

Point Loma High School Attributes, Principals of Note, Administration and Staff

Let me start with the concept that Point Loma High School was an amazing school during those years. It had an amazing staff, wonderful students, and tremendous community support, all of which was so important. I'll talk in a few moments about some of the teachers that were there that I knew and admired greatly, but I also had tremendous administrators. I mentioned meeting Jim Clarke when I first arrived. George Parry soon took over as principal and was a teacher's paragon as a principal. After George, we moved to Don Giddings, who had a great advantage not only of being a fine educator, but of having come out of the community itself. Don spent many, many years in Point Loma. And then on to Jim G and Barbara Brooks, and beyond that after I left.

It was a strong administration. It wasn't just the principals. One of the great administrators of Point Loma High was Izzy Skidmore, who was vice principal. Izzy was a great math teacher before she became administrator. After she left Point Loma, she became an outstanding principal of a junior high school. At Point Loma, Izzy became a symbol of the administrator who cared tremendously about students, but who had very, very high standards, and very strong principles of behavior for students. What I remember more than anything at the time about Izzy was her standing on the bridge between the classroom building and the library building at lunchtime, yelling down at students telling them to pick up their trash, because that was the kind of thing that Izzy did. At the same time, the students loved her, and rightly so.

Janitor Jack Prodanovich, Founder of the Bottom Scratchers, and Someone Surfers Looke Up To

That was the kind of thing that that made Point Loma strong, and it extended down into the custodial staff. Jack Prodanovich was the head custodian, and Jack was a super person to be in that kind of position and at that school, because at Point Loma we had a certain number of surfers and other water people there. Who better than the founder of The Bottom Scratchers [an elite group of free divers. The name came from wearing the horn of the Horn Shark on their trunks, which would scratch along the sea bed when they dove for abalone and crab.] to be a custodian there and to be able to talk with them about the things they were interested in.

TAs and Captain America

Our counseling staff was marvelous. Jack Haskell, who was also a fine teacher, was a great counselor. Jane Daniels was our head counselor for many years and guided a lot of students along the right kinds of paths for them. The counseling staff was one of the reasons that Point Loma was so strong. It even extended down to - I probably should stay up to - the level of our student teachers and TAs - teacher assistants. We had wonderful teacher assistants at Point Loma during the years that we were there.

It ranged from a young man who went on to become the head of the writing lab at UCSD and has been there for, I don't know, 30 years and is about to retire. Another TA got her teaching degree and went and taught in Australia, because that was what she wanted to do. We had another wonderful TA from the community, who decided that he wanted to become a force in the community. So, he became Captain America, and rode about the community on a motorcycle in a costume and was enormously pleasing. [This was probably Loch Crane.] There was a TA who became a college professor in the East, and so on and so forth.

I need to mention the secretarial staff, too. Alice Mayhew was a fixture at Point Loma and probably knew more about running the school and what went on than anybody else there. She was the principal's secretary, but, more than that, she worked with students and with teachers, and so on and so forth in all kinds of ways. I want to give the picture of this wonderful school staff that extended to all parts of the staff, and not just to the teachers.

But, at the heart of things were the teachers. There were superb, superb teachers there in all kinds of areas. There isn't time to go into detail on them, but Anna Risti is one of the great math teachers of San Diego, superb as a math teacher. John LaMott was a great science teacher, who turned more kids on to science than I think anybody else did. We had four language teachers like Jacquie Trenfel, Saul Madrid, Ed Leon, who taught Spanish, Russian, and German, respectively, and they were wonderful teachers. A great Social Studies/ History Department. The group was so balanced that Nick Theonosopholis, George Ryan, and Mac MacDonald were all superb teachers.

I guess it was for three years, the classroom that I was in with IS - the Independent Study program - had a conference room that was right next to Mac's classroom. And I used to love sitting in that classroom listening to his class, because his class was always so interesting and exciting in world history and going on so on and so forth. George Ryan and I traded classes very often, because I had to teach some history and I didn't know any history. So, he came in and talked to my students about certain times in American history, and I went in and talked to his students about writing and how to write successfully in terms of history. Milford Allison in Art. Just by chance, yesterday we had lunch with a former student of mine, Barbara Ambler, who would become an artist. She said it was Milford who did it, and did it not only for her, but for dozens of other students as well.

Coaches. Bennie Edens is a legend in himself, but then Gil Crosthwaite, John Early, Hugh Simpson, Ed Thomas, Mr. T, who won the girls basketball championships and what he did. Even Mike Lorch, who coached the JV basketball for a year, and his win-loss record was not terribly successful, but he has always bragged about the fact that he's the only JV coach, maybe in the world, who had one of his players go on and play on four consecutive NCAA Title basketball teams. One of his players went to UCLA and was not a great star there, but was the 10th man, 12th man, and he was always happy about that. John Early, who was there at first and then went to City College and coached.

English teachers, Madeleine McGowan was an English teacher and Mrs. Christiansen was a very fine teacher. There's a special story about Madeleine and then maybe I'll jump ahead a little bit. It also refers a little bit to recruiting teachers. In 1968, the state created a program called the English Teacher Specialist, and they brought together I think it was 200 of us who were English teachers all over the state, and who had some standing in different districts. They educated us to some of the current thoughts and ideas of teaching English. It was actually an outgrowth of the California Writing Project, which was the original curriculum project in California. It became the National Writing Project later on when it went national.

But the English Teacher Specialist, we had oh I think it was six people from San Diego County. One of them was Madeleine McGowan. She and I hit it off very well, so that I enticed her to leave Crawford High School and come to Point Loma, because we needed a teacher like her there. It seems to be that one recruiting device that principals should use with their staff is to get outstanding members of their staff who know teachers at other schools to talk to those teachers about coming and teaching at their schools. Madeleine was a very special person.

One of the things that came out of the English Teacher Specialist Program was one of the changes that I'm most proud of, and that is I found out that throughout the state of California there were some districts that had done away with what I would call the standard sequence of English courses, where you have 10th grade English, and then 11th grade is American literature, and 12th grade English is 12th grade English, although you often had an Honors class there or English literature there, and had gone to what were called English electives.

I was very excited by that and I came back to San Diego and decided that this was what Point Loma should do. I worked through the Board of Education and worked through the Central Office, and we created a program of English electives at Point Loma, in which your senior year students had a choice of half a dozen different electives: Shakespeare, the Novel, Poetry, Writing, and, especially, the Literature of Musical Theater. Larry Zeiger seized upon that and made it into a marvelous course that he taught for 20 years, something like that. Every year, in each semester, his class gave an end-of-the-semester program for the whole school, based upon what they had done in that class on Musical Theater.

That's what I've always found is one of my great accomplishments, the bringing in of the English electives, so that somebody like Larry, who had tremendous talent, could benefit, and all his students could benefit from it. Now, unfortunately, in spite of the fact that the elective program had a great positive response from teachers and from students, after about five years, it was too radical for the Powers That Be. They eliminated it, and basically went back to standard courses in 12th grade. Although, Larry was such an idol that he continued his course regardless of everybody else.

Collaborators and Team Teachers – Father and Mother to Students

Dorothy Sprungman is another of the great English teachers at Point Loma High, and my experiences with her are very unusual. I first knew her as a parent. Her son, John Sprungman,

was the editor of *The Pointer* the year that they made a mistake and appointed me as teacher in charge of *The Pointer*, but, after some trauma, I survived. I got to know John and, through him, his mother. I found out that his mother, in mid-life, had decided to go back to school and become a teacher, and she was looking for a place to do her practice teaching.

At one point I said to her, "Why don't you come to Point Loma and do your practice teaching, and I'll be your supervising teacher there?" And she did. So, she got her teaching credential, and then the next question was where was she going to teach? In my mind that was no question she was going to teach at Point Loma. Roots were there. She had established a marvelous reputation in her practice teaching, so she came to Point Loma. I immediately grabbed her as my teaching partner and we team-taught for many years. That was a great experience for me and, I hope, also a great experience for students. It took a while and we worked things out together.

One of the things that Dorothy said after we worked together for several years was that we were a good team, because we were a father and a mother to students. My job as father was to set impossible goals for the students to reach, while her job as mother was to tell them they could do it. So, we did that.

Neo-Classicism and Romanticism; Team-Teaching as Sparring Event

One of the things that we had the most fun with ever was we taught English literature together, and then later Honors English together. In English Lit, we were working chronologically, and we came up to the period of English literature called the Neo-Classic period, then the Renaissance period, where they went back to the values of classical literature. I would lecture to the class at the beginning of this about all the values of Neo-Classic literature, and Dorothy would sit in the back of the room and at the beginning would sort of mutter a little bit, and then, after a while, would start saying, "He's crazy." Then she'd get louder and louder, "You're wrong! You're wrong! Neo-Classic literature is nothing but a springboard into Romanticism! It's Romanticism that's at the heart of literature!"

So she and I would argue in class for a while, and then one or the other of us would throw out a challenge to the other one and say, "I'll prove you wrong! Give me six weeks, and I'll have a majority of this class convinced that Romanticism is better than Neo-Classicism!" Of course we took it on, and so for six weeks, we went back and forth with the values of the Romantic revolution and Neo-Classicism. I don't know how much you know about those, but they're at the basis of our life. So, it was a very exciting relationship that we had.

Summer School 1974 and Mike Lorch

Just as a minor aside, I liked the technique so much that when Mike Lorch [Fristrom and Lorch were the team teachers for Independent Study, or IS, an elite seminar program for gifted students] and I were teaching summer school class, and we went to the initial meeting of the class and I started lecturing on what the class was going to do, and what my values were, he sat

in the back of the room and first made comments about “That’s stupid!” and “How could you say that?” The thing that he remembers about it and told me was that Jess Perry, who was Head of English Language Arts, was there sitting next to him and just told him, “Shut up!” and “Keep quiet! Don’t say anything!”

The other part of it I thought that was interesting was that Tom Pacer was at the meeting, and he came up to me afterwards and he said, “I didn’t think you were in favor of all those things you said you’re in favor of. I was glad to find out that Mike was opposing you on this issue.”

It became a fun technique for us to use in other kinds of ways, too.

Hill and Wilson and The Rumors...

Somewhere along the line, I’m going to forget to mention key people. In science, Chuck Hill [Biology] and Penny Wilson [Anatomy] were key people. They and John LaMott just did marvelous things, John in Physical Sciences, and Chuck and Penny in Life Sciences, just great things. Chuck and Penny were especially interesting, because they were not married to each other and worked closely together, and there were various rumors, as there must’ve been about me and Dorothy, except Dorothy was old enough to be my mother. Not quite, but almost.

One of the things that I want to say about principals and teachers is that the principal’s main job is to find out who his or her good teachers are, and then help them be themselves, whether that means getting money, getting assignments, or whatever it might be. The great principals, and George Parry was one of the best, found out who the good teachers were, and let them go and let them do things like this, and they still do. That’s a test of what happens.

I haven’t been in school or in a classroom for years, although I have done a lot of talking with teachers from throughout the state through the English Teacher Association, and I know that it still exists in some places, but fewer and fewer places. It takes more and more courage on the part of the teacher to do it, because principals have been so hamstrung by Boards of Education and by testing results that it’s very difficult for a teacher to say, “This won’t have anything to do with testing results, but it’s good for the students because they will remember it 50 years later. So, it’s still possible.

One place, a couple years ago, an American Indian teacher dared to digress from her school’s curriculum and teach American Indian poetry to her classes. She was threatened with firing because of it, because it didn’t help them on the test. She went through a very long process, until the Powers That Be realized that what she was doing was much better for the students than the standard curriculum was. That’s been an old, old struggle as well, but I was fortunate. Point Loma was fortunate that people didn’t worry too much about that.

I remember one morning, must’ve been in my early years of teaching, I arrived in my classroom and there was a whole new set of books on a bookcase over in the corner. I looked at them and they were books of preparation for the Iowa Test of Educational Progress, which everybody took

at that point, and I immediately call Jack Prodanovich and told him, “Get these out of my classroom! I don’t even want them in my room.” He did, and the principal never said anything about it. But, that was a different time.