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Cliff Pelloni: the King at Burger King

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WMU Alum Cliff Pelloni

Wednesday, Feb. 1, 2023 at 4:15 pm

Virtual Meeting via Google Meet

Cassie: Okay, so we are recording now. So, I will have you, again, say your name, introduce yourself, spell your last name for us, and then we'll talk about your connection to WMU.

Cliff: Sure, so I'm Cliff Pelloni and I live in Roswell, Georgia. I'm originally from Battle Creek.

Cassie: Okay, and so when did you attend WMU?

Cliff: I was a transfer student. I transferred in the fall of '84. I went to Kellogg Community College for two years cuz I played golf there. And then I transferred over to WMU, and I graduated in '87. So I was on a three-year plan.

Cassie: Okay, and what did you go to WMU for? What did you end up majoring in?

Cliff: Marketing, I majored in marketing.

Cassie: Okay, so what brought you to WMU other than, was it just because it was the local university, or were there other things that sort of influenced your choice?

Cliff: I looked at a lot of colleges in-state because I was going to go in-state. Proximity was an issue. I mean, it was nice that it was close. I had friends that had gone there because I had gone to KCC first. I had some friends that went there.

So I had visited the campus before. I liked the feel of the campus. It had a good reputation, nice history, and it wasn't that far, so everything was just pushing me towards WMU.

Cassie: So did you enjoy that decision? Did you enjoy your time at WMU? How would you summarize your three years there?

Cliff: Sure, no, it was a great experience. Lots of memories. It was the first time, obviously, a lot of people being away from home. When I went to junior college, I stayed at home, but then I moved to Kalamazoo. I got an apartment for my first semester, and then I'm like, I
kind of feel like I’m missing out. So the next semester, I moved into Draper Seidschlag, 409 Draper. I still remember that, 409 Draper.

**Cassie:** Yeah, and so how long did you stay there for?

**Cliff:** I stayed in there for a year, and then what happens it probably still happens, is I met a lot of people within the community, within Draper. Met some friends, joined some organizations, then we got an apartment in Knollwood, which has got, that was a long time ago.

**Cassie:** Okay, yeah. Okay, so going back to the beginning, then, when you first transferred, what are some of your earliest memories on campus?

**Cliff:** Some of my earliest memories on campus probably would be moving into the dorms. That was one of the things that was a very walkable campus at the time. Obviously, I went there a long time ago, but there was a Burger King at the end of, I think what is that, West Main, right? So I came out of my dorm, and you walked down, and there was a Burger King, and that was at the time where everybody was spotting Elvis.

So that was a big thing. In the news at the time, Elvis works at the Burger King on the campus of Western Michigan University. That was just one of those things that was in the news nationally. So I thought that was kind of funny.

**Cassie:** That is funny!

**Cliff:** Yeah, I remember when they had the orientation, so it was just before classes started, and they had some activities and stuff, and it was kinda cool cuz it was fall, it was September, meeting a lot of different people, adjusting to life, dorm living.

I moved in with a friend of mine who’s actually still my friend today. So I knew him from high school, and we were lifelong friends, and we were college roommates. I remember the walk to East Campus, the infamous walk to East Campus. And I made the mistake and I learned this, and I passed this on, is that you do not take classes, if possible, on a Friday morning at 8 o’clock.

**Cassie:** Yeah.

**Cliff:** Right, I tried to cram in as many one semester, as many classes as I could, and I’m like, Friday, I’ll get it done early, right? But that was tough to get up and do that walk, and then especially when it was winter, because you’d have to get all bundled up, and then you’d have to make the trek across campus, go up the hill.

And then go into these campus buildings, which were great, but since they were built way back, they just had the radiator heating and there was really bad control of heat. And I’m sure that didn’t change, right, for a long time. So here you are, you’re all warm from your cold.
You sit into a room and there's just so many people nodding off, and the teachers, professors, they were sensitive to that. But it was also the thing, we can't do much about it. It's either on or off. So sometimes the room would be 60 and everybody would be cold, or it'd be like 90 and everybody's falling asleep.

**Cassie:** Yeah, especially those early morning classes, I bet.

**Cliff:** Yes, and actually, I remember there was one specific time where it was a Monday, because on Sunday, cuz I was the homecoming king in 1986, I think it was. Yeah, it was '86/'85. Yeah, so the whole contest and things occurred on a Sunday, and I had a major math test that next Monday, and it was for like 40% of your grade.

**Cassie:** Oh no!

**Cliff:** Yes, exactly. So the whole contest itself was fun. I won, I came back to my dorm room and one of the guys had taken a toilet seat from the bathroom and put it up in my room because he said, every king needs a throne. And then there were people stopping by, but I tried to study, but that next morning it was tough. And needless to say, I didn't do so well on that test.

**Cassie:** Yes, well, you've talked a little bit about some of the quirks of East Hall, and I'm wondering, do you remember anything else about any of the buildings during your time.

**Cliff:** Sure, I remember I really liked being up at East Campus Hall because, one, I liked the historic aspect of the buildings cuz that was the original campus, and so I liked that kind of feel.

Nothing wrong with new buildings, but I kind of liked the fact that I was going to a place where other people had gone for decades, right? And then it was very serene up there. Because you're high up, too. You had some really great views, and so they had a library also.

So a lot of times I would just kind of hang out there to get away from the business of the main campus, especially in the fall when the leaves were changing and it was really nice up there. I'd have class, and I would just hang out with some other people, find a spot, relax, go study. And it was almost like I got to get away from campus. But I was still on campus, right? Yeah.
Cassie: Interesting, so what did a typical day look like for you while you were at WMU?

Cliff: It probably would depend on the semester and things like that. We would get up and then make it down to the cafeteria. This is when I lived on campus, right?

So we would make it down to the cafeteria in time for breakfast. I usually try to make my classes in the mornings so I could have the afternoons to study or to work or to do whatever. And then get back later in the afternoon, make sure I could have lunch somewhere, go study.

For a long time that my friend and I, we get to play racquetball. So we go over to the gym and we played racquetball. Sometimes there were events going on within the halls, so we would do that. I stayed a lot on campus. There was lots to do.

I made friends at other halls and so occasionally we'd go off like many people and I was a broke college student. So I didn't have a lot of money to go off and do things. So we'd find things to do. The student center at the time was not anywhere as near as I understand as it is now, right.

So it closed at a certain point. I think there was one food, not even one place to get food. That wasn't really a thing. But we did a lot of walking. I walked a lot, people try to stay physically fit. College has changed so much in decades ago and now they have all these facilities.

It's like health club and you just got all kinda different things you can do. But no, I just hung out with people, tried to get work done. Sometimes I had a job or things like that. Just typical college.

Cassie: Did you work while you were taking classes, too?

Cliff: Sometimes I did, sometimes I didn't. I worked during the summers a lot and so I would kinda bank up my money. But I do remember a couple jobs I had while I was working at school. One was at the mall and I forget Westnedge. Is it Westnedge Mall? I think it is.

Cassie: Yes, Crossroads.

Cliff: Crossroads Mall, right. So Crossroads Mall there used to be a nut and fruit shop called Morrow's Fruit and Nut Shop where they roasted nuts and they had fruits and things like that. And that was an interesting job. I got to see a lot of people.

I worked at a marketing company because I was in marketing. And I did an internship where I had to call the Blueberry Pickers Association of America Members to do a survey. And I guess at the time they were all picking blueberries because I couldn't get a hold of hardly anybody. And then I remember one time I worked at a big and tall man shop.

Cassie: Interesting.

Cliff: It was some very interesting job. But let's say when you're in college, you do what you can find.
Cassie: Yeah, right. And you talked a little bit about how sometimes halls would have events or something. Do you remember anything about those?

Cliff: I think, yeah, sometimes. And I can’t remember if this was specific to homecoming week or if we just did a thing. I remember in Draper/Siedschlag there was a girls dress guys contest. So every floor would have to have a representative and somebody would volunteer or be selected.

And then the girls would dress them up and that was one and then ladies who ran the cafeteria, they judged. So I think that was.

Cassie: Really?

Cliff: Yes, yes. That was very interesting. There were some things out on the lawn. I remember a couple of times that there’s a big hill outside that dorm that kinda goes down.

And a couple of times it was just like they set up some music and they sponsored some food. I think somebody got a grill, some spontaneous it was still sponsored, but it was more spontaneous. People had frisbees. It was one of those things where winter had lasted a long time. You got that early break, you start to smell spring and everything. And everybody, even though there was like 50 or 46 degrees out. We were all outside, people were laying out because it gets a little bit of sun.

Cassie: Right.

Cliff: Things like that. Yeah, that’s a long time ago.

Cassie: Yeah, no worries. So what were some of your favorite spots in and around Kalamazoo?

Cliff: Well, because it was in walking distance, we went to Waldo’s Tavern a lot. Right. And I think it’s still there. And I think it had opened only a few years before I got there.

So we went to Waldo’s and then there were some places gosh, I don’t remember they were Electric Avenue, I think it was called. And it was a dance club bar downtown Kalamazoo. We went to Bilbo's Pizza. I don’t know if that’s still there.

Cassie: Yeah.

Cliff: And then right by the Burger King down from Waldo’s, a Dairy Queen opened up. And they came out with something that was really new at the time. It was called the blizzard, right. So this Blizzard came out. And so I remember that my roommate and I at the time and you can do this when you’re young, you can’t do it now when you’re old.

But we would go down and we would get blizzard, these big super tall ones that are probably two days' worth of calories and stuff because it was so new and it was great. And I’d get the M&M Oreo and we’d do like twice a day. And then we realized after a while we
gained about six or eight pounds from eating all that candy and ice cream. So we stopped that.

Let’s see what else. Enjoyed the football games. I remember the whole becoming homecoming king. That was an interesting process. And actually, a matter of fact, I have a couple of things I wanna show you. I have a Western Michigan University 1983-85 catalog.

Cassie: Wow. It’s big too.

Cliff: This is when you have to go through and figure out your right. And then I go through I have a WMU folder where I catch stuff through. And then this was what the Western Herald used to be like.

Cassie: Yeah.

Cliff: And then there’s some evidence.

Cassie: So this is the paper from when you were homecoming Kingdom?


Cassie: Wow. That’s amazing.

Cliff: Yeah. Draper sponsored me, I guess one of the people said I’ll do it. And then you had to do two things over two days.

You had to dress up as your favorite Disney character and then you had to perform something on stage that related to college life. So actually, it was on a Friday and then. It started Friday and then. Well, it was a homecoming week because they had to count everybody.

And so I went out and I found a costume shop and I rented a Jesters outfit, black and white gestures outfit. And then I found a music place that loaned me a Lear, a mandolin-type thing. And so then I kinda talk sung a song about college life. And then… Yeah so I sat down all day Saturday and just made it up. And at the same costume shop, I found a pinocchio outfit.

Cassie: So you dressed as Pinnochio.

Cliff: And then they asked me questions about why did you dress up as this character and blah, blah, blah.
And then I was king and I’m like oh my gosh. And so beyond this celebration, there wasn’t a lot of benefit. I did get to be on the field during homecoming, right? But then I guess either the football team was really anxious or we were slow to get off.

All of a sudden, I heard this rumble, and here comes this whole football team. They just ran right over us, essentially right by us. So I remember that. And then I remember that at that Burger King of the week that this paper came out, I was going through and I was at the drive-through and the guy recognized me. So he gave me one of those paper crowns because he said, “Hey, you’re the king and you need to have a crown!”

**Cassie:** That’s cool.

**Cliff:** So fun times, I remember a lot of different classes. The professors seemed to be very caring. That’s what I liked about Western. Some of the schools you can get that are just so big and you never see your professors.

But a lot of them, even when we had big classes, they still took the time to talk to people. If you had questions, there were times when they had office hours. I reached them and I reached out to them, and they were great. One of my favorite classes ever was modern Japanese culture.

And I took that and I just enjoyed it. And I learned all about Japanese culture. And it was funny cuz later on my kids, I have two boys in middle school, they learned Japanese.

**Cassie:** Wow, so I just have a few more questions to ask you.

**Cliff:** Sure.

**Cassie:** I wanted to ask some more, they might be harder to answer, but more reflective questions. What do you think impacted you the most during your time at WMU? Whether it be a person, an event, a thing?

**Cliff:** Sure, this is probably a different answer than I think you’re looking for. But I think what impacted me the most was the opportunity for me to grow as a person by being on my own and having to make my own decisions, right? That’s just part of the college life. But especially when I was living on campus, you had to decide what you do with your time.

You need to do that. I felt the nice part about it was that Draper to me was a home, right? There was a common area. It was attached to a girls dorm, so you could meet people over there. So I think really the reflective point was helping me make my own decisions, and then having staff and people that would support it. The RAs, the hall directors, the instructors. It was one of those things where I didn’t feel like I was just a cog in a big machine but that they actually cared.

**Cassie:** And how do you feel about WMU now versus when you were a student at WMU?
Cliff: Sure, well, I wish I live in Atlanta, Metro Atlanta, so I wish I could get back more. I did go back a couple of years ago. I was driving through, so I stopped in. It's changed so much, but I would expect it to, and it's changed in a good way, so that's a nice thing. It's become much bigger and newer, and some of the roads that used to be there aren't there anymore.

It's nice that they're preserving some of the older stuff from an East Campus standpoint. I like to see that they're modernized it and they're becoming more competitive, because when you think of Michigan colleges, people think of two colleges, right? Mostly because of football, but it's time for WMU to get the respect it really deserves.

I just like to see that it's growing, it's continuing, and it's gonna serve students now, and it's gonna serve students for the next 100-200 years.

Cassie: And I did have a question that I just thought of too. I meant to ask it earlier. Was there anything while you were going to WMU that you didn't like about WMU or being a student there?

Cliff: That I didn't like... Well, I didn't like that at 10:00, they used to lock the doors between Draper/Seidenschlag, because before it was just a big long hallway, right? Cuz it's one building, but it was designed as one building and at one point, they divided from girls to guys, right?

So you might be hanging out with some people whatever, just doing whatever. And all of a sudden, I'm on the fourth floor over here, and I got to go down all the way down to the basement, go all the way back up. That was a small thing, but that was kind of pain in the butt.

Now, I didn't like that they allowed, I don't know if they did allow, but at the time, you weren't supposed to cook or have a hot plate in your room. And just because maybe the acoustics of it, but you could really tell when someone made something that wasn't great, and you couldn't identify the room, but it would stink up the whole place.

Those are minor things, there's nothing major. The walk was tough. The walk during the winter to East Campus was tough. I liked it during the summer and the spring. I did a couple of classes in the summer. In the fall, it was great. But yes, I cursed myself several times.

And the last one is, cuz I still have one of those, when I moved off campus, I saw a lot of friends that lived in the dorms. And they were fanatical about giving you parking tickets.

Cassie: Yeah.

Cliff: Back then I don't know what it is now, but back then it was like $6, which is, like, big, and if you missed the due date, it goes like $22, which massive money back then. And so I accumulated a few of those.

Cassie: Yeah, that's what a lot of people say actually, when I ask them that.

Cliff: Is it really?
Cassie: Yes, today and all the way back to the 50s, it’s parking.

Cliff: They were around. It was just one of those things. Well, it was a revenue generator, right? It was a revenue generator, but somehow they must have known that it was 12 seconds past where I was supposed to park. My time expired or something. And they must have had someone who could disperse 20 tickets in a 30 second… cuz I’m like where did they get all those tickets now?

Yeah, but overall, it was great. And I never got to see Elvis. They said he was working at the Burger King. I never got to see him.

Cassie: Instead, you were crowned king.

Cliff: I was crowned.

Cassie: You became the king at Burger King. (Both laugh)

Cliff: Since I couldn’t find the king, I became king. (Both laugh)

Cassie: Yeah so I just have one last question for you, and it says, do you have any other memories or anything you’d like to share, maybe topics that we didn’t touch on?

Cliff: Let me think about this. So Western is always a fond memory for me. When I think back, and I think this is just about life overall, the more I got involved in things, the better experiences I had, right?

And so one of the things I mentioned that when I first came to Western, I lived off campus because I wasn’t ready to get in the door. I didn’t know anybody, just a handful of people, right? And they already had roommates and stuff like this. Then I realized I felt, like, very isolated, right?

I felt alone. And once I moved on to campus and started to know people, became organizations, I helped charter a fraternity, delta signify, when I was there. It was just a much better experience when I got involved and I wasn’t afraid to talk to professors or I had questions and see them I’m like, they’re not mean. They want me to succeed.

There was one, and I can’t remember specifically off the top of my head. I think it was psychology or something like that, but it didn’t make sense to me. But I went to see him, and we had a discussion, and he realized that I understood what he was trying to teach, and he changed my grade there, right?

So he wanted me to succeed. It was a big change, but it was still I mean, he changed my grade. I think a lot of it had to do with just being involved. Find your group, find your tribe. Don’t be afraid to do other things. It’s that there’s some things I tried, and it wasn’t for me, but just being get involved.

Get involved, and then you won’t you won’t feel alone.
Cassie: Yeah. Being part of the community.

Cliff: Yes. There is one more thing that I didn't like, right? The brown and gold. So they've gotten much better. All the WMU wear has gotten better, okay? But back then, it was like brown potato sack clothes.

The designers had some issues or something, or maybe they didn't spend a lot of time. But now you got some great, cool-looking WMU wear.

Cassie: Right.

Cliff: And back then, it was just like a brown that wasn't, the gold wasn't very gold. It was like a pale yellow.

Cassie: Yeah, not very flattering.


Cassie: Right.

Cliff: What are you going to do if that's the colors?

Cassie: Yeah. Well, thank you so much for meeting with me today and talking with me, sharing your stories. I'm glad that we could reschedule for a time that worked for you as well. So thank you for being understanding and flexible with that.

Cliff: Sure and I'll get some pictures for you, and I'll send those over.

Cassie: Perfect yes, that'd be great. And if you wanna send a picture of the newspaper article too, we can include that. That'll be really cool.

Cliff: Okay. All right, we'll do.

Cassie: All right, thank you so much. If you have any questions or anything, email me, and then I'll let you know when your story is up on the website so you can go see your story and everyone else's, too.

Cliff: That'll be great. It may be people I haven't seen in 30 years.

Cassie: Right, yeah. Well, thank you have a good day.

Cliff: All right, thank you. Take care.

Cassie: Bye.