

Interview with Sandy Longhini

KI Sawyer Elementary School

No Date Available

Sandy Longhini: "We have two schools, two full elementary schools that we are offering. We have McDonald's school versus K.I. Sawyer Elementary School, and each grade level, we have probably at least 3, but possibly 4 classrooms for each grade level. So we knew we were really a full sized school system. In addition to the two schools we had on the airbase, and we had one in Skandia and we have one in the town of Gwinn, it is called Gilbert Elementary School. So we had four elementary schools at one time. When the based closed in 1998, people moved out and the teachers, we all had to take different assignments because, I think there were probably about 190 teachers and half of the teachers went home, which was really devastating because some of our newly energetic teachers who we had just really grown to like and respect, they had to leave the area. So, they scattered. So the remaining 90 teachers, approximately 90 teachers, we took different teaching assignments depending on our credentials. Having taught...let's see, I taught first grade for 13 years and then I was teaching 3rd grade for 7 years, so then I pulled out my Special Ed credentials and I taught in the high school for a couple of years. So that is the reason I know of this, 98. So I went and I stayed at the high school for two years and then I came back and taught at the elementary school. Taught second grade and now I'm teaching fourth grade."

Mary Rosten: "Now, how many middle schools did you have when you had the four elementary schools running?"

S.L. "We still had one middle school and one high school. At one time, back in the '70s, we had to have two different schedules. You were either the early schedule or the late schedule for teaching. We had so many kids; we had to have two different time periods to accommodate all of the students, especially in the high school. Elementary, we were okay, because we had four elementary schools, but once it got to middle school and high school, teachers either had to do their early schedule or their late schedule to accommodate the classes and shuffle around people."

M.R. "Now, did your classroom size change very much?"

S.L. "Classrooms...when I taught first grade: this was back in '76, I was teaching for a gal and all of the 24/26 kids that I had---kids, there was such a shuffle. Then, the airbase as well...this was not good, moving these families in and out of the base, such as they did, so then they signed on these families to be here for at least 4 to 6 years before they would move on, and some were high enough in rank that they were able to stay on the base and they were able to have more consistency in their child's education. It was tough. I am sure those kids moving school to school, they had to be...was pretty crazy."

M.R. "When the base was up and running, did you have communication with other schools on other bases to kind of having an executive curriculum; in the state we have one, but did you have one among all of the bases?"

S.L. "American teachers, we really didn't. We didn't have an ongoing education, like it should be. The principals would get the records from the kids, but as with teaching, it is so hard to find an extra minute or two, unless there was a real problem, normally you would call as a teacher to another school, you could, but all of the records came with the kids, it was pretty self-explanatory."

M.R. "So it still went by states, even though they were moved state to state, country to country, they still were kind of subjected to whatever state curriculum they went through. So you can see where the holes might have been, come in."

S.L. "But as a school system, we were really fortunate, because we were always considered in the forefront because our kids that transferred out, they always seemed to be ahead of the school system that they were transferring into. We always were pretty proud of that. We are a pretty aggressive school system, compared to the state, we have pretty high standards."

M.R. "Now, how has the population of the children that you are teaching now changed since the base closed? Has there been a big change in any certain area of the children's development? Has there been, over the years since 1998, I think you said, in 7 or 8 years, has there been one area where you hadn't previously seen a major need?"

S.L. "Right now, it's not really, but over the years, we are seeing a need and the school district is aware of it, but the budget is so tight, we really need to have five daily kindergarten placements for these younger kids. Right now, because of the bus transportation cost, and I think almost every school district is experiencing this; they have what is called a two and a half daily kindergarten student. Well, if a kid and a kindergarten student goes every Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoon, let's say, and then they're sick on Wednesday or there is a vacation like Thanksgiving, you may only see that child one day that week, and it's just not enough. So, it is under review right now, and hopefully we can work it out next year where we hopefully have five days of kindergarten. I don't know if it is going to be a whole day, or maybe a half day, but these kindergarten students really need to have a better basis. We are seeing that the kindergarten teachers, I mean, I hope you get to visit one, Ms. Keniville or Mrs. Box, they're in a big meeting this week. They are pushing forward for contact time with the students, because it is really a tough boat if you don't have that foundation."

M.R. "And the other question I wanted to ask, sort of on that same line, is kind of in regards to parental input. When this was a base, you had military families making up the majority of your student population. What was the parental input at that time? Did you have strong parent involvement?"

S.L. "Oh, definitely, definitely...our parents, to this day, they are really interested in the kids' education. We just got done with parent teacher conferences, and I think the parents really try to make the contact strong. However, it is a little different situation where now we have both parents working outside the home, it really tough to get to school during the day because then they are docked for time away from their jobs. We have our conferences held in the evenings to accommodate the parents. We have some really good parents to support us. Generally speaking, the parents are very supportive."

M.R. "And do you see any increase in special education needs in the past several years? I know in the state, there has been an increase in that; I am wondering how that has affected your school?"

S.L. "It is the same as every district. We have a lot of high needs cases. We have a lot of learning challenges, all learning disabilities, and the case load has increased over the years. So, speak to maybe a Special Ed teacher, Teresa Valenski would be the one to speak for that, I would add her name to the list there, Teresa Valenski. She is the Special Ed teacher and she has been teaching for probably twenty years."

M.R. "And now, in teaching, I know I'll speak for myself as a teacher, a big part of the education and the payoff is in the development of those students over years. Have you had a population that has stayed in this basic vicinity over the past seven years? Has there been a stable population where you can see that type of progression?"

S.L. "For the most part, the students that we work with, I would guess maybe seventy or eighty percent, they will finish through the system, they will be graduating, and we are able to follow them right through high school. It is really fun to see, because I always save their papers and I say, 'I'll be giving this to you at graduation!' And Mrs. Henry, the fifth grade teacher, she and I, we do drama. It is fun to see them go on into their drama productions in the middle school and high school years. We always support them, and years go by so fast and there they are performing on the stage. It is exciting."

M.R. "I want to switch gears a little bit, just to ask you, and I had spoken with the principal a little about this, and she gave me some of her opinions, but, the recent crime trends that have happened on the base: I know that there has been a big increase in 2001 and 2004, documenting cases. Has that affected the young student population? I know they aren't usually the perpetrators in this, but have you seen and impact either emotionally or academically on the young people of this district?"

S.L. "I think the kids are aware that certain things happen, because we talk about rules and manners and how we should act as kids, and I think they are aware of certain things that happen, but I think they are still too young to understand. So I think they are still pretty innocent at this point. As you get to sixth grade now, sixth grade is a little different. They are getting a little bit of the street life in the seventh and eighth grade, but for the younger kids, I don't really see that as being a factor right now, but they are aware of it. They'll talk about the behaviors post event and how you make good choices and what happens if you do make bad choices. So we work really hard on that in elementary. Hopefully we are planting good seeds so we can prevent it in the middle school and the high school. However, we always have that peer pressure. That is really tough no matter where you live and in any school system. We have a few bad apples in every barrel and we just don't want them to spoil the whole lot. We have to be careful."

M.R. "Now, where would you hope to see education in this district go in the next five or ten years? Is there an area, and I know a lot of it is based on the funding, but taken ideal for you to say that funding were available, where would you think the majority of resources would be in place?"

S.L. "Well, actually, we have been quite lucky. We have fortunately been able to get a grant, it's called Co-Nect, and we were able to qualify because of our population and being of lower income. It was based on the needs of the families. So we were able to take advantage of the three year grant on which we were able to update all of our technology. We were able to participate in a lot of workshops and bring in speakers...class visiting. We were able, as teachers, to go elsewhere to visit classrooms and see the schools. The school system is really rudimentary, so most of the staff participated in that. It was a really big school movement plan, and it was wonderful. So we were able to take advantage of that as did most recently the middle school and the high school. So, our whole system has actually been able to get on board with the technology and the software. Each classroom link has its own smarts, and there is a kart in the back of the room where the kids are able to keyboard. They are pretty much...to have that advantage, to have that available to their fingertips. As teachers, we are really trying to be aggressive in keeping up to date on the programs or on board with the writing program right now and also the spelling program. We were just dealing with that. We are trying to be aggressive to keep ahead with the kids. I think just keeping the kids on the forefront, they are the most important resource we have. So we are really trying to offer them a lot of career awareness. We do, as a school, we do career awareness project of the year. As fourth grade teachers we do one called career-arama. We bring in speakers throughout the year, trying to get the kids excited about getting a really good job someday, getting out there. So we do a lot of career awareness throughout the whole school...the career fair. The high school has just gotten into that, as always. We are updating the antique credentials. More Science, more English, more Math, which I think is a great idea. It is my personal opinion, but I think it is wonderful. I don't like to see watered down curriculum. If you walk into any of the classrooms, nothing is watered down. We are spooning it in as fast as they can eat it."

M.R. "I don't want to put a thought in your head, but let me voice this and see if you agree..."

S.L. "Sure."

M.R. "What I am hearing is that your philosophy is that if you have higher expectations of the children, that they will rise to meet those expectations rather than lowering the expectations to meet them where they are. Is that fair?"

S.L. "That is exactly right. I am always trying to challenge them. But I am always trying to bring reality into the picture too. I know some of the kids do have some challenges within their home life and in their neighborhoods, but I don't think that is anything new. In the inner cities, they have more of a challenge as educators to keep the kids in school and excited for the programs."

M.R. "Could you talk a little more about the program...you said you had gone to visit some schools? What type of schools did you go to? Did you yourself participate?"

S.L. "I did."

M.R. "Okay."

S.L. "It is called Connect School Improvement Plan, it comes down from the East coast, its base is in Boston, Massachusetts, somewhere in there. Once a year they would have a big contest for all of the participating schools throughout the United States and Cathy Lamy would be the best person for you to talk to about that because she was able to successfully get the grant for her school district which is one of the top, and as teachers we called it Critical Grants Visits. We would go out...and these are schools that are also in the same grant and the same rules. These were schools that were lighting the tough struggles with budget crunch and also for the kids that came from financially...more needs, more financial needs, and we noticed that where the families that do face that challenge, it is hard for them to be able to...they can't have a computer at home, so this grant was able to give computers to the schools which we were able to teach the kids how to use the computers and also to bring in the parents to give them lessons. They would have nights where the parents would come to the school and we would have computer lessons: how do you operate this technology. So it was a wonderful opportunity for us to go in and evaluate their school to see from an objective point of view coming in from the outside: what do we see that they are doing right, what are some of the weaknesses they need to work on. They in turn visited our school as a team. Probably 18 teachers from the whole United States and they would say 'Oh, here is where you are doing a great job on this, but this is where you might need to improve.' which was great. We would trade ideas for projects...it was a wonderful learning experience."

M.R. "Now, will you make contact again with those same schools in another year or two years?"

S.L. "Hopefully, after the three years."

M.R. "Oh, the three years has passed?"

S.L. "Yes, the three years has passed, but we are still able to get on the website. We are still logged in; we have our own user name. We are able to take advantage of any professional development that comes by the way, and all of the different lessons, lesson plans. We have a project builder. Many of our teachers and all of the schools have submitted big projects in the project builder. So we have award winning projects taking over the school district, they are recognized nationwide. In fact, we were also designated as one of the top schools in the Connect System. That was quite a feather in our cap."

M.R. "What were the three years that this ran? Do you know the dates?"

S.L. "It was probably about three years ago, I would say 1999."

M.R. "Oh, so shortly after the base closed."

S.L. "Right...1999 to maybe 2002/2003. Then after the elementary schools had received grants and funds and the middle school and the high school grades would get on board."

M.R. "So they were able to have different grants for each of the school levels?"

S.L. "Right...but it was pretty much the same rules and we just loved being able to take advantage of all of the opportunities, especially the technology workshops for the kids because that's where it's at. We also have a project night, where a lot of the teachers with the students would display the projects that

they've worked on and that's fantastic. We still continue that to this day. We have what is called Celebration of Learning. This year it is on the night of May 4th at 5 o'clock, so I'm inviting you right now. You've got to come and see. The 4th grade is going to be performing a Michigan Musical because we in the 4th grade, we teach about the state of Michigan. That is in the Social Studies curriculum. You'll really enjoy it; the kids are excited about it."

M.R. "Now are most of these projects then technologically based? Or maybe any?"

S.L. "Not always...pretty much hands on. We oversee all of the projects from kindergarten through sixth grade that night. You really need to come. May 4th, at 5 o'clock. It is 5 to 7:30."

M.R. "Well, it sounds like this school district is putting a lot of time on the teachers' part into extra projects. The evenings you talk about with the parents. So the moral, I guess this is my Segway into the moral of teachers, by judging from behavior, I would assume the moral is high. Is that a good indicator or there are there a few that have high and then a few..."

S.L. "Yes, no we are pretty close as a staff. In fact, we are doing reading month right now, and at the end of the month, I believe its March 30th, we are going to be doing a play: our drama presentation at 7 o'clock, and again I invite you to that. We are going to be doing Cody Fried Worms. The play will be presented and then we will be able to have the special desert offered after."

M.R. "Well thank you, I see your class is coming in."

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