Vintners has created and sponsored—and I think now it's spun off a little bit, but—the Napa Green Initiative. So there's a Napa Green certification for a winery, as well as for vineyards. Can you tell me about what those are, and what your interaction with those programs has been?

01-01:33:59

Duncan:

Yeah, so we have a goal to have every Vintner member Napa Green-certified by 2020. The last count that I knew, I think we were about almost four hundred of the 550 members, plus or minus. And so then the question is, why aren't you Napa Green, right? So you probably noticed it driving in here, but we have our sign out in the vineyard, and our winery is obviously Napa Green, as well. So yeah, I think you go through a series of education, and there's a certification process, and honestly, I can't rattle the criteria off to you off the top of my head. And it's not organic. It's not biodynamic. It doesn't have to be—from the Duncan family, and for Silver Oak and our brands, for Twomey and Ovid, we really think about it around best practices, and so if we can do something better and more sustainable, then that's a good thing, but we're not going to do something more sustainable that's not good for the wine, because that's not sustainable either, right? And so I think that the Napa Green program is something that just basically builds awareness around it. So a year ago we sponsored one of the educational seminars here, shortly after we got our LEED Platinum certification. So I was like, yeah, we want to talk about Napa Green at the greenest winery in the world. And so we had like sixty-five vintners here, and I talked a little bit about what we were doing, and we had other experts stand up and talk about viticultural practices, and different things you could do, and the criteria. And I think twenty or so of those vintner members are probably certified now after that seminar.

01-01:35:59

Meeker:

You said that only twelve acres is Silver Oak in this immediate area?

01-01:36:04

Duncan:

Well, and actually it's planted into sauvignon blanc, and it's funny because we're down here in the Valley floor. This isn't good cab soil, and so we don't grow cabernet here.

01-01:36:16

Meeker:

It's just too rich? Is that—?

01-01:36:17

Duncan:

Yeah, this is all river bottom, traditional sort of floodplain. Literally floodplain. If you were here this last February, you would have been stuck here. And so we actually grow sauvignon blanc in our clay-filled soil out here, which makes great sauvignon blanc. Goes into our Twomey bottle. And yeah, so we have a couple of different vineyard sources in Napa—well, a number of different vineyard sources, but one is up Canyon Road, and we have a beautiful, really important vineyard there that provides about a third of the Bordeaux varietals for Silver Oak. We've got one sort of at the top of Atlas Peak. We have a long-term relationship—we don't own the land, but a long-term relationship with a beautiful vineyard just south of Napanook that's a new planting that we're really excited about, and we have some of the old vines, and then some new planting. And then there's a place in Saint Helena that is a vineyard we've had for thirty-five years that we've had a great

relationship with the father and now the sons. Ernie used to be the butcher in Saint Helena for forty-five years. [laughter] Everybody knew him, and his sons own it now. And so we source from throughout Napa, which is one of the things that I think adds to our consistency, because if you have a hot year, or you get a wet year, or you get a frost or whatever Mother Nature throws at us, we're not beholden to the one spot. We can sort of make the blend each year by what's the best stuff from our different vineyard sources. We also respect and love single-vineyard wines, like our Twomey pinots, or Ovid, but if we get a hard Mother Nature event at Ovid there's only fifteen acres, and you've got to do the best you can out of that. But that's kind of our philosophy.

01-01:38:17

Meeker:

I've been interested, in my own research, thinking about changing farming practices and vineyards, and I just had a telephone call with Robert Sinskey a couple of months ago and asked him about this, because I know that he was one of the first in the Valley to go organic, and he said at the time he didn't even want to tell people, because people thought—he was like, “Yeah, you go into the health food store, and that was like the dusty bottle in the back of hippie wine.” [laughs] But now, with green certification, are you finding that the public is beginning to respond positively to these kinds of practices, I guess?

01-01:39:00

Duncan:

Yeah, I think being sustainable—I like to use the word “sustainable”—is critically important to the customer, and we don't lead with that. We don't come out and say, “We're sustainable so you should drink Silver Oak.” We want you to drink Silver Oak because you like the wine, and we're sustainable. So that's kind of the way that we think about it. The reason I like to use the word “sustainable” is there are organic practices that are not very sustainable, that aren't the best thing to do, probably, for the long term, or are not economically viable, which I think is a critical part. Our president of our winery had a great saying that money is also a resource, and so if you're organic at the cost of quality, or at such a high cost of doing business that you can't keep the economic engine going, that doesn't make any sense either. So I think there's a spectrum of—it is really solid marketing research that putting “organic” on your bottle is not good for sales. [laughs] That is still true.

01-01:40:23

Meeker:

Oh, it's still true?

01-01:40:23

Duncan:

People have a perception of organic wine as being of lower quality, which I don't know what they think—and, again, it's like, what is not sustainable is what are people doing. And especially in Napa Valley, there aren't practices that are bad, per se. So I think a couple of the things that are interesting and up-and-coming are around carbon footprint. I think that's the next big thing, is getting battery-operated—batteries are bad, too. [laughs] Everything has a

downside. But trying to have less hydrocarbons in the vineyard is probably the next forefront.

01-01:41:11

Meeker:

What do you think of the role of the Vintners in perhaps influencing this discourse? And maybe they've now taught consumers that good wine comes from Napa Valley; are they also trying to teach consumers that sustainable wines can be good, or good wine should be sustainable, something in that—?

01-01:41:39

Duncan:

Oh, yeah. I think if you look at the Napa Valley Vintners website and the education we're trying to push out to the public, there's no question that—yeah, and trying to have every winery certified by 2020, every member certified by 2020 is another way of really putting your stake in the ground. And I think that we've learned so much, and I always tell consumers that the most important thing that's happened in the last ten years in the wine business, to me, is technology in the vineyard. And an easy way to think about that is we used to use airplanes to do an NDVI, to do an infrared photograph of the vineyards, which at the right time of year it can help show you weak spots in the vineyard, or maybe where you've got irrigation problems, or—so it'll cost three thousand dollars or six thousand dollars to go take a picture from an airplane, right? Well, now you can do that with a drone, and you literally can do it every day. So we have the ability to monitor water through technology, and water use in the vine, in a way that just didn't exist ten or fifteen years ago. So that, and for us we've really seen a direct correlation between our understanding of that, our vineyard practices, and quality in the tank and in the bottle. And that's exciting. That's really exciting. So we definitely have our best wines yet to come.

01-01:43:12

Meeker:

As a consumer of wine, it is remarkable about how the quality is so good these days, and so widely spread. You can taste it. [laughs]

01-01:43:25

Duncan:

Yeah, yeah.

01-01:43:27

Meeker:

You had briefly referred to the Transportation Task Force, or studies about transportation, and I guess that's a reference to the work you're doing on the Transportation Task Force. Can you tell me what this is, and if there are any interesting ideas that are starting to percolate?

01-01:43:43

Duncan:

Yeah, so Alfredo Pedroza's leading that from a government standpoint, and he's really passionate about trying to make the private sector and the government sector work together. And then Ted Hall also has a tremendous amount of experience in traffic studies, back to the seventies. He's fascinating to listen to. And so we're trying to, and actually the Vintners have committed some money to, doing some new studies. We've done lots of traffic studies,

but to really try and understand where we can make the greatest impact. And so that's what this Transportation Task Force is getting together every couple of months to try and figure out a couple actionable items. But then if you're doing highway construction, it's expensive. You can't really pay for highway construction from the private sector, so how do we get Caltrans involved? So there's a lot of interesting moving parts to that.

01-01:44:51

Meeker:

Is the answer drones? [laughter] No, but I—

01-01:44:55

Duncan:

Yeah, I don't know. It's—

01-01:44:55

Meeker:

Yeah, no, I'm joking, but it's such an apparently intractable problem, and I've been stuck in traffic here. I was stuck in traffic this morning. I was surprised. And it was commuters. These were not wine tasters at eight in the morning or whenever.

01-01:45:12

Duncan:

Well, was that coming through Saint Helena?

01-01:45:14

Meeker:

Yeah, yeah.

01-01:45:15

Duncan:

That's the high school.

01-01:45:15

Meeker:

Oh, that's the high school traffic.

01-01:45:16

Duncan:

So when school's out that doesn't happen. [laughs] So they put that stoplight in. I watched them put that stoplight in. I'm like, I guess it's helping, but otherwise you could never turn left there, so—

01-01:45:27

Meeker:

Right, you couldn't get out of the high school. Oh, that's what it is. Interesting.

01-01:45:30

Duncan:

But no, you're absolutely right, it is, and that's where there's a lot of confusion, and where if people are not all dealing with the same set of facts—and let's emphasize the word "facts"—they're making assumptions about things that are not true, like the traffic's bad because of wine tasting. The traffic's bad because so many people have moved here because it's beautiful, and then they have jobs and they've got to move from one place to another. And the reason it's beautiful is because of the wine tasters; let's not make any mistake about it. [laughter] So we've got to keep that purpose alive. They say Santa Clara would have been equal to the Napa Valley as a place to grow

grapes and got mowed over by development. And so today that'll never be put back to farmland. And what I think we all want to be sure happens is this never becomes Santa Clara and becomes homes, which, under the Ag Preserve, it can't, but I always am concerned that maybe it could.

01-01:46:38

Meeker:

Well, it's so interesting. You just described, I think very well, this whole ecology of different issues—development, transportation, agriculture, tourism—and how they just all are wrapped up into each other. You can't really pull one issue out.

01-01:46:57

Duncan:

Yeah. Well, and, again, to bring that in a tangible way is we had these wildfires in 2017, October 8 and 9 of 2017, so the Tubbs Fire that burned from Calistoga to Santa Rosa and burned down Coffey Park and all that area, that almost exact same fire footprint happened in 1964, and burned down seven structures. And in 2017 it burned down nine thousand structures. So if we're going to build in the forest, there's going to be wildfire; we can't stop that. And so that was terribly destructive, and obviously with all the loss of life and everything it was awful, but it is something that—we always have to deal with Mother Nature, and I think that's something that here in the Valley that we think about. And we don't want to spoil—it's funny because the reason people like to come here is because of the farming, and so you have to think holistically about that, I like to say in a spherical way instead of a circular way. A circle's flat, but there's all different facets to the way you need to look at that.

01-01:48:11

Meeker:

And because agriculture is at the center of this, that's why the Vintners are involved in all these issues?

01-01:48:17

Duncan:

Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. And that all comes down to protecting what the Valley is, which is something the forefathers and founding fathers saw, now seventy-five years ago.

01-01:48:30

Meeker:

When we spoke on the phone you said that you have your particular areas of interest and bailiwick within the organization, meaning the Vintners, but other people who work here participate in different facets, different committees of the Vintners. Can you tell me a little bit about the other people here at Silver Oak who work with the Vintners, as well?

01-01:48:54

Duncan:

Oh, yes, so of course I'm a big supporter of what the Vintners' mission is, and so our Chief Information Officer, who happens to be my brother-in-law—we're a family business—he goes to all the CIIC meetings, and so he's on the Community Industry—whatever that stands for—

01-01:49:16

Meeker: Community Issues and Industry Committee, I think.

01-01:49:18

Duncan: Issues Committee, yeah, there you go. So he spends time doing that. Our marketing and PR person is involved, and has been for the last few years, in the PR for Auction Napa Valley. Our Director of Hospital serves on Auction Committees, and she's a wonderful party girl, so she knows how to— [laughter] And I say that with all due respect. And then our President of the winery, he serves on a couple of other industry committees outside of the Vintners, and so we're involved in the Vintners as well as some of the other, more politically active—and he actually was one of the members of the APAC committee, Tony. Yeah, so I'm trying to see if I'm leaving anybody out. So we definitely provide and participate in the things that the Vintners puts on.

01-01:50:21

Meeker: And I would presume that these volunteer activities for the Vintners are more or less underwritten by this organization?

01-01:50:29

Duncan: Yeah, to the extent that anybody's spending time going to a Vintners meeting as opposed to doing their job, that is a form of underwriting, [laughter] if you're the owner. So yeah, but it's important, and they need people and ideas, and we want to know what's going on and be involved. So I think there's a mutual benefit, in my way of thinking.

01-01:50:51

Meeker: I think that we can probably wrap up now, and I want to get some sort of concluding thoughts. Is there anything else about your work with the Vintners that we haven't talked about that you'd like to spend a few moments talking about? Because I do think we have some time.

01-01:51:10

Duncan: I don't know. I think we covered the big buckets. One thing I'm thinking about, which is what's next, because I've been Chair of the Auction, I've been Chair of the Board. There are a number of people who—Beth is a great example, or Cyril—who were on the Board years ago and then have come back on the Board. So one thing I'm trying to think about is do I want to go back on the Board, which I guess I could run again next year, because you have to take a two-year break. Or Pat Stotesbury, or there's lots of examples of people who have been on the Board for a long time. So I don't know that that fits in the history, but I think about that as the future of the organization is probably just as interesting as the past, and what our priorities are, and especially with the political winds and some of the people that are—the easiest way to characterize them is anti-industry. That's not totally fair to them or to us, but they believe some of the cultural issues in the Valley—and I mean human cultural issues, not viticultural issues—are caused by the wine industry, and I think education and, again, dealing from a fact-based set of agreed-upon, real data is something that's really important that the Vintners

needs to serve, continue to serve as a voice of logic, and spend the resources, spend our money as an organization on making sure we have real data.

01-01:52:47

Meeker:

Can you unpack that a little bit? It was interesting, but—

01-01:52:52

Duncan:

Well, so if people say wine tastings are causing traffic problems, that's an easy one, but we know from a fact-based standpoint that that is not true. Yes, there are cars on the road, but it's not the vast majority, and it's not what causes all the traffic problems. And there's all kinds of ideas, like if we staggered tasting room hours so the tasting room employees leave at different times in the Valley, that would probably help somewhat, but who wants to be open until seven, and who wants to be open until five? So then you have all those things, right? So that's an example of something. Or the other thing is what role viticulture plays in the ecosystem. So if you're going to take down forest land, or range land, and plant a vineyard, the natural forest is not necessarily better. An easy example is a vineyard acts as fire brakes. And just having oak trees might be pretty, but, again, that doesn't drive the economic engine of the Valley. I am a staunch believer in the hillside ordinance. As I mentioned before, I think we would have no trees if that hadn't been put into place. Plus, especially around here, it's not really good vineyard dirt anyway, so it's a win/win. But there's facts around that that I think people can sort of make up their reality if they're not dealing from fact-based thinking.

01-01:54:46

Meeker:

This is a big year for the Vintners. It's the seventy-fifth anniversary. I had the opportunity to join everyone at the January big meeting down at the Lincoln Theater it was called. Were you there that day?

01-01:55:03

Duncan:

I was not. Yeah, I missed that one. I was out of town, and not happy about it, because I wanted to be there.

01-01:55:11

Meeker:

Yeah, it was pretty cool. In fact, they showed a video based on the interviews that our office had been doing back to the late 1960s, including an interview with Louis M. Martini in which he talks about the founding of the organization. So it was pretty cool, and it was fun to be there. I was going to ask you what your feelings were on that occasion, and what your thoughts were—

01-01:55:37

Duncan:

Well, my feelings are that I'm horribly sad I wasn't there, [laughter] because I wanted to be, but I had to be out of town. I had another engagement, and I was not in the Valley.

01-01:55:46

Meeker:

Over the years, have you learned much about the history of the organization? Is there anything about the history of the organization that has intrigued you?

01-01:55:54

Duncan:

Well, I probably don't know as much as others, being an English major and not a historian, but I think the thing that I appreciate the most now is that I had the opportunity to know Robert Mondavi, and I had an interaction with him, which literally changed my life and it was an amazing moment. Do you want me to share that story?

01-01:56:17

Meeker:

Yeah, I'd love to hear that, yeah.

01-01:56:18

Duncan:

So I was at an event, and we were all sitting on the lawn waiting for the speaker to come up and talk, and there were hundreds of people sitting to my left, and all of a sudden you just sort of see a wave, everybody's face look up, and so I turned my head and here's Robert Mondavi. And he sits down right next to me, just right here. And so the guy that I was with turned to him and said, "Mr. Mondavi!" He introduced himself. He goes, "Do you know David Duncan from Silver Oak?" And Bob Mondavi turns to me, he puts out his hand, and he goes, "No, but I should." [laughter] And he was probably in his mid-eighties at the time. And he just had a way to make you feel so warm and welcomed, and for him to say "I'm interested in you, kid" was really transformational for me, because when I meet people now, I always try and really think, be in the moment, be there for that person in that second, and he was so good at it. So that was my moment to—and then later I had other opportunities to speak with him and talk to him, but I think about those kind of—it is fun to be in the fabric of the legends of the wine business, and you go back to Louis Martini or Justin, really—he's in the Hall of Fame—who was my dad's founding partner, and just some of the luminaries, and there's that side, and then there's also the characters, and there's a lot of characters in our business, too. John Shafer is a great friend, a really, really close, important mentor to me, and a great friend of my father's. The Novak family, knowing Mary Novak and celebrating so many different occasions with her and her kids. And so I think that's a fun thing that I think, especially if you're a young person, that you could look forward to.

This industry's so unique in a way of being grounded and also being important in people's lives in a way that I think a lot of other—if we're a manufacturing industry or a food industry, if you're raising cows and making hamburgers, which I've done, you're not necessarily impacting people's lives. But when they open a bottle of wine, they're celebrating, they're enjoying, or they're commiserating, right? That's what we talk about is creating that moment, and I think that's something that we get to do as a winery, and then the Napa Valley Vintners really understands how to celebrate that for all of

their various members, and at the Auction, and all the good that we do. So that's pretty unique. It's really pretty unique.

01-01:59:08

Meeker:

What do you think the greatest opportunities are for the Vintners, looking forward?

01-01:59:12

Duncan:

Well, yeah, I was kind of on that thing about thinking about what's next. I think wine, as you mentioned a minute ago, the quality of wine around the world is just on this rocket ship of increasing, and the interesting places to grow wine grapes. I don't know, it was fifteen years ago they announced that they were growing wine grapes in every state in the nation. I don't know how you do that in Alaska, but—and so I'm not too worried about a lot of the regions taking over from Napa, but Napa is a very, very, very unique place, from a climate standpoint, from a soil standpoint, and from an infrastructure standpoint. If you wanted to go to the next greatest place to grow grapes, but it's neighborhoods, you're never going to be able to take the houses down and plant grapes. And so I think continuing to inform and think about what a special place Napa is is something that we almost have a duty to do at this point, and the Vintners are the leaders of that, and really the responsible party for that, so—

01-02:00:30

Meeker:

Well, and a huge resource, in addition to nature and climate and geography, are the people. And you have so many people living here and visiting here who know an immense amount of wine. They're making it happen. How do you keep Napa a place that can accommodate the winemakers, the viticulturalists? How does this place accommodate everyone, really?

01-02:01:03

Duncan:

Yeah, I think, from an economic standpoint, the barriers to entry are getting higher. It's expensive. We have a wonderful relationship particularly with David, but with a lot of the learning institutions. You see these young people coming into the business, and we have a position out right now on our winemaking staff; we had sixty-five applications for this job. And so there's a lot of interest. There is a way to make a living and have a great career and a great job, and get to make wine, which ultimately is fun, let's face it. So yeah, I see that as—if you're a young entrepreneur and you want to come into the Valley, it's getting more difficult. There's no question about it. But so is buying a house in San Francisco or LA or Denver, but people still thrive and do it.

01-02:02:05

Meeker:

And that might be why there's grapes being grown in fifty states now.

01-02:02:08

Duncan:

Yeah, that might be.

01-02:02:09

Meeker:

Yeah. What do you think, just in terms of Napa overall, what are you most excited about looking toward the future?

01-02:02:18

Duncan:

Again, I'm going to go back to the quality of the wines, and the difference that we can make in the wine world. I think being a leader in sustainability, a leader in the education and understanding of wine, both from a consumer standpoint and from a vintner standpoint, for how to grow things better, being sustainable, quality, the research that we could support, all those different things are something that I think Napa is one of the leading—it's arguably the top—I think it's the number one place to grow grapes in the world, but there's these old places in France that are okay, too. [laughter] But we are definitely in the top few places in the world that have this unique climatic and geologic purpose that makes wines that are extraordinary on the world stage, and that's exciting that Napa gets to continue to do that.

01-02:03:19

Meeker:

It's a little off track, but you had talked about Robert Mondavi, and he's such a central part of the Napa Valley story, and his family goes back a couple generations now, and continues on. But the Robert Mondavi Winery was bought by Constellation.

01-02:03:41

Duncan:

Right.

01-02:03:42

Meeker:

Silver Oak remains, even more than when it started, a single family operation. Can you tell me about the degree to which that is important, and if you want to continue in that direction how are you planning on doing that?

01-02:03:59

Duncan:

Yeah, the vast majority of Napa Valley wineries are family-owned, and there's very few that are corporately-owned. There's volume that's corporately-owned, obviously, so—

01-02:04:08

Meeker:

I think that's a really important point to make that I think that a lot of people go to the grocery store and they see big corporate wines, or they look at Napa and they might see some big labels that have been acquired, but of those five hundred wineries how many are corporate-owned?

01-02:04:28

Duncan:

Well, I can tell you because I get asked this question all the time, and there's a perception that we're corporately-owned. And there was a funny thing, because there was a clause in our arrangement with Justin that said no press releases, no announcements, no nothing, and Justin, of course, told the first reporter that asked him that he sold Silver Oak. And so it was kind of in the paper that oilman Ray Duncan bought Silver Oak, and so people think we purchased the winery, but they don't know that we started it and then bought

out our partner. And we've grown, and we do distribute nationwide, but that doesn't mean we're corporately-owned; we're family-owned. But for a lot of our Vintner members, they are family-owned. They're first-generation, second-generation, and I think that is important to the dynamic of the Valley, and what we continue to do. But there's also situations where people need to get out. They have other purposes. You mentioned before we started that two years ago we bought Ovid, up on Pritchard Hill, and that wasn't because I'm some business magnate that's trying to make M&A a big part of our corporate strategy; it's because my friends who started the winery—I've been buying the wine since the first vintage—wanted to sell, and they wanted to redeploy and whatever, and they had built something really neat, and I saw opportunity there that I think would work from a business standpoint going forward, and so we shook hands and that was that. So we didn't buy that as some big play; we bought it because it's awesome, [laughter] first, and because I think over time, we can create something of value and something great for our customer. So now I consider Ovid to be family-owned, even though we have three labels. I don't know when we're not a family. And so, again, for most of the wineries in the Valley, that is the story.

01-02:06:37

And the other thing about the corporately-owned wineries is they're run by people, many of whom I know really well, and they're great people. So the fact that they have shareholders and that kind of thing doesn't mean that they're necessarily bad for the industry or bad for the consumer. In fact, they're really good, and a lot of those wines people love, and they serve a purpose, as well.

01-02:07:03

Meeker: Do you have any final thoughts?

01-02:07:06

Duncan: I don't know. I don't think so.

01-02:07:08

Meeker: Well, thank you very much. I appreciate your time.

[End of Interview]