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## Steve Abid in the Fight Against Landlords and Parking and Becoming a Teacher

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WMU Alum Steve Abid

Friday, Jan. 20th 3:05 PM

At the Zhang Legacy and Collection Center

**Cassie:** Okay, today is Friday, January 20th, at 3:05 PM, this is Cassie Kotrch here with Steve Abid. Is that how you pronounce your last name or is it Abid?

**Steve:** It's A-bid.

**Cassie:** Abid, okay, okay.

**Steve:** Yeah.

**Cassie:** Okay, and then if you could just introduce yourself and spell your last name, then your connection to WMU, that'd be great.

**Steve:** Okay, my name is Steve Abid, A-B-I-D. And I came to Western Michigan in the fall of 1974. I transferred as a sophomore from Grand Rapids Junior College and came here for the last three years of my bachelor's degree and then later completed a master's through Western as well.

So I lived in the Valley, my first year in Stinson Hall. And then we rented a house, my three roommates, or suitemates, and then we had six altogether, so two other guys. And that house was on Cedar Street, which is just down the hill from the East Campus, or it was at the time. So that's when I first started and started on a route toward becoming a high school teacher.

**Cassie:** Okay, I'm just going to move this a little bit closer. So we already discussed this a little bit, but are you from the Kalamazoo area?

**Steve:** No, I grew up in Grand Rapids. My dad had gone to Western Michigan College, I think it was called, back when he was here. And I knew about WMU, both of my dad's brothers, one older, one younger, came here as well, so there was a sort of a family connection. I will be honest and say it was not my first choice.

**Cassie:** Yeah. (Laughs)



**Steve:** I was accepted to a couple of other schools that I really wanted to go to. But my dad was indicating that I would go to junior college first and save money, and then I could go wherever I wanted. And I said I was paying my own way. And he said, "Yeah, I know you're paying your own way, but this is how you're gonna do it." And I don't know how many World War II dads you get to talk to, but if you have a dad that took on Hitler, you're not gonna win very many arguments.

**Cassie:** Yeah. (Both laugh)

**Steve:** They singlehandedly won World War II all by themselves. So I did that, I went to Grand Rapids Junior College, and at the time, I was not happy about it. There was sort of a perception that that was like 13th grade because you were living at home. And some of the stuff I was learning were things that I had had my sophomore and junior years of high school. But the one really great thing that came out of it was that I met my wife in the very first class I took, and I knew she was gonna be my wife. It took her a little bit longer to want to-

**Cassie:** She needed some convincing.

**Steve:** Had some convincing. My kids think I stalked her, but we went on a date, and then I had tickets to a Notre Dame football game, and she was a big Notre Dame fan, and so that convinced her to go on a second date. And then it was about six months before we went on a third date. And at that point we became a couple, and then we got married in 1977. She went to Aquinas, so she stayed in Grand Rapids when I came to school here.

**Cassie:** Okay, so you guys were long distance for a little while.

**Steve:** Yeah, and very expensive phone bills back then, and letters, every day I'd write a letter, so yeah.

**Cassie:** So reflecting back on your time at Western, which is a few years...

**Steve:** Yes.

**Cassie:** How would you summarize your experience here?

**Steve:** First of all, I always think about the people that I lived with and knew from school, from classes, those are very, very great memories. And then I had some really excellent professors, people that made me think a little bit differently about things. And in the undergrad program, my methods classes for teaching, got some good advice. I'm not gonna say everything they taught us were things that you could actually apply, most of it was sort of theoretical.

But at least I thought I was prepared to, I knew the subject material, and I felt I had some ideas of how to teach it to students, so that was good. And then just the fact that at the time I was here, we had a really great basketball team. And the men's basketball team made it to the NCAA tournament at a time when it was really hard to get in.

**Cassie:** Right.

**Steve:** And they lost to three schools that year. One was Notre Dame and the other was in the regional final against Marquette. And Marquette went on the following year to win the NCAA Championship, they lost by five. And we thought that was really cool that our guys were playing on national TV.

**Cassie:** Right, and getting that close.

**Steve:** That didn't happen back then.

**Cassie:** Yeah.

**Steve:** Yeah, got close, back then not every game was on TV. And to be on NBC and to have the sports announcers say the names of guys that were in the classes you were taking, that was really cool, we took a lot of pride in that.

And I'll never forget there was somebody in the stands, the game was in New Orleans, and there was somebody that had a sign that said, "Yes, Virginia, there is a Kalamazoo." And I thought that was so funny and so cool. And it was on the front page of the Western Herald and probably Kalamazoo Gazette or whatever other papers. But anyway, those are some of the many things.

**Cassie:** Yeah.

**Steve:** But yeah, so.

**Cassie:** So you went to, it was Grand Rapids Junior College at the time?

**Steve:** Yeah, that later became community college.

**Cassie:** Okay, so you went there first, and then you transferred to WMU?

**Steve:** Yep.

**Cassie:** What are some of your earliest memories on campus?

**Steve:** First of all, just how big it was, I mean, coming from Grand Rapids and really didn't have any schools nearby that could rival that in size. Today, Grand Valley is similar but back then it was not, it was a very small college.

So just that and then being sort of apprehensive because I went in, my person that lived in my room, my roommate, we knew each other. We worked together at a store in Grand Rapids, but then really not knowing anybody else, and especially not my suitemates. And as it turned out, my roommate only lasted one semester. And my suitemates and I lived together for the remaining time that we were in school. And I've lost touch with them, and I feel badly about that. And I've tried various ways to see if I could reconnect. But those guys, we had a lot of fun. We got into a little bit of trouble.

And we all, I think, from what I can tell, did well in our chosen professions. And so we managed to get through and still have a good time while we're doing it. So I got to know those guys and then we lived in a coed, suite to suite dorm. So there were girls across the hall. They became like sisters to us, so we had a good relationship. And then I bought a car from a guy that lived down the hall from us. Little things like that, that stick out in my mind.



**Cassie:** It really created, like, a sense of community there.

**Steve:** It very much was, yeah. And third floor Stinson. So like I said earlier, the following year we moved into a house, those two guys and then the roommate that replaced the one from Grand Rapids. So the four of us and then two other guys from across the hall. So we sort of stuck together. Two of those guys played soccer for Western and the rest of us drank beer. Drinking age is 18. I have to start with that, disclaimer. (Both laugh)

**Cassie:** And did you have classes on East Campus?

**Steve:** I did. West Campus too, but mostly on East Campus. It depended on the semester and what I was taking. So at the beginning, my sophomore year, I would say most of them were on the main campus or whatever that, the West Campus. A few in Sangren Hall. I think that's where the education classes were.

And then Brown Hall or Dunbar Hall, I had a couple of, because at the beginning I was majoring in Spanish and business was my minor. I thought I was gonna be a high school Spanish teacher. And my reason for that, I had four years of Spanish in high school and I liked the language and it came easy to me. And then when I started here, I had the first professors, they were teachers that were not native English speakers, they were native Spanish speakers.

And so the rapidity with which they spoke and the accents threw me and I was having real difficulty. And one of the classes was a lecture in history of Latin America from a professor that came here from Cuba. And I could not figure out what we were talking about half the time. The entire lecture was in Spanish. I was trying to take notes. At the beginning, I

thought it would make sense to try to translate and write in English what she was saying and then I couldn't keep up with that. So then I was trying to do it in Spanish.

So anyway, I would end up losing track and then I would just write a love letter to my wife or soon to be wife. (Both laugh) So I got a D in that class. And then the rule at the time, it may still be that if you got a D in your major or minor, you had to take the class over.

So I ended up having to take that same class and that lady was the only one that taught it. So I had her again, I had all my old tests, I had everything that I had from the previous time. And I don't think I ever worked harder on a class in my entire life and I got a C, which was good enough. And then one of the final classes I know this is not really what we're talking about, but one of my final classes for my minor in Spanish was modern Spanish literature, also taught by a lady from Cuba, also entirely in Spanish. Plus we read plays and novels and short stories that were all in Spanish.

So this was like, I had done my student teaching, I had gotten everything out of the way, and I only had four classes my final semester, and this was one of them. We never got anything back. We didn't get any papers or tests or anything. But every time we read a short story or a novel or anything we read, we had to do a paper on it, and the paper had to be in Spanish.

So what I knew about modern literature and music and art was that, especially 20th century, existential philosophy affected how people wrote and thought and did things. So every paper I wrote was about existentialism. I didn't really write about whatever it was, the topic of the play or novel or whatever in Spanish.

And so I submitted all these papers, never got anything back. So anyway, at the end of the semester, the professor had each student come individually for a conference in which she would go over your grade. And so I come into the office and she says, "Senor Abid, you are the only one who knows what I'm trying to teach in these classes." And she said, "You are doing A work." And I said, "Well, thank you." And she said, "But your pronunciation is lousy." And I said, "I understand." And she said, "I would have to give you a C." And I said, "I will take a C, I just need to graduate, I just need a C." And she said, "I cannot give a C to somebody who's doing A work." And I said, "Well, then I'll take an A." She said, "I cannot give you an A." So we negotiated and I said, "Can you give me a B? Could you see your way clear to that?"

"I could give you a B, but you must make me one promise." "What's the promise?" "That you will never teach the Spanish language for as long as you live." "I will not teach it. I promise I will not teach it." So my degree was actually in business, like a bachelor's in business, and so I could teach high school business subjects.

But I had the minor in Spanish, so my teaching certification said, I'm certified to teach Spanish from Grade 7 through 12, is how it worked back then. So the high school I taught at, every now and then there'd be one Spanish section that the principal was trying to fill, and he knew everybody's transcript and everything. And he would say, "I've got a Spanish section that I think I would like to have you teach." And I'd go, "I made a promise that I

would never teach a Spanish language.” (Both laugh) So that was sort of a few tense moments, but we got through it, and so it was good.



So I have a few friends that are native Spanish speakers, and they joke with me all the time about it, and they say, “Your pronunciation is not that bad.” So Dr. Cardinas thought it was, all I can say. And I really don't know half the stuff that I say when I speak Spanish.

But anyway, and then the classes I did have on the East Campus. I remember I'm drawing a blank, but I think there was like East Hall maybe or something like that and then there was another. There's North and then West Hall. So I think I had classes in East and North.

**Cassie:** North with the library in it?

**Steve:** I think so, yeah. So I took accounting and then there were classes that were like the teaching of business classes. Those were also offered on the

East Campus, even though technically they were sort of education classes, but they were, so here's how you teach accounting. Here's how you teach business law. And what I do remember, I was talking with John, he asked where my car was parked and then showed me where I needed to park because you'd get a parking ticket. And I said, well, that's the one thing from 47 years ago or whatever that has not changed.

I will never forget that. You came up this driveway, so to speak, onto the East Campus. There was sort of a turnaround, and there was a small parking area which students could not park in. But there was no way to get out of there without going through this little roundabout or I don't know how to describe it.

But the campus police would wait for people to come through there, and then they'd give them a ticket for being in the lot that they weren't supposed to go into without them. There was no other way to do it. You drive through there to get to someplace else.

And I'll never forget there were students when this first started, at the beginning of the fall semester, they had never done it before. People leaning out of classroom windows and yelling at the campus police, you can't do that. It was sort of an entrapment thing. At the time when I was here, the parking ticket revenue was the second or third highest source of revenue on campus. And I got quite a few parking tickets while I was here.

**Cassie:** Funny, as you were talking about the parking services drove by.

**Steve:** There they go they heard my story. So I had all these tickets, and if you paid them, I think they were \$2. If you paid them within 2 hours of them issuing, it was only a dollar. So I had taken enough economics and did the opportunity cost in my head. It was cheaper to get the ticket, pay it early than it was to actually get a parking sticker. So I would do that, and then when I would get over there to pay it, they were closed, invariably, because I always had these late afternoon classes.

And so I would put them back in my glove compartment and I didn't realize that they matured like savings bonds. The longer you have them, the more they're worth. Well, I had mentioned that my dad had come to school here and I was home one weekend and he said, "Anything you want to tell me?" I said "No, nothing unusual. It's all good." And he said, "Can you tell me why there's a warrant out for my arrest?" And I said, "I don't know what'd you do?" (Both laugh) It was through Western Michigan. Evidently I have a number of unpaid parking tickets. Well, the car was registered in my dad's name, so it was my car, but he registered it.

And so I said, "Yeah, I guess I better go pay those." So then, anyway, I went in with this whole stack of tickets and they gave me a discounted rate for the bogo on parking tickets. But then I mentioned that we lived in this house on Cedar Street, and the landlord kept our security deposit at the end of the year when we were in. This would have been 1976. And we didn't feel he was entitled to do that cuz we had not done any damage to the property. And actually, we had stripped some woodwork and refinished it for him, we offered to. If you wanna do this.

**Cassie:** Put more value into it.

**Steve:** Yeah, tried anyway it was really cool oak with carved we're in there with toothbrushes and the stripper stuff to get all the paint out. Anyway, I had taken business law that semester with a guy that was an attorney here in town and he's still adjuncts for Western cuz I looked him up recently.

And anyway I went to my professor and he took me to lunch and he said well here's a couple of things you can do. So anyway, he sort of guided me through the process. We went to court, went to small claims court, but the landlord took it to district court.

And so my attorney professor said you can sue him for trouble damages three times the amount because he kept the money without proof that there was anything that had actually happened. So I went to court and I was never more nervous in my entire life and I was my own witness so I was testifying.

And anyway we won the case but he got away without paying because all of his bank accounts and everything were in New Hampshire and so he was a big scam artist. So anyway, I felt good about what had happened as far as winning a court case. So then I went back to my professor and told him all that had happened and asked how much we owed and he said you don't owe me anything. Just someday when somebody comes to you with a



problem you can help them out. It was the original sort of pay it forward kind of thing. Anyway, I always remember that he was really a good person.

**Cassie:** Did you get your deposit back?

**Steve:** Never did.

**Cassie:** Well, how did that happen?

**Steve:** He kept the deposit, but refunded. We paid the first and last month's rent, and somehow we got a check back from that. So we kept that. But it wasn't the deposit, but it was money that he was entitled to, that we had written a check for the deposit, and then he didn't cash it or something. So I can't remember the specifics, but it was, okay, it sort of made up for the fact that we didn't get the deposit back. But my roommates were happy because they wanted it. Well, my one roommate wanted to blow him up if we could do that. He had some ideas about how to make that happen. Anyway, it was a negative but sort of a funny experience at the same time.

We had a lot of parties at that house. We learned how to cook. Every one of us had one recipe that we could cook. And so we each took turns one night a week making dinner. And then on Sunday, we would go to McDonald's or something. But every one of our meals that we could cook was hamburger based, cuz that's all we knew how to.

So it was, my one roommate could do spaghetti, another one could do goulash. I knew how to do chili. Night after night, it was a lot of hamburger, a lot of tomato sauce, but we didn't starve. And so then we had a big thanksgiving dinner. We did a turkey and all this, and then we did the same thing for Christmas. And then my mom gave me, I'm Syrian, so she gave me some recipes to try. So I made a Syrian dinner one night. It went well, and I still have to this day, I have the handwritten notes that I wrote as my mom was telling me this, but I had to call her a couple of times.

So it's long distance, no cell phones or anything. And I asked a question about it, and I said, "How long does this go for?" And she said, "Well, till the whole house smells good." I go, "Okay, now, is that your house, or how do I evaluate this?" She goes, "Well, I have your dad go outside and come back in and then he'll tell me." And I'll go, "Well, my roommates don't know what this is supposed to smell like, so I don't know how to make..." anyway, that was sort of fun. I had a good bonding experience with my mom.

**Cassie:** So I just had a few more questions for you.

**Steve:** I'm probably talking too much.

**Cassie:** No, you're not. You're good. Just a few more questions, really. I wanted to ask, what did a typical day look like for you while you're on East Campus?

**Steve:** So when we lived in that house, I usually had an early morning, like 8 o'clock or whatever the earliest start time was class. So I would walk up the stairs, and I think there

were 114, sticks out in my mind, steps to go up to the East Campus. And so either I had one or two classes, would come back, and then it seems like my afternoon classes were on the other campus.

So those could have been the education classes or Spanish or something along those lines. And then in the fall of my junior year I had to do observation teaching, it was called back then, at Comstock High School here in town. And so they hooked you up with a teacher that was teaching the subject that you were hoping to teach, and so it was Spanish at that time for me.

And so I observed this Spanish teacher and along the line, they let you teach a lesson. And so I got to know some of the students and the teacher pretty well, and I learned some things that helped me in my teaching, even though it wasn't Spanish. There's teaching tricks that work in just about any subject area.

And then toward the end of my time here, so I did my student teaching in the fall of '76. So I lived back in Grand Rapids, lived at my parents house and I student taught at Central High School in Grand Rapids public schools. So when I came back for the winter semester, there was no place for me to live. So I just stayed in Grand Rapids and commuted my senior year. And I had Monday, Wednesday, Friday, day class and then I had a Thursday night class. So on Thursday, I would come for my night class and then spend the night either with my roommates or with other folks here in town that were people that lived across the hall or other connections that I had. As I was driving down here today, it was like, wow, that memory does not go away, because the commute has not really changed.

**Cassie:** No, I mean, it's a straight shot if you take 131 and you're just along for the ride.

**Steve:** And I live up in Comstock Park, which is a little bit north of Grand Rapids. And so, right near the on ramp to 131. So straight down. And so I used to, here's the halfway point, here's where I used to stop and get gas. Exactly, just how I did it, always divided into thirds and for some reason, I don't know why. But anyway, so my final year here was a little bit disjointed cuz I really wasn't on campus so much.

And then in fall '75, my junior year, I went to the Catholic Church on campus. Is it St Thomas Moore? I can't remember the name of it. But anyway, in the bulletin, this would have been like the first weekend of the school year. There was an ad for somebody who wanted to teach high school religious education at St Augustine's, which is the cathedral.

So I said to myself, I'm going into teaching. This might be a good opportunity to figure out, even though I'm not really a religion teacher, I probably could figure out what they wanted me to talk about. I've been a Catholic my whole life, so it wasn't like a stretch.

So anyway, I applied for this and along with one of my other roommates and I got hired. He didn't, but he was going into geology, so I think he was just as fine. He was more looking at the money part of it. So anyway, I did that for that junior year, and then my senior year I came back and drove, like on that Monday night, I would teach that class, then go home.

So it was really cool. So they would have been graduated from high school in '76, '77, '78, in that time period. So they're probably in their 50s now, I'd say, or 60s, yeah, 60s. They threw my wife and me a wedding shower. We had a party down here and they gave us some gifts.

So it was really a very cool experience. I feel like I got off the topic of your question, so I apologize if I didn't answer it.

**Cassie:** No no, it's okay, you did. So we talked about a few things that I think impacted you pretty heavily, like your professor making a promise not to teach Spanish. I'm wondering what you think impacted you the most during your time at WMU, whether it be like a person, a place, an event, something that happened?

**Steve:** I don't know if I could narrow it down to one thing. There were a lot of things, as I said at the beginning, I think the people that I met here and I feel so badly that as far as my roommates go, I really have not kept contact with them.

We saw each other at my wedding, and then one of the other guys got married and then I don't know if anybody else got married and didn't invite me or if they just never got married or whatever. So the people is a big part of it. I had another Spanish professor, and when I taught high school, I was the senior class advisor.

And I would give an assignment at the honors assembly that the students needed to send a note to somebody that had made an impact on their life, that they wanted to let them know. And I said, you definitely need to do this for your parents, and somewhere there's a teacher or a coach or an advisor, somebody that helped you get to where you are. Either in kindergarten, first grade, high school, it doesn't matter. Send that person a note. And so, they would send it to me, which was nice, but not really what I was... But I would bump into like kindergarten teachers, and they would say, I got a note from so and so, and it was just so nice and thanked me for doing that.

So as I was thinking about my time as a student, that there were a few people that I needed to do that for. Here I was telling other people to do it, and I had never done it. So just recently, I since had contacted a few different people. And this Spanish professor, I don't even know what made me think of this, but I went through the catalog to find out his name because I could not think of his name. I knew I could hear his voice, and I knew the stuff he taught me, I had him for three different classes.

So I contacted the language department and said, I figured out who it was. And I said, I don't know if there's any way I'm assuming he's retired because he's not on your department faculty on your website. And so I got this beautiful note back from the head of the department, first from his assistant, then from the head, and he said, we still keep in contact with Dr. Griffin. And he said, here is the email address. So I wrote him a thank you email, and he wrote back a Spanish reply, but he translated for me. But anyway, we've communicated a few times since then. So anyway, that was sort of a rewarding like, I closed the loop on that part and thanked him for teaching me.

But also he did some social stuff with students that back then when you had these really small seminar courses in your methods area, like, we went out for dinner a few times, or he cooked dinner for us, he and his wife, at their house. So just little things that helped me to sort of figure out how I wanted to relate to students and ways to teach things, to take difficult stuff and make it easier to understand.

So I appreciated that. And then it was sort of our unofficial engagement, my wife and me, happened here. Officially, it wasn't for like a year or so after that when I actually proposed with a ring and all that. But we were walking across from the valley, and there's a pond and a little wooden bridge thing, and so it was more like, "Hey, what do you think about getting married?" kind of a thing. But it was a thing, so that part will always stick out for me too.

**Cassie:** So we're nearing the end of our time.

**Steve:** Okay.

**Cassie:** Do you have any last thoughts or any last things you wanted to share?

**Steve:** Well, I have a lot of memories that it's really hard to articulate, and so I'm glad you had some questions because it did jog some things for me. I was sad that none of my kids wanted to go to school here like they did. They weren't interested at all. Yeah, I think my dad was really happy that I went here. And then his younger brother, especially. I coached football for a long time, and our success in football was not really great until PJ came along.

And so he would always, whenever they would fire a coach, he'd say, I need you to go to Western and be the football coach, because where he worked, people evaluated how good you were at your job as to how your college football team did. So if you went to Michigan or Michigan State. (Both laugh) You were in the clear!

Yeah, so he felt like people didn't respect him, so I said, no, I don't think they want me. But anyway, nothing jumps out to say. I really need to get this off my chest. But, yeah, I'm hoping that I'm gonna go over to the bookstore. Is it still in Sangren hall?

**Cassie:** The bookstore on campus?

**Steve:** Yeah.

**Cassie:** It's in the Bernhard center.

**Steve:** Bernhard center?

**Cassie:** And it's right next to the new Sangren Building. Sangren, that was built in 2013, because obviously it's the same name, but different building.

**Steve:** Got it.

**Cassie:** But, yeah, it's right on there, right across from Kanley Chapel and such like that. And the Seibert admin building and such.

**Steve:** Okay, I need to find some stuff to wear. I've got a couple of things, but when you do it online, you're never quite sure. The pictures don't always match whatever product is well.

**Cassie:** If you drive that way and just go towards main campus that way, then you'll pass by the old... you'll pass by the North Hall facade, and then East Hall, which is now Heritage Hall. It's at the top of the hill, of course.

**Steve:** Of course.

**Cassie:** So if you drive that way, you'll be able to see them.

**Steve:** Cool, which one had the columns then? Was that the east?

**Cassie:** That's East Hall.

**Steve:** That was so cool.

**Cassie:** And you won't get a ticket if you drive up there.

**Steve:** All right, I'm glad they fixed that. (Both laugh)

**Cassie:** No catches there.

**Steve:** When they did ESPN Game Day from campus, I don't know if you were a student here then or not. I can't remember how long ago it was. It might have been the year that we went to the Cotton Bowl.

But anyway, my kids religiously watch college game day, and so they're broadcasting from our campus. And I had that same feeling, like when the basketball team was playing on national TV. And so I texted my three sons and I said, you see where everybody's sitting? And you see that building just to the left?

And yeah, I said that's Sangren hall, that's where I had my education classes. And I said, do you see the building right next to that? Yeah. That's where I had to pay the traffic tickets or parking tickets that I never got to pay. "Thanks, dad. Another story that we don't care about," anyway... (Both laugh)

**Cassie:** Well, thank you so much for talking.

**Steve:** Yeah, I'd be eager to see how this whole thing turns out. Can I show you the other, or do you want me just to send them to you and you decide what you wanna do?

**Cassie:** Yeah, you can send it to me and we can take a look at those, though.

**Steve:** Okay.