

Interview with Jerry Taylor Conducted by Jake Powell

Jake Powell: The following interview was conducted on behalf of the oral history program of the Century High School. The interviewee is Jerry Taylor. The interviewer is Jacob Powell and Lauren Thompson. The interview took place at 1:15 on May 23rd. Could you tell us a little bit about your involvement with the Site Council?

Jerry Taylor: The Site Council, not the core team?

JP: No, we'll talk about that a little bit later.

JT: I was on the Site Council for a couple of years here. Maybe for the second or third year, that's for sure. I've worked with some of the issues that we faced at that point was smaller communities and trying to get the WINGS program started up.

JP: So, what would you say, in your own words, what is the Site Council and what were your responsibilities?

JT: It's a group of other students, and parents, and teachers, and administrators that look at issues here at school and trying to do school improvement basically. I think also staff development is an important issue. But, they do some goals development and defining what school goals were going to look on as a staff. And primarily that's the purpose.

JP: And how did you get on the Site Council?

JT: I don't really remember. I know that it's an elected sort of thing, but I don't really remember being elected. I guess there was an election. I don't recall so much, but I did submit my name to someone interested. I don't know if they didn't have an election because they had just enough people who were willing to do it.

JP: How do you feel about your participation in the council?

JT: Well, pretty good. I have a long history with participation because I've looked at Hilhi's Sit Council. I felt pretty good, because I'd had a lot of past experience of Site Councils and how they work, and so in understanding the limitations of the Site Council and trying to build up expectations that we could do an enormous amount of change.

JP: Do you think your experience helped quite a bit, not just in the Site Council, but in the beginning of Century? Did your experience with other schools and what you had done before help you prepare and make it a better experience, the new school?

JT: I hope so. One of the things, Phil (Barnekoff) interviewed me, I told him straight up that I was really interested in Century because I was hoping that we could develop schools within schools, and trying to attempt to work with students who would succeed

here at Century. I put a lot of energy the first few years in that concept, and that's why we started the WINGS program.

JP: You kind of touched on it, you mentioned schools within schools, but what was your initial vision of what Century High school would be, and where you kind of wanted to go with it, what your vision of it was.

JT: Well, it was a chance to try some new things. I hoped we would... it was a chance to start some new traditions. And I was really hoping that we could try some new things instead of reinventing the same sort of things that they were doing at Hilhi and Gelncoe. And, not only just in the traditions like Jag Fest and that sort of thing, but I also tried some things differently in terms of working with students. We had not yet - we'd never been successful at Hilhi in trying to help students who weren't succeeding in the curriculum, and that was one of the things that - the visions that I had of Century. That we could work with all students and see if we could help them succeed.

JP: How do you feel that that's working out? Do you think that's on the right path?

JT: No, personally WINGS has been dismantled for next year, it's not going to happen. That's disappointing. So it's discouraging at times. We are hoping to - I mean we haven't given up on that, because I think that one of the goals that Mrs. Montgomery has is that we tried to develop schools within schools. And because of the way that Century is organized into four wings, we could have four separate schools here, where it could be a little more user-friendly, and students would have some of the same teachers, so there would be more of a sense of community. Some students can connect with schools pretty easily, and they don't have a problem with that, because they connect with people very - they've learned about those skills, how to connect with people. But some kids really have a hard time, and they feel overwhelmed by the size of school. And with 2000 plus students, they feel lost. So breaking it down into smaller units seems to make sense to me. And that's a vision I still have, and I hope it's still a vision of our principal. That's one of the reasons why I want to stay here.

JP: Do you think students have an equal voice in what - do you think they have a voice in what kind of goes on in the school, or do you think it's pretty much left up to the administration and those sort of figures?

JT: I don't think the students use their voice. I think that they have a stronger voice than they think they do. But, to answer your question, no, but I'm not sure that it's because we don't want to hear from students, I just don't think that students get organized to be heard.

JP: So do you think that students need to begin taking more initiative in getting their thoughts heard, and getting stuff done?

JT: Well, I know it's hard, because I've been on the other end of that. It's to figure out that it is that you really want to change or see difference and then mobilize people to do

it. It's really hard. Sometimes the issues that get mobilized seem to be kind of surface issues, like "Are we going to have a dance?" Which isn't really a substance sort of issue, it's just kind of like social stuff. But I wish students would get more involved and have more voice, and participate in the dialogue with teachers about significant issues that are educational. I think it would be helpful and I think it would help us. I think a lot of teachers would listen. Maybe there's some that wouldn't...

JP: I think I know what you mean, because when you try to get students to talk about something at school, all they want to talk about is dances and open campus is a big issues. I think a lot of teachers share your views that they should talk about more important issues about learning.

JT: I don't mean to minimize and say other things aren't important, because they are important. And if they're important to the person that is presenting the idea it's just that - I'm just curious how students feel about Jag Fest and how it's done, and the big production that we do for such few numbers of students, that we're supposedly paying tribute to, when we have so many great students that do so much here at Century. I just wonder how students feel about that. If they are able to have a voice to say something about it. When I look at the court, I don't see who's there, I see who's not there. That's the reaction that I have as a staff member, but you as a student may have an entirely different view of that. But I don't feel like it's something I should comment on, it's really more whether the students are ok with it, and they seem to be. I don't know.

JP: What have been the most important decisions you've participated in, from either when the school was beginning, or just all the way up into the present?

JT: Probably the most exciting thing was when we did get approval to do WINGS. That was very exciting for me, and I felt really invigorated and energetic. A time period to bring teachers together and talk about ideas and what we were going to do with that program. That was real important to me. But, the continuing dialogue about how we're going to handle dealing with those students is just as important to me now, because now that we're not going to have that program I think we're going to see the same problems that had existed before come back. People are going to go "Oh yeah, that's right, we had those problems before we had that program." So that was really an exciting time for me. The first two years here was really an amazing experience, it was just so difficult. Working here was really hard in that it was just - it took so much energy. Everything was new, there was no procedures. There wasn't anything set up. It would always seem like we were responding to everything by the seat of our pants. The first year we had like 1,100 kids that had never been in high school, and only 250 or so that had been in high. So those 9th and 10th graders - it was just like being in a big junior high. They had no idea what it was like to be in high school or how to act like a high school students. It was crazy times. It was wild.

JP: Do you feel that you personally benefit from your participation at Century, do you get anything out of your job?

JT: I get a lot out of my job. I like it here. I like Century a lot. And I like working with students, with high school students. It's pretty neat. I think our students here - I just think they're great. We have just a cross-section. I just really like the diversity that we have here, over what I recall at previous schools.

Lauren Thompson: What do you think is your biggest improvement here that you've made? Like a personal contribution. Or maybe a failure too. You can say something that you tried that didn't work out.

JT: Well, I think one of the things that we've been working on in the last three years is our guidance program here was nationally recognized, and won the national award for planning for life. What students don't realize is that very few schools do what we do. It's like you don't know what other schools are, so you wouldn't know how to compare. But there's very little guidance that goes on in most public high schools. They go into the classroom and they try to get students to look at career options, to look at university or college choices. The purchase of ECOS came out of this whole process to try to get students so they can access financial aid, and colleges and universities. So what we've done with our guidance program I'm very proud of. I feel very good about it. It's trying to get to all students because a lot of counseling programs really spend most of their time looking at very few students, because they're the ones that are having problems. What we're trying to do is, we want to have services and access for all students. It's a goal for me. We're not quite there, but we certainly try.

JP: What kind of tasks, or duties, do you have to do on a regular basis? Just like, what would your basic daily schedule look like?

JT: It depends on the time of the year. Generally one of the things that is very frustrating about my job is scheduling. It's something that you as a student interface with the counselors more than anything else, is scheduling. But it's our biggest frustration. It's so - because with 2,200 students next year, 2,000 this year, it's really hard to get the perfect schedule for everyone. And it's really difficult for students to get all their choices they requested. And even sometimes it's hard even to get the alternates requested. So we're constantly interacting with students for a lot of time at the beginning of both semesters, around schedules. And it's very hard. It's frustrating for the students, but it's hard for us too, because it's all computer generated, and it's based - it's a complicated process. We'd like it so that you do get the courses that you want, but it doesn't always work that way. And it's hard.

LT: How do you think that the staff and the student body have grown since the opening of Century?

JT: That's a good question. Well, we have had a lot of staff changes since I've been here. Enormous number of staff changes. And in fact, I'm the only counselor still here from the very first year. So we've seen a lot of changes. And that's true with the staff too. There's been a lot of new staff. And as we grow, we've gotten more. And we're going to lose

staff with this shift to Liberty (High School). But I think that changes with the staff has just been more that it's just gotten larger and there's been a lot of turnover. Sometimes for me - because the first two or three years I tried to get to know everyone on the staff. Because it was new and it was building. But so many new people come on, I'm just lost - it's just so hard to do it year after year, trying to get to know everybody, because there's a lot of changes. But the students have changed quite a bit. That's the neat part - is that - like I was telling you, that first year or so it was just crazy, and it was just really difficult and our students were really immature. But now that we've - over the years - we're now going to be entering our sixth year. Seniors really do set the tone for the building. I never realized that fully until I saw - was in a school without seniors. And that it's good that freshman come in a little bit intimidated. Instead of coming in, thinking they own the show like the first two years, there was the 9th and 10th graders, and they'd never been in high school. And they were the high school. And they were our leadership. And it was hard. So it's neat to see the students taking on their responsibilities and roles. And I think that our student leadership - and of course it changes from year to year, but I think it's been pretty good overall. It's really nice to see.

JP: How do you feel about diversity at Century? How do you think that it affects Century as a school?

JT: Well, like I mentioned before, I really like that we have a lot of students from different backgrounds. And I think it improves the school. And it's a good learning experience for everyone. And I'm kind of - I don't know what to expect when the shift to Liberty occurs and how that's going to affect our diversity in the school. But I hope - I really appreciate that we have a large Hispanic community and a large Caucasian community. I think that that's really good. I like it, I like it a lot better than what I recall at Hilhi.

But I don't feel like I got to answer your question earlier, Jacob, about my job - my responsibilities. Because schedule changes is only one very small part of my job description. It actually consumes at the beginning of each semester. But as the coordinator I have to coordinate all of the activities and sometimes I feel badly because as the coordinator I kind of have to make sure that things are done when they need to be done, and following all of the policies and procedures. And that some of my students are shortchanged from that, because I have the same amount of students as the other counselors, but I have some responsibilities that they don't. It's a real juggling act. Some days I feel like I can't do it all. And I feel badly about that. And wish that we could have smaller student loads here. We have over 400 students. But really in reality we have over 500 because all of us have about 100 kids that come and go. They just kind of - they go somewhere else some of them, and some of them just leave and go out into the community. But they - people are - this is a huge turnover here at Century. That's one of the things that has been - it's very hard to handle. Last year - and I haven't seen the numbers for this year - we enrolled about 500 new students last year. And we're - at semester we were ahead of last year's pace. I just don't know where we're at now. But that's a huge number of students that come to Century. So we're constantly introducing new people into the mix here. It's a very good challenge, one that I don't think we've figured out how to handle.

JP: All right, is there anything else that you'd like to add? Or you can say anything you want.

JT: Well, I just wanted to say that when Century opened, I wasn't on the initial core team but I was brought into the core team earlier than the rest of the staff. Myself and Lynn Miller, who was a counselor here for the first two years. We were put on the core team about January whereas the rest of the staff came on - think it was April or May. So we had like 4 months where we were kind of were members and attended the core team meetings, and weren't a part of a lot of the early decisions that were initially made. But next year you - probably, since you're not going to be forecasting when you're a senior, but you're going to see how hard it is to shift 700 or 800 kids to a new school. And that's really something that was quite an ordeal that I recall. Because there isn't a staff yet over there so you'll kind of get a glimpse of some of what occurred before Century opened next year. It'll be different, but a lot of the same things. A lot of similarities.

JP: That's all.

JT: Thank you.

LT: Thank you.

JP: Thank you for your time.

JT: Thanks.