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Eric Kent and Joyce Harger in a Joint Interview Full of Laughs

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U High Alumni Eric Kent & Joyce Harger

July 30, 2022 at 11:00 AM

State and U-High Reunion

Cassie: What graduating class were you guys?

Joyce: 1962.

Cassie: Okay, and you are the same class?

Eric: Yep.

Cassie: Okay, so that was when it was U-High?

Eric: Right. U High, yes.

Joyce: It was campus school.

Cassie: Well, campus school was the grade school, right?

Eric: Yes, U High was the highschool.

Cassie: Are both of you from the Kalamazoo area? You were born here?

Joyce: No, I was born in Georgia. My dad was in the military as a flight instructor, and then we moved up here because my aunts lived here, and we lived with my aunts.

Eric: He's a pilot?

Joyce: Yeah.

Eric: I didn't know that.

Joyce: Yeah, he was an instructor in the war, and that's why we moved all over Florida and Georgia, and then he worked in Chicago. Thank goodness, because he was only home on weekends, and even that was too many days.

Eric: You may hear more than you want to hear. (all laugh)

Cassie: It's okay, I like it. I had somebody yesterday sing the entire fight song for state high.

Eric & Joyce: *(sings some lines from the fight song)*—

Eric: Something like that

Joyce: I don't know, that's enough.

Cassie: So, reflecting back on your time at campus school and U High, how would you summarize your experience at the school?

Eric: I guess we'd had absolutely fantastic teachers, except for Elsie. She might have been a good teacher, I don't know, but she sure was harder on us. But Ms. McGowan was third grade, Ms. Schimmel was 4th grade, Ms. Chait—

Joyce: I thought Mr. Hoffman was 5th.

Eric: Mr. Hoffman was 5th, yep. And I think Ms. Chait, was sixth or middle school.

Joyce: I don't remember.

Eric: They seemed to really... they were teaching because they wanted to teach, not because they needed a job.

Joyce: Or the money.

Eric: Or the money, yeah. Right. Eunice Kraft, I did her tax returns for a couple of years when we lived in Sturgis. She was pushing 100 years old. She was still just as sharp as a tack. She lived in the house in which she had been born. And they all had their idiosyncrasies. I think we had fun as a group of kids.

Joyce: That's why I graduated at the bottom of the class. (all laugh) Because I had lots of fun. And I liked having a small group of the same kids, however, looking back on it, we had ten national merit scholars in our graduating class. And so, in high school, I just really didn't spend any time on the books, and I thought why bother when there's all these—

Eric: All these brainy people.

Joyce: They're really brainy people.

Eric: They would not send out a class standing to colleges to which you've applied. They wouldn't send out information like that without an explanation of the school itself. Because I was in the bottom third, but I got accepted to Michigan Tech as a math major and was there for three years. Then I went to Western for two years to get a bachelor's in business and a master's in business administration at Michigan. So, I couldn't have been in the bottom third of the whole world.

Joyce: Yeah, and I don't think I could have even got into Western with my grades and my average...

Eric: So, what'd you do?

Joyce: I went to a private women's Christian College in Columbia, Missouri to get away from home, and my father, and got on the dean's list the first semester.

Eric: Show off.

Joyce: We had to be in our rooms at 8 PM and we had room check, and there were specific areas in Columbia, Missouri that we could not go to. And I think we got to stay out till 11, maybe, on Friday, and so the structure was good. And then I realized I wasn't as stupid as I thought I was.

Cassie: Do you remember anything else about the student body here, and what that was like, what the culture was like at the school?

Eric: We went to school with some, I'm trying not to use names. Kids from families, which were extremely—

Joyce: Well-taken care of.

Eric: Well-taken care of, yeah.

Cassie: Yes, I've heard people have said there's faculty brats. Then there were like doctor and lawyer brats, and then, yeah...

Eric: I think, as I understood it at the time, it was because of limited enrollment. The first people were the offspring of faculty and staff at Western. The next were siblings and heirs of people who had gone to the campus school—

Joyce: Or donated money.

Eric: Or donated money, yeah. And then, we always kind of thought that the next choice went to the football coach, the golf coach, and the tennis coach, and then everyone else. But there were people who, in today's world, would obviously be billionaires or the kids of those people. But I don't think we ever really knew it at the time. I don't think I was aware that some of those fellow students could buy and sell the whole university. Did you? (to Joyce)

Joyce: No, I didn't even think about that. I just remember it was doctors and lawyers, and a lot of—

Eric: Business owners

Joyce: Business owners, judges... But I remember hearing that people put the application in for their children to come here when they were born. I don't know if that's true, but...

Eric: Really?

Joyce: But people wanted their kids to come here so much that they put their names in early. Real early. But I don't see it as the kids of the doctors and the lawyers as being brats. I mean, Tom Cooper had six kids in his family just like Eric's and his parents were the most wonderful people I've ever met.

Eric: Kalamazoo was lucky in the way that people like Parfets, and Strykers, and Upjohns, and Gilmores have all contributed to the... to the city in ways that only they can because the rest of us don't have that wherewithal.

Joyce: But I didn't feel like they separated themselves—

Eric: No—

Joyce: Or felt like they were better than anybody else at all.

Eric: No.

Joyce: I mean, the Coopers would have had someone from the other side of the tracks, as my dad would say. They wouldn't care who it was; they were just real open. A lot of people had siblings that went here, like my brother went here three years before I did. He was in Eric's oldest brother's class and he was a good student with all A's. And then when I came along, the expectation was that I was Bob's sister and would be a good student. Well, then they found out the truth.

Eric: Did Ginny tell you the story about she and dad?

Cassie: Oh, at like the parent teacher conference?

Eric: Yes.

Cassie: Yes yeah. And how... as she told it was, I forget who the teacher was...

Eric: Willy Sack, speech teacher.

Cassie: And then he said, well Virginia is great and nothing like...

Eric: We didn't have any troubles with Virginia, like we did with Wally.

Cassie: Yeah, exactly.

Eric: And he said (stern voice) "Mr. Sack, we don't make comparisons between our children like that." And I think Mr. Sack got the idea that that meant he didn't either.

Joyce: Your dad said that?

Eric: Yeah.

Joyce: Oh!

Eric: Yeah, when he got put off, he got put off. But yeah, my older brother, I'm not altogether sure that my father or some of my uncles didn't have the same Latin teacher I did. They might have had her in their college career instead of their high school career.

Joyce: Ms. Giedeman?

Eric: No.

Joyce: Kraft.

Eric: Mrs. Kraft.

Joyce: Okay.

Eric: But yeah, my older brother went, my older sister went, and my younger brother went. Then they figured the only way they could get rid of the cancer was to close the school. So, well, there were two more at home and they didn't know what was coming down the road eventually.

Joyce: Yeah.

Cassie: So, what did a typical day look like either at campus school or U-High? I know you said you got in a bit of trouble while you were here (to Joyce).

Eric: In school though? Not really in school, you didn't get in trouble.

Joyce: Oh yes, Bob Slemmons, Jack Simpson, and I were always talking in class. I remember Mr. Deur, the science teacher, saying to me when we were fooling around in class, talking and passing notes: "Ms. Tracy, would you like to wait in the hall for a while?" Yeah, otherwise... typical day...?

Eric: I never really thought of any of them as a real strict disciplinarian, but I think we understood that we weren't supposed to be screwing around.

Joyce: I must not have gotten that memo.

Eric: You missed that day... (all laugh) Ms. Schimmel was our fourth-grade teacher and...

Joyce: She was structured.

Eric: She was. Ethel Schimmel could walk up to a chalkboard with a piece of chalk in one hand and a piece of chalk in the other hand. She would write 'Ethel Schimmel' forwards while simultaneously writing 'Ethel Schimmel' backwards. I never even tried to figure out how she could do that.

But I was, apparently, sometimes disruptive in class too. She walked up to my desk from behind me and picked up my ruler and whopped it across the back of my head and broke the ruler in two, telling me to behave myself. She felt so guilty that she gave me a quarter to go to the co-op right out here and buy a new ruler. The ruler was only 16 cents and she told me I could keep the rest and buy a candy bar.

And she took me to a play at the Junior Civic that Suki Carrell was in.

Joyce: Wow.

Eric: Because she knew I had a crush on Suki. Suki was an adorable little girl. So, she took me to go see Suki in the play. And I said, how can you get mad at her just because she breaks the ruler over your deserving head?

Joyce: Suki was one of those perfect students, like my brother. I remember in the third grade when we were learning penmanship and cursive, her letters were always perfect, and she always had all the flags and stars across her desk. You know, we got stickers.

But I think you're right. I think the teachers... when I look at my grandkids in school today... the teachers cared about us learning something.

Eric: Yes.

Joyce: They cared about us becoming well rounded.

Eric: Some of the high school teachers were Mr. Engels and Mr. Duer. I am trying to think about some of the math teachers.

Joyce: Yeah, and a lot of them did extra things outside too.

Eric: Who was the one that taught government?

Joyce: Walters. Was it Walters?

Eric: I don't think he taught a class, did he? Maybe he did.

Joyce: And I think it was Mr. Duer that took us on some trips; out of state trips. Because we went to Maine, yeah.

Eric: He was biology, right?

Joyce: Yeah.

Eric: Rashlayn taught chemistry and I never liked chemistry, but it wasn't his fault. I didn't like it.

Joyce: Yeah. And I felt like the counselors were always available too. Of course I did spend some time there...

Eric: Who was the seventh grade teacher who gave us math homework a week ahead of time?

Joyce: I don't know.

Eric: Yeah, you do!

Joyce: You're expecting me to remember that?

Eric: Yeah, you're too young to keep claiming memory failure. (all laugh)

My seventh-grade math teacher would give us a week's worth of math homework to do that was due on Friday. She gave it to us on Monday. I don't know, someday I'll remember her name and I'll shout it out. But I did not do a good job scheduling a week's worth of work. On Thursday night I realized I hadn't done any of it. Yeah, on Friday morning I bet you a third of

the semester I was sick. (weak voice) "Mom, I don't feel good." But I don't think she ever cured me of doing the whole week ahead of time.

Joyce: But when I compare it again with my grandkids in schools today, elementary, middle school, and high school now, I mean these kids go to school petrified of being there just because of fights that break out and drugs being done. We never had a police officer in the school, and I was never concerned about safety at all.

Eric: My little sisters ended up going to Loy Norrix because U-High had closed. And one of them came home from school once and told my mother, "I saw Mr. Spencer in school today." She said, "Really? What was he doing there?" and my sister told her: "There was a fight or something in the bathroom and one of the girls got stabbed." And my mother said, "Wait a minute. That never happened at U-High." And Chuck was one of my classmates.

Joyce: The officer's son.

Eric: He might have a different memory why he was at Norrix.

Joyce: I don't know, I felt like the school was like family really.

Eric: Yeah, well, it was safe. For you it was safe.

Joyce: Yeah.

Eric: I had too many sisters and brothers there to really be safe. And we have a little different perspective, because we all grew up together before we ever got to high school. I think that was good for us overall. Larry Moore came in, in high school.

Joyce: Lynn came in.

Eric: Who?

Joyce: Lynn Harrison.

Eric: Lynn Harrison, well, that was a good addition. Tom came in, in high school, didn't he?

Joyce: I can't recall. Pretty soon, nobody will remember anything. You wait another ten years.

Eric: That's why she's (referring to Cassie) doing this (all laugh).

Cassie: Exactly.

Joyce: That's why she's doing it now.

Eric: Yeah.

Cassie: Well, do you guys remember anything about the buildings at all?

Eric: They were a lot nicer than this piece of junk (all laugh). Yeah, the rotunda was neat.

Joyce: What do you call that, the track, and the gym?

Eric: No, over in the elementary school. Kindergarten, first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, yeah. And we would have a Christmas pageant, I guess it was, that now you couldn't do it because it's too secular.

Joyce: Too many people would get offended?

Eric: Yeah, and that was done there. There was a May Festival that was done there. That was kind of a gathering place for the whole elementary school. The cracker box gym was downstairs. It was probably about half the size of a basketball court, wouldn't you say?

Joyce: Probably, yeah.

Eric: But they tried to teach us, one of the things they tried to teach us was square dancing. That probably worked better for some than others. But it was our gym. Down in the center of the building was the big gym, the high school gym and that had a track around it—

Joyce: Yeah, that's what I remember.

Eric: It had a swimming pool under it, it had ropes that they hung from the ceiling and you were supposed to be able to climb the ropes. I couldn't climb those ropes.

Joyce: Yeah.

Eric: I can remember off that track there were two offices in the middle of it. One was for the ladies' athletic department and the other was for the guys. So, they had gym teachers and coaches and stuff over there and the same over here.

Cassie: During your time, either at the grade school or the high school here, what event or what person do you think impacted you the most during your time?

Eric: My goodness.

Joyce: Ms. Stinson, my kindergarten teacher. I mean, I still remember her vividly. I remember specific things that she did with us. We had plays. We had... the whole back room had just big wooden box cars that were like a train.

Is that where we dissected the mole? That wasn't in kindergarten, that was probably later. We put it out on the ledge and froze it, and then we dissected it.

Eric: Really?

Joyce: I think that was you and me. I think you helped me with that.

Eric: I probably didn't admit it.

Joyce: And I remember her vividly. I remember her never raising her voice if a child did something not appropriate. I mean, she was just so calm and so into teaching. She used a

whole lot of different methods to teach too. She used a lot of hands-on things, not like the academics today which I've volunteered in the schools. And I mean, these poor kids in kindergarten are expected to do structured writing—

Eric: And I think she loved children.

Joyce: Yeah.

Eric: At least five-year old children.

Joyce: Yeah, I, mean she's the one I remember the most. What about you?

Eric: The one I remember the most... although I can't remember her name was the seventh-grade teacher.

Joyce: Ms. Gish?

Eric: Was that Gish? With the element notebook?

Joyce: I think so.

Eric: Yeah, okay. And not necessarily because she was my favorite, but it was—I don't know what it was. Just because I had to start thinking—in theory, start scheduling some time, and learning this, and learning that.

I think probably the one that had the most effect on me at that time was Mr. Schannhals—

Joyce: The shop teacher.

Eric: The shop teacher in middle school was Mr. Schannhals. We had a third of a year of shop, a third of a year of art, and a third of the year of home ec. Shop was kind of fun. But Mr. Schannhals found out that I was planning on going to Michigan Tech. And he said: "I think it would be helpful for you if you had a drafting class or engineering graphics class" is what they call it, but in high school it was called drafting.

And so, he set me up with a class and I was the only student, he was the only teacher. It was done during social hours or individual study, and I just went as fast or slow as I needed to. He got me through the whole thing, and I got up to Michigan Tech.

And sure enough, I had an engineering graphics class. I don't know why as a math major, except that it was an engineering school, and you were going to take engineering mathematics too. And it was a whole lot easier.—

Joyce: He had already taught you the basics.

Eric: He's already taught me the basics, yeah. I thought that was above and beyond the requirement of a high school teacher, doing all that for one kid. Because I didn't show any

real prowess for anything shop-wise I don't think. But I appreciated that for eons. I should tell Carol Lou that. Carol Lou?

Joyce: Carol, I don't know.

Eric: I don't know either.

Joyce: His daughter was in our class.

Cassie: Okay.

Eric: And his son was in my brother's lab class.

Joyce: And the mother did Girl Scouts.

Eric: I didn't know that until today when I saw the book.

Cassie: Yeah, wow.

Cassie: Okay, well, that was all the questions that I had. So, thank you very much for—

Eric: Oh, we're not done yet.

Joyce: Yes, we are.

Eric: Ginny didn't warn you, did she?

Joyce: No. Have a good rest of your day. Thank you. (all laugh)

Cassie: Thank you. And this was Cassie Kotrch on Saturday, July 30th around 11 AM to 11:30 with Eric Kent and Joyce Harger.