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Bob Kent and the Shenanigans of "Not So Perfect" Kids

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U High Alum Bob Kent

Friday, Sept. 2 at 2:34 PM

At Heritage Hall in the Kocher Conference Room

Cassie: Okay, today is Friday, September 2nd. It is 02:34 PM. This is Cassie Kotrch interviewing with Bob Kent. So I'll start by saying, obviously you went to U High, correct? With all of your siblings... or was it State High at the time that you were there?

Bob: It was U High when I was there.

Cassie: Okay, and did you go to campus school before that as well?

Bob: I did.

Cassie: Okay, were you there from kindergarten through graduating?

Bob: I was in East Hall from kindergarten through my senior year at Western.

Cassie: Wow, okay. So you have-

Bob: Because the business school was in the building for accounting.

Cassie: Right.

Bob: Yeah.

Cassie: And North Hall, correct? So that's where the business library was for a bit.

Bob: Yes, yes.

Cassie: Okay, so that's a lot of years to be associated with East Campus. Reflecting back on your time on East Campus, how would you summarize it and how would you summarize East Campus?

Bob: Well, I'll give you some background first. My father and my two uncles attended the campus school. My father was born in 1916, so it would have started in about 1921. And one older brother and one younger brother. They did not graduate from whatever it was called at that time.

They graduated from Kalamazoo Central, probably because that was about the time, I think, that my grandfather went to work for the Kalamazoo Public Schools. So there's family history there. My father graduated from Western in 1937, so he would have been in the East Hall. My mother, who was originally from Iron River in Iron County in the UP, graduated in 1937 from Western. My dad's brother, my uncle, Richard, graduated probably in 1939. And my mother's sister Doris, also from Iron River, graduated in '38 or '39.

Cassie: Wow.

Bob: So, we had some time here and then my oldest brother would have started in kindergarten in about 1946. They still had the trolley at the time. There's some question as to whether or not that's what he spent his lunch money on. We're not sure.

Cassie: And which brother was this? What was his name?

Bob: The oldest one is Wally, Wallace.

Cassie: Wally, okay. Yeah, I've heard a few stories about Wally.

Bob: I'm sure. (Both laugh)

Cassie: Yeah, so it sounds like it was almost a sure thing that you were going to go to these schools.

Bob: I think so. And I'm one of six, and all six of us started in kindergarten there. My two younger sisters, because of the closure, graduated from Loy Norrix, and the youngest went to South Junior High because of the closure. But we spent a lot of years here.



Cassie: Wow, and how would you summarize that experience going to school here, all those years and with all of your siblings?

Bob: We had a great time, and it provided us with a very, very good background. This was not a very diverse school. I don't know what you've heard before, but roughly half of the students, for example, in high school are from the community, and a lot of it was second generation. If you look through the list that you can get from John Gowdy's study of the school, I don't know if you've seen that, but he's got a list of all the graduates of the school. It was for a master's or a doctorate, and I think they have it in the Zhang collection. And that goes back to the beginning of the school.

And then the other half, a lot of the students, their parents were faculty or administrators at the university. In talking to, for example, my brother, when we were talking about some of the buildings on campus, Beth Stinson of Stinson Hall was our kindergarten teacher. Schneider Hall, Joel was in my brother's class, and Pam was in my class. George Kohrman was in my brother's class. Polly Lawson of Lawson Ice Arena was in his class. We could find others in other classes. These were real people to us. These were not just names of halls.

Cassie: Right, yeah.

Bob: And virtually everybody went on to college, which is not normal either, in terms of in general, as far as high school education. So it was very different from that standpoint. High expectations. There was the understanding that we didn't have to be here from either side. We could choose to leave, or they could choose to say, it's not a very good fit. Now, that didn't happen, but... So, it was an unusual group of people. And if you look at the people from the community, the parents were... well, like Bill Parfet was a year ahead of me, Sally was a year behind me, and Don was a couple of years after that, and Ian was after that. Upjohn Company. Carol Boudeman was in my class, Marty was in my brother's class, and Woody was a little older, Mary Jane was in between. And also you had owners of local businesses. Hammond Machinery, Shepherd Fuel. Woodruff... was Woodruff Coal and it's now Woodruff Fuel. That's not typical in most schools.

So, that was different. And a high level of achievement by the parents. For instance, both my mother and father were college graduates. My dad was an attorney. My mother taught until she started the family. That's not true with all parents now. And my wife has worked in a high school and in a middle school, and we've talked about that on occasion. Much different than the experience of most students.

Cassie: Right, yeah, and I had another question, too, while we're going back a little bit. You said that you and all of your siblings started kindergarten here and that your parents and aunts and uncles and such had connections to East Campus as well, or WMU. So what was your earliest memory of East Campus? Do you remember?

Bob: Probably when I started kindergarten.

Cassie: Okay.

Bob: Although there may have been occasions when we were up here because of older siblings, but, I'm old, so I don't remember everything anymore either. And you don't have the advantage of seeing, other than maybe in photographs, what it was like.

The elementary was separate at the south end. And my understanding is that the rotunda was there. It was designed that way for educational purposes. That would be a mix of the classes. So you had on the first floor was K-3. And if the building had not been changed the way it is now, if that was still there, you might find what we found, like on the first floor, because of the age of the students, the toilets were not very far off the floor.

Cassie: Yeah.

Bob: I don't know where the teachers went. And then on the second floor, actually, between first and second grade, there was little stage, but behind that was a room which was used for a break area, where I probably fell asleep with everybody else, and that would be typically first or second grade.

And the nurse's office was on that floor. Second floor was four, five and six. Fourth grade teacher was Ms. Shimmel, who I think had all of us, as did Ms. McGowen and third grade and Ms. Stinson kindergarten. But I think my mother may have had Ms. Shimmel in college.

Cassie: Wow.

Bob: Because the teachers were part of the university. But that second floor was four, five, six, and there was a room between five and six similar to one and two. The art room, the music room, the basement had the cafeteria and there was a gym, which we called the cracker box gym, which you've probably heard of.

There was a room just beyond that, kind of in the corner, which was a projection room. So we could go down for movies if they wanted to show film or whatever for a class that was available. And the nursery school was also down there, and the PE teacher's office was down there.

So the building was designed that way. And during the day we could see siblings. They might be upstairs or downstairs or whatever. And there were times when we had a classmate who had a vision problem, and if he broke his glasses on the playground, they could go get his brother and say, "Alan, Jeff needs you, because he's broken his glasses" or whatever.

But also you didn't feel so alone. I remember one student in kindergarten that just cried his eyes out when he started kindergarten, when his mother left him. And in our case, all we had to do was say, hi, I'm down here, because there were so many of us, and that was true with several of the families. Families were bigger than now.

Cassie: Right. Do you remember anything else about the buildings at your time in grade school or at U High?

Bob: There was the connection between the two, which was the office, and the principal's office was above that. And then in this building, we were on the, if you want to call it, basement level, the lower level and the top floor.

But this floor was college. And then the gym was at the north end. If we needed to get to the gym, we had to go upstairs and around the track and down the stairs because we did not go through the college end of it. Right about here is where the college bookstore was. Across the hall was the teacher's lounge. You could usually tell who was in there when the door opened and the cloud of smoke came out. So we were kind of in the building... we were in two thirds of the building, but we were not on this floor.

I don't know if anybody has mentioned to you the hall monitors. So, there was one who sat right at the base of the stairs on this floor, one downstairs and one upstairs. So if you needed... from the study hall, which was roughly above us facing out, and had probably held 60 kids, if you needed to go to the bathroom, you'd get a hall permit. You'd show it to the person in the hall upstairs, and you'd come down here because the boys room was downstairs.

Cassie: Wow.

Bob: And the girls restroom was upstairs. So, this building also had the junior high, which was at this end of this building. Across the hall from that was the library, the classrooms, and then downstairs was classrooms.

The windows in the building originally were double hung, and there were occasions when somebody might go out the window during a class if the teacher had left the room in the room at the far south end, at the end of the hall, there was a storage room and our junior English teacher got called out of the room, and somebody says, "Well, let's all get into that little storage room." And she came back and wondered where her class was. We were not perfect children.

Our science classes were in West Hall on the third floor. And so we had chemistry and physics and physical science there. And the lower part of that building was the wood and metal shop, which has disappeared from a lot of schools now. But because it was part of the university, it was very, very well equipped.

And you may have heard this, there was tunnel between the two, and if you came out at the other end of it in West Hall, you might find a shelf with specimens and formaldehyde, for example, which were part of the university.

Cassie: Yeah, I was just about to ask if you ever took that tunnel ever.

Bob: No, I would never do that.

Cassie: No?

Bob: And that was primarily for the steam pipes, as far as I know, because everything was steam heat. In the spring, you'd hear the clang, clang, clang of the radiators, and you'd have to wait for that or occasionally, if the windows were up, a train would go by, and they'd have to... it's like having a train go by at Waldo Stadium. You just kind of can't hear anything until they're done. And that was true even when I was here for college classes.

So, we had West Hall. We were in East Hall. If we had school assemblies, we went to the Little Theater, which I think now is Esports.

Cassie: Yes, it is.

Bob: We were not supposed to use Walwood Union. That was the student union when my folks were in school and before Bernard center was open, but we weren't college students, so there were limitations. Now, there were some people who might have gone over there. There was a story that the basketball coach went over and walked in with... some of the guys were over there and noticed that the little cartons of milk he said he'd never seen so many cartons of milk with smoke coming out of them in his whole life, because that's where they quickly ditch their cigarettes. But as I said, we were not perfect students.

So we had this building with West Hall during high school or before. We did not use North Hall to my recollection at all and then there was the Little Theater and very rarely perhaps used Walwood.

Cassie: Right.

Bob: And they did a really nice job with the restoration of Walwood.

Cassie: Yeah but then once you got into your undergrad, then you started to go into North Hall, right?

Bob: Yes.

Cassie: Okay.

Bob: But I don't know if you're familiar with dual enrollment?

Cassie: I am, yes.

Bob: When my son was in high school, he took vector and multivariate analysis I think, which is calc three.

Cassie: Mm-hm.

Bob: High school junior, he took on the west campus.

Cassie: Okay.

Bob: He got trucked in from Richland and my younger son is a graduate of Western.

Cassie: Uh-huh.

Bob: So it carried through.

Cassie: Yeah.

Bob: But my sister took I think at least French three, which would have been on the other campus at that point. So she took the shuttle bus.

Cassie: Right.

Bob: Which you may have heard of

Cassie: Mm-hm.

Bob: And it would have been Eddie driving it and Eddie's Lane. And so she rode that as a high school student in order to take French. It was like dual enrollment but not quite the same because of the relationship between the high school and the university.

Cassie: Right.

Bob: So we did get over on occasion. I didn't do any classes like that but they were available to some that worked a little harder at high school than I did.

Cassie: Okay. So we talked a little bit about the buildings but I wanted to ask if you remember anything about any teachers or faculty during your time here. Whether it be at campus school, U High, or WMU.

Bob: The campus school Ms. Shimmel or Ms. Stinson had been around for a long time. In kindergarten we all had her. She was terrific. Mrs. Walker was my first grade teacher until it became Mrs. Bosma but that's the same person. She remarried. Ms Thomas for second grade, Ms McGowan for third grade. Ms Shimmel had an interesting way of teaching writing cursive which they don't do anymore. She had a device that held chalk and so she would put lines on the board.

Cassie: Right.

Bob: But she was ambidextrous in cursive, so she could do it either left handed or right handed.

Cassie: Wow.

Bob: Which was really interesting. You think back she was pretty good. Fifth grade changed and then Mr. Christensen, then Ms. Gish had been here a long time for seventh grade. High expectations, she was big on intellectual curiosity. Mrs. Monroe taught Spanish and French. I took Spanish. She would have, each week, a Spanish day and if you spoke English you had to pay a fine, like a nickel or whatever. So she came into class one day and started Spanish class in French so we made sure she paid the fine.

Mr. Fox in history was particularly good. They changed English teachers when I was a junior and it was Ms. Williams who had retired from Kalamazoo Public Schools and had taught at Kalamazoo Central. By that time I think they were beginning to see that the school might very well close. My understanding is Dr. Miller, the auditorium president...

Cassie: Yeah.

Bob: Had come from the budget side and had trouble justifying what it cost for 350 high school students. Because they were no longer able to train as many student teachers as they had. But if you look- student teachers taught in a lot of different places. I think they had an agreement in Paw Paw, for instance. And Mr. Weber taught math for a long time. He had been principal at Richland High School and then came with the university. But they were all basically university people, so all very qualified.

Cassie: Yeah.

Bob: And again, the expectations were that we would do the work and progress from there.

Cassie: Yeah, so we have about 20 minutes left, so we still have time. But I did have another question that I wanted to make sure I got in. What did a typical day look like for you at the school? Whether it be campus school or U High, did you have any favorite pastimes or any memories that stick out?

Bob: The high school day ran from 8:10 to 3:10.

Cassie: Mm-hm.

Bob: I asked a question of a board member at the Gull Lake schools why school was getting out and starting earlier and earlier because they were talking about a zero hour at 6:45 and our kids were involved in that kind of thing. Then they'd be done at 2:30. And they said, "Well, we have classes later than any other of the schools in the Wolverine Conference." So I said "So, it's being driven by sports?" And he had this look on his face like, "maybe a little". So if we had a game on a Friday in South Haven, teams might leave a little early.

But there were standard, probably 50 minutes classes. And there'd be enough time to get from upstairs to downstairs with time for a bathroom or whatever. Then the lunch, they'd have the elementary at one time for the lunch and the junior high and then the high school. Or you could bring your own or whatever. We really didn't have a lot of time to leave the campus for very long at lunchtime. So it was kind of an open campus but not really because there wasn't time for that.

So a typical day was class, maybe a study hall which would be with 60 people in it, maybe, which was just... there was a desk up in front for whoever gave out the hall passes and students and the chairs with the writing surface with a few for the lefties.

There was I don't know, somebody may have mentioned that the building was relatively easy to get into. If you went to the north end there was a ledge around and I don't know if there were any locks on the windows or not but they could be pushed up. And there were times when somebody might come into the building on a weekend and move all the chairs out of the study hall. And stack them, like in the women's room.

Cassie: Oh wow.

Bob: And then Monday morning people would show, where are the chairs? It wasn't destructive in any way. It was just-

Cassie: Right.

Bob: High school hijinks kind of thing. I've heard that that got done. You'd have to verify that with other people.

Cassie: Okay. So you weren't involved in the hijinks?

Bob: I've heard that it happened.

Cassie: Okay (laughs).

Bob: But it was that kind of thing. Now, for gym class, we had to go down on the field if the weather was okay, which Western eventually used for practice for football to some extent, and there were some tennis courts down there as well. So it was an old building, but it had everything we needed and of course, this is before the technology in order to have retrofitted this building for Internet and all that would have been horribly expensive, just incredibly.

But a typical day was: you go to class or you go to a study hall, or you might have band or choir or whatever, some of those things in there. And the same thing pretty much with the elementary except you didn't change rooms, you had the same teacher, which would still be typical today.

Cassie: Right.

Bob: So it's not unlike, probably what you went through, except when we went from elementary to junior high, we just took a different set of stairs. My kids went to Richmond elementary and then they went to the middle school, on 40th street in Richland and then they came back.

They went to the intermediate school in the village, and then they went on to 40th street for middle school and then they came back for high school. So they were in the same square mile except for seventh and eighth grade, we were in the same building. So in my case, going off to college was just being allowed to be in a different hallway, and we parked down on Davis Street.

Never did register the car, which I probably couldn't get away with now, but I did the same thing in Michigan State when I was there. But a typical day was not dissimilar from what you had probably except might have to pay a fine for speaking English in Spanish class.

Cassie: Yeah, or having a teacher that can write cursive with both hands, I guess.

Bob: Not everybody could do that.

Cassie: No, I know I couldn't with both hands, no. So do you have any recollections about any events that happened while you were at school here? So any, like, dances or sporting events that stuck out to you, anything like that?

Bob: The dances typically were in the gym which worked out fine. And there's not much you can do to really decorate a gym, so it's other than a gym. And for the most part, functions were to be on campus, so for example, when I was in high school, the prom was over at Bernhard Center, as was our graduation.

Now, that changed for the last, I think, in 1966, the year after I graduated, I think they were allowed to go off campus for the prom for example, but I'm not sure of that. We played in the Wolverine conference for a long time with a very good football coach Roy Walters, who had been a record setter in track at Mankato State.

He was a fun guy as well, but could be demanding, he had some really good teams. Basketball was Barney Chance, and I went to school, kindergarten through my senior year in high school with Greg Chance, his son. And then after I graduated from Western, I went to Michigan State and Greg was still there, so we ended up sharing an apartment.

It was unusual for the basketball team because they played at Reed Field House. At one time they played at the Oakland gym and then when the Field house, and I think maybe Buck Reed coached here early on in his association with the university, I don't know that but that was unusual.

That would be unusual, and the opponents would find it unusual because that was a pretty good sized facility compared to most high schools. The football games were at Angel Field, part of K college, so we were kind of here and there. I do remember one high school football game against Portage, which was much smaller at that time, it was an agricultural area for the most part.

We were behind 19 to 13, I probably was a sophomore and Portage was kind of backed up deep in their own area and they were gonna try and punt out with, I don't know, two or three minutes left. And the punt got blocked and we ended up scoring a touchdown and the extra point and we won 20 to 19, that's my recollection of it.

That's only 60 years ago, so it may be off a little bit, but Roy Walters, the coach at the time, said if it had been his call, he would have said run into the end zone and take a safety. So it would be 19 to 15, and then use the free kick and you might still win it.

The smaller sports, tennis and golf in particular, we played up a level or two and did very well even on the state basis, we had some really good golfers. Rob Hammond was in my class, Jeff Blankenhorn went from here to Stanford and I think played golf out there.

Carl Engels was the coach of the tennis team and he did a great job. He was a chemistry teacher that was over in West Hall and it was kind of tiered and we were supposed to be reading the equation, so it would say whatever the letters and numbers are plus whatever plus H₂O equals this.

And one of the guys got stuck on H₂O and the person behind him whispered dihydrogen oxide, so he read it as this plus dihydrogen oxide equals whatever. Mr.Engel said, "Well, I guess, but that's what we usually refer to as water, John."

Okay, so we had a student teacher, we were not nice to student teachers in some ways. I have a friend who ended up being an industrialist. He became president of Interco which made benches and that kind of thing for gymnasiums and bleachers. He student-taught history and when he left he said "no, I don't think so." We had a teacher in physical science that said it's "93 million miles to the sun" from the back of the room, "Is that statute miles or nautical miles?" And she made the mistake of saying "I don't know" instead of "Well, what do you think or how would you find out?" Those are the things you learn as a student teacher but I think she was almost in tears.

So we had a lot of student teachers which was not unusual. Some were good, some were not. The student teacher I had for... I took typing as a senior, which I used a lot as a student. Beyond that, and I still use my keyboarding cause I do a little bit of writing. I just submitted something yesterday. Anyway, the student teacher in typing had been my sister's maid of honor, so it was difficult to call her Miss DeGrick instead of "hey, Susie." But that's what you run into because of the age difference in the family relationships and that kind of thing.

Cassie: Right, so I just have one more question to ask you, reflecting a little bit, how do you feel about the campus school or U High, now versus how you felt about it then when you were going to school?

Bob: Never having gone anywhere else, I don't have anything to compare it to. I know the experience that my kids have had, which is not necessarily typical because they were in the same school district throughout their pre baccalaureate education, through high school. They were all at Gull Lake, and they've done very well.

There was not a lot of turnover with the students. We came in with roughly 30 in kindergarten, roughly 30 more in junior high, and roughly 30 more in high school. But there's still a fair number of the folks that I went to kindergarten with through my senior year who are still around and we still see each other, or I knew other folks end up knowing a lot of the people in town, but that's because they weren't coming and going.

We had a couple of people that we had one in second grade, I think the parent took a job at Dow Chemicals, so they moved to Midland. But for the most part, these were families who... our family, my son is proud of the fact that he's fifth generation Kalamazoo County.

These were old established families and people who were with the university, stayed with the university. So, there are a lot of connections there that might not happen if you move around. We had good teachers, I think I was prepared for college and beyond that. But mostly, it's the lifelong friends and... like, I talked to Mike, Mike Lowe, who was from kindergarten. His mother was one of our Cub Scout leaders and used to sit with her in church out in Richmond. And knowing the parents as well.

Cassie: Right.

Bob: Or the kids and their siblings.

Cassie: Right, it's very interconnected.

Bob: My brother Eric had classmate Mike Kimberlyn. Well, his brother Jim was in Wally's class, which was '59. And Jim went on to become, he was in Wisconsin. Last I knew, he was in the paper industry, but he was a Big Ten referee for football and worked Rose Bowls and that kind of thing. And you'd see him on TV and say, "There's Jim!" which is a little unusual.

But I was sorry that my two sisters could not have completed the journey, but in my youngest sister's case, she ended up being Phi Beta Kappa biochemistry. So, she did okay,

that kind of thing. The other one's an artist and paints. For the most part, the memories are good, but on the other hand, you weed out some of the bad after all these years.

Cassie: Right.

Bob: You're close to 3:50. One more question?

Cassie: Got it. Yeah, do you have any other memories that you'd like to share? Maybe topics that I didn't touch on that you thought of?

Bob: I'd have to reflect on that. Nothing comes to mind immediately, but I'm probably a little bit like Mike Lowe. You wind him up and he'll say, "Well, we're gonna have to make another appointment..." The other thing is that if you get us in a group, we'll say, "Do you remember when?..."

Cassie: Right. Yep, your brother actually did that. Eric sat in with somebody else and they did it together and so they were able to-

Bob: With Joyce?

Cassie: Yep!

Bob: I don't know if you're familiar with Nipper Dog or if you've heard of the... it was the RCA dog. Well, the Humane Society had a six foot plaster Nipper Dog, and somebody from the high school borrowed it and took it to a party and then left it actually out at Winchell School with a note that says, "We didn't steal it, we just borrowed it, class of 1965."

Well, the police were all here the next day, and I don't think they ever knew for sure who did it, I hope, but typical high school kids. But, we didn't have some of the same pressures that the kids have today. And my kids are a little bit older.

I'm glad they're not in school now, but I get up every day. Glad I don't have to go to school so.

Cassie: Yeah. (Both laugh) Okay, well, this was great talking to you. Thank you so much for agreeing to talk to me today!