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Mike Lowe, a Career in Education and the Culture of U High

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U-High Alum Mike Lowe

July 29, 2022 at 1:00 PM

State and U High Reunion

Cassie: All right, today is Friday, July 29th, about 1 o'clock. This is Cassie Kotrch and I'm here with Mike Lowe. Okay, so let's see. So, your name is Michael, obviously, and were you a student at U-High?

Mike: I was a student at campus school which I started in nursery school, went all the way through U-High, the high school and graduated '65. So, I started nursery school '51, and went to school here. I just kept going.

Cassie: Wow, yes, you're here like K through 12.

Mike: Yes.

Cassie: Yeah, that's a lot of time to be here. And you're from the Kalamazoo area? Were you born here?

Mike: I am, I was born here. We've lived here all our lives.

Cassie: Okay, great, when were you born?

Mike: 1947.

Cassie: Reflecting back on your time at campus school and then at you U-High, how would you summarize your experience?

Mike: I thought it was a very positive experience. It was, of course, in the '50s and '60s, which some people think of as being idyllic. I mean, we lived out in the Oakwood area. And because it was basically a private school, I would take the city bus here and Winchell Avenue at that time was out in the country by Asylum Lake. We would catch the bus to go to school. My other two brothers went to school here. They were younger than I was, but I was kind of in charge of them. We'd go down the big steps here and go down to Oakland Drive in front of the old gym then take the bus home. When we moved from Winchell, we moved to Maple Street, which is off of Oakland Drive also. A good friend of mine, Bob Kent, lived on Hillcrest. So, we hung out a lot.

It was a great experience in the fact that the campus school, basically—all the time I went there from K through six, we had one teacher change. So, the teachers were there forever. There's a lot of families that have gone here. Parents, brothers, and sisters. I had two uncles and an aunt, and my mother went here for two years and then they moved to Otsego. So that

kind of thing led to a very close school, then we added another 30 students, seventh and eighth grade and then another 30 students for high school.

Actually, my wife came in ninth grade, and it was interesting, because she was able to give me a good perspective that I didn't have. It was tough on the new kids coming in middle school or in high school. I don't think that any of us that have been here a long time were deliberately trying to exclude them or be cliquy or anything, but those kinds of things happen. It was interesting in talking with her about her experience here, because she came from a public school in ninth grade. And so those kinds of things. Then especially as I would say, when I was probably in seventh and eighth grade, one of the reasons I think I decided to become a teacher, a coach and be in education for 40 years was because of the positive experiences I had here.

The interesting thing after that, I was able to teach in a lot of different diverse schools, rural schools, urban schools. And one of the things that struck me, probably when I was in my sophomore year here was a good friend of mine who was two years older than I was, who was African American and there were very few people of color here in our school, we probably had in 3 or 4 out of close to 400.

We're a very homogeneous group of white people who tended to come from upper middle class, certainly middle class. A lot of professional people, a lot of educators who taught at Western, their kids were here. And then a lot of wealthy people, one-percenters, doctors, lawyers, and 'Upjohn' people.

Our handle with the other kids in town was called snob hill. I didn't really think that we were snobby, but it's everybody's perspective. But what struck me when I was a sophomore, this friend of mine, he was a senior, had a party at his house and his father was an accountant, successful CPA. His mother was the first black nurse to work in the emergency room and surgery. So, the blacks that were here, were high profile people. But anyway, he had a party and everybody's kind of looking forward to it and talking about it. I remember going and there were three of us that showed up at the party and that just smacked me right in the face. I could not believe it, because everyone was friendly in school here and sports at U-High were huge.

So that was kind of my first inkling of "Boy, we are kind of a really closed society here!" One of the interesting things, I did not realize we had 87 people graduate in our class. We had about 52 boys and 33 girls but when I was going here, I just kind of assumed, well, it's about 50-50.

Roy Walters, our athletic director and football coach who also taught here, would always run a sports program, a summer camp, in the summer for junior high kids. Roy, basically, would then invite those good athletes, better athletes in those sports camps, to come to high school here. Which of course is kind of illegal. I lived in Galesburg even though I went to school here the whole time, we moved to Galesburg when I was in high school. But we had players from

Climax, Scotts and outlying areas, but the way we got away from that as a school was even though we were C school we always played up in the B's in the tournament.

And played in the Wolverine Conference which was also a B league. So, we took a lot of pride in our sports here particularly what at that time I would consider elitist sports. Golf and tennis won a number of state championships, even at the class A level. So that was very interesting.

Then it turned out that my wife's best friend was a black woman who was a cheerleader. It was interesting since I went into athletics coaching. After I graduated from here and played some college ball at Kalamazoo College, we didn't have women's sports here. Women's sports in Michigan didn't happen until 1973. And we would have had some excellent women athletes. Even to the point where my wife would talk about how disgusted she was when they would play basketball in gym, and they had to keep three women on each side of the timeline because it was too strenuous for them.

So, with those kinds of things, you're almost in a time warp. And we have remained very good friends with those people that we were in high school with. As a matter of fact, the woman that we were good friends, the black woman, she just came back to Kalamazoo, and we have seen her regularly over the years. She lives on the West Coast, so we've remained friends, and I've remained friends with her brother also.

So anyway, what I'm saying is as I got older and had more varied experiences in different settings, I came to realize that U-High campus school was a very good school and we got a very good education but it was also very closed off. We had some words along with our good points. And the other thing that struck me, being a teacher, we were just starting to get into some times that were difficult, a lot of upheaval. I remember sitting in our social studies class downstairs around 1:30, when we got notified that JF Kennedy had been assassinated and that just absolutely blew everyone away. And of course, we went through the Cuban missile crisis when we were in high school.

But we never talked really about any controversial things that were going on, which as I got older really struck me that they should not have happened. Particularly, Van Avery's drug store had been boycotted on the north side for not hiring blacks even though it was in a black neighborhood, so those kinds of things. Again, I never felt that any of that was just malicious, I think it was just ignorant. And again, without putting any blame there, but that had a profound effect on me.

Later on, as I became a teacher and as I became an administrator, particularly as an administrator, our administrators were very nice people, but they were very office oriented. For example, I never remember them coming in to visit a classroom, I never remember them evaluating teachers. Pretty much just stayed in their office. And if there were any problems behaviorally or any other issues, they would handle that. One of the things that I really felt important for me was to get to know the students, be in the classroom, be with teachers, visit the classrooms every day rather than just go in there five times a year to evaluate.

Again, that's not to be critical of my experience here, it was just the times, but I really think that helped me become the educator that I wanted to become.

I think also in terms of sports, we had very good coaches here. We basically had a talented group of people who were playing sports and did well in sports. But there was never what you would call today team building or bonding or building a winning culture, those kinds of things. That might have been because we already had it. The best two years or the best two classes, certainly from 1950 on, and probably before that were the class of 1956 and the class of 1960. They were just outstanding classes. I know in '60 they won the Mythical Class B Championship in football, even though they were a small school.

The basketball team in '56 went to the quarter-finals, losing the Lakeview in Battle Creek. They had a seven-footer that sticks balls in, that later played at Western. So, they just ran it through him. He scored 52 points in the game.

One of the things that I think the school did a good job with despite being a small school; we had a number of clubs, we had a good student government and we had hall monitors. Which was interesting because my future wife happened to be a hall monitor and I would get out of class, just because it was hard for me to sit in the class for a period of time. So I would look forward to talking to her even though I was dating another young lady. Then that young lady happened to go to school out of state, and this happens to a lot of high school couples. You just move on from each other. No bad feelings or anything, but my wife and I started to date in January of '66, and we never dated anyone else after that. Actually, we got married before I started my senior year at Kalamazoo College.

So that was kind of unique, that we did have some people that married each other, that went to school here. But I'm not aware of any that actually married from the same class. There is a couple in our class that are now married, but they had married someone else before.

So anyway, those kinds of things are kind of interesting when you look back on it. Of course, if someone had told me I would have been married three years after I graduated high school, I would have told them: "You are nuts!"

Alright, I'll let you ask another question, but that kind of gives you some background.

Cassie: Yeah, it gives a lot about the culture of the school, and a lot of really good information there. And since we've touched on the culture a little bit, I sort of wanted to move a little bit into more of your personal memories, and ask, what did a typical day look like when you were going to school here either at campus school or U-High?

Mike: Well at the campus school, the grades were all self-contained. We did have physical education, we had art, we had choir. So basically, we would come stay in the same classroom unless we went to our specials. And we did have a cafeteria here. So, it was probably evenly split between those that ate lunch here, and those that brought their lunch.

Of course, at that time, there was no free and reduced lunch, and honestly, probably no one would have qualified anyway. I think school would start about 8 o'clock, we'd get out about 3. And it was just kind of an enjoyable day. Again, like I said, when you start out with basically 30 classmates, and go through together for certainly K through six.

And like I said, the nursery school we had was down by Eddie's Lane. It was in the old buildings that they had built for World War II. Some of us even went that far back, and so, even those kids coming into kindergarten, some of us already knew each other from nursery school.

Very few of those people in K-6 left. I mean we had, I think a set of twins and maybe one young lady, but the rest of us stayed. So, as I remember—kind of using that word I used before—it was just kind of idyllic. I really looked forward to school, I enjoyed it. I really don't remember any bad experiences in terms of bullying or those kinds of things. Then we had our playground right up here on top of the hill, and then we would go out for lunch. Then for Junior High, of course, we went from being one class to two.

And then, we did rotate between math and science, English, social studies, those things. That was a good experience too. In Junior High, we started to play sports. Mainly it was basketball, and we probably played 10 or 12 games. The uniforms we had were all hand me downs from high school. So of course, even though it wasn't the style at the time, they hung down to your knees and said State High on it, but hey, we could play. The big deal then, was when we went into Junior High, we were able to be in the "big gym", the gym at the end here on the North end of the building.

And before that in Elementary, we were in the "little gym" which was off of the cafeteria. So that was a big deal being in Junior High.

We also had a nice library, it was kind of split. When we were in Elementary, we'd come over but we could only be on one side. They had a lot of autobiographies with Kit Carson and Davy Crockett and those kinds of things. And then when we were in Junior High, we could use the whole library for reports and things like that.

My experience in high school, because we lived in Galesburg, my dad worked here in town, he would bring the three of us in, and drop us off. And we would actually walk up the steps from Davis Street, which was always an experience, and everybody remembers coming up the steps. So, my brothers would go at that. When I was a freshman, they would go over to campus school. Then in my sophomore year, I was able to drive. In January, I had turned 16, so I had a car. So that changed things considerably for me, because then I was responsible for bringing the two of them, and I would have our day here. I played sports, so after school, we would have practice. And again, I loved playing sports here.

Academically, I remember it was very competitive, which I didn't really care that much about. I mean, my goal was to have a three point, my parents kind of insisted on that, but if it was a choice—we lived out in the country, and so we had a basketball hoop—if it was a

choice between putting an extra hour into study or to go out and shoot baskets, I was going to go out and shoot baskets.

I do remember, many of the kids were very competitive in class, and that was just interesting. Everybody kind of had their own thing, and many of the people really wanted to serve in the student council, or be a hall monitor, or join clubs or things like that. And my experience basically was, I didn't really care about that very much. My thing was sports, and I wanted to get good grades.

I was fortunate enough to be good enough in sports, where Division III schools kind of wanted me to come there and play of course. Well, no scholarships, athletic scholarships, but they give you jobs or something. I had kind of narrowed it down between Alba and K-College, but I could go to K and live at home.

So, that was kind of my experience. But I always looked forward to coming to school and just had a good time seeing new friends. The other thing is that, we would do a lot of things on the weekends together. Some of, quite mischievous. You're asking for my experience, we used to regularly be able to get into the school. We'd come in and play basketball on the weekends because it was easy to open up these big old windows. The school wasn't very secure. But the other thing that we did is some of us, we would come in and take all the chairs out of the study hall and put them in the girls' bathroom. So, the girls, of course, would get really angry on Monday because the bathrooms up here would be completely full. They couldn't even get in. We had a friend one time that left and we came into the building and had an old toilet with a mop in it and said gone but not forgotten.

We always viewed it as not being malicious or destructive or anything but the administration took a dim view of that. And so, we kind of got into a running guerilla war with the administration. We had a friend that started an underground newspaper his senior year which was hysterical because he would write things about certain teachers or particularly the administration. Our administrators were very nice people, but in our minds, they were very straight-laced people. Of course, we were a bunch of just young smartass guys. For example, one of the things that the administration did was that—we had one classmate that was very good at rhyming certain things, and he would write them on the bathroom stalls using their names and of course that probably was not a very nice thing to do. But it was really funny. So, everyone would run from upstairs to downstairs to read what had been written on the bathroom stall. So, the administration decided to now open the bathroom windows. Which of course when you went in there in the middle of winter it was very cold.

One weekend some of us got some brick and mortar and bricked up at least part of the window so it was no longer open. So just kind of those running types of things. It was an old building. It was really cold in the wintertime. Sometimes you'd have to wear coats.

The pigeons would get in the air ducts and coo, which was always very interesting. We had one teacher that was older that had transferred in after she had retired from another school.

She would hear these pigeons and go around and try to figure out where it was. And of course, again being the smart asses, we would then sit in our chairs and make cooing sounds, so you look back at these things you know that really that really wasn't very nice.

We had a librarian that was, again, a very nice lady. And we had a study hall here. It was nice that we had study halls, particularly if you played sports, because you could get a lot of your homework done. But one day there were four of us sitting at this table and one of them, the black athlete I was talking about, who was probably one of the best athletes ever to go to U-High. He and I took the table, and we actually hung it out the window and hung the legs on the window. Of course, if it had fallen off and killed somebody, if they were coming out the doors, but who thought of that? Right? You know. The librarian, Ms. Carter, came over. We were sitting on our chairs with our legs crossed, no table. She asked us where the table was and of course we said: "We have no idea, we thought you moved it." So just those kinds of things.

I'm sure there was—well, I know the administrators remember some of us very well and some of the teachers, but the teachers were really, very dedicated, good sense of humor and I think really took an interest in us. So, like I said, it was just a pleasurable day to come to school and play sports. Just like I said, we were really kind of isolated, not having to deal with many issues, you know. Life was good in Kalamazoo.

But again, from my wife's perspective, it was—her name is Margaret Lowe, by the way, Margaret Van Stream was her name when she went to school here. She was relating to me as we were talking about this, and we talked about it in the past over the years; it was tough on girls. I know she was telling me last night about how there were several girls that went to school here that really bullied some of the other girls. So, for those that had come in and have not been a part of this other group, of course I'm not going to mention the names, but some of these girls that certainly we're bullying some of the other girls came in in junior high and high school from campus school again.

Cassie: I hate to cut it short, but we are actually out of time.

Mike: Oh, okay.

Cassie: But if you do live in the area, I just wanted to let you know that even if this weekend doesn't work for you, I will be working on this into the fall actually. So, if you wanted to meet again or maybe your wife wanted to share her story as well, you can email me or just give us a call and we can schedule something else any time.

Mike: That would be nice. I'll tell you why. I was talking to one of my classmates with this group that we get to have a coffee and unfortunately, he had some family commitments this weekend, so he wasn't able to do this, but he said: "It might really be a good idea to kind of get this coffee group of ours together." and we kind of run anywhere between 10-16 people, depending on who can make it.

But he said: "It would be interesting to throw out a question and then have different members answer it because you would get a different perspective on the same topic." I thought that was a good idea, so I'm glad you asked that. I said I wouldn't share that with you.

Cassie: Yeah, of course. Yeah, that's definitely a possibility. I'll be working on this for a while because we are covering the reunion and then homecoming for WMU. So that gives us quite a bit of time to schedule something.