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Fred Buckman & the Push Toward Full Potential

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U High Alum Fred Buckman

July 30, 2022 at 5:45 PM

State and U-High Reunion

Cassie: Okay, today is Saturday July 30th, it's about 5:45 PM. This is Cassie Kotrch here with Fred Buckman. And what class are you?

Fred: Class of '63.

Cassie: Okay, great. All right, and how many years did you go to that school?

Fred: Three, I entered as a freshman in 1959, and I left after my junior year in 1962.

Cassie: Okay, why did you leave?

Fred: I went to the University of Michigan after my junior year.

Cassie: Wow, so you graduated early technically or?

Fred: I left early with an understanding from the principal that the one course I had not completed that was required for graduation was senior English.

And the understanding that we had was if I completed freshman English at the University of Michigan that would qualify as meeting the senior English requirement. So, I didn't graduate when I left in 1962, and I came back to get my diploma when the university was closing, I think maybe in 1967.

Cassie: Yeah, 1966 was the last year.

Fred: I know I received my diploma from high school after I received my diploma from the University of Michigan.

Cassie: Wow. Well, that's strange, you don't hear many people say that. Okay, and where did you come from to U-High?

Fred: I was in the public school system. I went to Woodward elementary through 7th grade. I went to Hillside Junior High in 8th grade and then came to U- High in 9th grade.



Cassie: Okay, so the three years that you spent at U-High, how would you summarize your experience of the school?

Fred: Life changing. One of the reasons that I was interested and willing to do this interview is that University High had a big impact on me. It was a combination of things. I think the challenge of being in classrooms with a lot of very competitive students and having a lot of direct contact with teachers and the encouragement from a couple of my teachers at U-High to pursue going to college early that when I look back at sort of how things have progressed for me. The teaching and the coaching and the competition that I had at U-High are all things that helped me be somebody who was interested in being an achiever throughout life.

Cassie: You talked about the competition, but you also talked about the teaching. Do you remember anything about the teachers or faculty during your time there?

Fred: I remember a lot.

Cassie: Good.

Fred: I had Mr. Engels for both Chemistry and Physics, a terrific teacher, very interested in getting students to ask the question “why?”.

And as good a teacher as he was, maybe even a better man. High integrity—cared a lot about the students. And I continue to feel that if there was one person at U-High that had an impact on me throughout my life, Mr. Engels would be that person.

But Mr. Hackney, who was a math teacher, taught geometry for me and sort of helped me step ahead a year in the math program.

Ms. Giedeman who taught Latin. For someone who has sort of a technical orientation, you would not think of Latin as something that was a memorable experience, but she made it memorable.

Mr. Fox, who taught US history, loved history. And the love of history that he had, made it enjoyable to walk into his classroom.

Mr. Walters, I don't know whether many people have talked about him.

Cassie: Not as much Walters. A lot of Engels and Hackney—

Fred: Mr. Walters was our football coach. He was also our golf coach, and I played both football and golf. I was not a great athlete in high school, but I liked sports.

He was one of those people who sort of helped urge me along to participate in things that I probably would not have done without a little urging. Another example of what I would say was a really good man. He cared a lot about his play. He also taught, I think, world history maybe in which I didn't take. But the relationship that I had with him through football, through golf, through seeing him in the hallways is very memorable.

Cassie: And do you remember anything about the students during your time there, and did you make a lot of friends once you got there or had friends already?

Fred: I had one close friend who came to U-High, I think the same year I did or maybe a year later, his name was Jim Vaughan. Jim and I lived close to each other, we came from families of comparable means. We were both from families that were very modest means families. In Jim's case, he simply had a sister. I came from a big family.

I had a sister that was older than me, I have five younger brothers. We lived in a small house up on the north side, and it was a three-bedroom house. We had six boys in one bedroom, my sister had a bedroom, my parents had a bedroom. We had one bathroom for the family. I mean, as I say, it was quite modest.

Jim was from kind of a similar situation and lived in the same area. He and I had been classmates together at Hillside and at Woodward, and we spent a lot of time outside of class together. At U-High, I met John Manske, Tom DeCair, Jack Tobias, Tom Klein, Scott Wagonmaker. A lot of people who became good friends, most of those people are gone.

So, I knew when I came back for this reunion, that many of the people that I was closest to would not be here. Jim is still around but was unable to make this event. But I have such favorable memories of U-High as an institution and what it did for me, that having this event was something—it felt right for me to come back and say hello.

Cassie: What did a typical day look like for you while you were at U-High?

Fred: I walked to school; it was a walk—it seemed like forever. You hear people talk about the fact that they walked through knee high snow, it was uphill in both directions and all this sort of stuff.

My walk was probably 35 or 40 minutes, something like that each way. As I recall we started school at maybe 8 o'clock or 8:10 in the morning. I think it was 8:10 to 3:10. And so I sort of loaded up on classes. I mean I was a good student and liked the challenges associated with it. I participated in athletics after school, and would walk home.

For me doing homework was something that was done on the dining room table, because there was no place else to do it and there were a lot of distractions. But I remember that lunch was something we normally did at school, and I normally carried my lunch. But for me



the treat once in a while was to walk down the hill to the McDonald's and that had just opened. They had seven hamburgers for a dollar. So, two or three of us would get together and pool our resources and buy some hamburgers and we might do that once every couple of weeks or three weeks or something like that.

Cassie: Okay, so what do you remember any of the school events that happened? Any school events maybe in the gymnasium or the track? Were there dances maybe, plays put on or sports events?

Fred: I was a year younger than my class. I had skipped a grade. In the middle of first grade, I went to second grade. So, I wasn't as socially developed as the people in my class around the girls in the class, particularly the pretty girls, I was pretty tongue tied. So going to dances was not something that felt comfortable to me.

I remember going to football games at Angel field, both as a spectator and as a player. We had good basketball teams, we had great football teams, we had great tennis teams and we had great golf teams while I was there. So, I remember the participation in those sports. I don't remember much about a specific event during that period. I remember making a lot of friends and part of what happened while I was there is I became sort of multi class.

I'm the class of 63. I knew almost as many people in the class of 62 as I did in the class of 63. I knew some people in the class of 64 because we were playing sports together. A few people in the class of 61 and 60. There's a person who will be here tonight, Dave Hamilton, who was kind of the perfect guy, when I came to U-High. He was the star football player, he was the smartest guy in his class, he was a great golfer and I aspired to be a great golfer. And one of the things I specifically remember about him and I'm going to point it out to him tonight when I see him, I saw him write his first check, okay.

I was doing a little bit of work in the pro shop at what was then the Elks Country Club and Dave came in to buy something and the head pro and the pro shop had to show him how to write a check. It was interesting for me because I didn't have a bank account, I had never written a check and I got a chance to watch this. What was funny about it, is Dave's father was the president of a bank.

Cassie: Really (*laughs*)?

Fred: Yeah (*laughs*). So it was not so much specific events. You know, I left 60 years ago. So, the memories I have are more memories that are in the part of the brain that has emotion and joy and stuff like that. I remember it as being a very happy time and I am looking forward to tonight.

Cassie: Yeah, yeah, definitely. I have one more question to ask you before we head over to the event that I've been asking everybody. So, I'm interested to hear what you might say. Basically during your three years at U-High. What event, person or even place do you feel impacted you the most during the time at the school?

Fred: Single event, single conversation that I had with Carl Engels. It would have been in about January of my junior year. He stopped me after class, and he said: "Do you have a few minutes?" and I said: "Sure". He said: "What are you going to do next year?" and I said "Well I've taken all the science courses, I've taken all the math courses, I've taken pretty much everything. So I think what I will do is take senior English and I'll take four or five courses a semester from Western." In addition to being a teacher at U-High, he also did some work with Western and so he had a good feeling about Western.

But he said to me: "Fred, you can do better than Western, okay, you can do better than Western. Why don't you think about going on?" And he handed me an application to Harvard. Okay. He said: "Why don't you think about what you can do rather than what's easy for you to do?"

And I went home that night, and I started talking to my parents about it. I was the oldest of the six boys. My sister did not go on to college and neither of my parents had graduated from high school. And so, we were not a higher education family.

And I remember telling my dad that I was thinking about going to college instead of going back to school for my senior year. I had expected that I might get a lot of support and what I got was sort of a look of concern. So, because at this time I was 15.

Cassie: Wow that was young.

Fred: He and my mother talked about it for a while and maybe a day or two later, he said: "Two things, you have to pay your own way, we can't help you and no drinking." I thought that I had died and gone to heaven.

I said: "If those are the only two things that stand in the way, that's what I'm doing." So, I went back, and I told Mr. Engels that I was going to give that a shot. I made an application to a couple of schools, Kalamazoo College, Northwestern, Caltech and then we had a couple of people in our class whose last name were Margolis, okay.

There was a Fred Margolis, a Sue Margolis. My pediatrician, and I still went to a pediatrician at 15, was Dr. Margolis who was the father of those people. And I was talking to him about it and he said: "You're not shooting high enough, he said you should go to University of Michigan."

So, I had my dad drive me over to the University of Michigan. I didn't have my driver's license yet.

Cassie: Right.

Fred: I met with the dean of admissions. I told him what I was planning on doing, leaving after my junior year. He said: "Where do you go to school?" I said: "Kalamazoo University high". He said: "We like that. Where do you stand?" And I said: "Well, I'm probably number one in my class." And he said: "Well, admitting you is not a problem, okay. Figure you are in. We need to figure out how to get you money. We need to figure out where we're going to put

you and stuff like that.” But it all happened really fast, and they put me in the school of engineering because the school of literature, science and the arts was full. I loved engineering, stayed there, ended up getting a degree in engineering from Michigan.

I went to MIT and I got a PhD in nuclear engineering. And when I think about how impactful all of it—I mean some of these things they don't seem that impactful at the time.

Cassie: Right.

Fred: Big deal, big deal in terms of the direction of my life and it's one of the reasons that I have such positive feelings about the school.

Cassie: Yeah, that's great. I mean you can hear exactly how that one conversation snowballed into a whole new life. You getting a PhD and everything, opens a lot of doors. Yeah, well thank you so much for agreeing to talk to us if you think of anything else or you want to maybe talk when we have more time or like it's quieter or something. I'll be doing this until October.

Fred: Okay.

Cassie: I'll be doing it through WMU's homecoming. So, I can give you my phone number email or you can always talk to the woman at the alumni association like Colby and such and they can get you in touch.

Fred: Colby has my email address. I don't know whether she has my phone number or not. But I'm pretty religious about checking email if you ever want, if you need to get in touch with me if you have any questions or want to do any follow up on sort of life after U-high or any of that sort of stuff.

Cassie: Yeah, that would be great.

Fred: I was the chief nuclear officer for Consumers' power and then I was the head of consumers. And then I moved on and ran a utility in the west, called Pacific Corp. I spent some time working for private equity. I worked for a construction company that built power plants.

I've done a lot of interesting things in my life. I'm just sort of dialing back right now. I mean it's been a wonderful career, a lot of—if you get to the point where you want to talk about any of that, I'm happy to do that.

Cassie: Okay, that's great.

Fred: Okay.

Cassie: Okay well thank you very much.

Fred: You're very welcome.

Cassie: It was very nice to meet you.

Fred: Thank you, nice to meet you as well. Thank you and I hope you do enjoy the diner.

Cassie: Thank you, that should be fun.

Fred: Thank you, yeah. Yeah definitely. I will see you in there.

Cassie: Okay, I'm going to go find my wife.

Fred: Okay.