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## Susan Larson and the Culture Shock of Campus School

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U High Alum Susan Larson

July 29, 2022 at 3:00 PM

State and U-High Reunion

**Cassie:** All right, today is Friday, July 29th. It is almost 3 o'clock and this is Cassie Kotrch and I am here with Susan. What was your last name?

**Susan:** Larson.

**Cassie:** Larson, okay. You said you were here for six years, so you were at the junior high sort of, before the high school?

**Susan:** Yes.

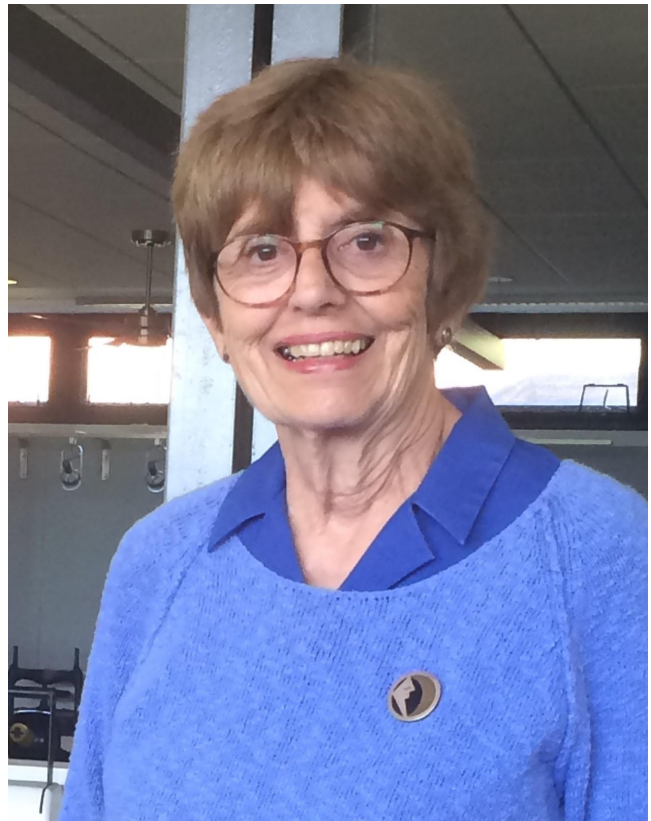
**Cassie:** Okay, and are you from the Kalamazoo area or did you move here and come to school?

**Susan:** My mother was attending Western in the summer times because she needed to get a few more years for her teaching certificate. She was teaching in the Upper Peninsula. We lived there with my two brothers and my mother.

She decided to move here. She looked for the best education for her children and this was it. So, we moved. I had gone to school in Sault Ste. Marie from kindergarten through sixth grade. I started out here in seventh grade. Total culture shock from the northwards of Michigan to this more sophisticated and developed area which was educationally ahead of what I was used to.

**Cassie:** Okay, so reflecting back on your time at the junior high and then the high school, how would you summarize your experience?

**Susan:** Well, it was rigorous which I really appreciated and revelatory, I would say, in that the attitudes of the teachers were so committed to the students and they really cared about how well we did.



And it was a little - I thought, weren't these days being wonky? I mean it was because the facilities were so crazy. In my Latin class - I had Miss Cage for Latin and we met in a classroom off the gym so you had to walk around the balcony to a classroom in the gym - I mean off the gym.

So that's why I say wonky. They managed to find places for us to have classes but it's a little strange. There were a couple of teachers - Miss Fitch, Cora Fitch - who was very old and made us memorize Evangeline which I can't recite now.

We had student teachers of course but the master teacher was always the one who made a difference, I would say. It was rigorous, competitive but in actually a pretty good way. I mean as I say they really focused on each student. And I felt like even though I was so much an outsider - I mean that because some of the people whom you will interview or have interviewed have been together since kindergarten. But I have not.

My parents were divorced so we did not have the means that most of the upper echelon families had here. So that was a real challenge. It was a challenge. I mean it was good in a way because we were integrated into the culture in most ways but not always.

I think that was the biggest challenge for me. It was culture. For classes, I quickly got an idea of what was expected of me and knuckled down so that I could do well and I did well. Not so well in junior high because that's sort of a transition period for kids in the end. So, I was feeling my way.

One person in junior high that I remember in particular was Mr. Fox. It may have been ninth grade but I am thinking it might be eighth grade but anyway it was pretty early on. In his class, I had given a report or some answer to a question and I had used the N-word. I mean there were no blacks in school. I had not seen any - I think maybe one person. He was such a good teacher in that he asked if he might speak with me after class. He didn't do it in a way that anybody else noticed. Then he informed me that it isn't a word that one uses and it was a good moment in my learning about different cultures.

We had African Americans in our class but I don't remember them in junior high. I guess they were - that was kind of a wash for me.

Yeah, let's see. Other people in junior high - teachers - I just remember those two in particular. Miss Kitterman was a high school teacher so if you want to go on to the high school, I guess you can.

**Cassie:** Yeah, of course.

**Susan:** She was the best teacher I have had in my life. I mean she was - she taught Latin and English so I had her for both. I learned grammar from her. I became an English teacher. And she encouraged creative writing and good writing and that has been the thing I do best in my life in the sense that it has kept me employed even when I don't want to be employed as a full-time volunteer now and things like that.

But she would really crack down on us if we didn't do our work. In Latin class, she would call on people if they didn't have things ready. She would correct them in a way that said, "you better do it better next time." And she took the time to correct our English papers so that we understood what we were doing wrong and the rules of grammar.

She was really excellent so there was Miss Kish, Miss Kitterman - there were quite a few misses in the school. There was Miss Cleveland. I think it was Cleveland who was a drama teacher. I think this was actually in junior high when I got the drama bug and she got us on stage in the building that used to be next door. I think there was a breezeway and then there was an auditorium - not an auditorium - some rotunda.

**Cassie:** Yeah, the rotunda.

**Susan:** Well, we did a play in the rotunda as junior high school students. I don't even remember what it was or what I did, but I thought, "Well, I can do that." And so that turned me on to drama and I acted through college. She was the coach for that or the teacher in charge of it. There were some other teachers that I wanted to point out.

There was Bernie Chance who was the typing teacher, top business, I think. He had a personality. I think he was a coach too. Anyway, I did all right in typing, but I wasn't super great. But I composed a poem about him. So, I got an A in the class from this poem I think. But again, typing has stood me in good stead.

There was Mr. Hackney who was the math teacher and a dear man. I was a good student. I was the salutatorian of the class when I graduated. So, I was a good student, and I could have done more in math. However, I was very conscious of the fact there were only two girls in the advanced math classes.

It was me and Brenda. I don't remember Brenda's last name. We were so self-conscious about being in geometry. I think I only took geometry. I didn't go on after that which I could have done but it wasn't encouraged at all. And as I say, I did well in it.

Anyway, there was chemistry with Mr. Engle. I looked at my yearbook to remind myself of some of these names and, and I was the yearbook editor too. So, I remember a lot of these teachers from that as well.

I remember the activities that we did. There was homecoming and a homecoming court and a competition based on service. I was the runner-up for the queen of service.

**Cassie:** What did that entail?

**Susan:** Just showing up on stage, I think. And how were they chosen? I don't remember how they—no, it was a vote, I think. Yeah, it was. We were voted on.

Another pivotal moment for me was when we had a class activity and we were planning some kind of carnival in the gym. And I came up with an idea of a game. It was simple game,

I am sure people have seen elsewhere, but they said, “Well, that sounds like a good idea,” and we did it. We built this thing you could throw balls into and decorated it and so on.

So, again, as somebody who was from the north woods of Michigan and wasn't given that kind of opportunity when I saw I could do that, I did it. It's another thing I have done a lot in my life has been head of lots of organizations and nonprofits.

I think attending U-High or State Junior High—I am not sure exactly when it changed to U-High.

**Cassie:** Let's see. The gentleman I was talking to just before you was just before the change. So, he was State High and he graduated in the late 50s and I think it was U-High in the early 60s. Yeah, I think it was like—

**Susan:** It was while I was here either in junior high or high school.

**Cassie:** Yeah, I think he was 57 maybe.

**Susan:** So, he was in my brother's class—no, he wasn't. My brother went here also. He is deceased. I think he was three years older. But I was advanced and he was held back early on. I don't remember the difference in the years. But anyway, he was maybe 57 or 56. David Schroeder was his name. He went on from here to Michigan and to MIT and got a doctorate. So, it was good training for him too.

Do you have other specific questions?

**Cassie:** Yeah, actually. We talked about a lot of the teachers that made an impact at the school. We also touched somewhat on the culture. Do you remember anything about the students or what the student body was like?

**Susan:** I do, but what you just said made me think of someone else that I wanted to say something about. That was Miss Cressman. Ms. Cressman was the Dean of Girls and she was very important to me. She wanted to make sure I did well and when somebody needed a person to be a governess during the summer, she recommended me and things like that. Anyway, she was a person who always made you feel that she cared about you and promoted your well-being.

So, as for the student culture. Yes, of course I do remember.

There's another teacher I just remembered: Mrs. Monroe. She was a Mrs. and she taught French and Spanish and was very exacting also. I minored in French in college.

The students were varied in ability but mostly pretty smart. I had the feeling that some of them came from backgrounds of advantage and therefore may not have worked as hard. Let me tell you about one in particular: he was my first date ever, Wally Kent. Wally. I think you had Eric Kent on your list out there. That's his brother.

Wally was the son of a lawyer and eventually became a lawyer himself. But Wally was the kind of person who wouldn't do the work until the night before, if then. I can remember him now with his project half done and sticking pictures on it or whatever he had cut out at the very last minute. Yet he graduated and did alright. He was the connector for our class for many years but unfortunately, he passed away. I think it was last year. I definitely remember him.

I also remember Emily Jackson, another friend whose father was a doctor. We were friends and did things together. My best friend was probably Gretchen Maus. Her family had a farm on the outskirts of Kalamazoo and she had horses, so we would go riding on her farm. She rode these horses a lot. She was a good student and her father was the registrar of Western and was able to get me a job in the summers sometimes. So, I worked in the registrar's office one summer.

Anyway, I am hoping to see Gretchen's sister who signed up because I have totally lost track of her. I have lost track of all of them. Some of them have died. I wish I had been able to come to the 50th because I think they were mostly there, but I couldn't come due to a scheduling overlap that I could not get out of. Somehow it seems like this reunion is drawing more men. There are only two women in our class that are going to be there tomorrow night. I do not know why.

Carol Shepard was another person, very athletic. She was at the 25th reunion which I did attend. So, I remember her.

Van Pena, Martha Van Keenan was another girl from our class. My goodness, all these names: Pat Lynn. Somebody else just flitted in and out of my mind. But Julie Pelen. And I see on the list of people coming that there's somebody named Matt Pelen because I have lost track of Julie Pelen who was a good friend.

I saw all these people but I have moved on and they have too. The culture was, I think if I had to characterize it, there were children of professionals and businesspeople, not of kindergarten teachers like my mother. There was one other class member whose mother was divorced and so their standard of living was less than most.

Another one was James Colton. James Colton's grandparents had founded the Bank of Niles Michigan or something like that, so they had money. It showed me what you could do with money. They had houses at Gull Lake and nice houses in town.

So, the culture was sports-oriented because these guys were jocks and the ones who are coming back are people who played football, tennis, basketball and so on. I don't see the people who were in the drama group with us.

We did plays and had plays every year and I was in them. We also had musicals like The Pirates of Penzance that Mr. Fry directed. He was the music and band teacher. Gosh yeah, Mr. Fry was a piece of work. I am trying to remember where we did our plays because we performed them on a stage somewhere. Maybe in the rotunda.

**Cassie:** Unless it was in the gym or was the little theater right there, was it maybe the little theater?

**Susan:** There maybe was a little theater.

**Cassie:** Yeah, just right across Oakland. Right like up here and right across.

**Susan:** Yeah, it might have been.

**Cassie:** It's a smaller auditorium. I think they used it as classrooms for a little bit, I think, around World War II because they needed more space on campus. But then yeah, the little theater right there was in operation until the 90s and did most of the drama club.

**Susan:** There were also classes for Western across the way in speech therapy and psychology. I took a college-level course in psychology and got college credit for it.

**Cassie:** In that building? Right there?

**Susan:** Yeah, it was. I don't know. I didn't see anything that looks like it. Is it still there?

**Cassie:** Yeah, no. Unfortunately, it's not really there. But that's also part of the reason why we're doing this. A lot of the buildings are gone or will be gone very soon because they're too far gone. Like Vander Kolk all right across there you're not allowed in there without a Hazmat suit anymore.

**Susan:** Is that where biology was?

**Cassie:** Vandercook was the first men's dormitory. Then, I think sororities and fraternities were there in the 60s.

**Susan:** I remember that we went through a tunnel.

**Cassie:** I think you are thinking of West Hall. West Hall was torn down. I think it was in 2013 when they had to close it down. But yes, because if you went into the basement, you could.

**Susan:** Yeah, if it was bad whether we could go through the tunnel to our science classes. The biology teacher was Mr. Doer.

**Cassie:** Yes. I have heard a few stories about Ray Doer. I have heard a few stories about Mr Fry so far.

**Susan:** Yeah.

**Cassie:** It might have been done by Ray Doer or maybe another one. I am not sure if you remember this, but the gentleman before you said there was a teacher, either science or math I think. But he would say something like "Stand up to the blackboard, stand up, chalk and talk."

**Susan:** Yeah. Was that Engel? The chemistry teacher was like that. I don't remember that in particular, but he was very keen on us memorizing the entire chemical table. My gosh. Yeah. I went and told my husband that he said: "Why would you have to do that?"

**Cassie:** Do you remember anything else about the building? We talked about little theater and West Hall.

**Susan:** Yeah, I do. There are several things in particular that I remember. One thing was the study halls. I don't know if anybody's talked about that.

**Cassie:** Yeah. The gentleman that was here before you actually was part of the hall monitors.

**Susan:** Little Goody Two-Shoes. He was probably the same. Yeah, so if you were chosen, it was supposed to be an honor. You got to sit in the back and keep your eyes open for any infractions. You would write down if someone was passing notes, not studying, got up or was disruptive by talking. And then you would report them. What a bad system that was!

**Cassie:** Right because the study halls weren't those mostly just student led, right?

**Susan:** I think there were two monitors at a time in the study hall. Big Room, 50 seats. I think it was a big room so I remember that.

Now, I don't know if this is worth being in this memory, but I remember the bathrooms upstairs. They were across the hall on the second floor. For some reason, the commodes—as we say in the south—were raised up. So, you would go in and they were up. You had to sort of climb up on these little platforms and the plumbing must have been underneath it. But it was an odd kind of situation and I remember it very well.

In gym class, oh yes gym class. I was totally not a good gym student but we had to wear blue gym suits. That's what they were called. Some of them had puffy sleeves and gathered pantaloons kind of things. I mean they were the ugliest things in the world but that is what we wore in gym. I cannot believe we did, but we did.

And then swimming, I was talking to the lady out there about a swimming pool. Was there a pool in here?

**Cassie:** Yes, there was. There was a pool in the building that used to be connected on that side.

**Susan:** See, I am sometimes getting things mixed up because I went to Kalamazoo college. And we did not have a pool at that point and we had to go downtown to the pool.

But yeah, that's right. We had these ugly bathing suits too. But anyway, it was good that we got started learning how to swim. I did not participate in sports teams. I did a lot of other things, which I have already told you about.

**Cassie:** Well, we have about 5 minutes left or so and there is one more question that I wanted to ask you.



What event at the schools, either at junior high or high school, do you think impacted you the most at your time here? You mentioned one already where I forget the teacher's name that you're talking about but he pulled you aside after you said the N-word in class.

Were there any other events that impacted you?

**Susan:** So, not talking specifically about special events like a school wide event?

**Cassie:** It could be if it impacted you.

**Susan:** Yeah, well there were a lot of them. But I remember graduation in particular because it was a very personal event, not so much related to the school. I had to give a speech because I was the salutatorian. So, I did give a speech and one of the parents, Herschel Hill's dad, said: "Was that you on stage? You have such a nice voice." It was so nice to hear that compliment because out in the audience was my father who lived in Chicago and brought his second family to hear me.

So, it was a fraught event for me. It was really hard actually to be in that situation but I had made my graduation dress and had my shoes dyed orange to match my dress. So, there I was on stage with orange shoes and a black robe.

Anyway, the other event was something that the parents organized. All the parents of our graduating class organized an all-night party. Was it on the night of graduation or was it—I do not remember why. Maybe it was prom? No, it wasn't the night of graduation, I don't think. Maybe.

But anyway, it was an all-night party. Can you believe that? Yeah, because they didn't want us to go out and get drunk, I guess.

**Cassie:** Yeah, we had it too.

**Susan:** You had an all-night party?

**Cassie:** The parents organized it, and it's called the senior all-nighter.

**Susan:** Yeah, well we did. I had played Tallulah Bankhead in one of the productions on stage. I had worn this tight red slinky dress. And they had convinced my mother, a kindergarten teacher, to come for this entertainment as Tallulah Bankhead in a tight red dress. I thought I would die. My mother was not slim. Anyway, it was brave of her and very good of her to do that.

But I remember that party and other parties that were at school. One thing we did that was really good was that we went to a camp for 3 or 4 days in junior high. It was outside in the fall so it was cold. It was a good bonding experience. And yeah, I remember it was good.

Anyway, I cannot come up with any other kind of things that just blew me away.

**Cassie:** That's alright. Yeah, well did you have any last thoughts or takeaways?

**Susan:** Well, no I think that's it. I just felt—Well yeah. Because I guess I should speak for my brother too. As a girl, I could maybe get along a little better than he could. He had a harder time socially than I did and some of his classmates weren't very kind to him. That was a shame. He was always kind of trying to prove himself for all kinds of reasons.

But he came back and we did the 25th reunion together, which was really amazing to me. It wasn't that they were purposely mean or bullying. There wasn't bullying exactly. It was just a kind of thoughtlessness and this feeling of "Well, I am a good person." I mean, I have it and you earn it. But they didn't say that. It was that we felt that then we did need to be really good and so we did our best.

He got a PhD and I have two masters and have had some really good jobs. So, we did our best. And I will also say that the fact that they gave us leadership roles was so significant. Like the yearbook: I was the editor of the yearbook. I became the editor of the yearbook in college also.

I have continued to be an editor. I don't know if it was high school, but I would say I am a lifelong learner. I have continued to take classes and encourage that kind of learning in our community, small as it is. It is the can-do attitude and the progressive attitude that was engendered by being here. Yeah, so I am grateful.

**Cassie:** Yeah, this was very great. Thank you so much.