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Virginia Kent-Graybill and a School Full of Family

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U High Alum Virginia Kent-Graybill

Saturday, July 30 at 10:35 am

State and U High Reunion at East Hall

Cassie: Okay, so today is Saturday, July 30th. It is about 10:35 AM and this is Cassie Kotrch here with Virginia...

Virginia: Kent.

Cassie: Kent-

Virginia: Graybill.

Cassie: Kent-Graybill. So, we'll start off just asking, you said you were here K-12.

Virginia: Yes.

Cassie: When about was that?

Virginia: I graduated in 1961.

Cassie: Okay.

Virginia: So that would be 19, I don't know.

Cassie: Yeah.

Virginia: Do the math, yes.

Cassie: Yeah, and then are you from the Kalamazoo area then?

Virginia: Yes.

Cassie: You were born here?

Virginia: Born and raised.

Cassie: Okay, great, reflecting back on your time at campus school and then, was it U High at the time you were there I believe, yes. So, reflecting back on your time at Campus school and U High, how would you summarize your experience?

Virginia: It was wonderful, it was like going to school with your family. I mean, especially those of us who started in kindergarten, we knew K-12 kids. And, we never had a class without a student teacher, because of the education program. But we had wonderful

teachers, and it was very good in the background. I mean, for my brothers and I, my sisters didn't graduate from here. But we didn't have any trouble, with study habits or anything when we got to college, it was good.

Cassie: That is good, sorry, I lost my place in the questions that I had for you. Yeah, so you said that your brothers and sisters were here too, right?

Virginia: Yes.

Cassie: What do you remember about the student body as a whole, and then do you have any memories with your siblings?

Virginia: It's funny, we were talking last night and in retrospect this is a terrible thing to say, there was not a dumb kid in the school. They were all very bright, and there was not a child of any poverty in the school. So, it was very sheltered... and we probably were very entitled but didn't know it at the time. That most of our friends were doctors, lawyers, business owners, that kind of thing. There were problems with families I know there were, and so we felt very safe. And it was a very different era.

I lived up at the south end of what was then State Hospital and we would take the city bus to school and walk home. I don't know that people would do that anymore, send their kid out the door to go on a city bus at this point. I don't know that in Kalamazoo, I haven't lived here in a long time. But we weren't dull, we could come up with some dandy things, and our teachers knew that I mean they respected that. But a lot was expected of us too intellectually, and so forth. So, I would say I felt that it was a good education for K-12, and it was also very safe and caring.

The brother if he talks to you, he had a real speech issue when he was in kindergarten. And we had Ms. Stinson, Stinson Hall was named after her, she was our kindergarten teacher, and she was wonderful. And he was trying to tell her something one day, and she could not understand, and he'd get more and more and more agitated. So she went to the first grade and asked me to come with her and whatever it was, she said tell Jenna. And I looked down and I said he said blah blah blah. How do you know that? I said we're used to it! But then the speech pathology was across the street, and he was sent to speech classes. And so, in the public schools that might not have happened as rapidly.

I was never in a public school until I did my student teaching in my senior year in college. Well, some observations but till I got to college, so I don't know what I am comparing it to. Never regretted it. Actually I think my father went from kindergarten to maybe fifth or sixth grade here. But my grandpa became the purchasing agent for the Kalamazoo Public Schools. And he decided maybe his kids should go to the Kalamazoo Public Schools, so.

Cassie: So, you touched on that a little bit and I think you mentioned your kindergarten teacher. But, what else do you remember about the teachers and faculty over here?

Virginia: In high school I remember we had a French teacher whose name was Mrs. Monroe. After the first semester or year of French and Spanish (she also did Spanish) you could speak no English in that class. I know so many kids who had two years of French and never really talked it. She was wonderful, and our math department was good. By the time I was a senior, I think there were maybe three girls still in the math classes. But, I remember one of my classmates getting in trouble for talking too much and it wasn't him, it was me. But, I can't think of a really bad one I can't, and many of them when the school closed went and started teaching at Northern. Excuse me, Western. You can tell where I live now.

Cassie: Okay, so what did a typical day look like here, either while you were in grade school/at Campus school or at U High?

Virginia: At U High obviously we changed classes every hour. And there were monitors so that if you had to go from upstairs to the basement, at the bottom of stairs you had to sign. And the study hall was student monitored but there were a few times like my senior year there was a rebellion at the end of the year. But, it was the day before school was out so they suspended them for a day. We weren't perfect, we did do things that were agitating perhaps. But the kids in our class probably if they were in classes today would be out picketing for gay rights. We were involved in things and in the community, we had some limitations. For instance, the Civic Theater had a theater group of kids, but you had to go to the Kalamazoo Public Schools for them. U High students were not eligible to be in the plays because they didn't go to Kalamazoo public schools. But, they managed so that we could usher, so a lot of us ushered down there. But it was: you go to U High, snob hill.

Cassie: Yeah, I heard that too. So, were there plays here like put on maybe in the rotunda or the little theater if you remember?

Virginia: Not the little theater no. Well, we used the rotunda in elementary school. Oh, yes, we did, they had plays up- is the little theater the one up by Walwood?

Cassie: Yeah!

Virginia: Yeah, we did up there, they were put on there. So yes, and we had talent shows and that kind of thing.

Cassie: Really?

Virginia: And we would go up there and Walwood at the time wasn't a cafeteria but an eating area. And we were not really supposed to leave the building at lunchtime, but we did. They had good hamburgers so we'd go over there, and half the staff was over there, and they never said anything so. And then my best friend and I used to go all the way out to McDonald's on Westnedge Avenue sometimes, which really probably wasn't the best idea in the whole world, but we did that, made it back in time.

Cassie: Did you have a favorite place to eat or a favorite pastime while you were here?

Virginia: Do you mean a place to eat outside of the building? See when we were kids, there was a cafeteria but in high school you did not want to go there. So, we would bring our lunch or we would go buy candy at the bookstore that was here. Or we'd leave and then we'd go over to Walwood or... I never went over there cause my brothers were over there. So Susan and I would either go down to Parkwood, which I don't think is still there, Park. It was at the bottom of the hill almost down to Academy. I don't think it's still there. And we would go down there or... no, we'd take any fast food. We didn't have as many choices either. I remember when McDonald's opened, it was a big deal.

Cassie: Yeah.

Virginia: And there was a restaurant out now where Meijer is now called Schwartz's and their daughter went here. And that was one of the original drive-ins so we'd go out there.

Cassie: So you talked a little bit about the plays and the talent shows. Do you remember any other events? Any like school events that they had?

Virginia: Well, it's really funny because of course we weren't very diverse, but we were diverse as far as religion goes. We had some Jewish students and so forth and we had Christmas programs. Those were usually in the rotunda, but every Good Friday, we would walk. No, our parents would drop us off at Kanley Chapel and we would have an Easter program and we'd all walk back to school. I mean, you couldn't do that today. And our Jewish friends would participate, read, or what have you. They participated in the program too. So a lot of you know, and then we had assemblies and so forth at the Little Theatre. We go over there, we'd walk over there and have speakers and what have you, our assemblies will be over there for the most part in high school.

Cassie: So, any events in the old gym?

Virginia: Basically, we use it for PE and of course the pool for swimming. And our pep assemblies were in there and our dancers were in there. So yeah, they did use it and there was a classroom on the second floor, and it was Latin, it was awful and I hated... We were not allowed on these ends. It was all college on the first floor, the east and west were all college, and we weren't supposed to walk through there. So, you had to go around that track that was at the top and I hated it. I was sure I was going to slide right through, and I hated it. You had to go from there around to Latin class on the other side of that track. So we used the gym quite often, there was nothing else. I mean, it was our gym. There were no college classes in it or anything. So, we never had, as I said, never had a class without a student-teacher.

Cassie: Do you remember anything else about the buildings at the time?

Virginia: We thought they were wonderful, they were old, and the basement was dark and this floor is much brighter, because it's been lightened up with paint and with more windows or new windows and so forth. We liked the building and then when the elementary

building was there that is now all the parking lot was all playgrounds. We would be out there at noon for, gee, I think we were out there for like more than a half an hour, just chasing each other around. And as kids, in the elementary, the hill... we would find cardboard or something, and slide down the hill.

Cassie: Wow.

Virginia: They wouldn't let us do that these days. We might hurt ourselves. We had some injuries, but nothing purposeful. They just fell off the slide or whatever. *(Laughs)*

Cassie: Did they let you do that back then?

Virginia: Let? Yeah, I saw... I remember they even... No, I think there was a teacher kind of supervising that in case anybody got hurt.

Cassie: Oh, okay.

Virginia: And when we got to high school, some of us had cars, and we would park at the bottom of the hill, so we'd have to run up the hill to get to class on time. And as I said, as a senior I had a class... What was it? Greek and Roman literature. God knows why I took that, I have no clue, but it was on West campus. So, it was first thing in the morning, and I guess my dad would drop me off but anyhow I would walk back. So, I was always late to my second hour class. I skipped school once. My mom was in the hospital, and I had the car because I was supposed to pick her up after school and I had a test that day. And I was supposed to be in a class on West campus but no, I was parked at the bottom of the hill studying for this test. I am such a radical. I am at the bottom of the hill studying for this test and I am waiting for somebody to come and pull me in for skipping school, never happened. And I did alright on the test. I don't think he even missed me. It was a college class, the guy who taught it was our neighbor and I don't even remember his name, but I don't think he took roll. It was a college class and of course we weren't used to that- not taking roll.

Cassie: Yeah. That is funny, though, skipping a class to study for another class. I think a few students-

Virginia: You might do that.

Cassie: I did do that a few times. Yeah.

Virginia: I had to, it was a math test, I think. It's like, really, I can't go to that class, I have to study. And if my mom had been... When my mom was in the hospital that meant that I had more, my siblings, they were all younger. So, I had more chores at home when mom was sick and my dad was helpful too, but it's the way that made sense to me at the time.

Cassie: Yeah.

Virginia: My one big radical move.

Cassie: That is funny. So, I just had a few more questions and we have about 10 minutes left or so. So, I wanted to ask, how did you feel about the school when you were going here? And then how do you feel about it now, looking back?

Virginia: I am not sure. It's the only school I ever knew, K through twelve. So, I am not sure I really thought about it. It never occurred to me to want to go to Central, and Norrix wasn't open yet. It never occurred to me to want to transfer because I was happy here.

Now I think we were privileged to be able to. I mean, yes, there was a tuition, but it was minimal. But to be able to go here, I don't know that we realize that, but we were privileged to be allowed - allowed is the wrong word - but to have it available to us.

So, I went to a very small college. I wanted to go to Michigan and my dad said: "No, you can't go there as an undergraduate." And I went: "Dad, you went there." He went there for Law school. And he did not let me, he thought it was too much of a jump from U High in a class of ninety to the University of Michigan, so I went to Albion.

And he said: "If you want to transfer you can." I didn't because I was happy there. And I don't remember my granddaughter just graduated from high school. My God, we had none of that process for college searching. She lives in Minnetonka, Minnesota and her boyfriend did too. They had a college counselor.

We would develop a list and "yada yada yada" so she ended up going to the college her parents went to. She's going to Notre Dame.

Cassie: Wow, nice

Virginia: I said to her: "Was it worth the money?" and she said: "Yeah, mom." Me and her dad think it was. It made her look at her options.

We didn't want her to think that that's the only option she had. I mean, no, she had lots of options. She has an International Baccalaureate diploma and all that. So, she's like her mother and her father - very self-directed. She'll be fine. So, I guess it was what we were used to.

And when someone would ask where you went to school, you'd say: "U High," they'd go: "You go to Snap Hill?"—"Yes, I do. Frankly, I like it there." But it never occurred to any of us to want to go somewhere else. I think my brother Wally once said he wanted to go to South Junior High because he wanted to change his name.

He always wanted to be Bill. His name was William Wallace. He always wanted to be Bill and he was told no. And then my sister went from sixth grade here - probably sixth grade when they closed - to South Junior High. It was quite a culture shock. And she was about 4'10".

I mean, some of her friends ended up there too but it was quite a culture shock for her.

Cassie: How many brothers and sisters?

Virginia: There are six of us - there were six of us. We lost Wally, but yeah, there were six of us.

Cassie: And you all went here at one point?

Virginia: I think Martha was in kindergarten when Wally was a freshman in college. I can't remember if he was still in high school and he's she's 14 years younger than he is. So, I think he may have been at college already when she started but yeah, we were the "you're one of the Kents." We'd say yes.



When Rick and I were talking and I said: "Do you know anybody else who has six kids?" I mean, he said: "Not that I can think of." You would have to.

"Are you Catholic?" - "No, we're not. We're Protestant. We're passionate Protestants. We used to talk." "Well, you're one of them." No, mm-hm.

"Is he your brother?" - "I don't know. What did he do? Tell me. What do I want to claim him this week or not?" And they were young.

There were several families with more than one kid in the school and especially at the high school level who were a lot of us with families.

So, as I said, it was like going to school with your own family which was very comforting. I mean, I watched my granddaughter at her graduation time go through some girl drama and I don't remember any of that.

It must have been there, and I might not have just been involved in it but hers! And of course, now with the advent of the phone and the whole technology, girl drama - it goes through a whole new level. And she's had a rough time. She had a rough time the last couple months of school and I think girls have a tendency to fall apart their senior year.

But I don't remember any of that. And there were kids who went to Aunt Susie's for six months and then came back to school because they were pregnant. There were some who did and at the time I am not even sure - this really shows my ignorance - I am not even sure that I would have thought that's why they went anywhere.

It would never have occurred to me. It was a whole different era. Some of them did get married after. One of my brothers, went there - there were a couple I remember in high school. Wherever they went, they went for six months and then: "Oh, we're back." - "Okay." All right, I mean it's such a different era than it was then. Society was so different.

Cassie: Yeah, so my last question is, during your time at campus school, the grade school or U High, what events impacted you the most during your time?

Virginia: One of the things I remember about being at campus school was when Queen Elizabeth was - her coronation.

They had us all in the rotunda and there was a stage, and there was a TV which we couldn't see, by the way, because it was about this big. And I remember that when events like that happened, they would have us watch them and so forth.

In the high school, what impacted me the most? I don't know. It's a hard one. That's a hard one. That's the late 50s, early 60s. I can't think of any off the top of my head. Just day to day.

Cassie: Yeah, were there any people that impacted you a lot?

Virginia: I think my friend Susie, who has passed away now, about she came in from Parchment when she was a freshman. She was a band kid, and I wasn't but we became very, very good friends. And the funny thing is that I live outside Mercat, and one of my K through 12 classmates lives out there, too. He lives three miles from my cottage. And somebody said, "How long have you known him?" and I said, "50 years or more, since we were five."

Cassie: Yeah.

Virginia: And his father was Dr. Charles Van Riper, the speech guy, and his grandfather was the doctor in the area, and Van Riper State Park is named after him. I haven't seen him in a while, he wasn't home the last time so actually, but. So long term friends, really long-term friends, that some of them are still my Facebook friends. And there's Joyce Tracy Harger. She grew up on our street and we've been friends since my brother were in kindergarten.

Cassie: Wow.

Virginia: They were in our house. My mother never turned anybody away. She made a mean peanut butter and jelly sandwich. So, at noon she was passing them on to the whole neighborhood.

I am going to find my brother for you though.

Cassie: Okay.

Virginia: Do you have any more?

Cassie: I just had one follow-up question. How did you and Susie become friends?

Virginia: I don't even remember.

Cassie: No?

Virginia: No, it's just part of it was she had one brother and our house was never quiet. It used to drive my dad nuts, and I don't remember because I wasn't in band when she was, we must have been in a class together.

And she actually - I don't think she ever really dated anyone at school. She had boyfriends but they were from other schools. I don't remember. I have to think on that one for a while. After she got there, she was just there. And her parents were a little older than mine.

But she'd be at our house, and she'd spend the night and so on and so forth. And along there were always spare kids at our house. It's what happens when you have six kids. You never know how many you got.

So, my brother's here right now with Chuck Spencer. He spent time with his buddies since he lived with his dad. And he lived around the corner. He didn't live on the same street or anything, but they've been like this since they were preschool, kindergarten

Cassie: Wow, that's very cool, I don't have any more questions but-

Virginia: Hopefully, that helped. Let me go see if I can track down Eric. He's out there talking, I know.

Cassie: Okay, great.

Virginia: I'll drag him back.

Cassie: Perfect.

Photo: Back row from left

Wallace (Wally) class of 1959

Robert (Bob) class of 1965

Eric the (Rick) class of 1962

Front row from left

Virginia (Ginny or Ginna) Class of 1961

E Anne. (Annie) class of 1969

Martha (Marti) class of 1973