

Interview with Elizabeth Altenburger: Transcript

March 16, 2020 at 9:34am in Houston, TX (interview conducted over the phone by Clare Hoelscher)

1 Clare Hoelscher: I'm recording now.

2 Elizabeth Altenburger: Okay.

3 CH: Okay. Thank you so much for agreeing to meet with me today. Um, I am Clare Hoelscher,
4 and it is 9:34 a.m. on March 16, 2020, and I am with Elizabeth Altenburger, um, in Houston,
5 Texas, but we are recording over the phone. Um, I want to clarify that I am going to record this
6 interview, and it will be uploaded to the UD Oral Repository. Is that alright?

7 EA: Yes, uh-huh.

8 CH: Okay, thank you. Um, so, my first question is where and when did you attend high school?

9 EA: I attended high school in Houston public schools at Lamar High School, and I graduated in
10 1959.

11 CH: Okay. Um, and what was your high school experience like?

12 EA: It was excellent. We had excellent teachers and interested teachers, and, uh, I think that my
13 foundation for wanting to be a teacher came from there.

14 CH: Oh, okay. Were there any teachers in particular who really inspired you to become a
15 teacher?

16 EA: You want names?

17 CH: Uh, it doesn't have to be. If you'd like to share, that's fine, but just something about them at
18 least.

19 EA: Well, one of them was Drew, D-R-E-W, Drew Black Staggs, Black was the middle name,
20 Staggs, S-T-A-G-G-S. Drew Black Staggs.

21 CH: Okay. And what about her made you, um, want to be a teacher like she was?

22 EA: She was, um, available. *[Laughs]*

23 CH: *[Laughs]*

24 EA: Uh, you know, if you had one question, she was available there to answer for you and help
25 you along, and, uh, and I really admired her.

26 CH: Awesome. Um, did you observe any major differences in high school education throughout
27 the years, beginning with your own time in high school, um, continuing through your teaching
28 experience, and maybe even when your kids might have been in high school?

29 EA: School differences? Um, well, I don't know if this is what you mean, but, um, of course,
30 we... the computer came in when I was at the end of my... a few years before I quit teaching.

31 CH: Mm.

32 EA: And, um, so that made a major difference.

33 CH: Yeah, that's interesting. Was there anything also, maybe even before technological
34 advances or, um, different technology being incorporated, like, um... was there maybe any shift
35 in how, um, administration functioned or how, um, students were expected to learn or curriculum
36 changes? It's fine if you can't think of any.

37 EA: I hate to ask you to repeat that, but could you?

38 CH: Yeah, sorry! Um, were there maybe any differences you observed in, um, how the
39 curriculum, uh, was written or standards changing or administration or how students were
40 expected to learn?

41 EA: Not really.

42 CH: Okay. Um. *[Clears throat]* People sometimes talk about being called to the profession of
43 teaching, and I know we talked about this a little bit, um, but what inspired you to become a
44 teacher?

45 EA: Well, when I, when I went to college, I don't think I had decided, but I tried and took a
46 variety of classes my freshman year, and suddenly knew what I did not want to do. *[Laughs]*

47 CH: *[Laughs]*

48 EA: And, um, I had some excellent teachers in various languages, English and Latin, and so
49 that's what inspired me: it was the college teachers.

50 CH: Okay. And what made you choose specifically Latin? Was it that or was there something
51 else with that?

52 EA: No, there was nothing else.

53 CH: Okay, awesome. What type of teacher education program did you attend?

54 EA: And that meant, remind me again?

55 CH: Um, what type of teacher education program did you attend? Was it based in your college?
56 Was it outside of your college?

57 EA: Based on college.

58 CH: Okay. And what college did you attend, if you don't mind sharing?

59 EA: Texas Tech.

60 CH: Okay, awesome. And how was your experience with that education program, uh teacher
61 education program? Did you feel well-prepared to enter the classroom?

62 EA: Oh, yes, I did, but part of my feeling well-prepared was also from my high school because,
63 uh, I observed those teachers, and they were so good that I, um, that was at, you know, the
64 forefront of my mind.

65 CH: Mm. Mm-hm. That's awesome. Um, when you were in your teacher preparation program,
66 did you have a lot of field experience along with, um, in-classroom, uh, education? Like, did you
67 get to go into schools a lot and practice?

68 EA: No.

69 CH: Hm.

70 EA: We had, uh, we had one semester, I think it was, when we, uh, went out from the college to
71 the... I actually did my student teaching at a... in a junior high, a middle school.

72 CH: Mm-hm.

73 EA: And not by choice, that's just where I was given, and so that was about it, plus Education
74 classes at Tech.

75 CH: Okay. Um, so, overall, how would you describe your experience teaching high school
76 Latin?

77 EA: *[Laughs]*

78 CH: *[Laughs]*

79 EA: Um, overall experience? It was fabulous.

80 CH: That's awesome. Uh, did you enjoy teaching in general?

81 EA: I did, um, but eventually I, uh, was asked to take full-time Latin, so I began to work my way
82 out of teaching English, after a while.

83 CH: Okay, so, did you teach subjects besides Latin?

84 EA: Say it again?

85 CH: Did you teach anything besides Latin starting out?

86 EA: English. English.

87 CH: English. Okay. Um, and how did you feel about teaching English?

88 EA: Well, I enjoyed it...

89 CH: Mm-hm.

90 EA: ...because I enjoyed reading and books and teaching through the use of, uh, you know,
91 novels of importance.

92 CH: Mm. Mm-hm.

93 EA: Um, but I finally settled in with the Latin.

94 CH: Okay. And, um, how long did you teach, if you don't mind me asking?

95 EA: About 18 years.

96 CH: Oh, wow! Um, and then, I know that you tutored after that. About how long did you tutor?
97 Are you still tutoring now?

98 EA: I'm not tutoring now. I taught... I tutored for about, um, about 18 years!

99 CH: Oh, wow! *[Laughs]* That's awesome. Um, what grade levels have you taught? Did you
100 teach a specific level of high school or did it, um, was it a range?

101 EA: Well, it was a range. You know, I taught either English or Latin, um, all levels. Except
102 Seniors. I didn't teach Seniors.

103 CH: Okay. Um, and when you were teaching, did you teach in private or public schools, or a
104 combination?

105 EA: It was a combination.

106 CH: Mm. Um, how would you compare teaching in those two environments? Did you notice
107 anything particularly different that stood out teaching in a private, um, school setting versus
108 public school, or even private Catholic? Or?

109 EA: Well, the discipline was basically much better than the HISD classroom...

110 CH: Mm.

111 EA: ...which was harder because of the lack of discipline.

112 CH: Okay. Do you think that was because of policies enforced, or what do you think might've
113 been related to that distinction?

114 EA: I don't know.

115 CH: Okay. Um, is there anything else you noticed that might have been distinct between the
116 two? It's alright if not.

117 EA: Well, just what I said, ...

118 CH: Mm-hm.

119 EA: ...lack of discipline.

120 CH: Yeah. Okay. Um, let's see. Could you describe classroom management techniques you
121 employ in your classroom? Such as routines, disciplinary policies, um, anything else related to
122 classroom management?

123 EA: Um, I thought you maintained discipline by being honest with them and upfront with them.

124 CH: Mm.

125 EA: If, for example, I was going to, um, give short quizzes unannounced, I told them in the
126 beginning of the year.

127 CH: *[Laughs]*

128 EA: I said, "you know, from time to time, to keep you on your toes with your homework and
129 such, you, you may... I may give a pop quiz." And they, the high schoolers, were fine with that.

130 CH: Okay. Um, and would you carry that into other aspects of your teaching with just being
131 upfront about different things you were doing, or...?

132 EA: I'm not following.

133 CH: Okay. Sorry. Um, 'cause you said that being direct and honest with them was what you
134 found to be the best method of that. Were there other examples of how that maybe was relevant,
135 or was that just something that carried through all of the way you taught?

136 EA: All of the way I taught.

137 CH: Okay. Awesome. Um, so what is most important to a successful and productive relationship
138 between teachers and students, in your experience?

139 EA: Well, I feel like this is a little bit repetitive, ...

140 CH: *[Laughs]*

141 EA: ...but, um, I was honest with them, and uh, they knew what to expect, and they also, I also
142 always had an open door at lunchtime, uh, ...

143 CH: Mm.

144 EA: ...you know, after I did *[Laughs]* my duties...

145 CH: *[Laughs]*

146 EA: ...that I had to do at lunch, but, um, I told them I was open to their coming by if they had a
147 private question they wanted to ask or something.

148 CH: Okay, awesome. Um, and what in... what is your experience in educational positions outside
149 of the classroom? Did you ever do anything related to education besides teaching or were you
150 mostly in the classroom for your teaching career?

151 EA: Just teaching.

152 CH: Okay.

153 EA: In the classroom.

154 CH: Mm-hm. Um, what is most important to a successful and productive relationship between
155 teachers and administrators, in your experience? [*Coughs*]

156 EA: Well, of course, the principal is the key.

157 CH: Mm.

158 EA: And, uh, she or he must have an open door.

159 CH: Mm.

160 EA: Uh, you know, no fear of, um, losing your job over coming up with something that needs to
161 be tended to...

162 CH: [*Laughs*] Mm-hm.

163 EA: ...or anything like that. So the open door from the principal and assistant principal.

164 CH: Mm. Okay. Um, were there any historical, social, political, or economic influences that
165 majorly impacted education as a whole during your lifetime?

166 EA: Um, in the early years, just after I graduated...

167 CH: Mm-hm.

168 EA: ...from college, which was in May of '63,...

169 CH: Mm.

170 EA: ...um, I went back to public schools in Houston. I started there. And I saw that there was a
171 decline over the years. I was lucky enough to be in kind of a new school, uh, headed west in
172 Houston, and that's kind of where the city was moving. Uh, but, um, there were, there were a lot
173 of problems overall in the public school system, which was forcing a lot of, um, families to move
174 to the, um, you know, other school systems.

175 CH: Mm. And did that affect, um, enrollment or just anything in your classroom.

176 EA: No. No.

177 CH: Mm-hm. Okay.

178 EA: Not in...not in Houston. *[Laughs]*

179 CH: Yeah. *[Laughs]* Okay. That's interesting. Um, let's see. Uh, this is another question. Um,
180 how do you...did you observe anything in how testing has evolved, um. especially in
181 standardized testing, um, at a district or state level from when you were attending to when you
182 taught?

183 EA: Say it again for me, honey.

184 CH: Yeah. Did you notice any differences in testing or, um, especially standardized testing at a
185 district or state level from when you were in high school through your teaching experience?

186 EA: Not that I know of.

187 CH: Okay. Awesome. Um, is there anything else you would like to add?

188 EA: No, I don't think so. I really appreciate being called...

189 CH: Mm-hm.

190 EA: ...and reminded of all of my time teaching. *[Laughs]*

191 CH: *[Laughs]*

192 EA: I enjoyed it.

193 CH: Mm-hm, yeah, thank you very much. Um, I appreciate you taking the time today to talk to
194 me...

195 EA: Okay.

196 CH: ...and this will be very helpful. Thank you very much!

197 EA: Okay, honey, bye-bye.

198 CH: Bye.