

## Interview With Mr. Caughell

Alex: The following interview was conducted on behalf of the Oral History program at Century High School. The interviewer is Alex Paine and the interviewee is Mr. Caughell. The interview took place on May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2002 at 9:10 AM.

A: What was your first involvement with CHS, and kinda, why did you choose to come here?

Mr. C: My first involvement with CHS was in 1996. I was president of the Hillsboro Education Association (HEA), which is a teacher's union, and I was invited to come to a big dirt patch, uh, right out, I don't where it was, but I think it was Mr., one of the school board members, named Mr. Vanderzanden turned over the first dirt, and I was here for that, and in fact that's on the archives I gave my little thing, How many days it was until they opened it. The school opened early, they actually made record time in building this school. That's my first involvement.

A: Umm...

Mr. C: Oh why did I want to come here?

A: Yeah.

Mr. C: Well I knew when I was not going to be President anymore, see President of the union means I don't teach, I advocate for the teachers. Um...when my, I was president for three years of all the teachers in the new school district. You know in 1996 we formed a new school district. We had 5 elementary districts, and the high school and junior high teachers were another union, in another district, and then we all formed together. In the fall of '96 was the first time that had happened. I was president from '96 to '99 of all the teachers, and then they asked what school I wanted to go to. See, I taught for like 20 years at Poynter Junior High, and I was tired of thirteen/fourteen year olds, and I wanted the big kids. I thought that Century was a brand new school, and I was excited about what they were doing, I really thought the new principal was going to be a good person, so I interviewed for the job, and they said fine, you're going to Century.

A: How would you compare your experience at the middle schools to your experience here? What was different?

Mr. C: Well the first big difference is uh, you're teaching kids who are 15/16/17 years old, as opposed to kids who are 12/13/14 years old, so the maturity level. Kids are more mature at the high school level, the curriculum was harder, and more involved, and how big this thing was. Century, I always tell people, what is it like teaching at Century, it's like teaching at Washington Square, because that's what this place is like. At Poynter I knew all the teachers, and I knew a lot of the kids. Here, I don't even know all the teacher's names, and I feel very bad about that. That's a downside of Century.

A: How did you become the union president?

Mr. C: First off, I was very concerned about teachers rights from the get-go, and I thought that sometimes teachers were being taken advantage of. I was very involved in the union, because that's what this is, it's a union. We pay dues, and we expect our union to bargain fair contracts, and good benefits, and good working conditions. We're most intimately involved with you guys, the kids, because if our working conditions are good, then those are good conditions in which to learn. Umm... I started out as a union representative at Poynter, and I was on the bargaining team, to help bargain contracts. In '94 to '96 I was president of the union that was just the junior high/high school teachers. There was an election, and I won that election, so I was president for three years of all the teachers.

A: How involved were you with the decision to switch to the block schedule at Century?

Mr. C: Yes I was. How that worked out from the union point of view, I would have to show you a contract, and I could get you that, and I can show you the page. But on our contract, you know what they teach over at Hilhi, the teachers teach 5, the kids have 6, and that's what our contract says, a high school/junior high teacher will teach no more than 5 periods. Well you know that here we teach 3 one semester and 3 the second semester, so that's six, but that's a violation of the contract. So what they did, is they came to the union, the teachers here, and said can we do something different, something outside the contract. We want to try this new schedule, because really in some ways it's better because we only teach three a day, and at Glencoe, Hilhi, and at Poynter they're teaching five a day, and so over the course of the year it's six, but it feels like only three a day, because that's what you do each day. It's your day-by-day that makes a difference, not over the whole big picture. So we have in our union, what is called a contract waiver, that means you can waive, if enough teachers in the building say, you know, there's a part of our contract I don't want to follow, because we want to try something new and innovational, which this was, a new way of teaching kids, and delivering, and teaching kids in a good way that was exciting and different. So, they, the first year here you know was just like Glencoe. In what, what year was it opened, '97-'98, yeah, yeah, and that year it was just like Glencoe, just like Hilhi. And then, during the course of that year they talked about it and talked about it here, and remember I wasn't here, I was in the union office. And, they brought it over and voted on it, and we wanted them to have a real high number because we wanted to be more, better, this would work better if more teachers bought into it, and we set a number, 80%, if 80% of your members say yes, we're willing to do this, and so they said they got like 88%, and they presented it to the whole union, our representatives, you know we have like a senate, and we voted that we approved it, and every since then they've waived the contract, and we said fine.

A: What were some of the challenges of being president of the union?

Mr. C: Good question. You're representing a very diverse group of people, not all teachers are the same, you've got teachers that teach little kids, kinder kids, and Mrs. Duyckinck teaching the advanced kids, you. Uh...you have different maturity levels,

different needs, uh...so teachers are not all the same, they are a really interesting group of people. And to represent such a diverse group, you can't just say that all teachers want this, they don't. (Goes on to talk about different types of teachers, money spent by teachers for kids, grade level teachers differences, elementary teachers, classroom differences, etc.) Just dealing with lots of different people, answering questions, and just trying to help them the best that I can. You know people think that unions are real hard, but all the cards are still in management, you know they control our working conditions, they can set the calendar. We have some rights, but we don't call the shots. The district office calls the shots.

A: What was your initial vision of CHS? How was it different coming to the school a year after it opened?

Mr. C: Well when I came in, remember, I came in '99, so I came in as a brand-new, like a kid. So it was weird, I knew very, very few people here, and some of these teachers had been together at Glencoe and Hilhi, and come in, and they had been together as a staff for two years, and had already done the old schedule, and one year of the new block schedule, so I had to learn the block schedule, plus learn as many teachers as I can, and the new system. It was new to me. And I hadn't taught in a while, although teaching is sort of like riding a bicycle, you're sort of like oh yeah, I remember this. So, that was a challenge, because I had been out of teaching for three years completely, so that was a challenge. The schedule wasn't bad, I found and I still find that 80-90 minutes for some kids is too long. I think 70 minutes might be more ideal. It was long for me, but then I got the hang of it, and now, like today we've got to do a 50 minutes class, I don't know, that's going to go like that, you know. I do like the longer classes, I think you can do more, go into more depth, a lot more depth. Challenges basically, new kid on the block.

A: What are some of the most significant changes you've seen since you've been here?

Mr. C: Size. This place is overcrowded. More and more and more and more kids. I mean, that office across the hall is going to be a classroom next year. That means you've got classes now, I don't know what your biggest class is, think about it. Are you a senior or junior? Junior. Do classes seem big to you?

A: My classes are fairly small, but there are a few, one in particular that is pretty large.

Mr. C: And maybe you can survive because you're really sharp and bright, and you can survive in that, but there are going to be some kids who will fall through the cracks. If they don't have the special attention they need, not just discipline. Teachers don't go into teaching to be a dictator. They go in because one, they care about kids, and two, they care about, or they better care about the curriculum. They better love, like I love history, and I hope my kids realize that, although I'm sure they sometimes think I'm being mean by taking out the book, and do the assignment, but you know I have their best interests at heart, but I think one of the big things that I've seen as a change is how overcrowded and, I think we are all starting to feel like rats in a maze. It gets too big, and there's not a sense

of community. Kids, you know come here, and it's like putting in your time at Intel, I don't like that.

A: How would describe the culture of CHS? Among staff, students, as a whole?

Mr. C: I would describe this staff, and students as extremely diverse. We have incredible range, from economic background, academic background, cultural, linguistic, racial, every which way, and that's what I notice about it, and that's what I like about Century. I also think it's accepting, for the most part. I think that, I'm in Full Spectrum, you know the Gay-Straight Alliance. I'm one of the co-advisors, and I know when we first came here, I thought there was a lot of bigotry, and I notice that there is less of it, I think that kids are more accepting. I think they go, oh okay. You're always going to have kids that are going to be...mean, and rude, and, but I think the vast majority of kids explain things, and that people understand, that makes sense to me. That...will be accepting, and kind to others, and that's how I, I, I don't know, we're certainly not there yet, there's certainly a lot more that this staff in this building can do, but I think the diversity and willingness to try new things. I think we've got an administration that's willing to try different things. Some of the things that they are talking about doing in the future are incredible.

A: Did I ask you about your initial vision of CHS?

Mr. C: No...well, oh...what I thought it would be like?

A: Yeah.

Mr. C: Remember I wasn't on, I'm sure like some of the people, like a core group that was actually on the planning team. That I wasn't on. I wasn't instrumental in how this building was going to be different than Hilhi and Glencoe, but I understood that when we interviewed they asked whether we would be willing to try a new schedule. So that I knew that was one of the things that they asked us about when Mr. Barnekoff, the first principal interviewed me over at the district office, he asked me would I be willing to try a new schedule, and of course what I could offer, and of course I talked about what I knew about history, and my travel experiences and how...The vision I had personally would be more a personal vision than a collective, like of the team. One thing that I can remember was that I was excited about this big place. I was curious about big kids and what it would be like to teach somebody other than middle school, so I was excited. I mean it's no big, incredible vision. That's what it was.

A: How much of that vision has been realized?

Mr. C: I like it here. I, I like teaching here. I like coming here. I hope that translates to the kids. (Goes on to talk about meditation, and patience) Did I answer your question?

A: Yeah.

Mr. C: Have I fulfilled the...say the question again. I don't think I answered it.

A: How much of that vision has been realized?

Mr. C: Yeah. It's getting better. One thing I've got to work on personally, I just, I know my kids better than I know my, the own teachers. It bothers me. When I walk down the steps, and hall, and I don't know the names of all the teachers, that really, really bothers me, because I came from a small school like Poynter, and we knew everybody, and we'd party together, and have celebrations. It was very common. Here we're so, so big. That's the biggest thing I'd like to change, and that's something I've got to work at too.

A: Is there anything else you'd like to say that we didn't cover?

Mr. C: Tell me what the big project is again.

A: We're looking back at the history of the school, and seeing how it has progressed and changed through time, from the initial conception to now.

Mr. C: Well you know, I bet when they started CHS, they never thought there would be anything like Full Spectrum Club, a gay-straight alliance, and yet our administration has been very, very accepting. I know the first year, the first principal was kind of a little worried what the community reaction would be. There is a law that if you receive tax dollars, if you have any kind of club, you gotta have virtually all kinds. Once they realized what a gay-straight alliance was, it wasn't about, it was about understanding gender differences and how people can be more accepting of gender differences, and how if you are, uh...trying to make people conform to a gender role. That would mean things like that no boy could ever be in a dance class, or be singing, or acting because this is a more feminine thing. Or a girl would not go out for sports because that's more a boy thing. If you get away from that, and I think basically that's homophobia, opposing the...that men never cry, that men are insensitive, that this is the way girls are, this is the way guys are. Get out of that, it sets us all free. Because we all know people have a right to be different, people have the right to be their own person. There are an infinite number of ways to be a human being, and I think that CHS is seeing that, and I see that beginning to expand, little by little, that we have a culture that says there are an infinite number of ways to be a human being. That's what I see.

A: I think that's all I have to ask. Thank you for your time.

Mr. C: Well, I enjoyed it, enjoyed talking about it a little bit.