

Interview with Pat Cochran

This interview took place on May 20, 2002 at Century High School. The interviewer was Rachel Sumner and the interviewee was Pat Cochran.

Q: What was your first involvement with CHS and the Planning Team?

A: First involvement was applying for the job. The district put out in December of '95, if people were interested could apply for the Planning Team. And you didn't get paid any more money for being on the Planning Team, but the little carrot to come on board and do it was that you were guaranteed to be able to teach in the areas that you wanted to teach. So that was the benefit for me. At the time I was teaching English at Hill High and I wanted to be in Art, but there hadn't been an art opening in the district for the 6 years I had been teaching so I kinda jumped at that opportunity even though the task then was to convince Mr. Barnekoff that this person that he knew as an English teacher really could be the head of his Art Department.

Q: How would you compare your experiences at Hill High with the ones that you've had here at Century?

A: It was just night and day. And that's not to say that there aren't some really good teachers at Hill High and I was affiliated with many of them, and Mrs. Duyckinck is certainly an example, we team taught there. So there was some good experiences and wonderful kids there but they sort of had developed an attitude over the years that "we can't do that" or "we've never done that before" and it seemed to me sort of a reticence of wanting to try new things. Like "we're a good school, we've always done it this way, this has always worked really well for us" and it had, but innovation was kind of looked at with skepticism and with a cynical eye, and I just felt like, and since I've come to Century, I think the kind of people that come here are very forward looking and willing to try change, sometimes change for changes sake which is always good, but the mix is a lot more dynamic I think over here. So that's the biggest change.

Q: How were decisions made by the Planning Team? And what was the process you went through, was it very democratic?

A: It was a very democratic process, I think Mr. Barnekoff had put together a team of really, they were just some of the brightest most innovative people. We'd get a sub to go do Planning work and you knew it was just going to be an exciting day, and so much fun, you could just hardly wait for those days to come. We talked about more of an idealism in education of what we wanted, how we saw this school, and the ideal that we could set up, knowing that we may not reach that ideal, but we could certainly aspire to it. So the work was done in a very democratic process.

Q: Speaking of the ideal that you had, what were your visions that you had for Century? What did the whole Team want it to be?

A: We wanted it to be a place that was safe for kids. We wanted it to be a place where teachers could really try new things and it was an environment, for not just teachers but for kids as well, to kind of go out there on the edge and make things happen. From an artistic point of view we wanted an environment that was welcoming. There's a lot of light in this building, a lot of openness. I think that the physical space kind of mimics what we hoped for in the academic sense, of being open-minded, of being willing to do what it took to be different, and a willingness to be different. To try things that weren't the norm. I think that the fact that everyone is going to tri-mesters next year and we're not, that that's very much in keeping with the Century attitude that we don't want to have to feel like we have to go along with the crowd. I think the art department, and by art I mean music, band, drama, fine arts, the art department here is really probably more popular than some of the sports programs. And how weird is that? I mean Century's a little different place. And I think part of that was from the Planning Team and part of that was from how we set it up in the very beginning and I think part of it is from the kind of people that we have who come here.

Q: What were some of the biggest challenges that you faced on the Planning Team?

A: Some of it was who we were picking to come, knowing that other schools needed to keep good teachers too. That was certainly a challenge, you know wanting to make sure that it was staffed with the best and the brightest that we could get. I think trying to continually think outside the box, of not being bound by our old set of thinking, so just to force ourselves and to challenge ourselves to say, "Well is there another way that this could be done, that just hasn't been done before?" And forcing ourselves to try and let go of those old paradigms and really look at things anew. When all these people on the Planning Team were very experienced educators, and were used to doing it a certain way, and then to just let go of what we knew and be open to be different. But we felt like it was an opportunity to do different and we went into it pretty quickly knowing that we wanted to do a block schedule and that was at a time when no one in the district, except for junior highs, were doing a block schedule. But we knew that we wanted to be on a block schedule by the second year, and we were.

Q: Was time commitment ever a problem?

A: Yeah, that was one of the questions that Mr. Barnekoff personally asked me was, "You have three kids, a husband who coaches, you're teaching English full-time, and that in and of itself is a pretty daunting set of commitments. How are you going to commit to doing one more thing?" And I just personally got a commitment from my family to give me that time, the kids picked up the slack, my husband covered for me. It took a real toll on the family. I was gone. I was gone during the summer. Mr. Barnekoff made it easier in that a lot of the meeting were scheduled during school and he would pay for a sub out of the Century Planning Team budget so that I had to prepare for a substitute, but then he would just take me out of class. So those were the easiest, and then we had summer meetings, but not too many evening meetings. Well no, that's not true. We had a lot of evening community things where we go around, and we went to every single junior high and every high school and made presentations about what was going to happen, and how it was going to look to the kids that were coming here, because we wanted them to feel included, and answering questions. I don't know, I guess if you want it bad enough you make it happen. But yeah, it took a lot of time. I guess too, even when I was working, it was like drive time. I quit listening to the radio and I would just sit and drive to school thinking about Century. I used my time better.

Q: What sort of satisfactions did you gain from being on the Planning Team? What sort of rewards came along with it?

A: It was probably the singularly most exciting thing, professionally, I had ever done. The ability to just come in and create something out of nothing, and the people that were put together these just minds that, "Well what if we do this? Well if we did this than we could do this!" It was like one idea would just snowball into an avalanche of just exciting things. And now I look at it and some of it I can totally see that it's happened and that's so rewarding to look at a concept, for instance, and of course I'm speaking from more of an art point of view, but one of things at Hill High if something went up in the hall, people wrote on it, tore it down, nothing was safe in the hallways, they just became a place for graffiti or for people to go, "Oh I don't like that person," and they'd rip it down. I mean you couldn't put things up. And I really felt like from day one when the kids came in if they saw this beautiful new building and we had artwork up from early, early on and people were still in awe of the building and being really nice, because we knew that wouldn't last, that it would build a sense of art being part of the environment. And so I think on day eight I had student work in the hall. And that was pretty huge, and nobody touched it. And I think to this day I don't think we've lost more than five or six pieces in five years. About one piece a year maybe somebody will hit it with a backpack or something. But the most amazing thing is I had a girl last week who came in and said, "Here's one of your paintings that fell down in the hall." And she's not even an art student! But they bring them in and give them back to us, and I think it's because people at Century see the art as being theirs. And they're proud of it even if they're not art students. That's become part of the environment and that's totally different from anything we've seen and I think it's because we set this vision that art was going to be integrated into the building from day one and everyone on the Planning Team embraced that idea and it worked. Some days I just go, "This was my idea and it worked!" but then some days I go, "I can't believe this worked!" I mean we have all these kids out there. Now you go out in the halls and we have 2100 students and you go down the hall feeling like a migrating salmon but nobody's

tearing the art down, nobody's writing on them, and that's kind of amazing if you think about it. And it makes me so proud of the student body that they respect that and they honor that. We really see it as a part of us, of who we are and that's really cool.

Q: Have there been any other visions that you had that you've seen carried on, you can see it starting to take place here at Century?

A: We have a real diverse population. And we'd had some real problems at Hill High with groupings of people getting in fights. And we were really aware that this school was going to draw on even more racially diverse populations. And in our belief statement we really wanted this to be a safe place, that if kids are worried about being beaten up or people hurting them or being mean to them that it's hard to learn. The intrinsic nature of racial differences, there's always going to be some friction, that that's just human nature. But what I think that we've seen here is that people are pretty tolerant of each other. You see a lot of interracial couples, you see a lot of interracial groupings of friends. I think we've done a good job on that. We don't have too many fights that are evolved around, Hispanics vs. Asians vs. Whites. I mean there's a little bit of it, but I just don't see it. I think the fact that it's not real obvious is good. I think the fact that we're not aware of it means that it's not a real big issue. I think that's (diverse population) part of our culture and I think the staff has really pounded that home. The Planning Team demanded a certain level of acceptance and tolerance from the people that they chose, and then those people became staff, and then staff had an attitude of, "We're not putting up with it." And then every teacher is committed to putting a stop to it. And I think the Planning Team set the tone for that.

Q: Are there any visions that you maybe haven't seen played out?

A: I think we had hoped that the school would be so cool, so technological, that kids would want to learn despite themselves. The building was so neat, the technology was so neat, the teachers were so neat, everything was so great that how could you help but thrive? It's like this little seed that's planted in the perfect temperature, in the perfect soil with just the right amount of water and fertilizer and then it just kind of sprouts and dies and you think, "We gave you every single thing that we've ever been told that a little seed needed to grow and to forge it's way." And then it's been very disappointing to see our drop-out rate, our kids being unenthusiastic. Because I truly believe we just have the best of those things and then I think, what are we doing wrong? Or is it really us? Or is it the kids that are coming in here? That just go, "You know I don't wanna grow, I refuse to sprout." And I don't know the answer to that. But that's been a real disappointment, I really thought that we would see a higher academic achievement than what we've seen.

dropouts

Q: When you were hiring new staff, what sort of things did you look for?

A: We wanted idea people. We wanted people that were innovators, that would try new things, that weren't stuck in a rut. Like, "I teach Shakespeare, and I've taught Shakespeare this way for 20 years, and my kids go on to college and do really well and by Gosh that's how I'm going to keep teaching Shakespeare." We wanted somebody who said, "Wow! This would be kind of a cool way to do it," or "I never thought of doing it that way." People who were open-minded, who were open to input from others. We wanted people who were team-players, because we hoped to do a lot of teaming. I think that's another thing that we haven't seen is integrated curriculum. That hasn't happened as much as what the Team thought would happen. That was a big thing that we worked with was small communities of learning and we're still trying to make that happen and we're still struggling to make that happen. The idea was that there would be these small communities, these kind of colleges that would be around each of those units and that hasn't happened at all. Well tiny bits but not like the Planning Team thought would happen. I didn't really quite understand how it was going to happen even when I was on the Planning Team, but it was one of those things that we waited and said "When we get the full staff on and we get everybody's minds together" because the Planning Team tried to not make all the choices. What we did was some of the basic "Here's our belief system and here's what we're going to try to do." We wanted block scheduling, we wanted innovative, creative teachers and then we went out staffed to open-minded, bright, innovative thinking teachers that were kind of on the cutting edge of trying some new things. And were willing to fail. To say, "well that didn't work, but let's try something else to try and get a kid engaged." So those are the kind of

people we looked for and I think we got those. I think we're really successful in our staffing, but then some of the things that were supposed to come next just didn't materialize.

Q: Would you ever want to be a part of that Planning Team situation again?

A: Yeah, Liberty opened and they had their Planning team and obviously I'm not on it, and it's kind of like starting a new family when a divorce happens, would you be willing to start a new family again? My commitment is so strongly here that I guess I just kind of feel like at this point I haven't finished the work that I've set out to achieve here. And I'm starting to run out of time, I've got maybe 8 years left. I might do it again. I wasn't ready to do it in 4 years when Liberty opened. I still felt like my energies were still directed to this school. It makes you plant your roots awfully deep. You put so much of yourself into it that you start to take things real personally. And that's been a problem for me, once the school opened being able to step back and not feel like I had to be a part of the running of it. Because it was so much mine at first.

Q: Is there anything else you wanted to tell me that I haven't asked yet?

A: There's a wonderful metaphor of just walking out here when they leveled the land, and one of the things in our meetings is we would come over here on a pretty regular basis we'd come by the site and see what was going on and there's just something wonderful about seeing it go from mud, from nothing, to this finished building and then when those first kids came in it was just, you couldn't be any more excited, it wasn't about the money, it wasn't about the time, it was just really I think with the Planning Team it was about the purest reasons of why I went into education. That experience was just about what's right for kids, how should it look, how should it feel, and that's what it was. And yeah, I would've been coming here for no pay at that point. Now I want my paycheck! But at that point it was just the exciting part. I did the presentation the first time we got together as a staff. I did a getting to know you activity that set the tone for the staff meetings. And that was probably the most nervous I've ever been of anything I've ever done educationally was with the staff and knowing that how that first thing came off would set the tone for how all of our staff meetings would be. And these were these people's first experience with Century and I just hardly slept that night but it went really well. And it's just this coming together and this feeling of comradery and such a feeling of all these positive, bright, energetic people all going the same direction for just that moment in time that was just exhilarating. I think it's kind of how the founding fathers must have felt when they met in Philadelphia and pounded out this idea, but on a much bigger scale, it had to of been some of that same energy of, "We can change the world."