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AP History

Interview with Bessie Azari

May 15, 2003 – 1:20pm

The following interview was conducted on behalf of the oral history program of Century High School. The interviewee is **Mrs. Bessie Azari**. The interviewer is **Chris Kim**. The interview took place on Thursday, the 15th of May, 2003 at 12:20pm.

Ok, if I could just start with some general questions... for the time that you've been here, could you give me some of your background here at Century? Like what you've been involved in, what your roles have been...

Well my major role here has been to be a school counselor, and have a case load of students by alphabet. In this case I've had A thru D, approximately over 4 years. And so that's meant helping those kids graduate, meet graduation requirements, have a good schedule, um... if they have any personal issues or problems with friends, to help them resolve those. And so... my circle has mostly been here in the counseling center, but has extended into the main office and the attendance office, because I have some things to do with attendance, like check to see whether kids are here, and work with vice principals a lot. So it's like the hub of the school is my home, and I still get lost when I go out into the hallways. [And] I do some classroom guidance, which means that I'll go out and meet with a class and take them to a lab and do a career activity, for example. So in that way, I've done some teaching. I've been the junior class advisor, or what was the freshmen, sophomore, and now junior class advisor [class of 2003], and so that's one student group that I've worked with, but I haven't been real active. I've come to a few dances, but I haven't participated a lot in extra curricular activities. I went to plays and the music programs; I've been less likely to show up at a sports event.

By junior class advisor, what do you mean, do you mean attending and helping out at the junior senate meetings... etc?

Yes, I show up when the senate gets together, which is approximately every few weeks, and just kind of sit in the background, and guide them a little bit, although they really basically get things done on their own.

And have you been to other schools in the past? If so, can you tell me how Century is different from those other schools that you've been to?

That's a good question. This is the biggest school I've ever worked in, as well as the only high school I've ever worked in, so my experience has been mostly in smaller organizations like middle schools and grade schools. One of the things that are really different is that the people don't know each other as well here. Teachers don't know each other as well, and the amount of communication on email is incredible to me, and part of that maybe due to my age. When I started in this business as a teacher and counselor, there was no such thing. There weren't even computers. So people wrote to each other on notes. I would go to my mailbox every day and find a stack of notes. Here, there is hardly anything in my mailbox. It's all in my email. And so I communicate frequently, with people on the staff, but not very deeply. So I know people professionally, but there are only a few people that I know personally. With students... wow, I don't know what to say about students... my impression is that there is a high degree of respect here. I've worked in other schools, where the adults are more authoritative. Both administrators and teachers have more rules with kids, such as what they can wear, what they can say, or what they can do, and kids as a result tend to test the rules more, and tend to be more rebellious. Here, I don't find that. I find kids generally accept the rules, and they try to do the right thing. It feels like they have quite a bit of freedom here. That is my view as an adult, although kids may not say the same.

If I could expand off that subject of student freedom a little bit, do you think that freedom has been tested a little too far, perhaps we don't have enough security? There have been events such as severe vandalism... could you perhaps give a little input on that?

I think that's a good question, because I think it's important that kids know what the limits are. I think that what does happen at Century is within normal limits. I've been a vice principal, and I know every year, coming in as a vice principal that things are going to go wrong. It's inevitable with this man people, and with problems that kids and adults bring into work. Things are going to go wrong, and there is going to be conflict. Kids are going to break rules and laws and that's just inevitable. I think the level of that is pretty low here, and the feeling of safety is very high. I'm a little concerned at the rising level of drug use. I don't know what that's about, but it seems to me like the staff is pretty responsive in trying to get remedies quickly, like when they see negative trends coming up. I think the drug use is maybe even more serious than any other things that kids may be aware of.

I see. Despite all this, could you tell me what you see as the high points of this school year? This could be from the school as a whole, or even just for you personally.

This is a hard year to find high points for, and I'm also not a big school view person, but let me see... One thing is that more students in the senior class are going to receive college scholarships this year than any other year. With college costs rising, and financial aid going down, I think that the gap being filled more by organizations coming forward and being more willing to come in and are willing to find kids that really need money. So I think that that's one thing that I

see, that there will be more scholarship money... but that's not really a high point of the year... I'll think of something else, let me come back to that.

Ok, I know you said you wanted to come back to the issue of the overall morale of the faculty and the students, is there anything you'd like to say at this point?

Well, like I said, compared to the other places that I've worked, the morale has been really high. I think a kernel of the spirit of the staff that came into this building when it was formed still keep with them, such as in staff meetings, some of the teachers that started this school and developed trust, are still the ones to come forward in the tough times we've been through. For instance, in the recent issue of whether or not block scheduling should be eliminated, the teachers spoke with heart, and with passion about what they valued here, and I think that really helped move the second vote. That was a really interesting process. The teachers got together and worked out a deal, and that was a thing that happens that was really cool, and doesn't really happen that often. There are a lot of things going on at the end of the year, and there is a lot of loss happening. People are realizing that this is year, enough people are going to leave that maybe things aren't going to be the same. However, I think people are going to cope with that, even though the school will be different next year.

Speaking of losses, what do you see as the major impact of cutting a whole 17 days off the end of our school year?

Well my first reaction was that I thought people were making too big of a deal out of it. Because I think what happens is that people adjust to this sort of thing. And I think that they have. I think that kids, teachers, everyone arises to this sort of occasion, especially in this high school. So frankly, I don't think this is going to have any permanent effect on anybody. I think the only way this could pose a problem is if it went on year after year. I feel sorry for the little kids in the elementary schools that are losing their learning time to do such things as read and write. There we may see some problems, but I think people presumed it would be much more of a problem than it really is.

On a slightly different note, what do you think Century is known for in the community of Hillsboro?

I think that this school is predominantly known for its arts and communication, its music and theater programs, and its technology. That's what I was told when I came here, and that seems to be true, that kids who come here can find their niche, especially in the arts and communication, I think this is the place for that to happen. Unfortunately, I think there is more technology in this school than what kids are interested in, and I think that's a problem because one of my roles here is to help kids choose classes, and there are kids that really aren't interested in technology. I'm still sad that there are no hands on wood/auto/metal shop programs. I guess our school is kind of known as an Intel school; it seems to me that many of the families here are employed in the electronics industry, and we have a huge number of kids that move in and out.

It's awesome, but it could be a problem. I call it turn over... if you count all the kids that move in and out, it's almost like the student body has doubled. Oh, another thing is that there is a lot of diversity in this school, which I think is great. I mean wow, I've worked at J.B. Thomas where there was a lot of diversity too, but I it just seems like kids just like it and go with it, unless I'm not aware of under-currents of conflicts between racial and ethnic groups of kids. It just seems to me that for some reason the combination of ethnic groups works well here.

Speaking of the students and staff in this school, who do you consider the key people of this school year?

Well there are a few people on the staff that I see as spokespeople. Your teacher, Mrs. Duyckinck for example, I think she makes a difference wherever she is. As well as Mr. Call, Mrs. Cochrane, Mr. Allen. And not only because they are fearless about speaking their mind and their quality of being articulate, but also because they have built programs. I think that their heart is really here. Mr. Taylor, the head counselor, he's a little bit more in the background, but he's made a big difference. Mr. Zher.... It's hard to name names without running the risk of missing somebody... Kids too have made a difference. Jag Media has been a huge force in this year. Most people, if not all get the morning announcements and sort of get a feel for our school through that program.

I know as a counselor, this must have had a profound impact on you, but on the threat of losing block scheduling next year, how did it strike you? Especially on the first vote where the decision was to get rid of block scheduling... what were your reactions?

I knew I was retiring, so I was a little distanced from it, because I knew I didn't have to deal with it. I felt like it would be ok for some kids, seeing as how there are too many course choices for ninth graders, and for students who just want to come here and get the basics and get out of here. But for the students who are interested in a wide variety of electives that hurt. I think that the school would have been damaged. It was not good. The scary thing was that it was really going to happen.

So I guess you felt a big sigh of relief when it was decided that block scheduling would stay?

Well yea, I would have had to change a thousand schedules! It would have been awful!

And there's been a lot of national coverage on not only Oregon, but on the Hillsboro School District even, such as in the Dunesberry comic strips, and in national publications like the New York Times. What do you feel about the entire United States getting these messages about Oregon?

Wow, that was something. For one thing, it amazes me how we are in the spotlight. I mean, not being in New York getting these directly, we don't even

know what they are portraying us to be, and it kind of makes me wonder what the rest of the world is going to think about Oregon. It's frightening to me, because I've been teaching in the Hillsboro School District for 30 years, and my children even graduated here. I've always felt that that this district was a great place, and I still do, although I feel some pain and disappointment, because I think this is going to hurt our reputation, not only as a state, but as a school body.

We recently had a War on Iraq, and even as we speak things are still going on there. Do you think it had much of an impact on Century?

I was surprised by this war. The build-up to the war, especially the last few weeks before the actual start of the war was just awful, and I felt like I could feel the tension in this school. The staff was worried that the kids were going to walk out in protests, and go to the streets. Not that it was going to become violent, but just about how we were going to handle it. Also, we had a few students who were either from the Middle East, or had remaining family there who were really upset. But after it started, not many students came into the counseling center, and I'm not sure how well attended the lunch forums were, but it seemed that the war was just dormant in the back of most people's minds. Overall, I don't think that the school was affected a whole lot.

Speaking of student walkouts, what can you say about the "massive" 5 student walkout that occurred earlier this year? Where the 5 students walked out and called the school from the local Fred Meyers, and were later caught?

[Laughs] Well I know of that and I know of students who wrote to the school board, one who even wrote extremities in the letter and was later reprimanded, but I think it's just normal student behavior and their own way of trying to express their own views. And with Liberty opening next year, which would result in a smaller school and less classes, I think that kids are concerned, because they want this place to be a good place to be. Kids have been coming in with concerns, both kids who are going, and staying, saying that they feel like many of the people they care about are leaving. There's a lot of stuff going on.

I could actually relate to what you just said, because I myself am a junior, and I've sat down with a few friends and pondered what school will be like next year. It was hard enough seeing Mrs. Young leave last year, but this time many people are retiring at once. Mr. Morton, you, Mr. Zher, it tends to put a lot of stress on people... Do you think you could share a few reasons why you yourself personally are retiring, and what effects do you think they'll have on this school?

I don't think there will be very little, if any effect on this school. When I left J.B. Thomas after 19 years there, it was the year that the 9th graders were separated from the middle schools, and became part of the high schools. That was not a good change. They were our anchor for the student body, and it was very hard to see them go. Anyway, the year that that happened, there were a lot of people who thought that there were going to be too many changes, and

that it would never be as good as it had been. All that happens is its just different. Also the effects of new, younger teachers that come in provide a positive effect. But you can see from talking to me that I have a very positive outlook, and I think that it's also because of being an older employee, that you know that nobody is irreplaceable. And also when strong people leave, people who never got a chance to step forward do. So everybody just pitches in, and it all works out. This school is overcrowded. Next year, with some of the body mass gone, I think kids are going to like it. The cafeteria is not a comfortable place to be, and I think that's another part of the culture here. The cafeteria is dirty, noisy, and I know a lot of kids that don't like to be there. It's no wonder that kids try to sneak food and find other places to eat. If this place was downsized, and everyone had a little bit more elbow room, I think it'd be really good. We also run many, many buses out of here everyday, and it's just a zoo.

If you personally could change anything about this school year, what would it be and why?

Well I don't know that there is much that I would change... I'll be anxious to see what happens when the school starts later in the day. I don't like the hours, and I think they start school too early, so I guess I would change that. It's not as healthy as it could be... I love the schedule, this year... but the answer is obvious. This year, there was too much stress, and I'm not sure that the teachers got to have as much time to really plan with students about what they want to do next year, because they were too busy reacting to what was going on, and that was really hard.

Shifting topics again just a little bit, there were a lot of things that impacted not only our school, but the education in the State of Oregon as a whole, what were your reactions on the failure of measure 28?

Well it was such a strange election because most of the time period between the surfacing of the measure to the time the final vote was decided; no one expected it to pass. It was really weird, that only near the end of the election did it seem that the measure had a chance of passing. I was surprised at the amazement I saw on some people that it failed, when nobody really expected it. Nobody in this state really expects tax-raising measures to pass, and there is a long history of tax measures failing in this state. I guess I was just particularly not surprised. I think that was still a time where most of the citizens and parents didn't really realize how bad it was. It's just been recently, just this spring, where we decided to have 17 days cut, that people were really aware of a financial problem. I'm sad that this community doesn't have as many resources here as there are in Beaverton, or there aren't organizations such as in Portland, where it's an intense urban area. This is an interesting community, because we are all sprawled and spread out. Not only are the people spread out, but the tax base is also spread out, which makes it hard for the city to support the schools.

Would you like to share any personal opinions or feelings on whether or not you wanted it to pass or not?

Yes, absolutely! I think that because once we step back, it's hard to regain what we gave up. We are not moving ahead the way we should be. I wanted very much for it to pass. I still think most of the problems are going on with the federal government and the loss of funding for the state schools. We're on the bottom of the food chain...

With the budget cuts in mind, if you could, what would you change around? Such as cutting days as compared to school programs, etc...

Honestly, I'm a little reluctant because I don't have a popular view about that. I really believe that the academics are the most important thing. I understand that many kids come to school for the activities and athletics, but they are very expensive. Other countries and even private schools in the US can provide a really good academic program, without providing student transportation, and lunches, and athletic programs, and dances. So, I just wish that there were more value placed on the core academic program. But unfortunately, its part of our culture and this community is very much that case, and we want to support these very expensive programs. In my fantasy, if I could deal with it, I would strip away not just sports but other extra curricular programs... and I think we've just become too accustomed to schools providing everything for kids.

So pretty much keep the core classes, and allow sports and other outside programs to be a bit more expendable?

Well I'd like to mention that in the core classes, the arts, such as music, drama, etc are included, but transportation, etc should be a little less emphasized. I was here as a parent in this district, when one year they took the busses away and you know what? It was okay. The year they took the busses away, which was the year my son was in the 7th grade, people threw fits at first, but soon carpools formed, and kids eventually found a way to school one way or another.

So it kind of goes along with the concept that when a gap is created, eventually something will come in and make up for it...

Yes exactly... nice observation. 😊

In your opinion, who or what group has been affected the most by the problems throughout this year, whether it be political aspects, violence, etc.?

My counselor perspective is that the people who are the most effective are the people who are the most vulnerable. It doesn't matter what group they're in. People who have already got enough stress in their lives, will be the most affected, and need the support system, so it's usually certain individuals that need assistance. I think this year has been really hard on Mrs. Montgomery, but she has a hard job anyway. I think that she's been really effective. New teachers as a group already have had to worry about their jobs, especially because they don't have a lot of teaching experience anyway. Seniors,

especially the last few weeks wondering if they were going to graduate, wondering if colleges would accept them, or whether or not they are going to be able to have a prom... Clearly they were the ones to worry. The 9th graders were like "yay 17 days cut...", but not the seniors. **And it's kind of awkward that prom is the day after school gets out...** Yea, that and people don't like the yearbooks are coming out so late either.

I know we've slightly discussed your view on education and the funding of it, but how strongly do you agree or disagree with what the district has done with the budget crisis?

I'm pretty supportive of the administration, and I've known the people in the district office for a long time. I know Joe Rodriguez, Carl Perez, and others... and I trust them. I think that they did the best they could. As a teacher, a part of the rank and file, I believe in the causes that we are fighting for. I think it's just a natural process of people protecting their own interests. I think the district office pretty much did the best they could. Public relations hasn't always been the best, I think if the district office came out early and admitted that they needed to make more cuts, and not taken salary increases, it would have been a huge boost to the confidence, and the whole process would have been better. But I think that they are honest, hard working people, and they did the best they could.

Again on the lines of cutting certain programs and things... between programs and personnel, which would you cut?

Sometimes people and programs are connected, but programs are really important. I think people can figure out how to think creatively about ways to keep programs going. There has been some kind of effort to try and save the arts and communications block. I think that's a good example, because 25-35 kids would have lost that program. People like Mr. Keene are retiring, and he was a wonderful choir teacher, who always cared about whoever followed, and this program was so successful partly because people love him. I guess I've said two things at the same time. I just hate to see programs go. As a counselor, I haven't been able to run any programs here, because all we could do is keeping up with scheduling. It's huge. Kids are at my door all the time, but when I was in a middle school, I had Natural Helpers, I have a peer mediation program... it was awesome to just have kids identifying with a group. And yea, it's a hard question to answer, I don't know how you could make these choices; you could probably cut some programs, cut some personnel...

So, based on the events that events that happened in this school year, and how we handled them, what kind of precedent do you think we've set for future generations that will come through Century High?

The late start on Monday mornings, started because Glencoe and Hilhi needed extra time last year to get geared up for the trimester. It gave Century a chance to have Monday mornings off too. But that set a tone for teachers working together frequently. I mean, teachers have faculty meetings about once a month, and they were quick and dirty, and they were after or before school,

and they really wanted to get on with their business and go teach. I think that the Monday morning sessions where teachers had a chance to have a long meeting, or get together in study groups, set a precedent for teachers to work together. And there was the site council, a group comprised of teachers and students, parents, and administrators who sort of steer the school. They are the ones who have argued and talked for the last 3 years for this waiver so we could have this block schedule. I think they came to the conclusion that this spring they spent so many years talking about this waiver that they had wasted time in which they could have been doing other things, and they realized that they never wanted to have to vote on another waiver again. They said that whatever the schedule is, we don't want to have to deal with a waiver any more. We want a schedule that we can keep, without having to talk about it anymore. What about students though? I don't really know much of what the students have been doing to set precedents and maybe that there have been precedents set as far as kids are concerned?

Well in my opinion, groups like SAFFE have done pretty big demonstrations about what the student body opinion is, and I think that this program has a great future. Not only are we going out and showing our opinion to the masses, like in big rallies, it's not something that is just going to die down. As people graduate, other people with either the same, or even differing opinions will rise up and help fight for a student voice.

Where are those kids coming from? Are they coming from already established groups, are they coming out of a class? Are you one of them so you could tell me that?

Well as I am not involved in any of these groups I couldn't tell you exactly how many people are from where, but I think that most of the kids that I see in these demonstrations have a strong sense of leadership, and could very likely be the leaders in their social groups, clubs, etc. It's not necessarily the people in senates, or leadership, but these groups attract people from the general populous of our school and they just happen to feel the same way seem to step forward.

One other thing I wanted to add from a counseling point of view was that this school has worked hard ever since I got here to make its self known for CAMs. Oh my gosh it's been a struggle. I've watched kids and teachers struggle. Teachers had ideas, but kids were lost on what these CAMs were. They just saw this school as a place where we could take a lot of electives. A sort of smorgasbord...They came in thinking, "oh I'll just take a little gourmet foods, a little keyboarding, a little Jag Media..." and nothing was connected for them. And I think the precedent was set this year, and we'll see a lot of CAM award nights going on, the different groups like the technology group, and the health 2 CAM. I think some of the CAMs are finally developing an identity for themselves. And again, is it the program of the teacher; what's the glue that's holding it together? But I think that is something. I think this could become more of the character of this school, and we'll see whether the loss of funds and staff could make a big difference in these programs.

Since this is your last year here, is there anything that you'd like to add as a message being left behind to those who are going to be here in the future years?

I just think that this is a really great place. There are enough differences among the student body. High or low incomes, interest areas and academic abilities, and it really is nothing but a miracle. There's not as much diversity in the staff, but it's just awesome. I think that as new students come in, when I come back to visit again, I think that 80-90% of students here are happy, even as transfer students. They feel like it's friendly, and they don't have to dress, look, or say a certain thing to fit in. And there is a perception in this community that this is a good school. Real estate agents will say that families coming in want their kids to be here when they go to school. Kids request to transfer here every year, and Mrs. Montgomery practically push them away, and that's partly the Liberty Phenomenon... a lot of kids weren't sure whether or not Liberty was going to be ok, so they wanted to stay here. So I think that this school has a good chance of going and being successful in the years ahead. Teachers are a little bit separated from each other because of the office configuration, and they don't use the teacher's lunch room very often, but they stay in their offices and it's comfortable, they've got a computer, their own desk, and their own groups. I've seen efforts on trying to bridge that gap but it doesn't seem to work very well, so it seems were stuck with that one.