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Interview with Betsy Biller, Assistant Superintendent 5/16/05

Talicia Savage: The following interview was conducted on behalf of the oral history program of the Century High School. The interviewee is Betsy Biller. The interviewer is Talicia Savage. The interview took place at the Hillsboro Administration office on Monday, May 16th at 1:00 pm.

TS: So, how long have you lived in Hillsboro?

Betsy Biller: I've worked in Hillsboro for 29 years. I don't live in Hillsboro any longer, I moved from Hillsboro in about 1992.

TS: So, you've witnessed the happenings of Hillsboro from 1980 to 1992?

BB: I sure did.

T And you basically know what's been going on since 1992?

B: I believe I do.

T: How often do you deal with criminals?

B: You know I don't deal with criminals very often, however because Hillsboro is a county state, there are a number of agencies that work on behalf of criminal rehabilitation, juvenile crimes, juvenile crime prevention, and I interface with those groups a lot. We supply a staff member to work at Parkins house, which is a residential center for students/youth who are waiting to go through the court system. They are not necessarily from Hillsboro, but anywhere in Washington County, because its Washington County facility.

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T: So, about when did these programs start?

B: I'm not sure when Parkins house started, my awareness of Parkins house and the juvenile crime prevention began in 1992 because I came to the district office, from work at a middle school.

T: Do you personally feel safe in the Hillsboro area or Washington County area?

B: I do. I feel safe for a number of reasons. I think that people who don't deal with kids at all and stay removed from kids are sometimes put off by the appearances they may give. Someone may have spiky hair and wear some kind of a strange collar or weird jewelry or tattoos or clothes that sort of scream intimidation. To me they are just kids in funny clothes. And I'm always friendly to them and they may be suspect about why is that weirdo woman being nice to me(laughs), but that's the way to approach people, it's just the costume they happen to be wearing and I have to treat them as kids that are here to

learn. I see that in the community as well. There are some people who are put off by the gathering, the social networking that occurs in the area in Hillsboro where a lot Hispanic families live. And yet if you go to Mexico or to any of the countries where Latinos live, that is part of their social culture is to congregate, is it's warm outside I don't want to sit inside being hot alone, I want to be out where things are happening. That doesn't intimidate me. We need to get people to learn not to be intimidated by that. I am careful, I am watchful about some of the things that could be random violence. When I'm in a parking lot a night I park near the entrance, I carry my keys with the pointy thing sticking out, I carry my purse close to me, I don't leave things open in the car, I lock my doors at night when I'm at home, that's the kind of things. But I am not afraid.

T: Have you felt safer over the years or less safe, maybe with the increase in population?

B: I really don't believe that I have felt a loss of safety. I sometimes worry for older people, because I think that they are susceptible targets for an opportunistic attack, maybe pushing an older person down to steal a purse or a wallet or something like that where the loss of the wallet could be minimum compared to the physical damage. That makes me nervous for them, but for my personal safety or the safety of my children, I really don't have that big of concern.

T: Do feel the community feels safer now with the more law enforcement than in 1980?

B: I don't think so. I think that there is a tendency on the part of different individuals and groups of individuals to tighten their ranks in order to form a little protection. The little neighborhood association feel safe because they know each other and they have this little block homes or whatever, but as long as you're my neighbor you're okay but if you're not my neighbor then we're going to watch out for you. I think we have a little more divide between group whether they are groups of more financially prosperous versus the poor, or the white and Hispanics, or an influx of other minority populations, people who speak English or don't speak English. I'm afraid we have a pretty big divide that makes a lack of trust sort of permeate some of these feelings.

T: And there been a change over time in those segregations?

B: I think so. When I first started working here in Hillsboro it was a very small community. It had a small field of a community. We had in what was the high school district four schools, we had Hill High, we had Mid High, we had Brown, and we had Pointer. That's it. When we unified in 1996 and became a larger district and then opened Century and Liberty and the other elementary schools that we've opened we've become a larger and larger area. We are a big area where we have downtown Hillsboro that's really does identify themselves as being in the little city of Hillsboro. But in Reedville for example, some of those people don't really consider that they are Hillsboro residents very

much, they don't come into Hillsboro for their services. They maintain to go to Beaverton or to other areas for services. So it's difficult for a community feel to build up and I think that the community feel is the best thing to have people value differences and not be afraid. As we've become a larger community, some things have come into the community such as drugs for example. The methamphetamine is a huge concern and the methamphetamine that leads to identity theft, that leads to violence. I am concerned that we get that curbed and stopped, but my tendency seems to be leaning to get the Meth. cycle broken down so that not one more kid gets involved in it and ruins their life, as opposed to I'm afraid someone's going to steal something.

11 63

T: What do you think the three biggest changes have been over the last 25 years in Hillsboro?

B: In regards to?

T: Law enforcement and crime.

B: One of the big things that has happened in relations with law enforcement is the school resource officers program. We used to have police officers that came to the school when we had a problem, they responded, they were pretty responsive, but I may know them I may not know them. With these school resource officers , and I think you guys have Pat Hess, is that correct?

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T,K,J: Yeah.

B: You know Pat Hess, Pat Hess is just like, he's just there. He was also my school resource officer when I was a vice principle at Pointer, as well. It got so that the kids knew that that was a good person, that was a person that if they had a quite problem that they could talk to and it didn't have to be a big oh he's the cop mentality. That is a huge thing to put the kids and the cops together in a positive situation. I like that a lot. The sheer number of police officers that are necessary to protect a community as large as and as populated area as Hillsboro, that's amazing because a lot of people including the congregates, don't think of Hillsboro as being a little town. And we got the precinct on Tenth Street and so on. In regards to probably the third thing are the incarcerations, the cost of incarcerations is so expensive. With the budget problems that the states has, it either sucks up more of the state money to punish people and keep them away from us or there isn't enough money and they'll be released onto the street before they've rehabilitated and they know they can get away with it and so it doesn't prevent crime from being recommitted. That's a big thing.

T: What do you think the differences are in the crimes that have been committed over the last twenty-five years, or a big change that is going on?

B: Well I remember, a murder that happened in the late eighties in Hillsboro and it was such a shock, such a shock, we just didn't really have that very often. It was a random murder of an elderly lady and there was a lot of speculation about who could be involved in it. At that time there was a lot of research about gang activity and of course everyone was afraid of what they don't understand and they were all sure it was gang activity, and it turned out that it wasn't. But I remember how distressing that was. There have been a few events that were criminal in nature that were really shocking to the community. They can serve to bring people together, and they can serve to tear people apart.

T: So, before it was a less excessive-

B: I think that the violent crimes were something you just didn't hear about and now it's around you all the time. You got your shootings at spring break and your fights from one house to another, you got a body found in an apartment and it's a real more common to hear that.

T: What right now are the biggest crime issues and how are they being dealt with. Put it into perspective of back then what were the bigger issues and how would they be dealt with.

B: When I started working here I would say that the drug of choice was probably alcohol or maybe marijuana. The fear now that kids have access to Methamphetamine is devastating, it's frightening. The alcoholics still.... (unintelligible) So that the meth. and the related crisis are the focus of our problems. Gangs involvement in the late 80's appeared to be more of a situation of kids who didn't connect with everyone else, banding together and forming a group that made them feel important and made them feel like they belong. What appears now is that gang influence is a little more willing to be violent, a little more likely to be well armed, a little more likely to involved in some pretty heavy money making, thru drugs or other activities and as a result they wiling to stand up against the side of right a little more, they are more willing to be violent. Those are terrible. The identity theft, well that is not a violent crime, as it is a real serious problem that has its cost in every way to everything. It's silent and invisible, you don't even know it's happening and you pay for those clothes and don't realize that part of the cost is covering the loss that they have when people buy the clothes with false ID and they end up not getting money for it.

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T: And so there has been an increase in that sort of crime?

B: Huge increase! And they have little task forces that are trying to figure out how to curb it and your hearing all the time about shred your paper work and don't put your bills into an open bin, get them into a closed locked mail box and when you send them don't leave your mailbox unlocked because mail can be stolen.

T: Do you think that there has been in an increase in stricter punishment or what kind punishment that you would normally see in juveniles?

B: I really appreciate that question. There's measure 11, have you guys talked about measure 11 at all? Measure 11 is put a number on a ballot measure and so ballot measure 11 came up and it was mandatory sentencing for certain crimes. Mandatory sentencing for assault involving a burglary or a theft might mean that you have a bicycle I like, I knock you down and you get a cut, but I knock you down to take your bicycle and I would spend a minimum of seven years in prison for that crime. To me, that is a reaction to Oregonians saying that we can't control crime so we're just going to look it up in a place where we don't want to think about it. We have built, I can't tell you how many prisons and jails and how many prison beds and so on, hired the staff that it takes to man them, while funding for school has gone down, and to me Oregon has got it all wrong. McClaran when I was a child, McClaran down in Woodburn was a place for juvenile boy offenders and they were troubled kids, they were kids who got into trouble who disrupted their neighborhoods and so on. It's where murderers go now, it's where kids who are willing to assault, attack, rape whatever, are there. It's like a developmental prison. It's just awful because that atmosphere is elevated.

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B: OK can you hold on for just one second...(leaves room to go see someone)

B: Measure 11 took away judges discretion about a crime. You might be the best kid in the world and one night do something stupid, harmless stupid prank and someone gets hurt. Is it really going to serve you best to send you to prison for seven years, when nothing about your life up till then showed that you were on your way to prison, nothing about the kid you've been says that you belong in prison. It's dumb, stupid, irresponsible, punishable, yes, prison, no. But that's what measure 11 has done, it has taken (unintelligible) and it has built a punitive rather than a rehabilitative program. That is just fundamentally wrong. It's sponsored by a man whose daughter was killed by a man in Lake Oswego and he just decided to drive a car into her to see what it would be like and killed her. Yes, that's terrible, that's horrible, that does deserve to be punished. But every kid who makes a mistake that doesn't cause a death, doesn't deserve to go to prison.

T: So you feel that the people are becoming scared, so they're like okay. Over time they've just gotten scared of criminals?

B: I think so. When a measure comes up on a ballot in November, there was a safety measure for sheriff and fire and there was a school measure, it's a local option to get more money for schools. I sat on a committee in the Chamber of Commerce with the business people that were there, and they considered those measures and other. They consider them and their job was to say whether they endorsed it or they didn't endorse it and they

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were going to let people know in writing that Chamber endorses such and such a measure. I could talk till I'm blue in the face for the school measure , I'm also on the library board and I talked about those also. The safety measure came up, BOOM, yes we support it. Didn't matter how much it was, didn't matter how much it was going to cost them, didn't matter what they were going to get out of it, no one had to be there to say we need this or we will lose "x" firemen or you're going to have 7,000 houses per firemen or anything like that. Yes, it just happened. That's probably a good example, keep me safe by keeping those away from me.

T: What do you think about the community awareness about whats going on?The juvenile violence thats happening, do you think they've become more aware of it or less?

B:I think that some of the general public overgeneralizes what they think about juvenile crime, so that all groups of kids might make them nervous so they tend to fear any groups of kids that they are not personally familiar with. It's part of that divide that I talked about earlier that I see happening. Because we tend to drive into our homes, raise the garage door, park our cars, lower the garage door, we tend not to know our neighbors with all of their oddities and figure out that they may be weird, but they're pretty nice people and they aren't going to hurt me. We tend to be so isolated and we tend to be afraid of other people.

T: So an increase?

B: Increase, yes.

T: So have you seen or been aware of any kind of racial profiling or changes in racial profiling?

B: I have not been aware of racial profiling, in terms of I see it on the T.V. shows. You know the cops are stopping the people that have a particular look or appearance or whatever. But I think that the general public some memebers have a tendency to do some racial profiling. On the Oregon Live website, the forum page about Hillsboro, some of the stuff that was written about Hispanics in there was absolutely hateful, to me those are the people that should be locked up. That is absolutely without cause or without foundation. The other day I stopped at a drive through to pick up some lunch and the young lady that waited on me had the most beautiful accent and I commented on it and she said most people like you don't think that this is pretty at all. You know just this divide. But I don't know that the police are involved in it, the Hillsboro police have tried to bring in people of different race. They've tried to do trainings; there is a understanding racism foundation that has actually done a whole course for kids and staff at Century that is really powerful stuff, because you need to break down those walls because you need to see people for people rather than for the color of the skin or the way they dress.

T: So basically the head-honchos and the government are trying to reduce it, but the community is kinda just pushing it back?

B: I believe that that is probably a pretty fair statement.

T: Do you feel that the government has been there from 1980 to present, or has the government been taking more role?

B: Yeah, I think it's more from 1995 until present that the government has really made a strong effort and part of that is the economy, if you had the statistics about the economy in Hillsboro and the number of small businesses you would be amazed how many small businesses are Hispanic based businesses. So the community is finally figuring out that this is an economic factor that can't be ignored, so they need to bring them in with the city, governs the police, the county governs the area. Also, they are working to try to improve the standing of all citizens in the community.

T: How do you feel that the media conveys juvenile crimes (Betsy Biller laughs and makes faces) and the crimes committed in school?

B: Do you ever see me on television? Have you ever seen me on television?

T: No.

B: One of my jobs- you lucky girl-one of my jobs is that when there is a problem or when we've got lice or whooping cough or a gun or a knife or a fire or anything, I'm the one that the media interviews. They can come up with some of dumbest things that they want to talk about, you know you just... (makes a face). First of all they want more information than they are entitled to have. If there is something going on my goal is to make the principal and the staff able to deal with the problem not the media. Then I want accurate information that I can share so that the parents of the kids that go to that school or who live in this community have a degree of reassurance that we are taking care of the problem and I hope that they understand that we don't have absolute infinite control over everything that happens. I will often say that I would venture that one of our schools is a safer place than sending your child to the mall, where people haven't had background checks, aren't supervising, aren't watching out for other people throughout the day and so on. Never the less the media has been blowing things out of proportion. I can think of a story last year that one of the media that I respected highly was trying to create a huge thing saying that, and her lead was "Did you know that your child could be going to school with a sexual predator." I'm not too familiar with that story, but it was a situation where in order for me to refute what she said I would have to have given personal information about the child she was talking about and I couldn't do that. So I was stuck not being able to defend the person she was talking about because I couldn't breach confidence. And so she ran with the story, she held the story three months from the time she did the interview until sweeps week when she advertised it on the news. Now tell me, that that's not manipulative.

Buller 8

T: So you believe that the increase in technology and stuff like that, there has been an increase in the media-

B: Brutal. Absolutely brutal. I was in a staff meeting when Kip Kinkle shot people at Thurston high school and one of the staff people here, her husband is a freelance photographer. He got buzzed by the associated press; however you can get to Springfield we have a school shooting. We had that information before it was on the news, there had been a school shooting. We had no idea who, how much, how bad it was, what the circumstances were. The media has got people throughout Portland Metropolitan area extending the story. People are always looking to beat somebody with the story. So yes I think electronics made it very accessible.

T: I've noticed that our neighbors in our cul-de-sac are Canadian and German and they compared the news from their country and here. The news in their countries are about other countries and other about other projects going on and about acceptance and ours is more like the tabloids, ours news is just tabloids. Welcome to Jerry Springer live! (laughs)

T: So what do you think is the leading cause of crime in Hillsboro?

B: Well, I think that might be too broad for me to answer.

T: Well concerning juvenile.

B: When kids get together in corruptive ways, peer influence, possibly inhibition. I like the commercial when a kid says I can't believe you won't let me go to the party just because there aren't parents there. The kid does a good job arguing for it and some parents give in at that, then he goes and picks up the phone and says it didn't work for him either. When kids are supervised and when kids have positive role models and when kids have positive choices to make it's almost like a momentum that's built up to make you do good things. As opposed to negative role models, uncertainty in their families, lack of supervision, lack of direction, they can find things to do that seem small and ultimately can lead to breaking the law.

T: Do you feel there has been an increase in parent participant?

B: I think a parent participate more than they ever did, but more and more parents are like me and both parents are at work, or there is a single parent trying to hold things together and is working really, really hard to try to keep food on the table and a house over their head. A roof makes more sense. (laughs) I think that the strain of the economy causes strain on the families and that leads to some fractures that cause people to make poor decisions or lead to people making poor decisions. So I think that more and more of our kids are becoming unsupervised. I saw it as a VP at a middle school and you would ask

11 C7

Bell 9

parent to volunteer and you get the kids saying, oh no, my mom can't come. Like I have two kids, my daughter didn't want me to volunteer at her things, and my son always did, same parents same mom, different kids. It's just you know that's what there was. I found that my sons were always happy to have me there and treated me like I was reasonably normal person. I always wanted to be the parent that my daughter wanted to be there, but she always had this little no, no, lets just see if other parents want to do it, but it never made a difference to her to say yeah mom come over. Parents need to be involved and they need to tell their kids, sorry but you don't have a choice I'm in I'm going on the field, you know whatever.

T: Do you think that the commercials that tell the parents to talk to their kids... Do you think that doing that has actually worked with the involvement of the parents.

B: Personally yes, and I think that any that it works for it's worth it. As a teacher and as a somebody that was an activities director at a school, talking with kids about tough stuff doesn't seem intimidating to me, talking with my own kids doesn't seem intimidating to me. I think that it is intimidating to some folks and that any help they can get I think makes it easier for them, does everybody do it, no, we have parents who will argue with us and pull their kids from certain units and certain classes that they don't feel the school should instructing them and yet we got to hope that the parents are doing it instead.

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T: Back to the major causes-

B: Yeah.

T: In 1980 what do you think were the most major cause of juvenile crime?

B: Social drinking, lack of alternative activities to do. Where did you go in Hillsboro if it was a Friday night and you were seventeen and there was no game and somebody wasn't having a dance at school? What is there to do?

T: Because Hillsboro is a lot bigger and there is more stuff to do there is less pressure-

B: I don't know, I don't know.

T: Have you noticed and changes of drug use in school over the years?

B: I think it would be safe to say that we didn't used to ever find some of the drugs that I consider to be more risky, crack for example. I'm trying to think about the incidents, I do a student survey every year about drugs and alcohol and I'm trying to think if there has been an increase. It has stayed fairly flat in the reports of alcohol and tobacco and marijuana, there has been a slight increase in amphetamine and in crack. Slight, slight increase. So I don't personally see the effect, but the survey would indicate that there was a slight increase.

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Biller 10

T: Is there anything else that you wanted to tell me that I haven't already asked about?

B: Another thing that I also noticed is a jump from sixth grade which is the first grade that we administer that survey up to grade ten, that's when the involvement in drug activity takes a jump. So then as a teacher that tells me that parents and teachers need to be talking in that very critical time about some things that can keep kids from becoming involved and divert them.

Jorge Zavala: Do you think the D.A.R.E program and programs like that have been helping?

B: I do. The problem is that I don't think any program is the answer to everything, but the D.A.R.E program may be good for kids. Just brings in a different person to do the teaching about staying away from drugs and alcohol and gangs, as opposed to their teacher. I think that true prevention requires a whole array of tools. The survey would also say, where have you received valuable information about gangs and drug use and alcohol. The D.A.R.E. program is one of those. Parents, teachers, ministers, my friend are other ones.