

Punky Fristrom Video 5 - How he came to PLHS, Coaching, Social climate changes
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How Coach C. Kermeen “Punky” Fristrom Came To Be a Teacher at Point Loma High School. From German Class at Harvard to English Teacher at Point Loma High

I’ll do my best with my memory that is fading rapidly of events that took place 50 years ago. Yours is really two different questions. The first one has, I think, a very strange answer. I came to be an English teacher, because I took a German class in college in which we read, in German, a short story called, *Der brennende Dornbusch*. [The title “Der brennende Dornbusch” means “the biblical burning bush.” It’s most likely that the book referred to was the short story by Ernst Wiechert from 1945.] I was so excited by reading that story and by talking in class that I decided I was going to be an English teacher.

Until that point, I had gone through the possibilities of being an engineer, a political scientist, a psychologist, and then, finally, my junior year in college, I took German and decided that, no, teaching English sounded much better. So that was part of it. Then, at that point, after my junior year in college, Anne and I got married, so we had the two of us to deal with. She went to work at Springside Elementary School near Philadelphia to support us, while I finished school. Then, the next year, we both went to the Harvard Graduate School of Education to get our work in on education.

Recruiting From Across the Country When Baby Boomers Were Growing Up

It was while we were at Harvard that people in California, Colorado, anywhere in the country were desperate for teachers, because the baby boom was hitting and the various districts were exploding. I remember seeing a figure somewhere that in that year, 1956, San Diego City Schools added 30,000 students to their population. I’m not sure of the 30,000. It could’ve been 37,000 or it could’ve been 25,000, but it was a large number of students.

So, they went out all over the country, recruiting potential teachers from Graduate Schools of Education. In their journeys, they came to Harvard, and they used a great strategy. They brought a film with them, showing Balboa Park in winter -- beautiful green trees and flowers, and the various buildings there. At that time, it was rather cold in Cambridge, and we were very anxious to get out of any place that was cold and go back to simply anywhere that would be warm.

We’d never been to California at all, but very, very soon our possibilities narrowed down to either Los Angeles or San Diego. We knew very little about either one, although we obviously made the right choice between the two. We would’ve made it faster and without as much thought had we known about the wonders of San Diego and the possibilities here. When the recruiters came, we had a reception. I remember the story that was told by the head of the Graduate School of Education that when the representatives from San Diego were there, he took them aside, pointed to us, and said, “Sign those two!” And they did.

So, we got to San Diego that way, never having seen it, knowing very little about it. We did make one request though. As Anne was going to teach elementary school, and I was going to teach high school, we asked to be assigned to schools in the same part of the city, so that we would not have too much trouble finding a place to live and then getting transportation. So we were fortunate enough that I was assigned to Point Loma High, and Anne was assigned to Cabrillo Elementary. We knew nothing about them at the time, but we got a map of San Diego. On the map we saw where the schools were, and we saw that they were within a couple of miles of the Yacht Club. So we decided that won't be too bad! We were very happy coming to San Diego under those conditions.

On Becoming a Coach and Meeting Bennie Edens

When we first got to San Diego, I was very anxious to see the school that I was going to work at and meet some of the people. So in the end of August, in 1956, I went up to Point Loma High and introduced myself to Jim Clark, who was the principal, as his new English teacher. We chatted for a while, and talked about various things, and then I happened to mention that I was also interested in coaching. He immediately got up and said, "Come with me!" And we went from his office right out to the football field, and that's when I met Bennie Edens.

I don't know why, because I was as unlikely a candidate for a coach as I can imagine, but Ben said, "Great! I need a coach! Can you be on the field with us for practice this afternoon?" I said, "OK, I'll come!" So, that afternoon, I was out on the field with the varsity football team, all of whom seemed to be about 6'9" tall and weigh 350 pounds, and I was about half that size. I can still remember being absolutely amazed that being called a coach gave me a certain amount of authority over these marvelous football players, athletes, adults, who looked 20 years older than I was at the time. That was the beginning of my work with Ben, and the beginning of my work as a teacher at Point Loma High.

Further Recruitment of Teachers in the Present

I think it's a great process. Timing is everything though. They ought to be right now in the Midwest, in upper Minnesota, in the northeast at Harvard, Boston College, Boston University, *etc.*, where the snow is up to three feet thick, and it's cold and miserable. You can't underestimate the influence of climate and of showing marvelous pictures of San Diego in the winter to people who are suffering with the cold back there. I can remember Cambridge in the winter. We lived in a house that was about a mile from the Graduate School of Education. On cold days, when everything was closed down, and the people moved on skis, we wouldn't go directly from our house to the School of Education. We would go on an oblique area, so we could go into a building halfway there and warm up, before we went on to class.

The more you can take advantage of that, the better. Of course, I think there's some other things that they need to do, not only San Diego Unified, but California. At that time, California was, I think, third in the nation in the amount of money that the State gave to the schools. Now, we're 49th. That makes a difference, not only in terms of the kinds of salaries that you can offer,

but in terms of the perspective that a potential teacher will have on the opportunities that are going to come into California. It's unfortunate that this has happened. It's something that the State has to reverse I think, because, obviously, I think education is the key to the future, both of individuals and of the state and of the country. It's essential that that happen in San Diego.

We have also to stress to potential teachers that California is, in spite of the financial problems, one of the areas in the country that is most progressive in its attitude towards education.

The Common Core Curriculum

One of the comments that I want to make is that the Common Core Curriculum is a matter of great controversy all over the country, but is being accepted in California as well as it is in any place in the country. It is an opportunity for education to become what it should be instead of what it has been, which is often test preparation, test taking, ranking by test results, and not allowing teachers to teach.

Point Loma and Ocean Beach Social Climate and Politics

I can speak more accurately about what it was then than what it is now, because it's been 34 years since I worked full-time at Point Loma. At that point, when I first arrived, it was a fascinating mix of different populations. Point Loma itself was then, and still is, relatively conservative. Our representatives in both the state legislature and in the federal legislature were Republicans, often conservatives. One of whom, Bill Lowery, [William David Lowery. A Republican, he served six terms in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1981 to 1993.] was a former student of mine and went back to Congress. I didn't agree with his politics, but I happened to meet him at a meeting, when he said I was one of the best teachers he had ever had, so he had some intelligence.

But then there was that slice of Point Loma there called Ocean Beach. In that area, they were a very liberal population where very liberal children came from very liberal homes. At that point, it came up at various times that any time any big corporation tried to buy land in Ocean Beach and build a Winchell's [Winchell's Donuts], or whatever it might be, the population rose up and protested, and wouldn't allow them to build. So they still are rather a liberal organization, and they still rise up.

And then, sort of alongside of these, was the Portuguese community, which had, in terms of its origin, parents who had moved to the United States from Portugal, from the Azores, and then children who were growing up here in the United States. They were often involved in the tuna industry. At that point, San Diego had its own tuna fleet, unlike a few years later when they lost it. The community lived in Tunaville, just a community of Point Loma that was consistent within itself.

Vietnam, Followed by the Movement for Integration and Busing

Now, I think it was the majority population of the conservative Point Lomans that muted any negative response to Vietnam, because Vietnam became a liberal protest more than a protest of the conservatives. I don't remember, although there very well may have been some events, or protests, or rallies at the high school about Vietnam.

At the same time, shortly after we moved there, came another enormous social movement in the United States and in education, and that was the movement of Integration. We became part of the San Diego movement to integrate our African-American population into our white schools. At that point, they were almost completely separate. I can remember one or two African-American students at Point Loma during my first three or four years there, but that's about all. But, then, all of a sudden, because of court orders, because of various movements, Martin Luther King, and all of the other Civil Rights Movements across the country, San Diego started to integrate its schools, too.

We started a busing program that brought in a great many African-Americans from the Southeast part of San Diego, and they became an integral part of the high school, particularly in the realm of Sports, because some of Point Loma's outstanding athletes came from that source. So, I was involved with them and with the idea of Integration at the high school much more than other social movements in any way.

I always have been very proud of a statement I heard a student make, must've been early 70s or something like that, and this was one of the white Point Lomans talking about what was going on at the school. At that time, we started to have fairly large numbers of Hispanics come in to join the mix of African-Americans and Caucasians. One of the things that I remember distinctly the student said, and I think it was in an assembly, or maybe it was just in class, was, "Why can't the Hispanics become part of the high school in the way that the Blacks did?" And that was impressive in terms of defining the way in which Point Loma welcomed and integrated the Black community into the high school, and I think eventually they did the same with the Hispanic community.