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Joseph Pillion: A Career in Speech with a Stutter and Life with Dr. Van Riper

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WMU Alum Joseph Pillion

Wednesday, Jan. 25 at 2:30 pm

Virtual Meeting via Zoom

Cassie: And then I'll have you introduce yourself for the recording and spell your last name, and then we can get started. Sound good to you?

Joe: Sure.

Cassie: Okay, great. All right, so I am recording now, so go ahead whenever you're ready.

Joe: Hi, I'm Joseph Pillion.

Cassie: Okay, thank you. And so you said in the document that you sent to me (written below) that you weren't originally from Kalamazoo and you weren't going to Western. You actually started out at Northeastern. Is that correct?

Joe: That's right. I started out at Northeastern Boston. I grew up in West Newton, Massachusetts, and I went to Northeastern for two years.



Towards the end of my second year, I learned that there was a stuttering therapy program at Western Michigan, and I wrote Dr. Van Riper, and he wrote me back this nice letter. I think I still have a copy of it somewhere.

Cassie: Really, wow.

Joe: And he invited me to attend the fall stuttering therapy group, and I decided to go, which meant that I had to withdraw from Northeastern. That was a big commitment since it was during the Vietnam War, and it meant that I was eligible for the draft.

Cassie: Right. Yeah.

Joe: In fact, I got drafted that fall, but I failed the physical.

Cassie: Wow, okay. So you actually did get drafted during the time that would have been during when you were invited in the fall by Dr. Van Riper, is that correct?

Joe: Right, yes.

Cassie: Okay, but you didn't have to go, so you did go to come to Western.

Joe: Right, yeah.

Cassie: Wow.

Joe: Yeah, so that fall, I attended the fall therapy group, and it was pretty intensive, and that was all I did that fall. Then spring term, I started to take a couple of classes at Western, and one was from Dr. Van Riper, Intro to Speech Pathology and Audiology.

That was the only speech pathology audiology course that I took on the West Campus. Rest of them were on the East Campus.

Cassie: Right. Was that also the only class that you took with Dr. Van Riper?

Joe: No, I took another class in Stuttering that was on the East Campus in the Speech and Hearing Clinic.

Cassie: Okay.

Joe: Yeah.

Cassie: Was that that same term or the next year?

Joe: I think that was next year.

Cassie: Okay.

Joe: By that time, I had decided to transfer to Western.

Cassie: Okay, yeah. And you mentioned that I think you were encouraged to stay with political science, correct? But take as many speech courses as you could?

Joe: Right, yeah. They didn't think at that time that my stuttering would permit me to major in speech pathology. They thought I was better off keeping my political science major. That way, I would still be able to graduate on time.

Cassie: Okay, but so you took all the courses, though.

Joe: Hm?

Cassie: But you took all of the speech courses, though?

Joe: Yeah, and Dr. Van Riper encouraged me to go into the field, so I went to graduate school at the Ohio State University, where I got my master's and PhD in Speech and Hearing.

Cassie: Wow, wow, so you actually did end up going into it further in your education, and did you work in the field then?

Joe: Yes, I did. Once I got my PhD, I did a postdoc at Johns Hopkins and the Kennedy Krieger Institute. I was there three years, then I left for a job down in Virginia. Then I went back to Kennedy Krieger, where I worked for 31 years.

Cassie: Wow.

Joe: I ended up retiring from that job.

Cassie: Wow, so that's a long career in the field that you were advised maybe to not go into, too. But it sounds like Dr. Van Riper, though, was a real push for you to stay on this and stay in this field and even get into it in the beginning.

Joe: Right, he was, he helped me a great deal. In fact, for fall term of 1970, I lived on his farm, and I would work with him every day. And that was quite an experience.

Cassie: Yeah, so it sounds like you built quite a relationship with him. What was that like, that relationship?

Joe: Yeah, I definitely did. He was quite the dynamic person. He was up every morning early, reading and writing. He wrote quite a few of the early textbooks in speech mythology. And he would be reading and writing every morning. He would probably get up at 4:30 or five. By the time I would see him, he would already have done quite a bit of work.

Cassie: Wow, and did you keep in touch with him then after you left Western?

Joe: Yes, I did, for several years.

Cassie: Okay, and what did that look like?

Joe: Well, he had advised me on where to apply to graduate school, that sort of thing. At one point, one of my sister's children was showing some signs of stuttering, and he had advised me on what to tell her to do about that. And they're both fine today. In fact, all three of my children are normal speakers as well. I followed some of the tips that he gave me and teaching them as well.

Cassie: Wow, so it sounds like he was a pretty big influence on your life and your career.

Joe: Yeah, he definitely was. He helped me a great deal.



Cassie: Wow, and so other than Dr. Van Riper, then, what else do you think impacted you the most during your time at Western?

Joe: Well, I think the East Campus was a very nice place to take classes. It was like going to a small college. You'd see people that you knew in every class that you went to there. At lunchtime, we would go to the Walwood Union, and at lunchtime, you could sit at a table with one of your professors, and that was great. You wouldn't have that same experience on the West Campus.

Cassie: Right, it was like a small community almost, it sounds like.

Joe: Right, yeah, that's exactly the way that it was.

Cassie: Wow, yeah, and you can definitely tell that too, with your relationship with Dr. Van Riper, that it sounds like people are very connected and such. And you also mentioned in the short paper that you sent over to me also taking classes in some of the other buildings like East Hall and sometimes going over to North Hall. I'm wondering, what do you remember about some of those buildings?

Joe: Well, the steps on East Hall, both in the front and the rear, I remember walking down the steps, going home on a cold winter's night, headed back to my apartment.

Inside the building, the ceilings were quite high. It was a beautiful building to take classes. I didn't spend that much time in North Hall, but there was a small library that some of us would sometimes spend time studying in.

Cassie: Right, and it sounds like you also then were in the building that is no longer there that the speech and audiology was in. Do you remember anything about that building?

Joe: Well, there were several classrooms in that building that I would have classes in, the speech therapy rooms were in that building. And that's where I had most of my therapies in the fall term of 1969 and the spring term of 1970. There were observation rooms where the speech pathology students in training would be observed.

There were audiology booths where the audiology students would do their testing. There was a small speech and hearing science lab. And that's where the faculty had all of their offices, too. There was one small part of the building also where the blind rehab program was located.

Cassie: Okay, and so who all did you work with during your speech therapy? I think you mentioned one other person other than Dr. Van Riper as well, right?

Joe: Mr. Paul Czuchna.

Cassie: Okay, so you worked with both Dr. Van Riper and Paul Czuchna, then?

Joe: Paul Czuchna, yeah.

Cassie: Okay, and so what was-

Joe: And there were student therapists that I would work with also.

Cassie: Okay, so what was that speech therapy like? I know you said it was pretty intensive in the fall when you first got here.

Joe: Right, when it started off we would learn what we did, when we would stutter. Then, we had assignments to go out and speak to people, ask directions, that type of thing. Go into stores and speak to people, speak up in our classes. Then, we learned stuttering modification techniques. First, was the cancellation to repeat a word that we stuttered on but in a different way than pullouts.

If we got into a block, to ease our way out of it, then something that was called a preparatory set, where we anticipated stuttering on a word. And rather just go into it and block, but to ease our way into it. But to still stutter, but in a less severe manner than we might otherwise do. So we spent a lot of time working on those various techniques.

Cassie: Okay, so when you weren't in speech therapy or in your classes later on, what did you spend your free time or the rest of your time doing in Kalamazoo?

Joe: Well, I had friends that I met. I go to parties and that type of thing. Sports, I like to go to football, basketball, and hockey games. And I still follow all Western Michigan sports.

Cassie: Okay.

Joe: As well as Ohio State sports.

Cassie: Right, yeah, well, two good, two pretty good schools. I don't know. Western's not on Ohio State's level probably, but...

Joe: Their hockey team is.

Cassie: Right, yes, that's true.

Joe: It's a great hockey team. They're ranked, I think, ninth right now. Last year they went to the Frozen Four.

Cassie: Right, right, yeah. And I just had two more questions for you, really. One is going back to the beginning of your relationship with Dr. Van Riper and coming to WMU. You mentioned that he wrote you a letter personally back trying, or I think he recommended that you come in the fall then. Is that correct?

Joe: Right.

Cassie: And so if you're willing to share, what do you remember about that letter?

Joe: He talked about the program, what the therapy would entail, the date that it would start, other times that it would be, any mentions that I would need to find a place to live. Those were the main things, I think, that were in the letter.

Cassie: What was your speech like at the time that you were getting into the program? And how do you think that the program helped you?

Joe: Well, it might've taken me, back in those days, a minute just to say my name. It was a really severe block on every word. On multi-syllabic words, I might block on every syllable. So it was pretty severe and the therapy helped me a great deal.

Cassie: And I just had one final question then, were there any last memories that you wanted to share or anything that we didn't touch on, maybe that you wanted to talk about?

Joe: Nothing that I can think of. I think I've pretty much covered everything. I really like the east campus. And I'm kind of sad that two of the buildings got torn down. I'm glad that they did restore east hall, that's being used.

Cassie: Yep.

Joe: But yeah, that's all I can say, I guess.

Cassie: Yeah, well, thank you so much for talking to me today and sending over what you did.

Note: Any stutter in speech during the interview was not picked up and translated by the transcription service used.

Additional words by Joe sent via email prior to the meeting as a document:

I grew up in the Boston area and attended Northeastern University for two years. I was a very severe stutterer and a political science major with no idea what I would be able to do in terms of a career. After my sophomore year, I wrote Dr. Charles Van Riper at Western Michigan about the possibility of receiving stuttering therapy at Western. At the time he was Distinguished University Professor and semi-retired. He wrote a long personal letter back and invited me to attend the fall stuttering clinic. The Speech and Hearing Clinic was located on the East campus in a building that has now been demolished. I decided to withdraw from Northeastern and travel to Kalamazoo for the clinic that fall. This was a risky move at the time as I was immediately eligible for the draft. The clinic was led by Paul Czuchna who was one of the clinic supervisors at that time. I did get to meet Dr. Van Riper at one point that fall. I later decided to start taking some classes at Western and ultimately tried to major in speech pathology and audiology. I was advised to complete my major in political science but to take as many courses in speech pathology as I desired. I took most of the speech pathology and audiology curriculum. All but one of the classes was on the East campus. Several classes were in the Speech and Hearing Clinic building. Many others were in East Hall with its high ceilings. After class I would have to walk down the long steps towards my apartment on Village Street. Oftentimes, a group of SPPA students would study together in

the small business library in North Hall. At lunch time, faculty and students would gather together in the Walwood Union where there was a cafeteria. The East campus offered an intimate small college experience for the SPPA, Blind Rehab, and Occupational Therapy majors and graduate students. Because I had all of my other classes on the West campus the contrast was very marked for me and experienced on a daily basis as I made the long walk up Oliver Street towards the East campus.