

**Interview with Janet Van Wess
May 16, 2003**

Tara Sprick: The following interview was conducted on behalf of the oral history of Century High School. The interviewee is Janet Van Wess, and the interviewers are Tara Sprick and Heather McCambly.

Heather McCambly: Tell us about your position and how long you've been here at Century High School.

Janet Van Wess: I've been here at Century High School for three years, and I teach Drama and English.

HM: Ok, umm, just to start out, how has this year been different for you from other years that you've been here at Century?

JVW: Hmmm, There's been a lot more changes in terms of what the school board has thrown our way. Just the indecision about whether we're gonna open the school or not, who's gonna get laid off or not, what bell schedule we're gonna be on or not, umm, whether we're gonna teach certain electives or not, whether we're gonna continue with CIM tests in certain areas or not. Umm, you really don't know whether you're coming or going, and as the year wore on, people are getting afraid that were gonna lose their jobs due to budget cuts. You just never knew what to say around people- made it very awkward.

HM: How has it changed your relationships here, staff member to staff member, or with students? How has that evolved?

JVW: I think the relationship with staff members is actually closer. I think they want to get together and commiserate, and that's not complain, but it's commiserate, because, really, people who are outside of education, it just sounds like griping because we're supposed to be grateful just to have a job. But... to have people to oh, talk to who understand the sense of loss and the sense of mourning the teachers are experiencing with having programs taken away and days taken away, it kind of brings us- excuse me- closer together.

HM: So what have you experienced as far as local reaction outside of school?

JVW: Uh, very little local reaction. Parents didn't get involved until it was almost too late. Umm, I remember I was calling the media about the situation that was going on here in Hillsboro with the budget back in October, and, umm the media wouldn't cover anybody except Portland, and, uh, I think the community has under-reacted. I don't think they've been responsive at all.

HM: How do you feel about the student reaction, varying from the attempted walkout to the new SAFFE program that started?

JVW: I think the students are, are really caught between a rock and a hard place. I mean, here they're being told they're supposed to value education, and yet the people who are in charge are cutting their days, so I think they're receiving mixed messages, and I think they don't know whether they're coming or going again, and that leads to a sort of

apathy. You, you know, you don't, one doesn't know what control or what power one really has in a situation like this, and a walk-out certainly wasn't going to increase, you know, our ability to learn, and it really wasn't going to affect, uh, the people who needed to get the message because they weren't looking at Hillsboro. They were looking at Portland the whole time. So, I kinda forget what your question was, how does it affect the students...?

HM: How do you feel about the student reaction?

JVW: I don't blame them. I think, you know, we're in high school, so I think that the reactions have been, I think the students have really behaved themselves well. I think this new SAFFE program is great that Ian's got going- it's Ian, right? Yeah, and I think it's awesome. I kinda wish it would have happened earlier in the year, and he's going off to U of O. But I think the, the general apathy is, is to be expected.

TS: How do you feel about the, uh, the Doonesbury perspective that is playing on things? How do you think that this media attention is going to affect the situation?

JVW: Well, Wyden and Kennedy says that it's gonna cause five million dollar loss of revenue annually to the state of Oregon- travel, tourism, people won't wanna move here because they know the schools are bad. Umm, personally, I'm really glad that it's come to light, because the more people who understand our, the way our system is taxed, and the more criticism that's thrown on it, the more enlightenment that's gonna come around, and I think, eventually, umm, the embarrassment and the, uh... information that Oregon taxpayers, basically, the public, receive is gonna be that you have to pay to play, you know? And if they, they say they want a good education for kids, they're gonna have to put up or shut up. You know, that's what it comes down to. Nobody wants to pay taxes, so...

TS: On the flip side of things, I suppose, what do you think have been the high points of this year?

JVW: I think the high points have been teachers who are, uh, dedicated pulling together to do the best they can under great emotional duress. I've really been impressed by my colleagues who continue to function at a high level, and continue to serve. Uh, I've been just really impressed with, uh, the dedication of our profession. That's been a high point for me. It kept me going, is people who just believe so much in what they're doing that, you know, they're gonna take this abuse.

TS: How would you describe the, the, umm, sorry, the school spirit of this year?

JVW: Terrible. Again, I don't think it's been good at all. I think morale has been really low, even, umm, among kids who are in Leadership. But these kids that I've talked to, they're, they're frustrated, they're anxious, umm, assemblies just seem to be a place to go rather than a place to celebrate or to share. And that's not a comment on Leadership's ability to put together an assembly, it's just the general malaise and apathy. It's really hard to get people involved in stuff, because it seems like, to me, they're perceiving that they are not being respected. Their teachers are not being respected, and we can't get excited about...school. Does that make sense?

HM: What are your feelings about what's to come, like, we're ending one year, and another one's coming in?

JVW: I think it's gonna be really bad for another two years. Umm, I think it's really helpful that everybody, as of today, who's licensed knows where they're going. I think, uh, we were kept in the dark way too long about whether schools are gonna open or close, and where people were gonna be assigned and who's losing their jobs. I think, when the dust is settled, that the people who are left will really pull together and, and really try and raise a phoenix, because, uh, this year's just been horrible. Umm, economically, I think we're really gonna be in the pit for about another two years, and, umm, I think teachers are really resentful that, you know, salaries have been cut, um, health insurance costs have been handed on to us, you know, passed on to us. Our PERS has been cut, and uh, you know, any other way we might have earned money through the schools has been cut, and it makes it seem like what we do isn't valuable, and yet the state of Oregon has ridiculous requirements for, for teachers- it's unlocked- have these ridiculous requirements for teachers. Uh, you know, the standards are really, really high, and it's very expensive, and we have to keep going to school and getting re-licensed and things like that, but they're not willing to pay teachers the salaries that they deserve even though next to doctors and lawyers, teachers in the state of Oregon are the most heavily, umm, licensed professionals. You know, we have to do as much as going back probably more than doctors and lawyers on a regular basis, and yet we make umm, probably, let's see... a lot less.

TS: How do you think the war on Iraq has kind of affected this year?

JVW: Not much. I mean, it was something to talk about. I think it was something we were supposed to avoid, so it was sort of... by not talking about it, by avoiding it, it sort of drew attention to it so that we didn't talk about or notice what was going on with our union and our contracts and the schools and all that stuff. I thought it was a good deflective instrument. I don't really think it affected- I mean there are kids whose parents are in the service here, but those kids have been taught how to handle these things.

TS: If you could change anything about this school year, what would it be?

JVW: I think I would have changed the way communication went between, uh, the district office and, uh, the union and the, the teachers and the classified staff- I think the classified staff was really treated miserably the second half of the year. Those are, like, secretaries and people like that, 'cause they didn't know what was going on and if I could change anything, I would just change the level of anxiety that everyone was feeling so we could, you know, really get down to work and enjoy ourselves.

TS: Alright, I think we've covered all the bases. Is there anything that you'd like to add or that we haven't asked yet?

JVW: Go Jags! Go Jags!... Go Jags!