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## Suzanne Witthoff: Trailblazing at WMU

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WMU Alum Suzanne Witthoff

Thursday, Jan. 12, 2023 at 11:00 am

Virtual Meeting via Zoom

**Cassie:** So do you have any other questions before we get started?

**Suzanne:** Not at this time.

**Cassie:** Okay, great. Well, let me know if you do.

**Suzanne:** Okay.

**Cassie:** But I'll just have you start with your name and if you could spell it for us and then your connection to WMU.

**Suzanne:** Okay, it's Suzanne, Roach was my maiden name, Witthoff.

**Cassie:** Okay, and what is your connection to WMU?

**Suzanne:** I'm a graduate of Western Michigan in the business school between 1966 and 1970.

**Cassie:** Okay, and are you from the Kalamazoo area or... how did you come to the Western?

**Suzanne:** I'm actually from the Ludington area. I was raised in a little town called Fountain, Michigan, and I was one of the first ones in my family to go off to college.

**Cassie:** Wow. And what made you choose WMU?

**Suzanne:** They had a secretarial school at the time. And back in 1966 before computers they had a secretarial program that was two years, and that's originally how I started out at the college. I was gonna get a two year



secretarial degree and liked it so much and found my niche and went on and completed my four years.

**Cassie:** So looking back on that time, how would you summarize your experience at WMU?

**Suzanne:** It was eye opening, coming from a very small town, and it was kind of a farming community and a small area. It was quite eye opening to me. It was a larger town to come to, and I know that my aunt had suggested Michigan State and some other different colleges and Western was really a good fit for me, and I'm glad I made the right choice in choosing Western.

**Cassie:** And you were on East Campus for most of your classes, is that correct?

**Suzanne:** Yes I was. At that time you have to keep in mind there were very few women in business. I was probably one of a handful in the business school at that time.

**Cassie:** Yeah, how do you think that affected your experience?

**Suzanne:** Yeah, I didn't really realize it until I looked back. I think I knew it at the time, but business was always sort of of interest to me, even through high school. And like I said, secretarial was kind of a key female position in business at that time.

And when I finally decided to go into retailing it was obviously an area that was open to women. I feel like I was a little bit of a trailblazer maybe. And that's kind of a good feeling.

**Cassie:** Yeah, I bet. So what are your earliest memories of East Campus then and being on campus?

**Suzanne:** That's interesting. First memories, just it was finding your way around. I remember getting to Western early and going up to the business campus and sort of familiarizing myself and finding out where my classes were and just familiarizing myself with the campus. It seemed quite daunting at the time, but it didn't take very long to become familiar with the areas.

I remember all the steps going up to East Campus, and every day whether it was snow or rain or whatever we would make our trek up there. And they had a good bus system at that time, but we walked a lot on campus, which I'm sure they still do now but I know that the campus has expanded into other areas.

**Cassie:** So did you live down in the vine neighborhood then, or did you live on East Campus?

**Suzanne:** I'm sorry, I'm having trouble understanding you.

**Cassie:** Can you hear me?

**Suzanne:** That's better yes.

**Cassie:** Okay, I was just wondering, did you live down in the vine neighborhood then, or did you live on East Campus?

**Suzanne:** I actually lived in Henry Hall my freshman year, and then they made it a senior women's dorm, so the underclassmen were moved, and I ended up out in the valley, and then I actually got special permission to move off campus after my sophomore year. So I lived in Sprague apartments and then West Campus apartments. And that's a story there too.

**Cassie:** What, living in the West Campus apartments?

**Suzanne:** No, just a story that we found out when my daughter attended Western.

**Cassie:** What did you find out?

**Suzanne:** Yeah.

**Suzanne:** Do you want me to tell you that now?

**Cassie:** Yeah, sure, yeah.

**Suzanne:** Okay, so that was my senior year and my roommates and I decided to have a welcome back sort of party at our apartment, and I think we all had boyfriends at that time and we decided that it was going to be a kegger. We decided that we would charge money so that we could pay for the beer.

And as it turned out the party grew, and apparently people we had invited just a small group of people, but somehow it got the word spread and as the party grew it spilled out into the parking lot, and it got really, really, really big. And I think people heard about it on campus that there was this big party at West Campus Apartments.

And finally the roommate's boyfriends, and everybody just shut it down and everybody ended up having to go home, but I mean it was huge. I don't know how many people were there, but it was pretty crazy and it had gotten much larger than we had ever anticipated it would be.

So years later when our daughter attended Western, she said, "There's this big party." She said, "It's the first weekend of every year when you come back to campus" and she said, "They had this big party at West Campus Apartments." And we started laughing as we said, "Gee, we had this party", and she said "That's about when it started."

She said, "And they've done it every year since." And that was the first that we knew that it apparently is still going on.

**Cassie:** Somebody kept it as a tradition, I guess.

**Suzanne:** Yeah.

**Cassie:** Wow.

**Suzanne:** And I think that kids just come there and look for a party or whatever, and I don't know if they just have it in the parking lot or exactly how it goes on, but we said we kind of had the original party at West Campus.

**Cassie:** Yeah, a trailblazer in more than one way. (Both laugh) Yeah. Wow, that's funny. Wow, that it was still going on too when your daughter was there?

**Suzanne:** Yeah, she graduated in 19... let's see, she graduated high school in 1995, I think she graduated around '99 or 2000.

**Cassie:** Okay, yeah. So it was a bit different than when you were there.

**Suzanne:** They may have put an end to it someplace along the way, I don't know.

**Cassie:** Right, yeah. So do you remember anything about the buildings on East Campus?

**Suzanne:** I do, they were old even at the time, back in 1966 to 1970 but they somehow had a special nostalgia to them even at that time, and they were well kept up. And I was used to being, I think, in older kind of buildings anyway. I mean, some of the high schools that I had gone to had been older buildings or whatever, so that didn't really affect me.

But it had the true feeling of being a college campus and sort of ivy and everything on the buildings. Whereas the main campus was very modern in both architecture, except for the president's house, of course, on the main campus. So yeah, that's probably one of my earlier recollections of the buildings.

There was a memory that I had, too, and I'm sure you've probably heard of this before. But there was an old kind of, well, to become a true coed on campus, you had to be kissed at midnight-

**Cassie:** Yes, yeah.

**Suzanne:** On the backside of, what was it, I think it was East Hall. And so that was going on even then. So that was kind of a tradition that was founded, I don't know when, but was still going on at the time that I was there.

**Cassie:** And were you ever kissed on that side of East Hall?

**Suzanne:** I was.

**Cassie:** So you became a true coed.

**Suzanne:** Not by my husband-to-be, but I was kissed there. (Both laugh)

**Cassie:** And where were most of your classes at then?

**Suzanne:** There were three buildings, as I remember, but I think most of our classes were in East Hall and North Hall. And that leads me to another story about North Hall.

And that was originally why I kind of signed up to do this, because this is kind of a special memory for me, and I'm sure other people experienced the same thing. But going back to the fact that I was one of the few females on campus. So my husband and I knew each other from, I think I had some old high school friends that were in his fraternity.

And so I had met him on campus at various times and knew him, but had never gone out with him or anything. And we ended up having a class. It was Dr. Morrison's business law class in North Hall, our senior or it would have been our junior year.

And we started dating at that point and ended up getting married a few years later. And I don't think that we would have ever gotten together had we not had that class.

**Cassie:** Wow.

**Suzanne:** So that's just kind of a personal little note for it. But obviously North Hall has special significance to us and we've recalled the memories from that class many times and how we started dating and whatnot.

**Cassie:** Did you ever go back to North Hall?

**Suzanne:** Not for many, many years. I think we did go up there. We haven't been back to Homecoming or anything for several years.

And we did go earlier in our younger years, and it would be fun to go back. But I think we did visit East Campus a couple of times during the times that we were at Homecoming when it was still operational. And I don't know when they closed that.

**Cassie:** Well, after the College of Business moved to West Campus, the School of Art and the University Archives took over East Campus, especially East Hall. And West Hall was torn down and North Hall is torn down, except that the front facade of the building is still there.

**Suzanne:** Okay, I did not know that. That's sad.

**Cassie:** Yeah, well, the front facade is still there, and the old large fireplace that they had in the reading room there is now in East Hall. So they preserved that big mantle fireplace and put it in East Hall.

**Suzanne:** Okay.

**Cassie:** When they did the renovations, yeah, so they-

**Suzanne:** Okay.

**Cassie:** They saved what they could. They completely renovated East Hall, but kept everything the same, just made it stronger and it looks nicer.

**Suzanne:** Okay.

**Cassie:** But yeah, so you can still visit the front of the building is still there and the fireplace.

**Suzanne:** Okay, we'll have to go back there and do that soon.

**Cassie:** Yeah. So you mentioned one professor that you had, that class that you met your husband in. Do you remember any other faculty during your time at Western?

**Suzanne:** I remember Dr. Morris, who was my accounting professor, and I believe he was an accountant. I remember that he had written a textbook for accounting, and we were the first ones to use it before it was even published. And so we went through and he found the mistakes and we found mistakes, and it was kind of a testing thing.

**Cassie:** Yeah, like guinea pigs.

**Suzanne:** Like guinea pigs, exactly. So I remember him. I remember some of the other professors, but I'm having trouble recalling their names.

But I remember the classes. There was a female teacher that did either a management class or I think it was business problems. And that was really interesting. And of course, my retailing professor too, but those are the ones that the key people that I remember it from that time.

**Cassie:** Yeah, I've heard that, what was it, the business problems or manager problems, something? I've heard that that was a tough class for some people.

**Suzanne:** Yeah, but we had ways around that. (Laughs)

**Cassie:** Really?

**Suzanne:** There were two sections of the class, and I think I was in the second class maybe later in the morning or the afternoon, or maybe it was just on a different day.

And my husband was in the class also, but in a different section. And so we used to share information back and forth for what happened in the one class, because the one class obviously was held before the other class. And so we would have information and probably have some better discussions with the professor. And she thought we were very smart. (Both laugh)

And also she required that we dress professionally. And so I remember having to put, well, we wore nylons at that time, and so you put nylons on and a better shoe or a flat or whatever, and it was sweaters and skirts and things.

So it was not trucking to class in any sweatshirts or Levi's or anything. She expected us to sort of dress the part or at least better clothes. Maybe not suits or anything, but she expects to appear in a somewhat professional capacity.

**Cassie:** Okay, so what did a typical day look like for you on campus?

**Suzanne:** Well, I used to have my morning classes as much as I could, cuz I like to get my classes done with for the day and then have the rest of the day to do whatever I needed to, whether it be study or whatever. I remember working at registration.

So that if you worked at registration, and at that time, it wasn't on a computer online, you actually physically had to go through and get your punch cards. And how do we do that? Yeah, and if you work at registration, you got to register first. So we learned that very early on, and both my roommate and I applied and worked just about every registration there was during our time at Western.

And you could just go ahead and pick your classes and have everything lined up. And you knew that you were going to get them instead of having to go in and find out no, that class was filled, or you had to get a C card or whatever.

**Cassie:** So you had it figured out, you had an in.

**Suzanne:** We had it figured out early, yeah.

**Cassie:** Do you remember what you used to do in your free time?

**Suzanne:** We played a lot of card games. I learned to play bridge and we played a lot of eucher and, of course, there were parties, and once I started dating my husband, there were more fraternity parties and things, so we did our share of that.

And socializing and studying and just kind of living day to day, as I'm sure kids do now. We didn't have cell phones, so the online socializing was more in person.

**Cassie:** Do you have any recollections about events that you remember while you were at Western, whether it be sports events or parties, something like that?

**Suzanne:** Yeah, football games in the fall and snow carnivals in the winter. I still have all the old pictures and things on slides from the snow carnivals. And like I said, various parties and we would have parties at our apartment.

**Cassie:** Snow carnivals?

**Suzanne:** Yeah, parents' weekend was really special cuz that was the first time that our parents met once we were dating.

And that was a lot of fun, that weekend, because the parents really joined in and really partied with us so those were some special memories to be made.

**Cassie:** Yeah, and what was the snow carnival?

**Suzanne:** What was snow carnival?

**Cassie:** Mm-hm.



**Suzanne:** It was a big winter party and all the fraternities, all the dorms would make these fantastic ice sculptures and they were pretty good.

They usually had a theme and like I said, I've got pictures from those cuz it was a big wintertime event. And then, of course, the snow sculptures would last for a good portion until the temperature started warming up. I don't know what the climate is in Kalamazoo anymore, but we used to have a lot of severe storms.

**Cassie:** Yes, we still do.

**Suzanne:** Okay, yeah, coming in off the lake and yeah, it was equal to, if not more than homecoming. I mean, everybody at the campus really got involved, and you walk around and see all the snow carnivals. I'm trying to remember other events that went along with it.

I think I'm sure there was a dance or something. And then, of course, the concerts and things that we used to go to, those were always memorable too.

**Cassie:** So what do you think impacted you the most during your time at Western, whether it be an event or a person, place, thing?

**Suzanne:** Well, you have to remember that the Vietnam War was going on and that was a very, very major event, and it was the time of the hippies and it was a different time to have lived. And I've often laughed and said that maybe we need to all band together as senior citizens and do what we did back then to make change in the world.

But yeah, the Vietnam War was very strategic and a very key event, because I remember my husband's senior year that they were ending the draft, but they had that big drawing so that you were no longer eligible because a lot of guys were in school just to avoid the draft.

And that last year they did this lottery and it was by birth date, and those whose birth dates came up earlier were to be drafted as soon as they were through. Yeah, so that was a key thing that happened during our time at Western.

**Cassie:** I just have— sorry, what were you gonna say?

**Suzanne:** No, I was just gonna say I don't know if there's very much on things that happened during that time, but we would have big protest marches down the main part of campus.

**Cassie:** Really?

**Suzanne:** It was an interesting time to have been there.

**Cassie:** Did you participate in some of the protests too?

**Suzanne:** I did.

**Cassie:** What was that like?

**Suzanne:** Well, you felt like you had a voice and that you were you were protesting what we thought was an incorrect war. My brother was there in the Navy. He served two deployments, so I think I had a sort of a personal connection to that. Yeah, I'm trying to think what was the question once again?

**Cassie:** I was just asking what it was like to participate in the protest.

**Suzanne:** Yeah, it was different, and I remember that I think the police came one time and kinda broke it up and we all sort of ran off or whatever.

I was never arrested or anything like that, but there was the hippie faction. I didn't consider myself a true beatnik or hippie or anything at that time, but that faction was on campus and was certainly a leader of the protests. It was an interesting time to be in college.

**Cassie:** Yeah, so how do you feel about Western now versus when you were going to Western?

**Suzanne:** Well, I have a lot of really good memories. We've donated some money to it, probably not as much as we have. I've been watching some of the business school emails that I've been getting.

In fact, I just read one this morning about the students and all the entrepreneurial things they're doing. And it's really quite impressive that students are really starting businesses and things even before they're done. And I was gonna talk to my husband about maybe doing something more positive for these things, cuz I think they're really doing a tremendous amount of good.

And the students coming out of Western are still very A1, top of their game.

**Cassie:** Yeah, and I just had one last question really. Were there any other memories that you wanted to share as we're finishing up or any topics we didn't touch on that you wanted to talk about?

**Suzanne:** I've got two quick memories.

**Cassie:** Yeah, go ahead.

**Suzanne:** One is about computers, and I'm trying to think how that related, because they must have been on campus if we had the punch cards to be fed through, something for registration. But I remember being in the business school and they made an announcement.

It was either my junior or senior year, and they had something called computers up in the business school. There were no classes, they said that classes would be coming for the students. But they were housed in a very special area on north campus someplace, was my understanding, and that they were in rooms that had to be temperature-controlled and humidity-controlled.

And it was this big new thing, and they were called computers. We had no idea exactly what it was. And I think that was one of my first introductions to the word even. I remember computers coming to campus anyway.

**Cassie:** Wow,

**Suzanne:** In that fashion. And the other thing was, my husband and I, hold on... My husband and I went to I think it was a marketing problems or some kind of a research thing that was being done, and it must have been happening through the business school, as I remember. And one of the professors had announced that they were doing this testing of plastic bags in the grocery store.

And it was being done up near my home in Manistee, Michigan. And my parents still lived in that area. So my husband Ron and I drove up and attended this testing that they were doing on these plastic bags, and they were the precursor to the plastic bags that you see all over the grocery stores now.

And I remember my husband and I saying, "This isn't gonna work" because the bags weren't that big. And at the time, the problem was that they didn't have an easy way to put the plastic bag on something so that they could load the groceries in it. And it seemed like it was a very cumbersome idea.

So we've always laughed cuz we said, well, what did we know about plastic bags and how popular they were going to be? Cuz we didn't think it was gonna ever come to fruition. We thought they were paper bags.

**Cassie:** Yeah, it's funny. Like two items that are so commonplace nowadays, you basically saw come to fruition at your time at Western.

**Suzanne:** Yeah.

**Cassie:** Wow.

**Suzanne:** So enjoy your time there and getting started in your career. And if you don't like what you're doing, my advice is to find something that you do like cuz you spend a lot of time in your job, and it's important to do that.

**Cassie:** Well, thank you for the advice. And thank you so much for talking to me today. I really enjoyed hearing your stories. And I'm not sure cuz I didn't look at your consent form yet. But if you are willing to have your picture or photo accompany your story, then you can just email me a photo of yourself or whatever from whenever.

If you have a photo from your time at Western or a more recent photo, whichever you'd like, that you'd like to accompany your story, you can email that over to me.

**Suzanne:** Okay.

**Cassie:** And when your story is up on the website, I'll send you a link so that you can go view it.

**Suzanne:** Okay.

**Cassie:** Awesome. Did you have any other questions?

**Suzanne:** I don't, except if I have trouble getting that consent form to you, I will reach back out.

**Cassie:** Okay, sounds good. All right. Well, take care, have a great rest of your day.

**Suzanne:** Thank you. You do the same.

**Cassie:** Thanks. Bye.

**Suzanne:** All right. Bye.