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AN INTERVIEW WITH MR. VIRGIL NELSON

JODY STURGEON AND KEITH HALL

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FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY

CHAPTER II: INTERVIEW WITH MR. VIRGIL NELSON

Virgil Nelson did not know at an early age that he desired a career in education. In fact, his plans were to buy land, farm, and continue the tradition of his parents; but because of the influence of some very important people in his life, his career path changed.

His parents were the first and most influential in his life. They were good parents who were supportive and encouraging. They were firm, but always loving in their discipline. His mother's expectations were always high, and his dad's message of: "Get a good education, son! They can't ever take that away from you," has lingered with him throughout his life.

Another family member who influenced him was his older brother, Rex, who was his idol, and who was partially responsible for recruiting him to Fort Hays State University in the fall of 1954. Virgil knew that he wanted to be involved in agriculture and industrial arts, and he knew that he wanted to be near his brother.

As Rex did, Virgil also entered the field of education. While teaching in the classroom from 1958-1965, he began working on his degree in administration. Virgil had become a serious student and wanted to receive this advanced degree. He took classes for three summers and

several Saturdays, and completed his degree in 1965. In the same year he accepted the position of principal at Phillipsburg Junior High School. He held this position until 1969. In the fall of 1969, he became the elementary principal at South Grade School in Phillipsburg. He served in this position until he retired in 1995.

Virgil stressed the importance of having quality teachers and administrators in the forefront of our schools today. He defined a quality teacher as one who is human, an effective departer of knowledge, and organized. He said that instructors must like their work and they must like young people. Teachers must have the desire to increase the level of understanding on the part of the students. In addition, he said that effective teaching techniques are also vital to the departing of knowledge. He proudly mentioned that the Phillipsburg School District has been very involved in improving effective teaching techniques since 1985.

Virgil said that one of the things he has found that is almost always second in nature is organization. He remembered that before he started his first year of teaching, he went to the school the summer before, picked up the teacher's edition of the textbooks, and spent the entire

summer planning lessons and strategies. He stated that he wanted to be a success right from the start. Many teachers he has observed in the past have had discipline problems because they had not planned their lessons carefully enough to handle any extra time.

Virgil included that qualities of a successful teacher can also extend into administration. When he reflected upon his role as an administrator, Virgil said that his leadership skills early in his career were nothing like they are today. He said that one very important quality is common sense, and how it is used to treat people. It is also the role of an administrator to be able to work with a group of people and to help them become a dynamic group that cooperates with each other.

Another quality an effective administrator must have is vision. He must be able to see issues that will affect education five years from now. This quality is even more important today because of the wave of new technology and the use of that new technology in our educational endeavors.

When Virgil announced his retirement he received many nice cards from people he had worked with during his years in education. In

several of those cards he was recognized and thanked for being fair.

Virgil noted that it was tough when he had to approach colleagues whom he had worked with for years and "nudge" them to be more productive in their work. He felt it was how he got them back on track that made him a respected leader.

In addition to the qualities of being a good leader, Virgil explained that his role as a leader has changed dramatically over the years. He said that when he started as an administrator he was autocratic and dictatorial in style. He would describe his later style as site-based management, which he noted has actually been practiced in Phillipsburg for years. Virgil said that whenever he and his staff were going to try something new, such as a new discipline plan or the use of new technology, he always tried to start small. He related that to when his staff developed their targets and school improvement plan for Quality Performance Accreditation. They began working with reading and math. The process was a success and they feel now they are ready to add other areas. Virgil felt that when administrators get the support of staff members, the chance of an idea prospering is much greater.

Virgil taught seven years and served as an administrator for thirty years. It was during this time that he started understanding the barriers that exist between teachers and administrators. Although administrators do not see themselves differently from teachers, teachers view administrators in a different manner. Yet, someone has to make decisions that ultimately affect staff. Virgil said that teachers and administrators want the same thing, to help students, but they reach their goal in different ways. Communication barriers always exist. A leader must know that whatever decisions are made, there will always be disruptions among the staff. Barriers are natural things that happen in the whole process of decision making and communication is still vital.

Over the thirty-seven years in education, Virgil commented on how the educational environment has changed. He said that when he began teaching, audio-visual equipment was just coming into use. He didn't have access to much of this equipment but the school did have a 16mm projector that was used to show films to the entire school. That was considered a real treat to the kids.

One thing that Virgil did use was a reel to reel tape recorder. He would tape students as they gave reports. He recalled how amazed the

students were when they first heard their voices on tape. Virgil also used the recorder as a self-improvement tool. He remembered how he used a lot of "and-uhs" when he spoke, and this helped him correct those habits. He said that when he first went to Phillipsburg they had quality audio-visual resources, but the rooms did not have enough outlets to allow for the use of several resources at the same time. Virgil commented on how the Interactive Television rooms at Phillipsburg High School are equipped with some of the latest technology available for classroom use. He noted that as fast as technology is changing, schools had better be able to swim, otherwise they will go under quickly.

Virgil's Master's Project dealt with another physical change. This change was based on the use of carpeting in schools. He said that when he researched this topic at Forsythe Library on the Fort Hays State University campus, there wasn't much written on the subject. However, there were schools in Colorado that were putting carpeting in their buildings. Now, Virgil said, most new buildings are carpeted.

What has surprised him about our schools is how some are not equipped with air-conditioning. One of the great things that has happened in U.S.D. #325, due to the school bond that was passed in August of 1994,

is that all buildings are going to be air-conditioned. Virgil expressed his regret that it has taken so long to get to this point, since homes and cars have been air-conditioned for years.

A different type of environmental change Virgil mentioned is that of family and society. So many more demands are placed upon schools than ever before. In 1958, when Virgil started teaching, the Russians had just sent Sputnik into space, and there was concern about the math and science programs in the United States. That was when the National Science Foundation programs began. Virgil was amazed how we were able to use our technology to put our first astronauts on the moon. He attributed that accomplishment to the financial efforts devoted to that task. Virgil professed that he has always been a strong believer in that anything we want to do, we can accomplish, and education is a part of that process.

Virgil stated that he believes there are two keys that make a school system work. The first and foremost is staff. There must be quality people who like what they are doing. He remembered having seen people who did not like teaching and fortunately they were able to find another vocation.

The other key that makes a school system work is a community that supports education, parents who support education, and a board of education that supports education. Virgil said that Phillipsburg is very fortunate because they have had that support. He added that the school has not always received everything it asked for from the board and the community, but overall, the groups have worked well together. That is supported once again by the bond issue that was passed. Virgil described school-community relations as a triangle consisting of parents, the community, and the school working together toward common goals. In order for the triangle to function properly, the building blocks must be active together. Schools must participate in the community, the community in the schools, and parents must help hold the two together.

Based on the idea of the school and community, Virgil stated that he believes that people see their hometown education as being strong according to a recent Gallup Poll. There are always issues that are negative. He noted that human sexuality is one of these areas. Some people think the schools need to do more, some think they should not touch the topic, and then there are those in the middle. Virgil confirmed that he

is a supporter of most issues in school reform.

As far as challenges that face education in the future, Virgil envisioned finances as being very important. He said that there is a direct correlation between the dollars spent on education and the quality of education those dollars provide. The challenge, he stated, will be to maintain public education. Each year there has been a bill in the state legislature in support of private school vouchers, and that movement has grown stronger each year. Virgil has always believed that public education has been the common denominator of bringing people together. A profound belief in American education is that the doors are always open to all children.

Another challenge facing education in the future will be a political challenge. Virgil said that educators have let other people take care of the politics and in the future that will not be permissible. As the president of the Kansas Elementary Principal's Association in 1993-1994, Virgil attended leadership conferences in Washington, D.C. He and other principals from Kansas called upon our senators and representatives about several issues they were concerned about. One of these issues was the amount of sex and violence on television. This group of principals was

part of a coalition who expressed concern on this topic. Recently, Virgil read where there is an interest in putting "v-chips" in our televisions so that viewers will be able to monitor this at home. Virgil does not take credit for this action, but he mentioned that this is the political part that we will have to be aware of.

A third concept that will challenge education will be the change in structure of schools. This may involve anything from where education will take place and when. When Virgil marveled at the interactive video equipment he predicted that in the future, students might learn at home. Technology will be able to provide that. Virgil also stated that the length of the school year will change. If schools extend the school year, the finances will have to be there to support those involved. We can not expect people to work more without paying them more.

A final challenge facing education is that of the school having to do more. Virgil discussed some of the programs that schools have started, for example: human sexuality, drugs and alcohol, and the breakfast program. Virgil noted that these are not bad programs, but the line must be drawn somewhere. The schools are going to have to either expand the school day or year, or be very selective in the programs they wish to

endorse.

As Virgil reflected upon his years in education, he felt that the most significant achievement to him personally was the teamwork that had been established at South Grade School. When he first went into the elementary building in 1969, he wanted to see people coming together to work as a team, not in isolation. He wanted interaction at all levels. One thing Virgil did accomplish was allow for common planning time for each grade level. He felt this really helped to bring grade levels together. He based the idea on going to see a doctor. If that doctor didn't know how to solve the problem, Virgil hoped that the doctor would call somebody else who might. A total team effort is what solves problems. It is vital that all people who are involved in a project get worked into the process so that a trust is shared by all. Virgil felt he developed that trust at South Grade School.

In 1989, Virgil was named the Kansas Elementary Principal of the Year. Kansas is divided into six districts and each year each district nominates a candidate for this prestigious award. All districts then come together and select one candidate to represent the entire state.

Virgil had to compile a resume, state all of his activities, and list his

achievements on a personal and professional level. He also had to obtain letters of support from another administrator, a teacher, a community member, a businessperson, and a parent. Virgil was very pleased that his family was able to be with him and share in the proud moment when he was awarded the Kansas Elementary Principal of the Year.

Virgil mentioned that when a person has received the Kansas Elementary Principal of the Year, he is automatically selected as a National Distinguished Principal the following year. Virgil once again completed similar paperwork for this award. The conference was held in Washington, D. C. He said that it was a super experience. Virgil received a brass bell from Lauro Cavazos, the Secretary of Education. He stated that even the President of the United States has presented the award in the past.

The awards that Virgil won allowed him to travel throughout the State of Kansas and those experiences gave him a picture of what education is like over the entire state. On a national level Virgil made some very meaningful contacts for education.

When asked if he would change anything if he were given the opportunity to begin his professional life again, Virgil expressed that he

would have spent more time with his family. When his daughters were growing up he was the Community Education Coordinator. He spent a great amount of time fulfilling the obligations of that position and missed out on many activities that his daughters were involved in. Virgil encouraged all administrators to take time out for their families, because once that time is gone, it cannot be relived. Virgil continued to say that it is so easy for people to get wrapped up in their job and forget about the most important people in their lives, their family.

Virgil expressed excitement in his recent retirement. As a gift for his retirement, Connie, his wife, planned a trip for them to the eastern United States. Virgil and Connie also look forward to continuing their hobbies of collecting old postcards and sheet music. Furthermore, Virgil emphasized that he is anxious to spend time with his family. The Nelsons have two daughters. Kim and her husband, Mark, and their son, Jonathan, live in Olathe. Kim teaches fifth grade at Mahaffie Elementary School. Mitzi lives in Shawnee, Kansas, and is a bond trader at the Commerce Bank in Kansas City, Missouri. Both girls received their degrees from Kansas State University and are working on their advanced degrees.

Virgil added that he is keeping his options open for future activities.

He said he might consider something that offers a flexible work schedule, but for the time being, he and Connie simply want to enjoy life.