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Peter Boylan: Judo Club and International Experiences

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WMU Alum Peter Boylan

Thursday, Jan. 12, 2023 at 4:30 PM

Virtual Meeting via Zoom

Peter: Yes.

Cassie: Okay, perfect. All right, so I'll just have you introduce yourself, and if you could spell your last name and then say your connection to WMU.

Peter: Okay I'm Peter Boylan and I attended Western from 1985 to 1990. And then I was technically a graduate student from 1990 until 1999. But I was only on campus for two years.

Cassie: Okay.

Peter: I spent most of that time in Japan.

Cassie: Wow!

Peter: It was an interesting time to be at Western and then come back after a few years because it was at that period Western really made the change in mentality from being a fairly small school to being a big school.

Cassie: Right.

Peter: It went from being really easy to do anything you wanted to really difficult, requiring a lot of paperwork.

Cassie: And I think most come, late-mid 90s was when it was mainly just main campus that they were using, right?

Peter: Yeah.

Cassie: Okay.

Peter: Yes, it was very easy to use space on East Campus.

Right. So are you from the Kalamazoo area? What brought you to Western?

Peter: Well, my dad graduated from Western, and Western offered me a slot coming out of high school and I really didn't know what I wanted to do. So, it was an easy choice. It worked out well.

Cassie: That's good. So what did you end up going into?

Peter: I ended up majoring in comparative religions with a specialty in Japan. And of course, I don't do that for a living, I work in the automotive industry instead.

Cassie: Okay.

Peter: But that's what I really enjoy.

Cassie: I was just going to ask, reflecting back on your time at WMU, how would you summarize your experience?

Peter: Oh wow. There were two very different experiences. There was my undergrad and my graduate. Undergrad was interesting. It was a real growing experience because I got to move up from not knowing what I was doing and I joined the Judo Club and moved from absolute beginner to being one of the top guys in the club and running the show.

Cassie: Wow.

Peter: So there was a lot of growth, and I made a lot of mistakes.

Cassie: Yeah, but learned from them too?

Peter: But it was lots of fun because we were very much on our own, we did not have a lot of administration contact, really. Not to even get into influence, we just didn't have much contact with the administration.

We had, underneath the gym at Oakland Gym, on the floor beneath the gymnasium, there was what had been originally a dance studio. And it had a slightly sprung floor and we got that for Judo and we covered it in mats. The whole studio was covered in mats. And we would train there. It was great for taking falls because that spring in the floor took just a little bit of the sting out when you got thrown. And we had basically an office down at the end of the hallway that we had the keys for and it was ours.

We kept all kinds of stuff in there, uniforms that we sold to the new students every semester and we'd sit in there and chat. It was great.

Cassie: Wow, so then what about your experience as a graduate?

Peter: As a graduate it was much more contentious. The new rec center had been built, and everything was being run through there with lots of paperwork. And we came back one autumn, and they had ripped all the mats out of the dojo.

Cassie: Oh my goodness.

Peter: Which was really a problem because we had classes to teach. We were teaching the university phys ed classes- for judo classes, and they had taken all of our mats.

Cassie: Wow.

Peter: So we raced around trying to find what they had done with them, fortunately, they hadn't thrown them all away.

They were sitting in a warehouse. But yeah, there was not a lot of communication, it was just done to us. So we had a much more adversarial relationship with administration as a graduate student.

Cassie: Okay.

Peter: I was on campus from '94 to '97 as a grad student.

Cassie: Okay, I see. And so you said that your dojo studio used to be in the basement of the Oakland Gym?

Peter: It wasn't even in the basement, there were basically three levels. There was the gymnasium level, there was the level that had the dance studio and showers and locker rooms. And then underneath that was another level that the ROTC used.

Cassie: Okay.

Peter: So the ROTC guys got to listen to us bouncing off the floor every evening. (Both laugh)

Cassie: Do you remember anything else about the building?

Peter: Well, there was a track above the gym, and we would do laps there as warm ups and training. Oddly enough, barefoot, which probably wasn't a good idea because it was kind of old and there were loose spots that we probably could have hurt ourselves on.

Cassie: Yeah, but nobody did?

Peter: No and it was like one 13th of a mile, I think.

Cassie: Okay, do you remember anything else about the buildings on East Campus?

Peter: Not much about the other buildings, I didn't get into the other ones very much.

Cassie: That's all right.

Peter: I think I went to one frat party at the Geek House when it was on East Campus and decided that was enough for me. Yeah, there wasn't anything else to draw me over to East Campus, really.

Cassie: Yeah.

Peter: But I'm in Oakland Gym four nights a week.

Cassie: Wow, so what did a typical day look like for you on campus? Or during your time there?

Peter: Classes on main campus, usually, if I could manage it, between ten and four sometimes occasionally I got stuck with an 8:00 a.m. and occasionally a night class. But usually in the evenings I was over at Oakland Gym for the judo– for the university judo classes. And then we had judo club practice afterwards.

Cassie: Wow, so a full day?

Peter: I spent a lot of time in my uniform.

Cassie: Yeah.

Peter: Yeah.

Cassie: So when you weren't in class. Sorry, go ahead.

Peter: No, I was just going to say we usually had three sections in the fall. And two sections in the winter.

Cassie: Okay, so when you weren't busy with classes and judo. What did you spend your time doing?

Peter: Reading, a lot. I was something of a bookworm at the time.

Cassie: Okay.

Peter: I got to know Waldo Library really well. Knew all the nooks and crannies and corners.

Cassie: Do you remember anything about that?

Peter: I remember the green glass, the ugly green glass. Before they did the renovation. This 1950s industrial green. We joke that when they when they announced the renovation. We joked that they should baffle the rights to take out sections with a sledgehammer.

Cassie: Not a fan.

Peter: It was really ugly. Yeah. (Both laugh)

Cassie: So did you have a favorite reading spot?

Peter: Yeah, there was a couple of spots down on the ground floor. And there was one up on the top floor, on the third floor, that were nice. I could go in there and nobody would bother me. It was rather secluded.

Cassie: So did you live on campus during your undergrad?

Peter: I lived on campus both during my undergrad and during my grad.

Cassie: Okay, where at?

Peter: I lived in Smith Burnham for three years and Davis for two. The miracle was in Smith Burnham, I got a double room as a single for two years? For two and a half years. My first roommate crashed out of Western badly. He spent more time down the hall smoking weed and drinking than he did in class.

Cassie: Yikes.

Peter: He crashed out pretty fast. And they didn't stick me with anyone after that. And then I was able to get it as a single for two years.

Cassie: That's nice.

Peter: Then they told me I'd have to have a roommate. So I had to go over to Davis Hall because that was senior residence. A little bit nicer, but I had a roommate.

Cassie: Okay.

Peter: And then as a grad student, I lived in the apartments across Oakland Drive there at the bottom of Westnedge Hill. I'm not sure there are any apartments there now. Last time I was through town, most of them had been torn down.

Cassie: Do you remember anything about those apartments?

Peter: We had a great time. We had a basement apartment. And I was married and I had two little kids. And it was a wonderful international experience. We had friends from all over the world living around us. My kid's best friend was a little girl from Turkey.

Cassie: Wow.

Peter: And we had a grand time. The ethnic food being cooked was always interesting. Because we had Indian students and Turkish students and German students. Yeah.

Cassie: Wow.

Peter: It was a wonderfully diverse area.

Cassie: And it sounds like it was a community too.

Peter: Yeah, it was nicely built so that we all faced in a circle out of a courtyard. So the kids could all play in the courtyard. And it was easy to watch them and get to know your neighbors. We spent a lot of time out there talking. With other parents as the kids were playing.

Cassie: So I'm wondering, do you remember anything about any of the faculty? Or maybe some other students friends that you had? During your time at WMU?

Peter: Faculty? Yes and I'm drawing a blank right now. I had a wonderful English professor. And I can't think of his name. But he was my Shakespeare professor coming in my first

semester as a freshman. And he was great fun because not only was he an English PhD, but he was an Equity actor.

So when he read Shakespeare, he really read Shakespeare. That really was an experience. Great experience. Then I got into the comparative religions department and just had a blast. We had Nancy Falk who was teaching Indian traditions. Byron Earhart was teaching Japanese religion. Tom Lawson was teaching African religions.

Religious what do you call? Theory of religions and how to shake up dumb shits. He was a great deal of fun. I took every class he offered, and we did. A couple of friends of mine and I did a couple of independent studies with him.

Cassie: Do you have any recollections or memories about events that happened on campus? Different sporting events or with judo or whatever else?

Peter: Well, the Judo Club sponsored a few tournaments while we were there. We put all the mats in Oakland gym and we'd sponsor tournaments with people from all over the place.

One year we sponsored. The Midwest Collegiate Open, and we managed to get people from as far as ways, from Kentucky and Tennessee.

Cassie: Wow.

Peter: Which really surprised us.

Cassie: Yeah.

Peter: We didn't have quite enough organization to keep doing it. We probably should have kept doing it year after year, but we only did that one once.

Cassie: Okay, well, that makes sense, too.

Peter: Yeah, that's one of those events that should rotate around other universities.

Cassie: Right. So I just have a few more questions for you. One that I wanted to ask, though, is what do you think impacted you the most during your time at WMU, Or who?

Peter: Probably the Judo Club.

Cassie: Yeah.

Peter: Probably the Judo Club. As a group, the instructors and the other members, we were a very tight group. We hung out four days a week in the dojo, and then we would do things together outside of judo as well. We would do weightlifting or have parties, just eat, spend a lot of time together hanging out in the cafeterias.

The Judo Club was really my home at the time, it provided a lot of support. There was always one or two of us that had everything together at that moment. If there had been any time where none of us had it together at the same time, we would have been in trouble.

There was always one or two that had it together enough to help everybody else through their crises.

Cassie: Okay, what do you think is, like, one thing that you disliked about WMU when you were going there?

Peter: I can't even complain about the food because when I was there, the food was good.

Cassie: Yeah, well, that's good.

Peter: Yeah. Probably the only complaint I would really have had was probably the same one people have now, parking was impossible.

Cassie: Yeah. It always seems to be impossible.

Peter: Yes, but that's true at every university I ever had contact with.

Cassie: Yeah.

Peter: You've got thousands of students that all wanna bring their cars and just not enough space for them.

Cassie: Was there parking at Oakland Gym at the time?

Peter: There was parking at Oakland Gym. There was plenty of parking at Oakland Gym, in fact. Nobody else wanted to go there.

Yeah, it was good there. The parking was down below the gym, and we'd walk up the steps and go in the side door.

Cassie: Okay. And so how do you feel about, sorry, I was gonna ask how do you feel about WMU now versus when you were going there?

Peter: When I was there, especially as an undergrad, it was very much home. Both the Judo Club and the Comparative Religions Department were really very good to me, good places for me to be. As a grad student, it was a little, as I said, we had more arguments with the administration.

But now it seems very big and very different it's been 20 years since I was living on campus, so more than that. 25 years since I was living on campus, so the last time I was there a couple of years ago it had changed significantly, just the physical plan.

Cassie: Right.

Peter: But I grew up... my next door neighbor when I was growing up, had been a WMU student in the 30s.

Cassie: Wow.

Peter: And my dad was there at the late 50s and 60s. And then I was there in the 80s, the changes we talked about were quite remarkable.

Much of campus now was an 18 hole golf course and then when my dad was there, it was still a nine hole golf course, and when I got there it was buildings. Yeah. It grew a lot. I'm hoping it got a little bit more... it went back to being a little more flexible the way it was in the 80s rather than the way I remember it in the 90s.

Cassie: I just had one last question, which was do you have any other memories or stories you'd like to share, or any topics that we didn't touch on that you wanted to talk about?

Peter: Can't think of any... I remember the characters in the Judo Club. There was Rake Crandall and Frank Sugar and me and Chris Bowman, and Earl Bland was the instructor.

And we would train for a couple of hours, and then some days we'd sit around and talk philosophy for two or three hours.

Cassie: Wow.

Peter: And we'd be there after the security would come through and lock up, and we'd be there after security left. Yeah, we all had keys.

Cassie: Really?

Peter: The instructors, yeah, we had keys to the dojo and keys to the building and keys to the office.

Cassie: Wow. So it really was like your home.

Peter: Yeah, we had a refrigerator in the office. Although that was more for ice in case of injuries. (Both laugh)

Yeah, it was good. Spent a lot of time there. We'd go in sometimes on Saturday or Sunday afternoon and train just because we had the keys.

Cassie: Yeah. Well, thank you so much for talking to me today and sharing your story, it's a unique one.

Peter: You're welcome.

Cassie: We haven't had anybody else connected to the Judo Club before.

Peter: All right.

Cassie: Yeah.

Peter: I'll have to see if we can scrape up some photos.

Cassie: Yes.

Peter: It wasn't like now, where everybody takes their camera out and takes their phone out and takes a picture.

Cassie: Right. Well, if you manage-

Peter: Not a lot of photos taken.

Cassie: Yeah, if you manage to find any, yeah, you can just email them over to me, and I'll include them with your story.

Peter: Okay, I will do that.

Cassie: All right, perfect. And I can send you a link to your story as soon as it's up on the website, so you can check that out.

Peter: Okay, thank you very much.

Cassie: Thank you, have a great rest of your night.

Peter: You too, thanks a lot.

Cassie: Yes, thanks. Bye.

Peter: Bye, bye.