

Interview with Mary Hamerman

By Jessica Hanson

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Jh The following interview was conducted on behalf of the oral history program of the Century High School. The interviewee is Mary Hamerman. The interviewer is Jessica Hanson. The interview took place at 8:20 on Wednesday, May 22, 2002.

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Jh What was your first involvement with Century High School?

Mh When they were talking about planning the high school I was asked to meet with Henry Weans, the director of special education, along with other special education teachers and talk about the ideal special education physical layout; what it might look like, kind of dream a little bit. That was quite a bit before the actual planning team got together. I was a part of that first.

Jh What made you decide to come here?

Mh To Century?

Jh Uh-huh.

Mh Well, being on the planning team of course was a big thing. I had never opened a new school. I've been teaching for 24 years. It seemed like an exciting thing to do. I knew that, I came from a very close knit group of special ed teachers at Glencoe, that group was going to be going different directions in the near future. I wanted to determine my fate instead of having someone else determine it for me. It was a way of kind of controlling my future.

Jh How did you become a part of the planning team?

Mh We went through an interview process. We had to first apply and then we went through an interview process with Mr. Barnekoff. Then we

were notified if we were selected or not. So that was pretty much the process that we went through. If we were interested then we just followed that process.

Jh What other school, well you said you were involved at Glencoe.

Mh Uh-huh.

Jh How would you compare that experience to your experience here at Century?

Mh Well, they've been two really, very different experiences I think. When I started at Glencoe I had moved up from Northern California, so I was new to the whole area. ... Was pretty unaware of how schools functioned here. So, I was the newbie. I had a lot of things to learn in terms of systems that are in place in Oregon, systems that are in place in our particular district, as well as Glencoe as a school. So different levels of how things work. Everyone else, of course, knew those things and they were very good about helping me along. I was a coordinator at Glencoe five of the nine years I was there. That was a very enjoyable experience, I learned a lot by being the coordinator. Here at Century I think I used the experience at Glencoe because suddenly I was the one setting up systems. Before we opened there was just an awful lot to do. Some of it just because it's a new school, some of it very, very specialized in terms of the special ed program, which has it's own parameters that have to be followed. So I used that Glencoe experience to help me a lot here at Century. Both places have been good experiences.

Jh How were decisions made by the planning team? Was it a democratic process or...

Mh Phil was very, very good about getting everybody's input. I think that in a democratic process, things sometimes are going to move more slowly because you're going to have input from everybody. So at times there was, I think, some frustration. On the whole, I think people felt very involved with the whole process and a part of it. He made sure that we all were given time to give our view points on different things and if we had something different to say than what the majority said, that was okay. It was a safe environment to express ideas that might be different from the majority, which is very refreshing. The other part that was kind of the

down side was whenever you are a part of a larger system; things will happen that you have no control over. Sometimes decisions were made where we were not a part of that decision. Because we've been so involved with the development of the school, those were sometimes hard to accept. But again, when you're part of a bigger system, logistically those things do happen. Sometimes we wanted to have a little more control over some of those decisions. Phil was certainly not the person who was making those decisions for us, it was other departments, other places in the school district where they had to make decisions either because they were on a strict timeline or they felt that a decision had to be made then, so it didn't go by the planning team and we found out about it after a decision was made. That caused some frustration.

Jh What were some of the biggest challenges you faced on the planning team? How were they resolved?

Mh Being in special education...it is a department and in many ways there are similarities with other departments, but in many other ways we're very different from any other department. I felt that it was my role to continually bring that up, that the things that we face that were a little different and made us a little bit unique, not to alienate us at all. The philosophy of opening Century was that all teachers would teach all kids and I totally continue to support that. On the other hand, there are special factors that have to be part of that. At times I think I felt kind of a horse of another color. That's just because of the way special ed is a little bit different. However, there also was another team member who had a lot of experience and is also connected with special ed and that was nice because we could discuss some of those issues. On the whole I think everybody worked together really well. Things went along, as we would have liked them to.

Jh What were some of the greatest satisfactions as a member of the team?

Mh I think learning about other people. We had, obviously, people from different schools, people from different walks of life. First of all, finding out who the team members are on that level was very satisfying and those kinds of relationships. Although, the planning team obviously was dispersed after the school was built you still feel a very grass roots connection with the people on the planning team because you shared and

struggled and went through things with them and got to know them. Also, getting to know about how the departments work. Some of their struggles, some of their things that they could bring to the table and then using that information later on because your knowledge base is much bigger.

Looking at a school as a whole is a really unique opportunity. The day-to-day teaching, when you get involved in that, you get very amerced in your own stuff. Being able to look at a school from a huge perspective is great.

Jh How did you hire new staff and what were you looking for?

Mh Well, I know when the planning team was hired, was interviewed and then asked to be on the planning team, Phil's vision was always that this school would go to block scheduling and that we would offer students, perhaps a little more freedom than they'd been able to at the other high schools and that was a vision that we all bought into on the planning team. So it was very important that teachers you bring on board also share the idea, first of all that we go move into a block situation and although we couldn't do that the first year, it was always our goal to move there as quickly as possible, which we were able to the next year. I think that was a critical factor in hiring staff. Also, hiring staff who could look at the whole picture as well as just what they're doing day to day in the class room. Who could be part of a team, some people are very comfortable doing they're own thing and pretty much living with the confines of that. Other people are more willing and open to being team players. Sharing kids, talking about kids that they have in the classroom with other teachers that have those kids. We were looking for a team building kind of school, just that kind of attitude and philosophy I think was important.

Jh You talked a little bit about the vision for Century. Is there anything else about that, Century's vision?

Mh I think visions are something that you strive towards. If you can reach it in a year, it probably wasn't big enough. I think part of the nature of having a vision is the frustration that comes with not being able to reach that right away, but also the knowledge that you are making steps towards that. For Century again, like I said before, all teachers teaching all kids was big. Being in some kind of a team, not necessarily your department as a team. But working with other teachers where you shared a group of students, so that those students would have greater support and teachers would also have support as they could share information about students.

So that was a real big issue. Giving students time to access the technology here, that was very important. Treating them in some ways like college students, where here's all the tools, here's the resources and now you need to take some responsibility and apply those to your daily work that you're doing here. That's kind of a stretch from where a lot of high schools have. Again, we're still building towards those visions, I don't know that we'll ever get there, but that's not as important as knowing what it is and making those steps towards it.

Jh How much has that vision, do you think, has been realized so far?

Mh Well, again, it's hard with changes in administration and things like that, changes in staff. We have teachers coming in that probably have no idea, who hires, what our vision really was at the beginning. Both teachers and instruction assistants who I think are also an equal part of the staff, as well as our classified staff who do an awful lot of work here too. So all staff...it's hard to keep them aware of what that bigger picture was. That slows things down. We have to remind ourselves that sometimes you just have to go back to square one to make sure everybody has that common knowledge. I'm not sure that we've been able to do that for a variety of reasons, a lot of them is when you get overpopulated as we are now, and so crowded you fall into survival mode. Vision is usually not something that people have time to spend a lot of time on when they are in survival mode. They're trying to get through the day and work with all of the kids that they have every day. So it's kind of a set back but that's part of life and it's how you deal with those set backs that's really important not whether you have them or not because you always will. I can see that we're still making progress, we have to get off the road a little bit but I think generally we come back to where we were. When I visit Glencoe or Hilli the feeling here I think is still a really good, positive feeling. Certainly I think teachers for the most part are very willing to work with all kids, which is great. I think we're still moving in the right direction. I can't put a percentage on it but we're still going down the right path, we just need to keep it in mind and remind ourselves what that goal is.

Jh Based on your experiences what kind of advice would you give to the Liberty planning team?

Mh Listen! That means assimilate that information. Listening is a difficult process it's not a simple thing that most people, or a lot of people think it is. Take into account all different perspectives, all different views.

Not just teachers, not just possible staff coming on, but your community. You need to be a part of that community, a positive part of that. Think about culture, we did a lot of talking on the planning team about what's the culture going to be at Century and how do you arrive at a culture which is the one you want, the positive kind of things, how do you do that. There's going to be a lot of obstacles, there's going to be a lot of barriers. They really don't matter, you just find ways to go around them or go through them or they become not that important. You just keep heading ...as long as you're united in what's your vision, back to that again, what is your vision is, I think, you can get there. Stay positive. There is never enough time, so be aware, that when it comes to the end, things will always happen. Liberty, as any new school opens, there's things that you think would be in place that aren't in place. Be patient with each other. The teachers are going to set the tone and if they're uptight and nervous and complaining, that's what the students are going to show, that same attitude. But if they're positive, excited and ready to face the challenges, then that's also what the students will reflect. I think those are just some important key things. It's an exciting time; it takes a lot of energy.

Jh How would you describe the culture of Century? Like of the staff and students?

Mh Again, overall, I think it's positive, it's a good place to work; I think it's a good place to be a student in a lot of ways. We do keep questioning what we are doing and that's a healthy thing. Sometimes when we get caught up in that though we tend to get a little bit negative on what we don't have or why things aren't going the way they should be going. We need to keep in mind the positive things that are there. I think students for the most part are pretty open to learning and that's nice. I think teachers are very willing to go the extra mile and work with students as much as they need to, to help them to be successful. Again, when you get overcrowded, you're going to add to stress and stress leads to not such positive behavior; both in students and staff who get short with each other. You get focused on what am I doing today, how am I going to get all these papers graded. Instead of being able to look at a little bit bigger things. I'm looking forward to when Liberty opens, I plan to stay here at Century. I'm looking forward to a smaller Century and getting back to a feeling of family and letting some of that stress go. Feeling a little more like it's more manageable. Now some many people are just at the edge with the daily stuff that it's a difficult time. Next year's going to be difficult, we're going

to need to really work with being good to each other so we can get through the year. Educationally too, I think that kids generally get a very good education here. There's some things that need some work. There always will be but again, we're a questioning staff and I think that's a healthy sign.

Jh What are some of the most significant changes you've seen at Century since it opened?

Mh Well, when I think of Phil, I remember seeing him many times walking down the hallways with his shoe rubbing off the black spots that are left by shoes on the hallway. As I look around our school today I know there's a lot of issues with having enough custodial staff and things like that. But also concern that students take a pride in the school, enough pride to bend down and pick up a piece of paper. Enough pride to eat in the areas where they should be eating and even though we're very full, respect the fact that it's the students' job as well to keep Century a clean and healthy place. I think, again, probably overcrowding has something to do with it, but I think that's kind of a general attitude that's gotten a little bit lax. It's not a brand new school anymore. Kids, freshmen, coming in next year...Century has been around for quite a while for them in their lives and I don't think that they necessarily come in with the respect that needs to be there. I think our upper class men need to make sure that they're modeling that so we can keep this school. That's...on one level that we're talking about, but I think it's indicative of the whole attitude that people and staff have. We don't want to take this too much for granted. It is a beautiful building, the windows, the light that comes in here, there's just a lot to be said going for that. I think that's one area but it kind exemplifies the whole thing of what's going on here, that we need to pay attention to the details. I don't know if I answered your question on that one I kind of got sidetracked.

Jh Yeah, just significant changes.

Mh Changes, okay. One, we've been able to work more and more towards teams. I think that's another big issue. Having kids feel a little more connected, especially ninth graders with not just a teacher for ninety minutes, but for a network of teachers and students that can be their support as well. I think that's a very significant move. We keep trying to get there. Change, real honest change takes time. We don't always feel like

we have the time, we need to do it now. So we get some false starts along the way, but that's to be expected, I think we're working through that. I look forward to more and more teams being built, more and more teachers working together more closely. It is a new concept for teaching, teaching used to be you had your kids in your class and nobody knew what was really going on in that classroom but you. That's miles away from where we want to be, so that's a very significant change.

Jh Do you have anything else to add that we haven't discussed already?

Mh Now your project is mainly on the planning of Century?

Jh Well, it's just that we're doing a history of the school so far so...

Mh Starting with the planning?

Jh Yeah, starting with the planning.

Mh And moving on.

Jh Yeah.

Mh I think the technology component has been very positive here. It was decided that there would be no auto shop, no wood shop, those kinds of things because when we were looking at Century, we were going to go more generic into the skills that are needed for those types of jobs, so we were going to have a clean lab and a dirty lab. It's a little bit hard to see that, perhaps the community, perhaps our school system, wasn't ready for that kind of a concept. I'm sure it's difficult to hire teachers for those kinds of jobs when they're not your traditional kinds of technology jobs. I don't know what happened that we weren't able to pursue that as much, but I would hope in the future we could still look at that. You're talking about a paradigm in how people think. When parents come here and talk about the classes their kids take they think back to their experience. Well, I had wood shop, I had auto shop, that did a lot for me and to change that into well, this is a lab where you can learn these kinds of skills and then this is a lab where you can make those skills come to life with an actual product. That's transference that, again change takes a lot of time, I think we were a little previous, in not being able to implement that. Again, I'm sure there's other reasons, that I'm unaware of, as to why we weren't able to pursue

that. Really at the beginning and all the way through Century's history, so that's something that I would like to see addressed. I would forward again to Century being a little smaller and a little bit more connected, a little less stress. On the whole, kids are doing great things here. I'm sure that will continue. It's a good place for kids to be. I've been pleased, personally.

Jh Okay, great.

Mh Well that was easy!