Renaissance Man Steve "Mongo" Kaniuga and the Architecture of East Campus

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WMU Alum Steve “Mongo” Kaniuga

Friday, Jan. 27, 2023 at 5:00 PM

Virtual Meeting via Phone Call

Steve: Now I know what to expect, okay.

Cassie: Yeah okay, good. Okay, then I'll start recording then.

Steve: Okay.

Cassie: Okay, so go ahead, whenever you're ready with introducing yourself.

Steve: Okay, my name is Steve Kaniuga. And I think I first enrolled in September of 1974 at Western Michigan University.

Cassie: Okay, go ahead.

Steve: I grew up in Dowagiac, Michigan. Which is about an hour drive southwest of Kalamazoo, just north of the Indiana border. And I graduated in '73 and my high school advisor did not tell me that when... She had advised me to take Industrial Arts classes.

So I didn't take any college prep classes. And then when I took the test ACT, I guess I did really well. She said, you can go to any college you want in Michigan.

Cassie: Wow. So what made you choose Western?

Steve: Well, I didn't straight away. Because she said, but it's too late to apply to any colleges in Michigan.

Cassie: Oooh.

Steve: Except the local community college, Southwest Michigan College. So she said, I already signed you up to go there. You get tuition free at the local college. And then I went there for a year for the following fall and spring semesters. One of my teachers, my English professor and Dr. Lenro.

And he was also my academic advisor, he said “Why the hell are you going to this college?” I said, that's a long story, but. And he said, “Okay, I guess I know.” (Both laugh)
Cassie: Right, that’s funny. So then you transferred to Western from community college?

Steve: Yeah, he said his wife, Lynn Lenro, worked at Western Michigan, and she said it’s a great college. Because she commuted there from the Dowagiac and she helped me find the paperwork and whatever to transfer. I got some of my credits transferred, but some didn’t, and I lost some time there. I was working. They paid the tuition, but I didn’t have a full ride with all my expenses paid and everything.

And amazingly, tuition at Southwest Michigan College was $12 per semester hour.

Cassie: Wow, I wish that was the same today.

Steve: Which is like a cup of coffee and a croissant.

Cassie: Right, yeah. So what did you end up getting your bachelor’s in?

Steve: I studied industrial arts. Architectural, building trades, architectural design, and drafting, and stuff.

Cassie: Okay.

Steve: I wanted to go to the University of Michigan School of Architecture. They said that I had to complete a certain number of certain courses. Business, Math, Arts, Social Sciences, Physics, structural stuff. Then they would admit me. But I was working full time.

Turns out they were sending my financial aid, my tuition. I just signed up and I got my classes, but all the rest of the financial aid they were sending to my home where my disabled dad was living. And he had the same name, so he just thought it was disability checks.

Cassie: Oh no! My goodness. So, reflecting back on your time at WMU, how would you summarize your experience?

Steve: Well, I ended up changing. I couldn’t get into University of Michigan with my grades in calculus and physics. So I switched my major to education. And I met the Secretary of State for Zimbabwe. Was teaching my course in education.

Cassie: Wow.

Steve: Because they were at war. There was a civil war in Zimbabwe. Legally, it was called Rhodesia. But the revolutionaries wanted to take over and call it Zimbabwe. Which happened during while I was at school. Stuff like that was going on. I thought it was really exciting.

And the campus was not that far from my hometown. So I could go home on weekends if I wanted to and visit my family. I have a lot of relatives around Dowagiac. I like Kalamazoo. I worked many part time jobs around Kalamazoo. Sometimes I was working 30, 40, 50 hours a week. Part time jobs.
**Cassie:** Right, wow, so you kept— Sorry.

**Steve:** Kalamazoo was a wonderful town. I thought I was going to stay there the rest of my life. I thought, this is a great town. And Western Michigan University was a nice school. A good school. I liked the teachers and that’s right.

Lynn, Joe’s wife, I don’t know what she was a professor of… but she was assigned to be leader of some group to help with the recruitment of students and I told her my trouble with the junior college. And the high school stuff didn’t prepare me well to take— that’s why I didn’t do well in calculus. I didn’t have any prep work.

**Cassie:** Right.

**Steve:** And I didn’t have the courses where they taught about academic research and stuff. So I was starting from scratch. And she set up a program to do that. I don’t know. Joe was actually a neighbor of my parents.

So I would see him when I go home on weekends. And I’d sometimes see his wife. And she was telling me she was starting this program based on some of the stuff I told her. And I don’t know, I think she seemed happy with where it was going. But I don’t have much detail on that.

**Cassie:** Right.

**Steve:** I’m curious about it. I don’t know how much— I could go on and on. Because I have many memories. For instance, bilbo’s pizza. Is there still a Bilbo’s pizza there?

**Cassie:** Yes, there is, yeah.

**Steve:** They used to have the best whole grain, all natural pizza. Organic, and I don’t know the name. There was, off Westnedge Avenue, there were stores that sold organic farm probably products, whole grains and organic produce, and it was wonderful, I joined the Kalamazoo Nutrition Society, which was active back then. I don’t know what happened to that after I left, but I could go on and on about, right, many stories to tell. Greek Valley, I think it was called Greek Valley. There was the, what do they call it, The Greek Row, where there was… what’s the name of that street?

I think it was Lovell Street. Level? Lovell? Street, east of campus, had a lot of the fraternities and sororities.

**Cassie:** Yes, right, uh-huh. Now, I don’t know, now it’s just referred to as Fraternity Village, I think.

**Steve:** Okay. Yeah, after I got old enough or whatever, I had to stay in the dorm the first couple of years. Then I moved over to the, they call it Student Ghetto.

**Cassie:** Yeah, uh-huh.
Steve: I lived down Oak Street, and I just lived not far from East Campus over there.

Cassie: Yeah. So you had classes done on East Campus?

Steve: Yeah, that’s where I started out with my classes because I had to take classes in art and business for admission to the University of Michigan.

Cassie: Right.

Steve: I started out in Bigelow men’s dormitory, Bigelow hall which is behind the student union. Those are all gone now, all those dormitories. There was four large dormitories connected to the union by glass covered tunnels. They were called The Tubes.

Cassie: Yeah.

Steve: And it didn’t matter if the weather was bad, you could just go down to the main lobby area and then take The Tube over to the union to get some breakfast.

There was a cafeteria, that’s right, between the dorms and the union, there was a very large cafeteria with kitchens, and they had terrific breakfast there. My gosh, I just thought that was fantastic and it was all included with the dorm fees.

Cassie: Nice!

Steve: And I loved the eggs and the toast and the French… you can get French toast and pancakes and whatever, hashbrowns.

Cassie: Yeah, that sounds good.

Steve: Fresh coffee and juice and milk and whatever or cereals. It was just wonderful to go there and that’s where I would meet people. That’s where I met my first girlfriend, was in the cafeteria.

Cassie: Okay, so it sounds like you stayed pretty busy, though, while you were taking classes and working as much as you were. So what did a typical day look like for you or what did you do in your free time?

Steve: I would get off, I mean, in the morning, I would rush down West Michigan Avenue to get to East Campus. I ran track in high school, I liked the exercise, but I didn’t like when I had to run up that last hill to get to the top of the hill to go to the East Hall.
Cassie: Right.

Steve: I’d be breathing hard and sweaty by the time I got up there for my class.

Cassie: Yeah, those stairs, did you take those stairs all the way up?

Steve: Sometimes I ran up the grassy hill. It’s all foresty now, I believe, but it was a big, beautiful, grassy slope thing. There were a lot of trees back there, but not I think it’s a forest now kind of thing.

Cassie: Right, yeah.

Steve: Climbing out that hill and I thought it was awesome but those campus buildings, we looked like Ivy League. They had blinds drawn on the sides your brick, they had the Greco Roman styling.

Cassie: Right, with the columns and stuff.

Steve: Yeah, the work under the roof line and I just thought it was awesome. I loved architecture, and I wanted to be an architect, and I thought, this is awesome it’s like I’m going to an Ivy League school.

Cassie: Right, yeah. It was very collegiate.

Steve: Absolutely. I don’t think it was even 60 or 70 years old, but the building was showing wear even then, they have a lot of money for doing renovation work on the buildings. Although I thought the buildings were awesome. They had huge 14 foot ceilings and big classrooms, huge windows.

The windows were 4ft wide and seven or 8ft tall, lots of fresh air and light… I mean, natural light would come in, but then we could open the windows and have fresh air come in too, we would do that.

The art classes I took on the north side of the building were large and airy, and they were roomy enough for the students to spread out with their drawing boards and easels or whatever.
The plaster walls, interior walls, would echo sometimes, depending on what frequency you were talking or whatever. The teacher could kind of aim his face upward and echo off the ceiling if he wanted to and off the back walls to get four effect. I felt it's kind of like an oratory feel to it.

_Cassie:_ Yeah, uh-huh. And your business classes were around there as well, then?

_Steve:_ I took only a couple of business classes, I took several art classes, and only-

_Cassie:_ Okay.

_Steve:_ There was one professor for the life drawing classes, he would have us meet, sometimes he'd say, next meeting will be down in the, I don't know what it's called. The Valley, there's a lake, on the north side of campus there's a lake and a bunch of dormitories.

_Cassie:_ Yeah, The Valleys, mm-hm.

_Steve:_ Yeah, The Valley. He'd have us meet around the lake somewhere to do the drawing.

_Cassie:_ Okay.

_Steve:_ But most of the time, that was that was pretty rare, it was only during the really warm, nice weather.

_Cassie:_ Right, mm-hm, which is rare in Michigan.

_Steve:_ Yeah, which I don't consider to be that rare, I grew up in Michigan, so that's normal.

_Cassie:_ Right, well, within the span of the school year.

_Steve:_ Yeah, you're right, it was only in the early fall or the late-

_Cassie:_ Or the late spring, right.

_Steve:_ That we would have electronic classes outside, I thought that was unusual too though.

_Cassie:_ Yeah, and you talked a little bit about… cuz you wanted to be an architect, how you paid close attention to some of the architecture on East Campus.

What do you think was your favorite part about the buildings on East Campus or your favorite spots on East Campus.

_Steve:_ I really like to sit there, I felt like I was on a bluff looking Towards downtown, looking north, a panorama you could see out over or you could look any direction pretty much.
It's harder, I looked south to see stuff because there was a lot of taller trees and stuff in the way. But I mean, you could look north, east, west and look out over the whole Kalamazoo area, look out over campus.

And it'd be a nice breeze up there and the sunshine, and then behind me was all these Ivy League buildings, and I just thought it was awesome.

I liked the architecture up there, a classic Greco Roman style.

**Cassie:** Yeah, I just have a few questions left for you, but I wanted to ask, what do you think impacted you the most during your time at WMU, whether it be a person, a place, or an event that happened.

**Steve:** I thought I worked hard to learn outside of my curriculum. I spent many hours at the Waldo Library, when I should have been doing homework or studying for classes. My GPA wasn't much because either I was working or resting. I didn't do much homework, but I really loved the Waldo Library was like a backup national archive.

I spent time in there studying historical archive documents, I enjoyed that. I met many good professors, one of my professors of art was the head of the National Watercolor Society, painter society or something. And he showed off his work, and that was amazing, how he inspired me to do some even though I was an art minor, and he showed me some stuff about painting.

But my mother studied at the Art Institute in Chicago, she had an experience with that. And my older brother Jim, his IQ was 190 something. He could think photo realistically when he was in high school.

**Cassie:** Wow.

**Steve:** But anyways, I learned from these people, though, and I did some drawings, some paintings that I entered in the Juried Art Competition for the purpose. And that was exciting to be part of that. And they picked my paintings even though I wasn't that major.

**Cassie:** Wow.

**Steve:** That kind of stuff, maybe think in terms of I won't be an architect, but I can still try to be sort of a Renaissance man.

**Cassie:** Yeah.

**Steve:** Learn stuff, I can develop my skills with help of others.
Cassie: Right.

Steve: I still had trouble with math, I did take courses in computer science division of math department. And that’s what I ended up being hired by, I got my degree was interdisciplinary social science with minors in business and art and statistics.

And in the Air Force, I took some professional administrative career exam called a PACE test. And the Air Force hired me almost right away to be a computer programer. That started my federal civil service career.

And I retired from them a few years back, and I was happy with that career, but I mean, they got me started.

Even though I didn't go on the track I had planned, I still had the Air Force and the defense logistics agencies sent me on trips all around the country. They worked on projects, some of which I can't talk about, but it was just exciting. MY career started from my diverse education at Western Michigan.

Cassie: Right, and the experiences that opened a lot of doors for you, it sounds like.

Steve: Yeah, I’m grateful to Joe for redirecting me. And then my professor of art, my professors in all the departments, the guy who's from Zimbabwe who was telling us about...he was teaching us about educational theory but he was also talking to us about world politics at the same time. It was just kind of cool that opportunity was there, if you look for it to just become more enlightened about the world at large and what your own capacities might be. I was grateful for all that.

Cassie: Yeah, so I just have two more questions left, really. I wanted to ask, how do you feel about WMU now versus when you were a student here?

Steve: Well, yeah, one of my lifelong friends, he's my best buddy, he was a roommate with me. He was trying to get graduating from the school physicians assistants.

Back then before there was a medical college. And him and I were roommates briefly, and we’re still best of friends, but he, I’m sorry, I forgot the question.

Cassie: That’s okay, I was just asking how you feel about the school now. How do you feel about him now?

Steve: Yeah, him and I, we get together sometimes. We haven't since COVID started, but we used to meet near Kalamazoo and then just hang out. And he lives north of Detroit.

Cassie: All right, yeah.

Steve: I live closer to Cincinnati.

Cassie: Okay.
Steve: It’s about a four hour drive up there, so we don’t see each other often, plus him and I get together, and we go to the campus and drive through campus, and we go… We don’t recognize, I’d be overstating the fact I said I was heartbroken, but I was very disappointed to see they ripped down the east campus buildings.

I thought they would be worth spending millions of dollars to renovate entirely, gut them out if you have to, and renovate them and put in new insulation, heating water, electric, and blah, blah, blah. And to me, the origin, the heart of campus, that location, to me was kinda like the Mount Athens in Greece.

It was like where the thing started.

Cassie: Yeah.

Steve: I was disappointed about that, I’m glad to see a lot of work that’s been done for pedestrians and traffic flow.

There’s more housing, and I don’t know if the population… what the student population used to be when I was there was 27,900 or something. I think, I don’t know what it is now.

So I like some of the improvements, but tearing down the good old stuff is, to me, a bad idea, just very sad. The Heritage Hall is worth the money. I’m glad to see… I saw Western the Broncos were doing well, sports once in a while, I get the alumni newsletter, so I see a lot of growth in different research programs and community activity programs. And students are traveling the world and stuff. A lot of things that I never had an opportunity to do while I was there.

So those things are very good. That’s good progress, and I like to see it. Credentials of the university have grown. And the hall, that’s right, Sangren Hall. I remember going by Sangren Hall. I took a lot of great courses there. Sangren Hall, especially when I was in the dormitory right across the street.

I would sign up in the what’s the name of it? Tower where this ever tower? I think it was a science tower, we called it. I enjoyed to take my science classes there.

Really great professors who didn’t stick to a, what do you call it? A rigid syllabus. They would be flexible based on who that was in their class and what their capabilities were.

Cassie: Right, they were more tailored. They were involved with the students.

Steve: Yeah, they would meet with us, talk with us and say, give feedback to know what we understood, what we didn’t understand, what our objectives and goals were.

We were motivated. Some did that. Some were just like economics courses, that was.

Cassie: Right, those were rigid.

Steve: Those were rigid as you get. (Both laugh)
Cassie: So we have just a few minutes left. So I wanted to ask if you have any last or final thoughts, any memories you’d like to share or topics we didn’t touch on that you wanted to talk about.

Steve: Let me think now. Memories to share. There’s too many memories that the more I think about it triggers more memories and other memories are triggered. I could try to capture some of that. I have a lot of stories of big vignettes that come to mind that we don’t have time to talk about.

But on the whole, I’m proud of the year I spent at my community college. I learned, I met good people there. Learned in Western Michigan. I was there. I started to work on my master’s degree in psychology because Borgess Regional Hospital hired me to manage one of their, what do you call, residential psychiatric facilities.

And I thought that was awesome. I was working at the Griffin Crisis Center, which I think is gone now, which is-

Cassie: The Gryphon one?

Steve: Gryphon Crisis Center.

Cassie: Yeah, I think that we still have it cuz there's a Gryphon Place now, it's called and it's like suicide prevention.

Steve: They train me in that stuff, and I love working there. That was, in some ways, my favorite job. I truly felt I helped people.

Cassie: Right.

Steve: And I did a year of graduate studies in psychology before I went broke, and then I had to get a job, and my car busted down.

I didn’t have money for rent, so I took a job with the Air force. That’s memorable. So, yeah, on the whole, that was a good launching place for the rest of my life.

Cassie: Yeah, well, thank you so much for getting on the phone with me and talking to me today.

I really appreciate you sharing some of the memories that you have and your experiences at WMU. If you have anything that comes to mind afterwards, cuz I know that happens to me a lot, feel free to just email any stories that you have over to me or any photos that you find that you’d like included with your story on our project.

Steve: Okay, I will do that. It’s been fun talking about. I like recalling that stuff because it’s part of who I am, and I enjoy sharing if anyone’s interested in hearing about it.

Cassie: Yeah, so thank you for sharing. Yeah, and if you have any more to share, please feel free to reach back out.
Steve: So, are you currently a student there?

Cassie: I actually just graduated with my bachelor's in December.

Steve: Congratulations.

Cassie: Thank you so much. Yeah, it's been great. And I started as a student intern on this project, and they asked me to stay on until the end of it.

Steve: So are you gonna get a graduate degree in journalism or what, something like that about media or?

Cassie: Yeah, so I did apply for a graduate degree in film and television production, but also I'm applying to some jobs as well.

Steve: Okay, well, guess what? My one and only sister, her husband was a director producer for TV in Detroit.

Cassie: Okay.

Steve: For decades. For several decades. I learned a lot, I worked at his TV studio, WXON in Detroit one summer.

Cassie: Okay.

Steve: So I do know something about the history of television in Michigan.

Cassie: Yeah.

Steve: But this is probably just pretty old news for you, the history of it.

Cassie: I remember learning about it a bit in some of my classes.

Steve: Okay.

Cassie: Yeah.

Steve: But that was fun.

Cassie: Well, thank you again, and have a great rest of your night, and just email me if anything comes up.

Steve: I will. It's been a pleasure, Cassie.

Cassie: Thank you.

Steve: I will send you some stuff. I've already started to do a few notes, but I think it's very... 

Cassie: Okay, great, perfect.
Steve: Well have a good night. Have fun this weekend.

Steve: Thank you. Thank you, you as well. Have a good weekend.

Cassie: Good night.

Steve: Good night.

Additional notes added by Steve, sent via email after interview:

Starting in September 1974 I took art and business courses in buildings of the WMU East Campus upper plateau. Parking was for teachers, staff, and handicapped only. I walked from Bigelow Hall Men's dormitory down West Michigan Ave to Lovell Street then I walked up the steep hill to and found my building which was on the Northeast portion of the plateau. I later learned that I could turn onto Ring Road then onto Oliver Street, cross the railroad tracks and Stadium Drive and go up the hill to East Campus with a less severe hill slope and less automobile traffic.

East campus buildings were the original campus of Western State Normal School called the “Teachers College” from 1903, so they were designed with traditional college neoclassical architectural style. I thought it was awesome. I had signed up for the preparatory classes for admission to the Univ of Mich School of Architecture. The Roman style columns had rising taper and the scrolled tops but lacked the fluting details. The dental work under the roof soffits lacked every other “tooth”. Some portions of the brick veneer were covered in sprawling ivy vines. I wondered if Ivy league students saw pretty much the same thing as I did on the way to class, having seen movies and pictures of Ivy league campuses. Grades in calculus and physics precluded my UM admission.

Interior spaces seemed roomy with high ceilings and large double hung wooden windows providing generous natural lighting. The plastered walls and ceilings showed some bulging and cracks. My art classrooms seemed roomy and airy with plenty of room to set up for tablet or easel drawing. The plaster walls had a way of echoing some sound frequencies more than others. In some life drawing sessions we worked from various nude models hired by the art department. Depending on the time of day they might have light on them from the windows or be sort of backlit, but the art rooms were on the North end of the building, so the light was mostly indirect. On warm days we might open the windows to feel a cool breeze, but not enough to disrupt our sketchbooks.

It seems that the heating system for East Hall worked but not especially well because we sometimes kept our sweaters on for the chill and some days the teacher would open the windows a a small amount to let cool air in. I learned that there was gym across the street so after a jog around the North campus I went to see if I could lift some weights in the gym. Inside the front door I did not find a building map or signs on where to find which activity. I followed some students down a staircase to the right of the main entry, then I found myself
in an area of locker rooms. I heard people taking showers. Looking around I could see I was in the women’s locker room and yet none of them reacted to my entry. I still felt embarrassed and walked out of there as fast as I could. I was too anxious to look for the weight room there, so I jogged down the hill to Read Field House where I found very high quality workout facilities. Later I learned that Draper Dormitory had become coed including some coed locker-shower areas.

After I had moved to the so-called student ghetto, East of East campus, the hill was a source of more exercise as I ascended one side, enjoyed the panoramic view from atop and then descended the other side on the way to class and on the way back. One heavily snowed Wintery day I walked to a main campus class. I was tired to the point of exhaustion from a full course load and multiple part time jobs, and preparing for exams, and as I began to descend the large sloping hill Southwest of Waldo Stadium, I fell asleep. I wore a hooded smooth nylon coat that served like a toboggan. I woke later at the bottom of the hill with my textbooks and notebook still in my gloved hand. I was late for class.