

"Interview with Theresa Kirsch"
By AnhThu Lai and Katelyn Moorman

AL: The following interview was conducted on behalf of the oral history program of the Century High School. The interviewee is Theresa Kirsch. The interviewers are AnhThu Lai and Katelyn Moorman. The interview took place at Century High School on May 21, 2002.

AL: What was your first involvement with Century High School?

TK: My first involvement was being part of the Planning Team for 15 months. I remember starting in the spring 15 months before it opened. So I was involved in the beginning and I actually did not teach there the first year. I had an unplanned pregnancy, a very welcomed pregnancy, but I was not here the first year it opened, but I came back the following year. So that was my first experience.

AL: Did you have experience before the school started?

TK: As far as other teaching experience?

AL: Yes.

TK: Yeah, I had taught at Evergreen Middle School, primarily 9th graders, for 12 years...I believe it was, and loved the middle school program, and I think part of the reason I was appointed is because we worked on 9th grade teams and I was a ninth grade teacher and I had a positive experience. So the ninth graders were coming up to the high schools and it was like "what do we do with these wonderful children?"

AL: So how did that compare with Century when you first came here?

TK: Well, obviously, the middle school was very small, I mean, it's about half the size of what the high school is. It was a lot easier to incorporate or teach on the teams in the middle school. We had counselors that were attached to the teams, or grade levels, and communication at that point was easier. One of the things about the high schools being so large there are a lot more activities whether it's sports or clubs. It's just a busier place. And so at the middle school level the total focus was on academics and the emotional development of the kids. Whereas when you get up here into the high school the focus not only on the academics and emotional development and also on the activities, which makes kids well rounded.

AL: Why did you choose to be on the planning team?

TK: Primarily, number one, I was ready for a change, a challenging change, and the thought of being on the high school planning team, was feeding the need of what I was looking at. Also, the fact that the ninth graders were going to be moving up into the high school, I felt like I came with the knowledge of how they function these ninth graders and that I can be an asset. As far as math, I was also interested in starting an interactive math program I had heard, I'd seen it in action and it was important to me that we started an interactive offering here at Century also.

AL: How is Interactive Math different from the traditional math?

TK: Interactive math is what we call more problems solving focus. Kids need to explain why they see the connections. It's more conceptual learning. I hate to say that the traditional math doesn't have purpose but the Interactive Math; the kids see the connections. It's math with a purpose. It's not a mile wide; they focus on what's really important and what they need to know...not a lot of different topics. It is more problem solving focused.

AL: And you thought that it would be best for Century because...?

TK: Well, personally, I thought that it would be best for all the high schools. I really did. But it takes a lot of training and time on behalf of the math teachers and I was willing to try and help bring that along.

AL: What other schools have you been involved with?

TK: Well, other than my own children's school, it has been Evergreen Middle School and Century, so I've just had...I've worked at two at two different buildings. I guess that if you talk about student teaching, which was at South Albany High School, back in the middle 80s. So, I was there for about 3 months. So that's primarily it. Went to high school, to middle school, and back to high school.

AL: How were your decisions made on the Planning Team?

TK: The initial planning team, I hope I get this right, it seems to me, was about 10-12 staff members, all different subjects, some middle school, mostly high school teachers. And we met monthly. We wrote a vision statement, which is the current vision statement at Century High School. We, as a group, came to consensus on what we believed and the types of teachers that we were looking for to be apart of the team. We knew that we, really, we wanted block schedule. We knew that to open the building the first year with block schedule was not going to work. Just

coming to a new building is a lot of work in itself. Then to have the teachers teach on a block schedule that first year would be horrendous. So the first year, we opened up a traditional schedule, and although I wasn't teaching, I even came in on in-service days and met when they had block scheduling seminars, when they helped the teachers get ready for that, and all that first year, the focus was the block scheduling, and at that point, we had all the teacher on board. So back in the planning team days, we came to consensus on how we thought the building should operate, or what was the beliefs system. And that was how the decisions were made. It was consensus.

AL: What was the vision statement?

TK: The vision statement? I apologize, but I cannot remember it off the top of my head.

AL: Do you know what it was basically said?

TK: No...no...! This is bad! I know that we have it here, but I'm not even sure what it is! It's the same one...I know that. It hasn't changed.

KM: How are you chosen on the planning team?

TK: People who were interested wrote a letter to Phil Barnekoff, and on why they were applying to be apart of the planning team, and then he interviewed teachers. He made the ultimate decision. Probably, he had some input on his wife, who was an administrator, and there were also a few key people, who I don't know who they were. But he made the final decision.

AL: How did you and the Planning Team, decided to hire the staff here? And what qualifications were you looking for?

TK: First of all, we were looking for teachers who had a passion, not only for subject matter, but had a passion for kids. They had to like kids. I mean, that's our profession. And also, we are ready to come with the extra mile, they had to be open with teaching in a block schedule, they had to be open to change, because this is a big shift, I mean, they are trying to bring on the trimesters in the other two buildings and there are a lot of resistance. Some of the other buildings are open to it, but some are really resistance to change. So, once we did that, the planning team members, helped Mr. Barnekoff interview the teachers who wanted to come here. And we just made recommendations, did we think yes, we thought that this teacher fits or did this teacher did not fit. And ultimately, it was the three, it was all the building principals that decided, but pretty much, most of the teachers who

wanted to come. But there were some that did not. Let's say that there was an awesome teacher from Hilhi or Glencoe and their principal wanted to keep them, they stayed there...so that happened too.

AL: What were some of the challenges that came with the scheduling, because we changed from standard to block scheduling?

TK: What to do with 90 minutes. You know, it became obvious that we had to provide 2 to 3 different transition activities. And it was different in the way you thought about teaching in a section or a topic. Making sure that you gave the kids hands-on learning, especially with the freshmen. It's still difficult for the freshmen. And you really need transition activities. It took that first month, some of the classes seemed really long, but after awhile, it became easier and easier, and now with our Monday schedule, that time just seems so quick. I have a hard time adjusting to those shorter periods.

AL: How do you think we compare with other schools, such as Hilhi and Glencoe, with our schedules?

TK: They say, in the data, that we have good attendance record. At times, it's kind of hard to believe because sometimes the teachers think, "where are those kids, they're skipping?" They say that we have a better attendance, I think that most kids like to come to school here. That has been my impression and the kids are nice kids. That's how I have felt being on this side of Hillsboro versus being on the other side, which is really good, well-rounded kids. So that's what I've noticed.

AL: What do you think about the cultural distribution of Century High School?

TK: I like it. I think it's good, we live in a very mixed culture and I think that this is a better representation of how the real world is versus, I think, Glencoe, who does not have a lot of culture. And I think it is good, and it brings a lot of different flavors, as you want to put it to our school. I think it's good.

AL: How have you, or the Planning Team, contributed to helping Liberty High School in their development?

TK: Actually, I haven't been a part of that at all. I haven't even been asked any questions...pretty insignificant. To be honest, so I guess if they needed any help they would ask.

AL: What are some of the biggest changes you've seen here at Century since it opened?

TK: Well, one of the biggest changes since it opened has been the focus of the CAMs, we have like 3 or 4 CAMs, which when we opened CAMs was like a new word. It was viewed upon as a dirty word. Teachers just didn't know what to do. And now we have our Fame CAM, we have our Business CAM, we have our Health and Physiology CAM and now we're starting with a Technology. The technology fits beautifully because we have all this technology here. So we've come a long ways in implementing CAM programs. Another avenue that have been a big focus this year was the freshmen houses or freshmen teams where the teachers team together with the freshmen and the focus and primary reason we do that was to be successful and not be lost, because it's really overwhelming to be a freshmen coming into this school, 2000 students, very easy to get lost and disheveled. So trying to make them feel like they belong and yet help them along and give them tools to be successful. You know, we don't want kids to drop out; we really try to work with them. So those are the two biggest changes. I also love how I've seen how the Media Center is a big focus. It's a welcoming atmosphere, which is really nice.

AL: How do you deal with challenges or obstacles as a Planning Team?

TK: We actually work through with them in our meetings, just through conversations. It was a really vocal group...open...and people felt comfortable saying what they wanted to say. We didn't always agree, but it was okay to agree to disagree. But that didn't happen very often. But we were a vocal group. I don't really remember there being huge issues. But we were a vocal group.

AL: What was your vision for Century when it first opened for the next 5 years?

TK: When it first opened? Well, it takes a while for a school to develop its culture. When you come in, and it's just brand new, spankin' new, and clean, and it takes a while for high schools to build their traditions. You know, you walk into Glencoe, or you walk into Hilhi, you see banners in the gym, or you see trophies in the trophy case, and it's really nice to see where we're starting to develop that. But that takes a lot of time, effort, and hard work of the people here at school whether it's the activities director; I think that Mrs. Koellmann has done a wonderful job with our activities. That is a very time consuming job. And she's really come a long ways with the kids, because we didn't have a strong program when we first opened. But I really saw us as a high-tech school. I think that we were there and also with the CAM developments. So that was where my vision was.

AL: What is your vision now for the future, now that it has grown and developed?

TK: Next year is going to be a struggle. We are going to be very packed again with so many kids. It's really hard to be creative. Just like trying to find a spot to do this interview has been difficult. My heart goes out to these freshmen; I'm on a freshmen team. You know, I think about my own children, to come in as ninth graders, how lost would they be...would they be lost? And I think that we can do more work with the kids if we had maybe more space issues. And a lot of that is true in a lot of classes. And so any kind of block class or be creative is to be support, either with space support or support from your administrator, which they've always been great, been very supportive.

AL: How did the role of the principal, or leader of your Planning Team operate the whole meeting?

TK: He did run the meeting, but it was in a small room with about 10 or 12 of us. He would have an objective or a plan for the day and we knew what the agenda was. A lot of time and effort went into what our vision was and what kind of people we wanted. We also had to build community with ourselves because a lot of us didn't know each other really well. And so, I think that there was two different times where they hired a person to come in and so we got to know each other better. He is very pro-kids and that comes across in working with the staff. You know, very opened to talking or listening to suggestions. He was not autocratic, by any means. Very conducive to listening, he might not have always agreed, but he listened. And then he went back and he had a secretary Mrs. Hasen at the time, and she was very thorough and complete about writing up minutes and we knew exactly what was the expectation was and we usually had tasks that we needed to complete. We talked about certain dates and when we opened up, we had to go to all the high schools and all the middle schools. The Planning Team did this on evenings. We talked to the students about their choices and so there were a lot of evening times too. Usually that happened in February.

AL: How did the Planning Team get involved with the students when you make the decision to improve the situation at Century now and back then?

TK: Back then, before the school opened, the Planning Team really didn't get involve unless we happen to be at a perspective building we were teaching at like at Evergreen. There were a handful of kids who were coming over to Century because that wasn't really in our attendance area. We talked about mascot and colors, so we kind of helped with some of that information, but prior to that, there wasn't really much, and I don't know what happened when the building opened, because I wasn't here. Now, the Planning Team it is just like any other high school, we just work with the kids in the area we feel comfortable in.

AL: Who were the first people to introduce the Interactive Math program here at Century?

TK: Mrs. Turnis and myself, is that what you mean? Yeah...actually, Mr. Barnekoff went over to Westview High School to see what it's all about. We heard about it and we knew it was the new standard math. International standards. Then we decided that this met the needs for students, not all students, but many students. So we went to summer training and we were more convinced that this is what we were going to do. And then it was the matter of selling it to the parents of the students in those evening meetings that we had in January. So it takes time, we had to meet and do training about four days in February and then it was a week of training in the summer. So it's not something easy. It's time consuming.

KM: Has the program seen improvements from its students?

TK: I think that it meets all the needs of the students in there. Not all students, I would say, but 90% of the students. We have struggled with the numbers getting students to enroll, which makes me feel a little sad because I think that it is a great program and for my own child, I would choose that. You know, and that's coming from a math teacher. But I think that it is different to what most kid's parents are use to. So changes are even hard for parents. So that's why I think that they are not sure about it.

AL: What are the pros and cons of the program?

TK: Well, definitely a con would be, it takes money for the training for the teachers, not a lot, but it takes some money for that in a time of budget cuts. That's a consideration. Another con would be, it takes more work and more time to plan verses a traditional math course. And so the teachers have to be willing to do that...to take the time to teach it. But I think that the pros are that the kids have a better conceptual understanding of what they are doing and why they are doing it. It is just how it's set up. You know, we can't take that and put it into the traditional, it doesn't work, I thought that, but it doesn't...it just doesn't. You can take little bits and pieces, but not all of it.

AL: You mentioned budget cuts, how did the Planning Team manage to give something that would still benefit the students, but not go over the budget?

TK: Well, back then, money didn't seem to be a big issue. We had a bond, and we worked within the bond numbers, it was very plentiful. But now we are looking at budget cuts. Just the state revenues are not high enough. You know, people have been unemployed and there is not enough income tax for the people to pay and

property tax and revenue loss. So now we are looking at the cuts. There are a lot of questionable funds out there. We don't know where we stand. So now, it's an issue now, but back then, it really wasn't an issue. Which was nice.

AL: How do you represent the math department when you go to the Planning Team?

TK: Well, Mrs. Turnis and I, we were both math teachers. She was from a high school background and I was from a middle school background and once we decided who was on the Planning Team, we met with them in the spring prior to opening the building. All of the decisions about who was selected were done in April before the building opened. So then we met with them, but before that, we had been a part of their interviews. And one of the things was, "would you be willing to teach Interactive Math" and "would you be willing to teach on a block schedule?" That was our focus, that was our priority and everyone said yes. And that is very true here also. So that's how we represented it. She and I, although we were a part of the Planning Team, we were not considered as a team leader or a department chair. We went to the district meetings, so that they knew what was going on. Mrs. Turnis and I took turns and we worked through that. I enjoyed working with her...very positive experience. So that's how we represented Century's math department. We kind of did that on our own, I mean, Mr. Barnekoff didn't say that we needed somebody there. We just said that we needed to get going because we wanted the other schools to know what's going on.

AL: How have you changed being on the Planning Team and teaching math here at Century?

TK: I'm much more relaxed. I've always liked kids, but I think that I have a much more...I realize that they are my customer and their parents are my customer and I do what I can to teach them. And the Planning Team kind of helped that. It was just very powerful to be in a room of professionals talking about their visions of teaching. Things that I perhaps thought about before, but I never vocalized or really gave it deep thought. I'm there for kids! That's my job.

AL: Do you think that the students are improving year by year, or do you think that they are slacking?

TK: It's really hard to say. I think that they want things, in general, to be easy for them, and it's not always easy. They sometimes, I feel like, they don't want to think...not all kids. But I think that we are seeing bigger numbers. I like to think that it is part of society...you know, think about the Nintendo's and the computer games and the TV and, it's just different and we need to make sure that we can

deal with those changes. But...but the kids are still basically good. That hasn't changed.

AL: How does that make you feel about the system here?

TK: Actually, I think that we have a good system. I really do.

AL: What type of personality does it take to be on the Planning Team?

TK: I think that you have to be open to change and be willing to listen and I think that you also have to be respectful of other people's ideas and thoughts. You have to be a do-er. There is the follow through; you have to make things happen. That's what needed to happen, that's how I see as the Planning Team.

AL: What was the greatest satisfaction you have had being on the Planning Team?

TK: It was neat to be a part of a dynamic group. That was the big reward. A dynamic group that liked to see change, welcomed change, was there for kids. That's what was awesome. And it was different from teaching. You were doing something else to make the world a better place. It's not that teaching doesn't do it, but it was something else. Something else that kind of enriched your job. So that was a great satisfaction.

KM: Do you have anything else, do you think, that you want to share with us?

TK: Probably the biggest, I don't know if the other teachers would say this, but the biggest controversy, and there were not a lot of controversy, but one of the biggest controversies always was deciding what colors. The jaguar was pretty easy, it got down to that...and I'm trying to think if it was lions...the jaguar was really easy, it was pretty unanimous. But I wish I could remember the other color choices, but you're dealing in the metro league and all of a sudden, we were limited. The teal was very much an issue. And there are a lot of different colors of teal. And I think that the most people who opposed to it were coaches. Because they knew that they were going to have a hard time trying to find the right teal sometimes. But it all worked out. I just think it's great how our building, that's our main entrance color. That just says it right away, we're teal and black and silver. That to me was kind of a chuckle that most people would get excited about or passion about or one way or another, was about the school colors. The mascot, that was not an issue that was pretty overwhelmingly decided upon. And the kids did get to vote. So it wasn't, the Planning Team came up with the suggestions and also they take impute from the public. Anyways, it was a good experience. It's not something that I would choose right now, in my current life just because I'm busy with my own

three children. But down the road, 10-15 years or something, I would revisit it again. But you always have to weigh pros and cons of everything. It was time consuming, but rewarding.

AL: Do you think Century would be the same for your children when they grow up?

TK: Pretty close. In fact, my son would like to come here. But I keep telling him; he might not want to go where his mom teaches, because if there's a problem, he'll find me right away. You know, and he'll listen to other kids say, "oh, that Mrs. Kirsch, she's mean," or you know. So he might not like that. But he said that he'd like to come, but we'll see.