

Transcription of Mike Trygg's interview with John Stotka

Mike: The following interview was conducted on behalf of the oral history program of Century High School. The interviewee is John Stotka and the interviewer is Mike Trygg. The interview took place at Century High School on May...

Stotka: 22nd, Tuesday, May 22nd, 2002.

M: Ok, Mr. Stotka, what was your first involvement with CHS, and why did you choose to come here?

S: My first would have been 2 years before it opened, when there was a request for transfer sent out to all the teachers in the district, and I was at Hill High; and I responded to the request for transfers positively, requesting a transfer to Century.

M: Why would you call it "positively?" Were you looking forward to it?

S: Positive meaning yes I wanted to transfer, and the reason I wanted to transfer is Mr. Barnekoff, the new principal of Century, was a very good friend and, a lot of my friends were transferring, and I saw it as a good time for change.

M: What other schools have you been involved with?

S: Other schools? Oh my... I taught in Wisconsin, a big junior high in Racine, Wisconsin for three years, and then I taught in Superior... Superior, Wisconsin, for a year, then I transferred to Juno, Alaska. I taught there for five years at a junior high, and then I transferred to... I moved to Lincoln City, Oregon and taught at the high school there for a number of years, and then I came to Portland because my mother was here in a nursing home, and I taught at St. Mary's of the valley for two years at which time I transferred to Hill High and began teaching there in '86.

M: How would you compare all your other experiences to Century?

S: Oh... I mean... there's a tremendous amount of variety, especially because some of the schools were all junior highs and they're obviously a very different situation. Century was the finest physical facility that I ever taught at, obviously brand new and under I thought... I considered extremely good leadership with Mr. Barnekoff, and it was really fun setting up a new school. I'd done it once before in Juno, Alaska, I set up a new... I helped, I was a staff member, set up a new junior high in the city there, so I've had experience, and it's fun. I enjoy being a pioneer.

M: So you enjoy the challenge of...

S: The challenge of new curriculum, and especially, my transfer to Century was especially challenging because I took... I left my traditional field of science teaching and went into the Lab 2000 which was an integrated computer technology curriculum, and that was very challenging having not a strong background in computers, it pushed me to my limits.

M: How were decisions made in planning out the Lab 2000 setup and implementing all the technology made available to Century?

S: The Lab 2000 was a package program bought from a firm in San Diego, and they provided the setup and they came in and implemented all the computers and all the equipment, and they also offered a training workshop that I went through and that prepared me a little bit to be honest. It still took a lot more and to be honest implementation and curriculum directions happened as I taught it, for the three years I was in there.

M: What was your initial vision of Century and also your initial vision of what Tech Lab was to become?

S: Interesting... my vision of Century was just a new school with a new school with a new curriculum, and after 20-some years of teaching I realized a school is a school is a school is a school. They can talk about innovations and they can talk about new structures and all of that, but its mostly talk - a school is still a school and what it breaks down to is it's a classroom with a teacher and it's what the teacher makes of it. And the Lab 2000 that's a different story because that was brand new and it was something that had never been done before in this area. And I took a lot of pride in making it a unique offering to the students.

M: How long did you teach Tech Lab?

S: 3 years.

M: How much of your vision of what Tech Lab was to become... how much of that has come true?

S: Well, while I was in it... that's a great question... while I was in it, I would say to be really honest, Tech Lab reached about 50% of it's potential in the three years I was implementing it and a lot of that was due to my own shortcomings, much of it was also due just to students and how much can you accomplish in a short time. So, I only feel... It's only fair if I speak when I was in it. It wouldn't be fair to judge what's happening now at all, because I don't honestly know. But while I was in it I think it could have grown a lot, lot more. We had a lot of visions for different changes, the administration and I, but it was good, I mean the fact that it was absolutely packed with up to 40 students per period every period tells me it was popular and the kids really liked it, and a lot of unique projects came out of it and I think students really enjoyed it and that's what's important to me is that the

kids liked it and that they signed up for it. Yeah, a little testimonial there... it was fun.

M: What would you do differently with the Tech Lab if you could go back and do stuff over again?

S: Well the thing that I most definitely would have liked to have done, and that was lack of my involvement when the building was being built, was to incorporate a manufacturing lab, which we did have across the hall, but the fact that it was in a separate room meant I couldn't supervise both, but I would have liked to have incorporated a manufacturing lab along with the design lab. I call the Lab 2000 a design lab or an exploritorium and it would have been nice to go from exploring to applying, very simply put, and that never happened because of the wall separation... we started doing a little. We built electric cars which was an extension of design, and that was really enjoyable. But the sad part is that there just wasn't any other teachers to help out. It's a very difficult area to find instructors, very difficult, and consequently we had nobody to accompany me in doing this.

M: How close is the current Engaging Technologies compared to the original Tech Lab?

S: It's the same. I think Mrs. Richards has carried on where I left off. She's added some of her own computer expertise. She's a lot more... she's much better at visual presentations and using that part of the computer applications. She's also expanded her personal presentations into a lot of computer design, CAD, and AutoCAD, which I never did. I didn't because I was busy enough in the lab. I didn't need to expand my other offerings. So, I think she's expanded it, which is nice. But other than that I don't go down there much, and being retired I only come back just for subbing. (Talks about retirement - edited because my fingers are tired!).

M: Based on your experiences, what advice would you give to any other schools, like possibly Liberty, or any other new ones, in implementing a technology lab like the Lab 2000.

S: That's another excellent question, and to be really out front and honest I always, to this day, am disappointed that no one asked direction of myself, or Mr. Parker... I can only speak for myself... on what they offer at Liberty. Having implemented it here, worked really hard on it for 3 years, I would have thought they would have asked what I thought or how would I implement it. To my knowledge they're doing nothing in that area. I think it's incredibly valuable. I have always said that a student graduating from Century... that every student graduating from Century I can confidently say has a fundamental background in computer programming and... (cell phone rings)... so continuing, I would like to see a school like Liberty do something similar where you could be confident

students would be exposed to and have the fundamental knowledge of programming, Excel, Word, Outlook, so when they go into the job market they can say they do understand computers. That's about what I came out of it. Now I'm telling in retirement to have that fundamental knowledge of computer usage and I don't know what they're offering because as I said, 'no one asked,' and I'm very disappointed. I'm very disappointed because there is no better person to ask than someone who's been working at it.

M: Here we have the original documents from January of 1997 about the Tech Lab. And here it says that the original design of how it would be organized would be 8 islands with different stuff. Is that really what happened?

S: Oh, absolutely. No it did not. As I said it was a program that we bought, a package, and I see a guy's name here, Bob McIntosh, he's the one that I went to for ... I guess you call it... in service, direction, and he taught basically how its set up, and they're very strict on how they want it run. And we followed that very much, and then what was really fun was that in the three years that I was involved in it I got to deviate a little and I added a few things here, different types of technology, and like the electric car was added as a part of the tech lab, because it's definitely technology, and I added a labeling machine, and I added some different fabrication things. So, the eight islands are still there and they're still being utilized as they were meant to be. So, it's kind of proof in the putting that it was made right and it's continuing existence is proof that it's a good product. The one thing I would recommend, you asked earlier, I wouldn't buy a can program because they paid a lot of money for somebody else's ideas. I think that Liberty, with a little help from some people that have worked with it, it could have been set up a lot lot cheaper and just as effective a program and something similar to Lab 2000 without paying the thousands of dollars we had to for the can package.

M: So they could just come to people like you and other people who have been involved in it to help set up the same thing without...

S: Oh for sure. Yeah, they could have set up, yeah exactly, without spending almost a half million dollars. All you needed was the computers and some of the fundamentals. And the other thing is... the sad part about Lab 2000 is, because it was a package it was thrown at us as a huge, enormous package, and then we slowly pecked away at using pieces of it, and as I said after three years I was probably only implementing 50-60% of what was available. The rest I was still learning, and I'm not afraid to admit it, it was a real learning experience, and I hadn't learned it all, and I hadn't applied it all. So, the beauty of that is that it's an ongoing package that can grow and expand. Rather than buy the whole lump, it would be nice to buy a little and just add what you're familiar with because a teacher teaches what he's comfortable with, what she's comfortable with, and it's silly to give them a lot of stuff they're not comfortable with because they probably won't use it.

M: It was also kind of nice in tech lab to have that thing where you weren't actually teaching; you were letting us learn. It wasn't like lecturing it was more of experience.

S: Oh, total experiential, and it was a combination learning experience between the teacher and the students. And I definitely learned more from the students than from any in service that I went to or anybody from the company. The kids taught me a tremendous amount and there were many times that I'd tell the students, 'this is something we haven't used yet. I'd like you to grab it and work with it'... the laser program... I never really had any instruction on how to use the laser... the three lasers in there and how to use them in communications... and the students did it all, and then they taught me, and that's a great way to learn.

M: What are the most significant changes you've seen at Century since it opened... both the good and the bad?

S: Most definitely, the most significant for me is not knowing over half the teachers. (talks about subbing - again edited because it has absolutely no relation to anything important at all). That's shocking to me... the turnover that we've experienced here. And it's not turnover; it's retirement and new teachers coming in. The administration is so new too. 2 out of the 3 people there... excuse me... 2 out of 4 vice principals are people I do not know. So that's the most surprising, but other than that everything... the building is still very clean and maintained extremely well, and the lead custodian is doing a wonderful job in taking pride in the building, and I think that's really important. The athletic program has grown; I think they're doing a great job there. So I think things are being carried on in the tradition that Mr. Barnekoff wanted it to go.

M: We actually have this poster board in our class that Mrs. Duyckinck found. In the original plans for this school they were actually going to have skylights and stuff in it, but they ran out of money.

S: Yeah, well, the little bit that I was involved in the original building's... with helping Mr. Barnekoff and Mr. Parker were... was amazing what was chopped and ladded and lopped off. We never... the grandstand for the football field and track was lopped off or eliminated to add... well I guess Mr. Parker wouldn't like this... but to add another computer monitor or whatever. But it was all done in good direction, and it was decisions that had to be made, and I think Mr. Barnekoff made some wise decisions because you could always add bleachers, which they did later, and like that. The one thing I know Mr. Barnekoff and I have talked is a larger gym which they have incorporated at Century... Liberty. They did listen in that respect, and they've added a larger gym to hold the entire student body. (talks to a student in the hall - like you want to hear that)

M: Can I ask you one more question?

S: Yes, of course.

M: The last question is... how would you describe the culture at Century among the students and the staff?

S: By culture, do you mean...it's incredibly diversified. Something we really didn't expect, or I didn't expect, is the diversity. We have a truly diverse student body, a mix of Caucasians, and blacks, Mexican, Spanish, Hispanic, and Asian, and that makes it a great student body for the students because I honestly see the students of this school racially pretty tolerant. And I'm very impressed with that 'cause I have taught at schools that were 100% Caucasian and a non-Caucasian would move in and they'd be treated pretty strangely, not necessarily mean or anything, but just kids weren't used to them. Here, I think the kids rub shoulders equally, and I think that's an incredible advantage. The one thing I loved about Lab 2000 was it is a curriculum that makes no difference between races... that a Spanish or Mexican student probably excels more than a Caucasian because he's had less experience with it, or an Asian might excel even more. So, the Lab 2000 to me was a great opportunity for racial balance.

M: And the staff too?

S: The staff is culturally pretty biased to Caucasian which is sad, but that is simply a matter of availability. I know that the administration would hire a more diverse... more racially diverse staff if they could, but they're not available. It's just like the shop. I've always said that it would be great to get a female shop teacher, but they don't exist. How you going to hire one? As a matter of fact there are no shop teachers available because they tried to hire one after I left, and they just weren't there. So you can't blame the school or the administration for not being more balanced or diversified. But other than that I think culturally the school is really positive. I think I have to compliment Mr. Zehr, because he seems to be the discipline vice principal, and he's got things pretty well under control. I see it as a safe, friendly environment, and that's probably the most important thing culturally and that says a lot. As a sub I go to a number of different schools and I always feel very safe and very comfortable at Century. That's not a bias because I taught here, but I do, I walk in and I feel good about it. I've subbed at some schools in Washington, and you don't get the same feeling. It's more of... the kids are a little raunchier. I know one school I subbed at the kids were hitting porno sites and looking a gun sites. I questioned it and asked them to stop, and they said, 'no, it's ok. The teachers let us do this.' I was really disappointed because I was spoiled at Century, because there is strong controls, and after the first two years of major battles, the kids have come to realize now what the computers are meant to be used for and I think that that's carried on in 5 years. I think the kids respect that... the controls and monitoring of the computers, and that's more cultural too. I think it's culturally respectable.

M: Alright, thank you.

S: Ok, let's check it.