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Feenstra, Deb Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Oral History Interview with
Deb Feenstra

(unedited)

Conducted November 6, 1997
by Ann Weller

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"
AW: This is an oral history interview with Deb Feenstra, principal of Longfellow School. Well, let’s start out with your early life in Holland. How old were you when your family moved here?

DF: I was in second grade. Seven years old probably.

AW: What do you remember about the move. Were you happy to do it or...?

DF: No. Coming was difficult because we left all of our family behind when Dad was transferred here—so that was a hard move. I went to Van Raalte School which was the old building then and I remember thinking it was so strange to be going...we went upstairs and went in and it was not a comfortable thing. I was a real obedient child. I guess that’s a good way of saying it. And my mom got called the first day of school and said, "Your daughter’s in the principal’s office." I came from Louisiana and I was in the principal’s office and the principal said I had a very disrespectful "mouth", she remembers, because every time the teacher talked to me I said, "Yes, ma’am." My mother said, "She may say nothing else." Still to this day I say, "Yes, ma’am, yes, sir" to my parents. It’s how I was raised and they viewed that in Holland because it was different than they were used to, I think, as being disrespectful. So she explained to him that I can’t do anything else. I remember that as being a real emotional...and the other was we were getting ready to go to gym and they told my mother I wouldn’t listen. I remember just sobbing in the corner because...
she kept telling me, "I mayn't do that with my shoes." I didn't know what that word meant. I had never heard that word. I remember taking my shoes off and putting my shoes on and she kept saying "You mayn't do that." I didn't know what it meant and I remember being real frustrated. So that was my first memories of being here. And that was not comfortable!

AW: Culture shock.

DF: Yeah, culture shock of moving.

AW: Did you get teased for having a southern accent?

DF: Yes. Got rid of it very quickly because of that. It was hard for us too because we came from a Catholic background. Came into Holland and we played outside on Sunday—that was part of who we were—and my parents were told that the other kids in the neighborhood would not be allowed to play with us because we played outside on Sunday. I remember riding our bikes and they'd look at us out of the windows of the houses. A little group came to my parents and said, "Your children can't play with ours because we don't play outside here on Sunday." My dad worked six days a week so we raked our yard on Sunday. He never mowed the lawn on Sunday because he had due respect for sound here but....so it was tough. It was tough moving in.

AW: So this was in the sixties then, wasn't it?

DF: In the sixties, yeah. It was not easy. Louisiana is...there are bars everywhere. The neighborhoods are set up in little clusters and little neighborhoods and every neighborhood has their own bar and their own store and their own barber—all in one little location. She said, "We moved from a bar on every corner to a church on every
corner!" That's how it felt when we moved here. So our anticipation was a very open, caring community and it's not what we found when we first started. When we first started out in Holland it wasn't easy.

AW: What are changes you have seen in the community from that time to now in terms of what a newcomer might see?

DF: It depends on what little area of Holland you move into. Having moved from building to building and working for families in different areas, I think it depends on where you move into in Holland. But those things were things that we loved about Holland at the same time. It was wonderful being someplace where everything was closed on Sunday and it was your family day. We loved it. I remember thinking that was great. It was a different day and it was focus for family day. That kind of stuff changed for us once we got involved in school. My parents did PTO, and once they became part of and people knew who we were, that went away. I think it was we were just different when we first came in. And then ended up in a church and that whole thing started to and that changed. Moving into Holland now I think is very different. We've lost some of that Sunday mentality depending on where you live. Stores are open. Then there wasn't anything open when we first came here. I remember we went to Saugatuck to go to restaurants on Sunday because there wasn't anything to do here. That's also different. So it really depends on where you live still.

AW: What would be your contrast of how the Dutch heritage played out when you first came here and now?
DF: One of the things we talked about when we first drove through this town was how incredibly clean it was. And how wonderful that was and that work ethic piece. From the outside everything looked so wonderful. I remember all my family that would come over all the years. That was there then. I think we’re losing a lot of that now and just look when you drive around. Some of that is missing. There was a real strong, we felt at that point, drive to, I want to say, "redeem us," so that we would become a part of the Reformed Church culture. Which we ended up becoming and it’s what I live now and wonderful. But they had a strong need for us to understand what that was and be part of that. I think that was the Dutch heritage coming through. The work ethic piece too. That went with it. That whole Dutch puritan work ethic I think was real strong and drove a lot of what went on here. That’s different now than it used to be. That’s still there, but with the population that lives that way you have so much more around more that doesn’t have that same point of view of things. That’s different.

AW: Were there negatives to that much Dutch influence would you say?

DF: Yes, for us it was the lack of acceptance. If we were like they were, it was okay. There was a lot of it we did like. But then the pieces that went with it. My mother worked at the liquor store in Washington Square. I grew up near the Square and that was the worst. But her favorite thing, she said, was the people that would say things to us about, "You know you shouldn’t be working in a place like that," were the same people who would go to the Minit Mart and buy groceries, come over take the groceries out of the bag and put the liquor in the bottom of the brown bag, cover it
with the groceries and walk out the door! So, we saw a lot of...We look one way, we live another kind of feeling when we first moved here. But a very caring people. They were ready to help out. Once it was okay. Another thing that was real unusual for us here was...and we thought this was part of the Dutch heritage...was it was much more formal. Where we come from you aren’t invited to someone’s house. You just feel comfortable and you go. You’re not invited for dinner, if someone shows up you put another plate on the table. And the other was, we called everyone Miss and their first name. That’s the respect language. It isn’t Mrs. and a last name. That was hard to get used to. Changing that because that was kept for someone you didn’t know well. But the lady next door was Miss so and so and it’s their first name. And the male was always Mr. and their first name and that’s how a neighborhood kind of operated where I came from. It was very much lines self-drawn. We’re close just to this point but we really don’t know each other. It was a negative we felt was with it, that was our perception.

AW: What would you see as the pros and cons of Holland becoming a more diverse community, both ethnically and religiously?

DF: That is such a hard question! Part of what I love about Holland, and my husband and I left for a few years, and said, "We’re coming back this is where we want to raise our kids." We love the school structure and the school system. There’s a real commitment to education and learning. I think that’s part of that Dutch heritage that came through. But also there was developing...we like the development of ethnic diversity that was happening. And that there’s committed education. There is
diversity, but the trials of that for me are that I don't see it at something that's
blended--I see it as something that's very separate. The Hispanic community comes
in. We'll support that Hispanic community as a church, but we'll build you your own
Hispanic Church. We'll put you in your own...You know, there's some of that.
There isn't a blending. But that comes from both sides. I think it probably frustrates
me a lot to hear, "Well, the Dutch culture and heritage needs to accept who we are
and everyone moving from outside," but there isn't any acceptance of that original
Dutch culture heritage used like that. That needs to go away because the new is
coming in. So there isn't a blending. Again, I think there should be a blending, but
still as a family and what your heritage is and how you live, should still be possible in
that family unit. But then how do we blend that all together as a community? I see
us still isolated. I see economics in this community as the biggest diversity that
isolates people. More than ethnicity.

AW: Say a little bit more about that.

DF: I think it's more...it feels more a community of have and have not. I think we're
losing a middle and we're having a large group of lower economic and upper
economic but we don't cross each other very much.

AW: Is the middle moving to the suburbs or just going away all together?

DF: You know, we talk about that. I don't know. We see it in the schools. I'm not sure
what's happening to the middle, but it seems to be we're high on both ends and less
in the middle. That's my perception.

AW: It sounds like you've been interested in teaching most of your life. Did you start out
as a kid playing school?

DF: Playing school and doing the teacher business. Yeah. I’ve always known a helping profession of some kind is what I would do. How I would do it, I wasn’t ever really sure about. I always thought it would be some mode of teaching. When I went to Hope was a time when the unions were saying, "No more student teachers! We’re saturated in the market. Do something else." So I went through and got a geology science background and started working with it and going out doing field work and things, and knew that was not what I wanted to do. So I went back and did additional summers then to do that and said, "I’m going to do this. That is what I really want to be doing." And decided teaching was the way I would go. I thought about social work for a while, but it was always in that same arena of the helping professions. I just decided education was the way I wanted to do it.

AW: A lot of these are change questions because that’s one of the contrasts they want to focus on. What are the biggest changes you have experienced in the time you’ve been both a teacher and an administrator? How have schools changed or how the people look at the profession? Any changes that you can see over time?

DF: Size is one thing that changed incredibly in Holland. It felt like we would be small neighborhood schools that would be a part of and a piece of the neighborhood. We still work very hard to keep that neighborhood philosophy. A few years ago, we talked about getting rid of neighborhood boundaries. Do we bus kids? How do we do this differently? And the talk in the community was a strong feeling that we needed to keep the neighborhood school concept—which I was real pleased with.
Because there is something about we’re just part of this neighborhood and we’re part of the families that live here and kids just are here part of the day. So I’m really glad that we’ve kept that because in other cities, that’s gone away. And it’s something that this community is wanting to keep and I think that’s real important that we’ve kept it though we’re much larger now. Each of those schools are. We’re very much dealing with how do we blend the diversity of children together, because along with economic diversity comes educational background diversity, and that’s a change that we’ve seen over time. Students in the past came to school was standard; you went to preschool or mom was home with you. You came to school with basic knowledge, the basic colors, nursery rhymes, basic numbers, writing my name. Those kinds of basic things you came with. We have a large group of children now who don’t have any of those experiences before they come to school. But they’re coming in the door with children that do. That’s taken us as a profession to look at ourselves and say, "Okay. How do we say what does each child need to be successful?" How do I find what individual success is and now how to I teach that in a group of twenty-five?"

That is the struggle and the challenge. The other piece that was there, and again I think was part of that Dutch heritage, was mom was home. When I was first here this community did not even go to school hot lunch until 75 or 76! I mean, that’s just recent where when you go around the state then it was happening way before. Because moms were home. That’s the way we lived. Moms were here to help in school. Moms were here to do field trips. The support of learning was there. That isn’t there anymore—having that parental support. And that’s missing on both ends
because the upper income parents are both working full-time, both professional parents. They’re not around during the day to help with the kids. Kids are going to go before and after school care. And we’re just a part of that child’s day. We are not the outside the home day. We’re just part of it and that’s on both ends. People in the low income bracket are working second shifts, they’re working third shifts, they’re working factory schedules. Both parents, if there are two, are working and there isn’t that support. So many kids are home more alone. Kids don’t have that homework support at night. Those kind of things are happening that are very different for us to deal with than they were in the past. As well as what is my background knowledge I’m coming with. That we see just huge chasms between students of similar ages coming in. The background experiences. So then what’s your starting point? And what do you start with? That’s the biggest challenge that we face over the time of change, how do you do that?

AW: How old is Longfellow School and what size is it?

DF: It used to be Maple Grove School. That was like I think in 1927 when Maple Grove was here and then redone and changes and additions since then. We sit around four hundred students now. As short as ten years ago--some of the rebuilding was done in ’77--they sat right around two hundred students. So it’s grown a lot! We haven’t grown in space, in area. We haven’t grown that much in area, but many of the homes that are in our district that were once single family homes have all been converted over time. So we have more density population in the area than we had in the past. So we’re serving pretty much the same area, it’s just that there’s more
density in that area.

AW: What’s outstanding or special about Longfellow School to you?

DF: We are the cross section of Holland. When you look at percentage points of ethnicity, economics, different populist questions, we are within one of two percentage points of what the whole community is. So we are the truest reflection of Holland as a community. Our school is. Which to me is real interesting to have. It is a school that still has incredible support. We logged over four thousand hours of volunteer time last year alone. That’s two full time people! A lot of support still put into this building which is wonderful. I think the diversity of culture that we have is a great piece to put together. It’s a great staff and really is looking at, “How do we know our kids? How do we know what they need? And what do we need to do to make that happen for them?” Not, “We’re here. Come fit with us.” “What do we need to do—we have a profile of what our curriculum and our outline is. But how can we meet your needs under that umbrella?” We’ve really tried to do the whole child, because if you’re not healthy, you’re not going to learn. We try to collaborate a lot with outside agencies and have are a member of that agency team to say, “You know, this is what we see with this family. How can you help us out?” We may find they are already involved with that agency and try to connect. So, try to do what we can to make the walls to move out. Try to use the building more at night when we’re not here for other agencies to come in and be able to have the space and use the space. Try to be more of a resource center in the evenings. We’re not getting rid of that educational piece that we’re responsible for during the day, but then saying “This
building is here. People will access it; people will use it. What can we do with it?"

We’re just at the beginnings of opening that up.

AW: What is one thing that might be going on at night?

DF: Right now we have the Health Department. The nurse that is responsible for our area keeps office hours here. Because it’s closer that going out to the Health Department and she can be here at night. They’re starting a program to teach parents how to read with their kids and to bring parents in and to have parents do that. We use it for Spanish classes taught after school here. It’s not part of us. It’s an outside and they come in a use it after school. Boys and Girls Club uses the building after school. A couple of the churches that we have a partnership in tutoring and those sort of things come in after hours.

AW: Are these kinds of relationships true of all the schools in Holland, or are these ones that you at Longfellow have developed on your own? Well, I guess what I’m asking is, is there a policy in the Holland schools to do this kind of thing?

DF: It’s just starting. It’s going to be the strongest probably at Van Raalte and here because we have the communities and schools connection with Life Services Systems and that’s what’s starting that networking for us. Van Raalte was onboard first and then we were, so you’re going to see some of it in those two buildings. But it’s a beginning of trying to meet the needs. We have a different approach at Longfellow and it’s a collaborative team system, so when we want to come around a child and a family and make some decisions, we pull in a larger team. The district has an in-house team. We’ve added members from the community to pull into that team to say,
"What resources do you have for us? What info can you give us?" So that's something that we do a little differently than the other building, and that's part of that Life Services System connection for us that has helped us to expand for the communities and schools philosophy.

AW: Do you see positive things coming out of that for the children?

DF: Yes, very much so. It's amazing. We'll sit down around a family and they'll go, "Oh! We work with them! We know that family!" So it's more streamlining services and not doubling services and being able to put together a more comprehensive kind of package. Because part of the feeling is, and this is change across the board, is I think what happens inside the walls of the school are a reflection of what is happening in society and in the community. When the neighborhood is tense, the kids inside school, the tension is there. We need to have all members looking at, not saying "School, what are you going to do about it?" The school can't say, "Well, police department, what are you going to do about it?" We all need to sit together and say what role can each of us have in making this work or we'll never make an impact on the whole. So that's our goal, trying to do that. To say what can each of us do and have a piece in this, because one of us can't do it by ourselves. We need to not say, "It's your job. It's my job." You know, those lines and boundaries have got to... We had a wonderful meeting here last spring that communities and schools Dan De Pree helped set up. We had probably every agency there is sitting around a table in our media center saying, "Okay, what are each of our limitations. What can we each do? What are each of our frustrations? Because
as agencies in this community, we’re all saying there’s less money from the state, there’s less time, there’s more needs. How can we as a group better meet that, and the sum of the whole is better than the total of the parts. How can we put this together?" That was very effective and helpful, and it’s just a matter of sitting down together and saying, "Let’s get rid of the lines. Let’s get rid of the territorialism. What can we do to make the community work?"

AW: Will those be ongoing, like quarterly or...?

DF: Yeah, what we’re doing now out of those meetings, it depends on the need, and we’ll pull three or four out of that group. At least identify for us a contact person at each agency that will sit with us because it depends on what the need is. We may not need the whole group. Like we’re having one on the seventeenth of this month because we see a perceived need for pulling the group together who is willing to come in for that from outside agencies and let’s all brainstorm around this need.

AW: What is that particular need?

DF: We’re changing ethnic population in our core city group. A large group of African-Americans are moving into the area where it is a strong Hispanic group. We’re seeing tension between the males in those two groups about living together. And we’re starting to see it here at school. So then we start asking questions. We worked a lot with community police, "Are you guys seeing this in the neighborhood?" So that’s one of the pieces we’re seeing. The other is young single moms not having control over their male children. It’s coming out. Young and more and the profile of that family kind of has a look. Again, that doesn’t mean every young single mom is
going to have that. But we’re starting to see that as a profile coming out. So those are the two issues we’re going to meet around on the seventeenth.

AW: What do you think about the establishment of charter schools. Do you think they’re needed or not needed or how...?

DF: When I looked at the legislation for charter schools I was real excited. It was supposed to be this innovation, it was supposed to be a different way of doing things, very different from how we do it, and that’s what they were designed for. I was real excited to see the first ones come out and say, "What can we learn? What ideas do you have that we’re not doing in the 'box'?" They had some freedom from the "box" a little bit. I haven’t seen that! And that to me is my biggest frustration. It was designed to be, when you read the legislation, an innovative--something that’s not being done--way to approach meeting the needs of all kids. I don’t see any difference in how they’re running versus how we’re running. To me, that’s a big disappointment because I was excited about the possibility that some of the walls of the "box" would be released so that you could try some things a little differently. I’m not seeing it.

AW: Why do you think that’s happened?

DF: I really don’t know. It feels like it’s become more of a competition for kids based on finance and that’s all. That was never the intent of the legislation originally. We need to get past that and start talking about what service are you providing that we’re not to meet the needs of children. If a family finds a way to meet their needs, be it home school, parochial schools, public schools, whatever it is that works for that
family, that’s great. Because all of us need something different. I mean, what I have
can be what everyone needs. But to start another entity the same as already
exists, that develops competition, that develops territorialism. That doesn’t make
sense to me. That’s I think what we have. And that’s frustrating.

AW: What’s your feeling about the for-profit organizations that are involved in establishing
some of the charter schools?

DF: If it were for-profit, we’re making profit off our kids! There shouldn’t be anything
left over. There should be no profit. Because if there is, all the funds aren’t going to
where they’re supposed to be going, and that’s the children. When you pay taxes into
the school aid and it gets funnelled into the school aid act, you’re assumption is that
that’s all going to children. That’s what supposed to happen. I’m surprised that
taxpayers will allow that to not all go to children. And if it’s for profit, the profit is
going someplace else. So that, to me, is a disservice to our children.

AW: What are your priorities for schools in Holland and particularly this school? What are
the top three things that you want to have happen here or you want kids to go away
with or...? I know there are many more than that, but...

DF: Probably the top three are: Number one is how to be a learner. There’s no way in
this day and age we can teach them the knowledge they need to know. The rate of
knowledge is doubling so fast with technology now, we need to teach you to be able
to access learning. I think, probably when we look at the five exit outcomes we
have, if we can teach our kids to be those things, that’s our goal. Responsible
going to draw a blank on the last one! But it’s setting up that whole piece of their rounded member of the community and can contribute back to society when they leave. If they don’t, what’s the next generation and where are we going. I think that’s our biggest thing. You got to be a reader and a writer to be successful. So under the umbrella of all those things, you have to be a reader and writer. So we target that. We hit that very hard because you have to be to survive. Our kids now have never not known technology, have never lived a life without Nintendo. Have never lived life without digital clocks. All of those things that are part of their life, the accessing of a computer has to be as easy to them as us picking up a telephone. When I look back at the statements that were made when Alexander Graham Bell developed the telephone, people thought he was nuts! There was no way that was going to happen, a voice going across a wire. Our kids now talk to kids in Germany across the computer wire! It’s incredible, but what we have to understand is that that’s how their world is going to operate. But that has to be a tool for learning. It doesn’t take away taking out a good book. It can’t take away all of those things. It can’t take away the arts, because if we don’t have don’t produce a society in education that appreciates art and literature and all of those things…that’s what a society is based on; not technology. So we have to keep those things running. So we want to do our exit outcomes. We want to do good readers and writers, and we want to have an appreciation for arts. And technology is just a way to get there in all of those. So those are our three primary things. And to get there you have to be healthy. You have to be able to eat and you have to have a warm house. That’s
where that whole social group has to come in to help us make that happen.

AW: How much autonomy in terms of program does each elementary school have? Is there a general curriculum that all the schools use? Or beyond that do you have things that are specifically here?

DF: Our method of delivery we have some autonomy over. What we deliver is set by the district. So that's very much the difference. How you design that method of delivery is different in each building. But what you deliver is driven by the Board.

AW: Is it Lincoln that is emphasizing the arts now? Is there a particular emphasis here or do you think that there might be at some point?

DF: Our claim to fame right now is running an inclusive environment and teaming in mixing children, and saying that all children's needs we are going to try to meet without pulling you out and taking you away and putting you somewhere. Be it if you're exceptionally high or if you need special ed support. In looking at how do we put that all together in one big picture. Then to do that, we're looking a lot at the theories of brain research and multiple intelligences. And how do we access what a child is good at in a mode that they can work in and go from there. So that's how we're getting there. An inclusive model of brain research and multiple intelligence coming together to put it in place. I think, physiologically, scientifically, we know too much now how the brain functions. It's data we never had before. We can't ignore it. We can't say, "Oh, that's nice, but I'm going to do as I've always done." It is hard data that we have to use, and are responsible to use, to change how we deliver service to kids. Because we know too much to disregard it anymore.
AW: How are parents involved in the programs here?

DF: We have just an incredible group of parents. We have parents in and out all the time. They’re in as readers, they help transcribe writing with kids. A lot in the literacy program parents are part of. They also come in as a group and do the fun stuff still. They come in with busy elves, something they have in December, and the kids all make gifts for their families in the gym. They spend three full days in there, and they bring all the supplies and they set up...the kids go in and out and make things to wrap and take home. Those fun things that go on. They work on the playground here this Saturday again. Cleaning up the playground and doing stuff with it.

There’s a lot of ownership. Our PTO is very active. We can have thirty to fifty people on a meeting night still, which is great numbers. Always at PTO we have a spotlight on learning. We present something new, an idea we’re working on. We get feedback. We talk about it so that they’re part of thinking about that with us. They’re very visible. They’re here a lot. That’s a goal we have is it’s open door. You don’t come in and make an appointment. This is their school as much as it is their child’s school. So it’s a great group and they’re real involved in those kinds of things. Where we need to get better in involvement, is we have parents that will be on the school improvement team and that changes across the years. Parents that will be on a technology committee. We have parents in the committee structure. We need to get better at that. Have that involvement more. But that’s us getting better at inviting and thinking, "Well, this would be a good place to have that voice added," instead of after the fact. So that’s what we need to work on doing a little more of.
AW: I know you’re talking about in the days when the moms were at home all the time and at school all the time. It’s probably harder to get parents here now, but is the involvement across economic lines and across ethnic lines or not?

DF: No, it’s not. Even at PTO meetings at night, we do not tap our Hispanic population. Economically, our Hispanic population and that’s some thing we find…it’s more of an economic issue. Our low SES families do not, for some reason, become part of those things. A lot is work schedule. Second shifters, third shifters sleeping during the day. The work schedule drives a lot of that. Some of it that also that goes with that status is they were never successful in school; they’re not comfortable here. They’re not comfortable being here. How do we make that more open is one of the conversations we talk a lot about. What can we do to change that? But it is the parents that are upper white middle class coming in to do all those things. The left over moms who are maybe still at home. And yes, there are some. We have a few families in that economic status that are Hispanics. So it’s more an economic issue than a cultural issue.

AW: Getting out your crystal ball…Five or ten years from now, where do you think public education will be in Holland? Three years from now?

DF: I think we are at a real crucial point, and it’s kind of make or break time for us. We have got to get better at changing design...When you look at the design we live under, it was developed in 1907. It is a factory design. It has produced workers who could all do the same thing. That’s where the straight rows came from, with someone standing in front. I always like to say if you walk into a doctor’s office or a
surgical room that looked the same now as it did in 1907, I don’t know that you’d want to have anyone operate on you that was in there. We need to really look at what life is going to be like for our children. We’re so close to the next century it’s scary! We don’t even know what their jobs are going to look like. We don’t even know what their life is going to look like--our kindergartners now when they graduate. How do we get better at meeting their needs? Three years from now, five years from now, kids could be on line and learn from home and never have to walk in the store. How do you address that? How do you live with that? My fear is if charter schools keep looking like they’re looking, and profit schools are looking like they’re looking, and who they are recruiting, it’s causing an upper white middle class segregation is what it looks like somewhat with elementary school. I don’t want to see that happen. I don’t know enough about Black River, but when you look at the profile of Vanderbilt from the outside (and I may be wrong, we don’t have a lot of information) that’s what it feels like. I don’t want private schools to start popping up to meet the needs of kids; not charters, but just private business schools popping up to meet the needs of kids if we’re not meeting them. We have to get better at meeting their needs here because then we will start looking like a New York or a big city where students whose families don’t have the background in education, don’t have the money and the way to do it can access anything else, so they are in the public school. And you lose the diversity and the mix in learning, and you have children in the public schools who are poor, whose parents have no background education. They have that wonderful place in who we are now, but we need the across the board mix.
And if we start losing that, then I think we start looking like a New York or a big city inner school where everyone goes private. I don't see that happening in Holland because we're making such a step to meet the needs of our kids so that that doesn't happen here. We've got a community that's coming together and saying, "What are we going to do so that this doesn't happen, that our kids are successful and our schools are successful?" So I feel like we will be in a great place five years from now because we're at that point where we're making some gains. We make look a little different in the inside in how we deliver service. We need to look different. We meet kids' needs. But I think and I hope and will work real hard, so that public school is a member and has a place.

AW: What I've heard some of the charter people say is that their schools, at least the two here, reflect the community. That there is a high percentage of kids at poverty level and kids of different ethnic backgrounds. You're thinking that they're drawing off more of the upper...

DF: I'm thinking that maybe it's who they enroll. But when we hear from families who they recruit they do not go down...my neighborhood goes from River Avenue to Lincoln, from 16th...my low income neighborhood goes from Sixteenth to Twenty, Twenty-one, Twenty-two. They didn't send recruiters there. They sent the recruiters to Lawndale Court, to Thirty-second, and I go from then River Lincoln up to Thirty-second. That's where the recruiters went. No recruiters visited any of the families that live in that area. I don't know what their population is in the building but knowing from our families and asking the question on how they recruited, they didn't
go out and recruit from those neighborhoods. So to me, that’s a big message! Now, again, I don’t have the info what their numbers look like. I just have the info on their recruiting methods that came from when we asked parents. No one in that neighborhood saw anyone from the charter schools. But this neighborhood got letters and saw quite a few...

AW: We’ll change directions a little bit. You mentioned that you came here as a Catholic family and now you’re in the Reformed Church. How did that evolve over time? Was that true just of you or your family?

DF: I was the oldest. It started with me. Where we lived there was a sem student next door and his family. They were from one of the Reformed Churches in town. He was here at Western. I ended up going with the kids a lot. My brothers and sister are quite a bit younger than I am, so as they got older and it was just a gradual evolution that we came to. I think we were Catholic because we lived in a Catholic community. I think that, for me, the groundedness in Catholicism that’s what it was. I found comfort in it and a worship that we liked in the Reformed setting. I think it started out with who we were living with and who we were living next to.

AW: Did your parents change also?

DF: Yes. My dad was not Catholic, so that was the other. My dad’s reorganized Latter Day Saint. My grandfather even was a preacher in that religion, so I had a mixed bag coming in and then just had to sift that all out. That was my choice and it ended up being then the choice of my parents after it was ours.

AW: What do you think of the role of churches in Holland and how that has changed?
They seem to be more outreach into the community.

DF: I can talk just my neighborhood right now. They’re wonderful. They’re doing an absolutely incredible job. One of the history-making things that we did this year is that we had a morning joint service between the Christian Reformed and Reformed Church around our kids. And they said they think that’s the first time in Holland that they did a joint morning service. They had evening get togethers but a joint morning around Kids Hope. They’re doing a fantastic job. So we have First Reformed, Faith Christian Reformed and Prospect Park Christian Reformed, all entities working to help support the students here. Prospect Park has after-school programs they house there for the kids. It’s the Power Plant, extension from community now extended here to meet the needs of our kids. The others do the Kids Hope program. They are also wonderful at...we have a lot of families that come from Texas and Mexico who don’t have winter clothes. They’ll do clothes drives for us, coat drives for us. They’ll do those kinds of things. They have just been a great support. We have grandparents every morning--we call it the "Grandparents Group"--from Prospect Park who eat breakfast with our kids. They volunteer every morning. There’s a couple here that’s just there for conversation to chat, help start the morning. The cooks are here doing breakfast, they’re here just for that extra support. So they are doing a wonderful outreach job.

AW: Do you think their influence on the community is the same or stronger or less than it might have been when you first came here?

DF: Oh, more! I think those doors have opened up. I think they’ve opened up with each
other as well as to the community. There’s much more positive interaction than it was when we first came. Much more. But my fear is - we become too tolerant!

AW: Talk a little bit about that.

DF: That we want to be tolerant of everyone’s differences, that we become so tolerant what are our core values any more. And that’s a fear I have for the community that we want to say, "We will accept everyone." I think what happens to what our country was founded on. That’s what we were here. Where is that core system? I think that’s what we’re searching for right now as a community to say, "What ties us all together? What can we all bring together? What’s that core values? Where are the basic values that we’re all supposed to look at?" We’re not supposed to talk values, not supposed to talk character traits. Everyone’s suppose to have their own. But, our board adopted to do that, because we have to have something that we all say we value and we wrap around. If we don’t...and we’re so tolerant...

AW: What would those core values be?

DF: Honesty. Respect. I do think there has to be...we may say we hate the zoning that we have and you can’t have three cars in your front yard, no you can’t have, and no you can’t have...but that has to be there because it’s respect for property over all. And otherwise you lose, you know (Side A ends)...a basic respect for property, for others’ property, for my own property. And that comes from some of that zoning. My husband’s a builder in town, and he said, "Sometimes it may drive you crazy," but we go to Florida and you can’t believe it, what the look is...you’ve got a mobile home, then you’ve got a gas station, then you’ve got a house again. So some of that
stuff that drives us nuts in that city government picture gives us something we need. I don’t want to lose that. I don’t want to start saying, "Oh, well, we’ll back down on some of these things. Because I think those are real important too. But just the basic, what’s justice, what’s fairness, all of those things we need to have as a group to live together. Any society does. And we could become so tolerant there is no core.

AW: How do you think the role of women has changed in Holland over time?

DF: Still one of my favorite thing is, because we can have one day a year, that’s women’s night at church. That just has always blown me away (Laughs). It’s like we don’t have value any other time! Boy, its changed, I think. Again it’s been the work force that has changed, and it’s kind of hard for me because I do a non-traditional woman’s role. Teaching was a very traditional woman’s role. When I changed to administration in Holland, there was only one or two women, but now we’re fifty-fifty in our administration structure here in Holland. Women and men. We have a female superintendent now. Part of it, though, makes me at the same time sad for the kids in the world. My own kids. Because we’re losing that--there’s something about mom at home--the structure, the core, the having that. Moms at school help with the volunteering. I think we’ve lost some of that. It’s harder for us to get those people to...And that’s been some of the core stuff that’s been wonderful about this community that you had in the beginning. That’s changed. At the same time, I think women have a perspective on leadership, women have a perspective on what the needs are of the community that is being heard now more than it was before. I still
think we are a white male upper middle class dominated community. That’s who’s making governmental decisions; that’s who’s making a lot. It’s changed tremendously since I first moved to town. The women are a more visible part of things. It’s not just the white male in the suit that you see everywhere. So it has visibly changed quite a bit. Women who have more of that role. But I think what’s driving a lot of that in communities, the women’s role, even because church does still drive a lot of our structure in the women’s role. And the church community has changed so much. I have a non-traditional woman role from the original. But it’s still very traditional in thought. I have a hard time with a female minister in the church structure. Not that they can’t do that. That’s wonderful. But for me, it doesn’t fit. So I kind of live a dichotomy of the two. But the role has changed a lot in town. It has changed very much. And that’s for the better. Because I think there’s a nurturing view, there’s a view that I wish our males would take more. I don’t think they don’t have it, they just have never been given a chance to display it. So I think women are much more involved.

AW: One last question, and this may or may not be related to what we’ve been talking about, but thinking back over your life, what was the major turning point for you either in your personal life or professional life?

DF: I think leaving here was. When we left and went and lived in Duluth, Minnesota, for a couple of years. You’re growing up and you’re thinking...I loved coming here from a big city...I was glad to get rid of a lot what of what we lived with in the big city. And we go back home all the time and watching it change and the crime and all
those things were so awful. And Holland felt so safe and so wonderful. Some of that has changed. The crime has gone up. Those kinds of things. But we left and lived in Duluth for two years. There is something in this community that I didn’t realize I had. I wanted to get away farther from that small town. I’m going to out and be…and when we didn’t have it anymore? And what it is is so hard to...It’s community! It is here! It is a feeling that is in this community that you don’t have when you live other places. We were living in Duluth--very nice people, a very nice place. What that is, I can’t tell you. But when I was gone from it, there was this real need to be back here. And then that’s when the decision was, "We are going to go back there." What Holland is and has and was, is what I want my kids to be raised in. I need to do something to try to help preserve some of that "wonderfulness." That’s part of what I think was my job, that we are a wonderful community to be in. Go away from it a while and how do you explain what it is that’s missing? I can’t give you the words for it. But I knew that what was here was what I wanted. And I wanted to come back to it. It isn’t family, because our family isn’t here! My small core family is, but being gone from that and having the decision that I wanted to come back, and a lot of that is that original Dutch heritage, the ethic. Something that’s here that we couldn’t find other places. That’s it!

AW: Thank you very much!