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Oral History of Bill Saunders

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ORAL HISTORY OF BILL SAUNDERS

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CHAPTER II: INTERVIEW WITH BILL SAUNDERS

"You've got to reach 'em to teach 'em" and "If the student hasn't learned, the teacher hasn't taught." These are philosophical quotes that 1982 Kansas Master Teacher, Bill Saunders lives by.

Born on October 12, 1930, Saunders was the youngest son of two. He was raised in the small Southeast Kansas community of Pleasanton.

Attending grades one through eight at Pleasanton, Saunders felt that he received an adequate education. He stated that he felt it was adequate but not superior. He further explained that he grew up during the World War II era, and anyone that knew anything about teaching was recruited. Saunders recalls hearing his father, who served on the Board of Education, talk about the difficulties of finding certified teachers. The majority of teachers that taught during that time lacked both experience and a teaching certificate. Therefore, they were issued a county certificate.

Following his graduation in 1949, Saunders dreamed of marrying his high school sweetheart and had intentions of working in the coal mines, as his father had. However, his older brother George, had a different vision for his little brother. In fact, he was the individual most responsible for Saunders' desire to pursue a career in education. His

brother took on the role of being his mentor and enrolled him into the junior college at Fort Scott. George informed him of the day he was to arrive on campus. He also handled his living arrangements and his class schedule. On his schedule, Saunders noticed that his brother had enrolled him in a course entitled "Industrial Arts." This was the first class he had ever taken in this field. However, during his childhood Saunders recalls using tools to help his father tinker on their old car and fix their machinery. This was the basis of Saunders' mechanical exposure which later grew to shape his career.

While attending junior college at Fort Scott he declared industrial education as his major area of study with social science as a minor. After completing two years of junior college, Saunders was summoned by his country to serve in the Korean War.

When Saunders returned home from the service, he decided to finish his college degree. He ventured to Pittsburg State University (P.S.U.), and within two years received his bachelor's degree. It was at P.S.U. that he met a woman named Marilyn Taylor, who later became Mrs. Bill Saunders.

It was Marilyn who provided him the incentive to increase his grade point average and further his education. She was studying business administration and still had one

more year before graduation. Meanwhile, Saunders began working on his master's degree in Administration and Industrial Education, which he completed in 1956.

While finishing school, Marilyn worked at the Job Placement Bureau. Through her work, she acquired leads to job openings around the state. She relayed information to her husband, who was searching for a job, about an opening at Shawnee Mission. While traveling to Shawnee Mission for the job interview, Marilyn informed him of another position that she had heard about in Garden City, Kansas. Representatives from their district would be interviewing at the job fair in Ottawa. She didn't neglect to mention that it was the highest paying district in the state.

They stopped at the job fair and had an interview with Dr. LeRoy Good, the Superintendent of the Garden City School District. Good quoted him an annual salary of \$3,600, but also stated that he thought he could get everyone a \$100 pay increase. Saunders signed the contract and never went to Shawnee Mission.

In the fall of 1956, Saunders began teaching in the World War II barracks behind the Sabine-Caulkins School in Garden City. He was assigned to teach pre-engineering, descriptive geometry, engineer drafting and shop courses to junior college students. He also taught drafting for grades seven through twelve. Eventually, Saunders was given the

choice to teach junior high or junior college. First-hand experience with junior college football players, and their uncaring attitudes, contributed to Saunders choosing the junior high position. "The junior high students were ambitious and eager to learn. It was a joy to teach them everyday," Saunders admitted.

Along with his first teaching position, Saunders also drove a school bus. Saunders accumulated over five hundred thousand miles during his first years of teaching. Students boarded the bus at 7:00 in the morning; he taught them all day, and then drove them home after school. By the end of the day, he was ready for a relaxing evening.

After many successful years of classroom instruction, Saunders decided it was time for him to take on an administrative position. He stated, "If you try something new and fail, you haven't lost anything. If it catches on, it was worth the try." For the next 4 years he initiated numerous programs for the district.

Career Education was one of Saunders' first successes. This year-long curriculum was funded by the district and was implemented into all grade levels. The purpose of the program was to allow children to have a better insight on all careers.

At the elementary level, Career Education helped eliminate stumbling blocks for teachers. It did this by

scheduling field trips and guest speakers on subjects of interest.

An outstanding component of the program was the job shadowing experience. The encounter allowed junior and senior high students the opportunity to spend a day at a job site learning about the requirements, expectations, and responsibilities of their future career.

Another prominent aspect of this program was the career fair. Employers from the area would give presentations about the background of their occupation. The presentations helped students gain a better understanding of careers in the community and gave them a better insight of what classes would benefit them when entering that field. Unfortunately the program was discontinued, due to the lack of funds.

After four successful years of writing proposals and implementing twenty-one programs, Saunders chose to leave the administrative field. Saunders stated, "I missed contact with kids the most. That is probably why I left administration. As an administrator you went into the classroom, but you didn't get the satisfaction of working with the kids."

Upon returning to the classroom, Saunders introduced a home construction project to the Board of Education. With their approval, the district's dilapidated, World War II barracks, were razed. The idea became a reality and the

salvaged lumber was used to build homes with his twelve to fifteen year old students. His program was most unique in the United States, because it was the only program known at the junior high level. After designing and constructing five homes, they were auctioned to the public for handsome prices ranging from \$21,500 - \$39,000.

Furthermore, the home construction project stemmed from his teachings of electricity in his general shop class. In this class, the work was taught by theory, and pencil lead acted as wire on paper. Saunders felt that the children needed tactile experiences and that hands-on approaches of wiring would be more beneficial to them.

From there, his idea expanded to include all industrial arts classes and home economics. Blueprints for the house were developed by the drafting class. His survey class did inspection work and prepared the ground. The woodworking class added to the completion of the home by designing, manufacturing, and installing the cabinets and other woodwork details. Other areas that were involved in the project included plumbing, heating, rough framing, and finishing work. The Home Economics class was also involved by adding special touches with their interior decorating ideas.

Before the workers were allowed on the construction site, Saunders would start his class period with a ten to

thirty minute orientation. He would prepare them for the tasks that were to be accomplished each day.

Due to the uniqueness of the project, enrollment for industrial art classes was restricted to twenty-four pupils. Special Education students were also included in his projects and were often his best contractors. "They were usually in the program all three years and could assist new students when I was instructing others," Saunders commented.

Liability during his home construction years was not an issue, as long as the parents carried insurance for their child. Tetanus shots were also a prerequisite for being in the class. Fortunately, the most an injury ever required was a band-aid from a student stepping on a nail.

Saunders felt the home construction project dealt with a number of different areas. It not only allowed individuals to explore the many facets of building a home, but also taught them dexterity. Saunders felt that the key to education was for each student to be successful. The project of building a house permitted students to accomplish this goal. Saunders stated, "Most of them may never build anything again. But each of them probably will own a home someday. That could be the greatest investment they'll make, and as consumers they'll be a lot better off if they know how it's built."

When the lumber from the barracks diminished, Saunders explored a new project in hopes of gaining experience. This new project, entitled Kansas Energy Education, was an integrated curriculum for Kindergarten through twelfth grade. It included such topics as energy conservation of natural products, insulation in homes, and energy efficiency.

Always needing a new challenge, Saunders committed himself to serve on the Planning and Implementation Committee for this program. It was sponsored by the Kansas State Department of Education and the Kansas Energy Office. He also assisted Western Kansas schools by providing in-services. The instructional workshops were usually conducted during faculty meetings through centers of interest. However, he was also willing to go into the classrooms to train interested individuals. The supplies that were used for the projects were furnished by the state. Travel expenses were paid for by the Garden City School District. The commission was eventually abolished and consequently the program was as well. In order for his works to continue, Saunders donated his Energy Education Curriculum to other educators.

Following his Kansas Energy Education debut, Saunders found himself on a textbook evaluation committee. His involvement surfaced after writing to a publishing company,

expressing his concerns about their curriculum. He was unhappy that he had not come upon one text, through his years of teaching, that incorporated all the industrial arts areas. In return, the company replied to Saunders' request, by asking him to serve on their evaluation team. Being on the evaluation team helped Saunders build his professional library. The collection of books that he received from various publishing companies, helped him establish a better curriculum for his industrial arts classes.

Saunders' expertise in planning, organizing, and implementing programs into the teaching field, lead to a very important chapter in his life. He was teaching Industrial Arts in Garden City, when he was nominated for the Kansas Master Teacher of the Year Award. The Garden City Educators Association recommended Saunders for his excellence in teaching on February 24, 1982. He was given a set of guidelines to follow by the Selection Committee. With his wife's encouragement, Saunders decided to submit a scrapbook to the committee in means to support the nomination. It included a short biographical sketch, his educational philosophy, testimonies of his outstanding community and school service, and evidence of his participation in professional organizations. Saunders, along with six other outstanding educators, accepted the Kansas Master Teacher award of 1982. At the ceremony in

Emporia, Kansas, each worthy recipient was asked to prepare a five minute acceptance speech. However, as Saunders stepped to the podium, he was asked to speak ten minutes instead. Panic stricken, he remembered the educational advice he had received from a past professor, "You never want to run out of soap." This meant that you should always be prepared with a sufficient amount of information. Throughout his career, Saunders lived by these words and needless to say, was not able to express all the information he wanted.

Winning the award affected Saunders' teaching career in many ways. It made him more aware of his actions in the classroom. It challenged him to be creative with his curriculum and implement different projects each year. His experience made others feel more secure in asking for advice on how to be successful. When asked, he suggested that they be creative with their curriculum, consistent with children, and innovative with their ideas. "What works for one class might not for the next. Each class is different. The ideas are easy to come up with, it's the presentation that makes learning effective," Saunders remarked.

Saunders feels lucky to be honored as a master teacher. "We have so many good teachers doing an excellent job that have never been recognized. They do their thing everyday throughout their whole career and are acknowledged only by

their students. However, this is the joyous part, the lifetime friendships you make with the kids."

Over the years, Saunders encountered many changes in the educational system. As a result of increased responsibilities for teachers, he felt that the student's quality of education had been weakened and students were harder to reach. He felt that this weakness was due to many factors. Among these constituents were values, discipline, and paperwork.

Saunders saw that values, which were formerly taught in the home, have been added to the teacher's role. In return, instructional time was decreased and students suffered.

Discipline also played a role in weakening the system. When Saunders first started teaching, corporal punishment was accepted. Teachers did not have to use the paddle often, because children knew the teacher was the authority and they were to respect them. "Today, you wouldn't dare use a paddle or even hang one in your room," Saunders expressed.

There is quite a difference in the discipline problems Saunders used to see in kids, compared to the problems he sees now. In the past, chewing gum was one of the biggest problems he saw, yet before retiring, the most difficult problem he faced was student defiance. With the paddle

being non-existent in the Garden City School District, Saunders never mastered the conflict with a defiant child.

Personal contact was a means of showing students you were concerned in 1956. On the contrary, in 1996, his last year of teaching, he felt it was more difficult to reach students due to the fact that contact of any sort could lead to accusations and result in a lawsuit.

Once again, Saunders recalled his first days of teaching when he was able to spend an ample amount of time to prepare his lessons for class. In contrast, he stated, "Today, they're going to kill a teacher with paper work." This is another responsibility added to the teacher's job. With only 8 hours in a school day, Saunders found that during his last years of teaching, much of his time was spent completing paperwork for new programs, meetings and student records. Ultimately, students suffer because teachers are not allotted enough time for class preparation. Values education, discipline, and paperwork are just a few of the factors which led to the educational changes during Saunders' forty years of teaching.

For many years, Saunders has contributed much of his time to education. It is quite apparent that he treated his students as adults, his colleagues as equals, and the administration with great respect. He was a teacher of modesty, who performed beyond the requirement of his duty.

He did this because of his love for teaching and his respect for people. Saunders is a person of high integrity and great dedication to education. We all wish that every teacher had his measure of professionalism, enthusiasm, and expertise. He is truly a master teacher!