

Interviewee is Ms. Rooke conducted on May 15, 2003 in south 240

Oral History Project

I'm a French teacher at century and I run the French program. This year I've taught two through five and I've also headed the social committee, which is for staff. I organize the staff socials and I am a junior senate advisor as well and also the advisor for the international club. And we're also planning a group to France-to travel to France this summer.

Q In general how does this school compare with the others you've worked at in the past?

A I've worked in two other schools besides century. Century is the biggest school I've worked in and I've had I guess I've had a middle and a small experience in terms of the size of the school. One was an alternative school and the other was probably about 1400 students. I guess the size is the biggest comparison. Certainly the size affects the atmosphere of the school.

Q: What adjustments do you make regarding the size of our school since it is the second largest student body in the state?

Overcrowding

A I know fewer students. And I'm teaching four by four classes so that's fewer students and fewer contacts. So I just don't know as many students in the student body and that's just the biggest difference. At the alternative high school that I worked at, there was probably 140 students. It was like a family and you knew who everyone was, you knew everyone's business. You know it's kind of like a big town verses small town. That was a big difference. So I guess just not having as much contact with many different students. And the medium size school I think there was more of a family feeling among staff and students. I think that teachers generally knew students pretty well in the school and I see a lot of that going on here at century as well. I know that our staff members are very involved with students and their lives and what they're doing and their activities. So I see a lot of that contact taking place among colleagues. And that's really good. I think that's a huge effort to build community because of those contacts. I think there also perhaps more students who slip through the cracks because of that and that's unfortunate but that's gonna change next year.

block

Q: How do feel about century continuing on the block schedule for another year?

A I think it's good that we have the same schedule while we are transitioning to find another schedule that will fit within our contract.

Q: If you could change anything about the school year what would it be?

A: In response to that question, I really think that it's an overwhelming question. And I don't think that I can answer it sufficiently. Change you know I think about what would go on would that mean change within the means that we have which is not enough means 'cause obviously we're having a huge budget crisis. Or does that mean what would I change if we had the money. That basically comes down to money.

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Q: With respect to money, what were your feelings or initial reactions when measure 28 didn't pass?

A I actually wasn't terribly surprised. I had hoped that it would pass. It didn't surprise me that it didn't just because of the economy I think that it's hard for people to accept paying more in taxes when a lot of people don't have jobs. You know we have the highest or second highest unemployment in the nation.

Q: If you were on the school board, what would you change?

A I don't know the school board very, very well. I've only been to one or two meetings in the past and so it's hard to say like if I were to say what would I change, well maybe they're already doing this so they would maybe be offended by hearing me say that. So I guess I feel like I'm not informed enough to be able to answer that question. Although I do feel that it's very good for people on the school board or in the community or in administrative positions to spend time in the classroom. Whether they're visiting or dropping in at various different schools and just see what it's like. I think it's really important for those people to see what's going on in the school.

Q: The community is excited to see that liberty will open with all the rumors that it would. What's your feeling regarding the whole liberty thing, is there a sense of optimism?

A: My feeling about that is mixed, in that I'm not sure it's a financially sound decision for the district to open up Liberty. But at the same time it's exciting, certainly, and I know that a lot of people have been putting a lot of energy and time planning for it and I'm sure they're really excited and glad that's gonna happen. So in that sense it's a good thing you know for new programs to start but again omits the crisis of money and lack thereof. I wonder if it's creating more of a hardship.

Q: What solutions do you see that can get us out of this situation?

A How do we see it getting better. Personally I really feel the Oregon legislature really needs to redo the entire tax system. And I really firmly believe in sales tax. I think we're gonna continue to have these issues unless the economy suddenly turns around and we're suddenly thriving like we were in the 90's. But from what I'm hearing from the economists that's not going to happen; we're not going to have a turnaround in the economy that's huge. So we'll never have the kind of revenue coming in that we did before through the form of income tax and property tax. So that means they'll just keep raising taxes on those levels because Oregonians have said over and over in the past that

measure 28

Liberty

they don't want sales tax. But I think there needs to be some examination of that and some restructuring of the tax system in Oregon so that schools can be solidly funded. Because when you think of all the people who come and visit Oregon and recently I heard on the news that Oregon wants to step up the tourism industry. And Kulongoski has thought that that's a really good way to boost the economy here is by putting up this huge advertising campaign across the nation and say "hey, come and visit Oregon it's a beautiful place". And yeah, why not? But then why aren't we charging sales tax? To do that is going to be shooting us in the foot, to not charge a sales tax. You know we'll have more visitors where they'll just come to the state where they don't pay any tax! And when we go visit who knows what state, we're paying sales tax. I see that and I think our poor schools. It's really tough to talk about that without restructuring the tax system.

Q: What changes among teacher relationships have you made?

A: It has been a really, really tough year all round in so many different ways. I think that is definitely another area affected but all of the huge changes that we're experiencing. I'm in an office that is very close and we are all open about talking to each other and we have a lot of really good discussions in this office and that's always been something that I've really thrived on here. I remember when I was in graduate education school, learning to become a teacher, how we would have all kinds of discussions about educational issues-- just the things that come up in the classroom everyday and so many different issues always coming up all the time. It's just unbelievable the number of decisions that teachers need to make in one day and the kinds of things that come up in the classroom. In this office we've always been able to talk about those issues as they come up in a very open way and I've always learned so much from my colleagues and their perspectives regarding those different issues we discuss. And I would say that that hasn't changed; I still continue to benefit from that collegiate discussion that we have in this office and it's something I really appreciate because it's helped me grow as a professional... a lot. I really feel like I've grown a lot as a professional in the four years I've been teaching here and that is uniquely, well...not uniquely because my students have helped me grow. I think that a lot of that is due to my colleagues and I'm very thankful for that relationship with them. In that sense I'm feeling *really* sad that some of those colleagues won't be here next year. And so there's been a sort of sadness and mourning thing going on with that as these decisions come through and some of there are really tough decisions that are coming through--there's a lot of sadness and I'm feeling bad for a lot of my colleagues. With all of the uncertainty that has gone on this year, I think that that has put a lot of people on edge and they've been irritable, insensitive-myself included- so that has made me be more aware how these changes affect people and to just remind myself-I've had to remind myself a number of times this year- to be open and to be sensitive to other people and what they're going through because we all react to stress in different ways... and people have been on edge this year.

Q: Did you ever think that there would be 17 school days cut out in your professional life?

17 days

A: *Never.* Never, ever, ever, ever did I think that. It's appalling and unbelievable is what it is. I think it's criminal. There could have been other options.

Q: How deep do you think the rabbit hole can get? Are we at the bottom?

A That's a really interesting question because it's something that I've been thinking about a lot. I think things have to bottom out- are we bottoming out? Or is it going to get worse before it gets better? It's how things go, right? It's complex and it's hard to say just because we can't necessarily predict what's going to happen in the future. But, I would like to think that we're bottoming out right now. I would like to think that we're not cutting seventeen days so in that sense we've bottomed out in cutting more days. But who knows, maybe the district will decide to cut days next year too? I kind of have the feeling that they will just because I'm a bit of a pessimist that way but I don't think that they'll be so bold as to cut 17 days. And in terms of bottoming out, that's also difficult to say because we're bottoming out more for next year anyway because programs are being cut and teachers are being cut so it is getting worse. And that's not necessarily things that...it's not necessarily as visible to the community as the 17 days. But it is going to be visible when parents realize that maybe their student isn't getting as much one on one contact or why is it that their teacher can't call home when their student is failing well because there's too much to do. There is just too much to do. You know when teachers have a large number of students in the classroom plus they're taking on administrative responsibilities because we will be doing that next year- because we will be down administrators next year. Who's going to take on that responsibility? It will be passed on to teachers. We're going to be worked harder next year. And we're going to get less pay. The community doesn't see that. But hopefully they will. I really hope that they do because frankly there's going to be no interest in teaching. And I mean you mentioned teacher retention. And I look at myself and I'm only four years in this career? And I think what is in it for me? What's in it for me is the satisfaction of teaching students and teaching something I have a lot passion for and that is something incredibly gratifying. I love it and I definitely feel like I'm in the right place. Nothing can change that...well yeah a lot of things can change that actually; you make the conditions really bad and that's no long any fun. But for me at this point I can't say that I've got it hard because I don't, I'm lucky and I'm counting my lucky stars. I think over the long haul, if it gets worse... and that has to do with state and it has to do with funding. I look at in the long haul and I'm only four years in this profession...what's in it for me when they're taking away a decent retirement, if they're taking away my benefits, and they're taking away my pay...what's in it for me? You know I have a really good education behind me, I have a lot of really good experience and why should I continue in this capacity doing what I'm doing if I'm not being rewarded in a livable way? I'm not looking for... to make millions, obviously not. But I'm also looking to live comfortable and I'm not sure that I'm gonna be able to live comfortably like I might decide to make certain choices in my life if I am to continue teaching. Like I may decide to not have kids because I may not be able to afford to have kids on a teacher's salary. I'm looking at my single colleagues who have kids and I'm also looking at colleagues who are married and have kids and they're struggling and with the cuts, they're really struggling...I'm on the fence about having kids anyway but maybe I wouldn't have kids because maybe I wouldn't be able to afford to as teacher...in a way that I would see fit. There are things like that, that affect my

thinking and again it goes back to the state and priorities as well the community needs to decide that education is a priority and so does the legislature. I know it's a priority and my students know it's a priority but I don't think the community does and so hopefully they can see that eventually.

Q: Had the community been more connected, do you think the situation may not have been as bad?

A It's possible but then there has also been the economy that has taken a downturn. I think that maybe it could have been more alleviated a little bit. Maybe that may have meant that more people would have made more donations to the school or maybe they would have voted differently on that measure. So sure that's definitely an idea. But at the same time, given the economy it's just hard. When people are out of work they have nothing to give and they can't say "yeah, raise my taxes when I don't have any money coming in".

Q: What kind of precedent has this school year set for the school year and the schools around?

A I think that there have been a lot of negative precedents set by this school year. I really do. I honestly feel that there are number of points that are negative precedents for other buildings and teachers. We are paying for benefits now whereas we weren't before, so that's setting a precedent to the district saying "okay now that we've opened it up you can start gauging us on benefits. And once that opens up, every two years when the district wants to save money and they're trying to see what they can give and take with the contract negotiations, that's gonna be open, that's going to be wide open so that means we'll be paying more and more for benefits. And to me, that's my next 26 years of teaching so I'm thinkin' hmm... you know your average person in the community who has the exact same amount of education that I have earns twice as much as I do. Why do I wanna stay here, earning half of what I'm worth if I have to keep paying more and more for benefits? Those used to be perks to attract people.

We have set a precedent that we'll teach a sixth class for free. Yes, we work a contract day, we work an eight-hour day that's normal to work that much time but we're talking about *workload*. It's an issue of workload. We're teaching an extra class for free in the sense that that's another prep. That's whole other thought process that you have to go through in order to prepare for that class, that sixth class. And for some teachers that means they have a 5th or 6th prep. You know for a language teacher for example I have five different levels of language that I can teach. It's setting a precedent for other teachers and other districts to increase teacher workloads. And teacher workload in the United States is already higher than most other countries, most other industrialized countries. We teach more hours and we see more students than in other countries. I think it's a pretty bad precedent to be setting. It concerns me about my profession and it concerns me a lot about my future and my career here.

Q: Any final thoughts? The aura seems very pessimistic.

A: I'm sorry to hear that it comes across that way. I'm sorry to hear that my general attitude about this. It is kind of a tough day to be interviewing too in terms of what's going on in the building. And also think that...it's really hard because I generally am an optimistic person. I really am, I am an enthusiastic optimistic person. I guess, I've seen over the course of the school year I've seen my optimist slowly get crushed by some of the decisions that are being made. And at the same time I am a fighter, I have the spirit to continue on and to keep going and I keep thinking well I have this feeling well this school year is ending in a week...shortened, it doesn't feel right for it to be ending next week at all. It doesn't feel like a normal close to a school year, it feels weird to be ending next year. And yet I think a lot of people including myself are just looking forward to that just because we want to see a negative school year end. We want to see it end and have that closure and just start fresh next year. So for me, I'm really looking forward to that time to rejuvenate over the summer and feel that optimist again, to start over and try and give what I can to my program and my profession and to kids! I know that's something I can recover but I also feel like I need to see some... I feel like I need to see something from the district and perhaps from the administration as well that feeds that optimism. I need to see some more sound decisions made and some more caring and some more commitment to the profession right now. I guess for me, as someone who's starting out and someone who's committed to this profession and committed to making it good...doing the best I can everyday and giving the best I have to students every single day. Some of the decisions that I'm seeing made and the way the way the budget is trickling through and the decisions made thereof makes it hard for me... I feel like it makes it hard for me to be giving my best to the profession. And I wanna see that turn around and that's part of my optimism coming into play. But I wanna see things get better and so I am certainly willing to work towards making those things better. But I think the big one is the money, and the community, and the legislature, and the district also, making good decisions for making that turnaround that we need to see happen.