

NEVADA INDIAN COMMISSION

STEWART INDIAN SCHOOL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

BRINGING HIS GAME TO LIFE: AN INTERVIEW WITH RON WOPSOCK

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Bringing His Game to Life: An Interview with Ron Wopsock

Ron Wopsock is from Fort Duchesne, Utah and is a member of the Uintah and Ouray Ute Tribe. Ron attended Stewart Indian School 1967-1972. Several of his family members also attended the school. Ron was an outstanding basketball player at Stewart, and wished to continue playing basketball at the collegiate or professional level after graduating; however he was drafted into military service and had to defer those plans. He ended up working for his tribe, first in the Recreation Department for 23 years and then serving on the tribal council. As a council member, Ron steered the establishment of a charter school with an emphasis on athletics for his tribal youth, in addition to reintroducing a herd of bison at Fort Duchesne, operated by the tribe. He was inducted into the Stewart Hall of Fame in 1986 for excellence in basketball. Ron currently lives in Fort Duchesne.

My name is Terri McBride. It is Wednesday, April 12, 2017; we are at the Uintah and Ouray tribal offices in Ft. Duchesne, Utah. The interview is with Ron Wopsock, a former student at the Stewart Indian School. We will be discussing his experiences as a student. This interview is being conducted for the Stewart Indian School Oral History Project for the Nevada Indian Commission and will be archived in the Stewart Indian School Cultural Center, the State Library and Archives, and Special Collections at the University of Nevada, Reno.

So Ron, when were you born and where are you from?

December 18, 1952, and I am from Uinta and Ouray Indian Reservation, Ft. Duchesne, Utah.

How many people were in your family?

I'm gonna say twelve.

So you had nine brothers and sisters? Ten kids?

I'm gonna say pretty much half and half, but my mom raised a lot of family. That's what you experienced this morning [referring to a meeting with former Stewart students earlier in the day].

Okay, and what language was spoken in the household when you were a kid?

English and Ute.

Was there a communication barrier between the parents and the children?

No.

Did your family celebrate American Indian cultural ceremonies?

Yes, they did, traditionally, all involved in Sun Dance. . . . Early on, Bear Dance.

Do you pick pine nuts over here? Not like over at . . .

No. There is an abundance, but our people, I'm going to say no; but sometimes, yes, but not like Gardnerville. (chuckles)

Okay, right; it's not a big seasonal event.

Yeah.

Good! So, were any of your family members also educated at Stewart?

You know, Raymond was like a brother. Raymond Cornpeach, yes. My younger brother, David, he did go to Stewart and then he transferred to Sherman Indian School. And also, I've got another brother, his name is Wade Large, he went to Stewart Indian School and he graduated there.

Okay, and Johnny Angel?

And my sister, Corina Wopsock, she graduated from—and also, like you mentioned, Johnny Angel. He went there also.

Okay, wow. So, what years did you attend Stewart?

I'm gonna say '67, 1967.

To . . . ?

Seventy-two.

And you graduated in the class of '72?

Yes, I did.

So, eighth grade through senior year, yes. (He shakes his head). Tell me how you ended up going to Stewart in the first place.

Seventh grade up here, you know, I did—they had a, I'm gonna say, a track program and so, you know, you got involved and I ran, I pole-vaulted, but I also played basketball too, but the following year, eighth grade, I just didn't listen to my mom and my mom says, "Guess what? You're not going to school, so, I'm going to send you to Stewart." That's what happened.

So, did you want to go or not? At first . . .

Well, you know, maybe I didn't have a choice. (laughs) Ah, but, I was prepared, so away I went.

So how did you get there that first—on the bus? Tell me.

They put us on a bus, and I believe it was, Greyhound to Salt Lake and from Salt Lake to Carson, Continental, I'm pretty, yeah.

Did you understand where you were going when you left?

When I was about maybe third or fourth grade, my dad went to visit his brother, Henry, worked there. Like I said, he was at the end of gettin' his retirement and so we did go over there and I vaguely remember the buildings and what not. I did. Yeah, uh, so . . .

So you visited there when you were a little kid.

Yeah, uh-huh.

Your first impression when you got there as a student: what'd you think? Get off that bus and, boom.

Yeah, well, it was, I'm gonna say it was hard. It was hard, meaning, you got homesick. You know, and sometimes you're thinkin', "Well, I should have listened to Mom," but, on the other hand, I guess what really, caught my, um, attention was the basketball and at that time, Stewart, you know, you went to watch some of the games and they did somethin' that, that I never saw before and they were rollin' the ball and, you know . . . so, I just, I had my heroes, you know, and so that's what I wanted to do, so. . . .

Ron, did you enjoy being a student at Stewart?

I'm gonna say yes, I did. Uh, you know . . .

Sounds like there's a "Yes, but," there.

You know, I'm gonna say yes, and my thing is, you know the scholarships were there and having that opportunity like I'm tellin' you, if you coulda done things a little different and chose the right path, you know, things might, may have changed for you. The basketball skills; they were there—and um, when I was a junior, I come home for the summer—no I came home for the deer hunt—and the schools here, they wanted me to stay and play ball for 'em and never before has you know, that happened, but my loyalty is to Stewart and, I guess that would be . . . you know, sometimes you think about what if? You know, if you would've did some things that were different.

But some things that were different was, I had a relationship. I had a girlfriend, but being drafted, it put a damper on things. You know, had you been smarter and maybe got a little more, some help on the side, maybe you'da been all right. But it was, it was hard for me because my brother was in Vietnam and if you recall what happened when President Kennedy was shot. Okay, he was assassinated, but I'm in the sixth grade, I'm at Whiterocks Elementary School. It was a public school; it happened just

before lunch. My mom, she loved Kennedy, you know, and so when it came on the radio—and everybody—and they let us know at lunch hour. I ran home because I know how she felt about him and it was devastating, you know, for a lot of our people, you know, and so it was hard and so, like, from then on, whatever my mom said or told me to do, that's my love and loyalty to my mom. And so when she said, "I'm gonna send you away," well, guess what? That's what happened. And so my brother was on his way to Vietnam and so, those are some of the things that you think about, you know and what he went through and then he comes home and then, I'm thinkin' I'm a sophomore, and he's puttin' you through these, um, exercises that the Marine Corps does. The whole nine—we were marchin' and playin' his Marine Corps band. What do you call it? And you didn't listen, you got beat up! And so, it made me stronger, but the first year at Stewart, it was, it was tough! You miss home, but you, but I was that strong individual too, you know. So, the following year, I went back again, and then, um, my friends . . . I had a lot of friends; some are here, some are not here anymore. Johnny [Angel] was one. I grew up with Johnny, and so he found out and he says, "How was it?" I said, "Well, the basketball was somethin'." You know, it was really somethin' and so they all came down [to Stewart].

There was a bunch of our tribal members came down and we stuck it out. We stuck it out, and we went through the lettermen's initiation and that was an experience and a half. You had to letter in a varsity sport, and then you went to the initiation, and that's two weeks of torture. For me, it was nothing going to boot camp because the torture was already done. I . . . you know, I mean, that's what it meant that you're bein' a man about everything and you were going to be looked up to and the respect was for one another and you wanna make sure that the school was operating and no one was being destructive and things like that, you know. So, it was all important, you know, so we went through it, me

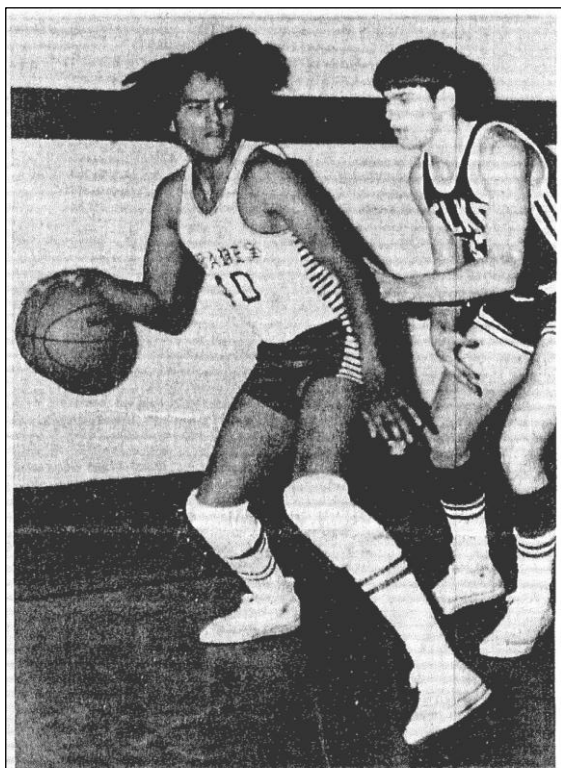
and Johnny, we went through it and it was chaotic and you were told to do some things that, you know, you don't normally do and . . . Sometimes the haircuts, you know, the haircuts meant nowadays you cut your hair all off, and nobody says anything to you. Back then, if you had your hair cut or you just somethin' hangin', you were made fun of. You know, that was the whole thing of the lettermen's initiation. And so they got us into the gym. I'm gonna tell you about the initiation, if you haven't heard this before, but we were all into the gym, those that were being—going to be Yannigans, so to speak, and then become lettermen. So, you had a two-week period that you had to survive. So, we're in the gym, they tell you, "This rope," everything. So, so we go out to the football field, okay?

Yeah.

They say, "Put your clothes where you can find them when you come back," and while we're . . . there was frost on the . . . so it's me and Johnny were the first so we, then if you—if you know where the football field is, the creek is right there and there's that bridge. Okay, you're linin' up and so the first two, it's me and him; you had to hold hands and you're jumpin' in and you're butt naked and, wow, you talk about a rude awakening! (laughs) You know, so, you go back to the gym, and there's a big pile of clothes. They tell you, you got so many seconds to get it and you start . . . if you're not listenin', you start doing push-ups, the whole nine yards, and then they give you haircuts. You know, this is all part of being a letterman. So, for two weeks you're goin' through that. You're doin' whatever that letterman wants you to do: from ironin' his clothes, washin' his clothes, makin' sure people stay on the sidewalks, not cuttin' across, you know . . . quite the experience, and so, we survived. So, the last day, they make you run from Stewart down to the Carson River, okay?

Yeah.

I think that's fifteen miles right there. So, then you're running and you're then helping your fellow Yannigans to make sure that once they get everybody there—this is in the springtime, I



WOPSOCK IN ACTION —Stewart's top cage scorer, Wopsock, is dribbling the ball against Elko guard Randy Friday night. Wopsock scored 18 points during the game to his team roll to a 67-55 victory over the visiting Elko Ind (Appeal photo by Dan Borsuk)

Ron outperforming his competition, ca. 1971. *Nevada Appeal*, date unknown. Courtesy of Ron Wopsock.

wanna say maybe, end of April, first part of May—so you're at Carson River and you have to swim across, you have to swim back. Okay? And the last thing is swats.

What's that?

They give you a swat. All the lettermen's. First year letterman goes through once. Second, twice, and so on to the senior, four years. Yeah, so you're just dealin' with all the pain, but it's part of the initiation to be somebody like they were. You know, wow!

So, the Yannigans were kind of leaders on campus? Kind of . . . ?

Yeah, they were like, maybe a security officer or somebody, somebody looks up to, to make sure there's no fighting; there's nothing like that goin' on. It was just . . . that was Al Tyler, Al Tyler's club. (laughs) Yeah, wow!

So, did you—what was the most difficult thing to leave behind when you went to Stewart? Or person?

There's a lot of memories. You know, sometimes you . . . sometimes for me, I guess, um, it's knowing the coach and the things that they taught you both on the court and off the court, you know, to be that individual that you're gonna stay one step ahead of whatever hits you and what I was taught was just 'cuz somethin' happens to you, there's a way around that brick wall. You know, you hit that brick wall and so you just gotta regroup and you can find that way around it. And so, that's been my life experiences and being here is really tough! I worked for Recreation [Department], it was no different, you know, um, very tough. So, I guess if I had to do it all over again, what the most difficult would be, go and do it right. Well, go and do it right meaning, like being drafted, you know. I wish there was, um, somethin' better that I could have done. You know, that was hard to deal with. Sometimes you have good memories, you know, and sometimes you're thinkin', "Dang," you know, or, "maybe I should have made that last shot," or somethin' like that. Yeah, you know . . . but I wouldn't trade anything for anything else.

Good. So your—you told me your mother required you to go to Stewart. How did she feel about you leaving? Was she okay with that or was she sad?

Well, you know, of the family, maybe I was the closest and so, sometimes, during the winter, even after you graduated and after you spent a little time or even between, um, we had no running water. Yeah, we had no running water.

We had no power! So, we were pretty isolated. So, when they came home—gaming, and they call it posse, it was just with cards, okay? So, they would game down here. So, when I'd come home, if your younger siblings didn't get the water, cut the wood, well, you had use the car to do all the above and make sure everything's taken care of, you know, and I just, with my mom, if she wanted me to do something, I did it because I loved her, you know. So, you know, you miss your mom. You know, all moms are special, you know, so . . . but here's somethin' that I didn't know: her dad, her dad's dad, is from Pyramid Lake and he is a full-blooded Paiute. And, so, I wished I woulda gotten a name. I never knew that, for all the years I went to Stewart Indian School. I never knew that. She knew it.

So, your great grandfather?

It would be my great grandfather. She knew it, so, um, I'm tryin' to remember his name. So, you know, Pyramid Lake—there was a lady at school, I can't remember her name, but she would always have a girls' basketball tournament, an all-Indian, and so it would be at Stewart, and there would be teams coming from LA, Bay area, and Pyramid Lake always had a girls' team and they were from the Harris family. Well, that's the family that he comes from. And I never knew it. Good ball players, you know, and I just can't think of the name right now, but interesting, huh? After everything's done and over with . . . (laughs)

. . . That one of your ancestors is actually from that general area.

Yeah, from Pyramid Lake. Yeah, that's where he's from.

So, I'd like to ask you some questions about campus life. Living in the dorms, was that okay? Not, I mean, too regimented? What did you think?

Well, when I first got there, um, you—you learn, I'm gonna say, discipline was taught to you. You have a responsibility to clean. So, you were

either cleanin' urinals; you were cleanin' the floor; you were mopping. You were taught to do all that, to take care of a responsibility that you had . . . then also came washing your own clothes, ironing your own clothes . . . and dorm life, if you didn't do some of the things you were supposed to do in your room, or be a part of—maybe there might be four of you, or two of you in a room—well then, you were penalized. You were penalized hours and that meant your liberty was taken away from you, you couldn't do anything, you know. So, you all tried to make sure your room was clean, your beds, all of the above, really.

So, eating in the dining hall, was that a social time?

When I first got there, I'm gonna say no, because you couldn't talk too much. You, you marched there, you know what I'm sayin'?

Okay.

Yeah, and then, um, and then after a period of time, maybe two years, you could at least talk, you know, and you're still in line and you couldn't get outta line, you know what I'm sayin? (laughs)

Right.

Yeah, so, uh . . .

The food was okay?

Well you know, powdered eggs, but you know, now, sometimes when you go on some of the trips, you might stay in, some of the hotels, motels, whatever, the eggs, they're like powdered eggs. So, you're already used to it. Yeah, you're already used to it so . . .

So, did you buy things at the student store, Novake.

Yes we, yes, I did. And every month, because we, we were enrolled here, what our department, what our tribe did, was they sent you twenty-five dollars out of your account. Everybody had an IMM account if you were enrolled. So, they had

like a bank set up at the school and so when it came in, they, you were allowed to check whatever you wanted to check out. But a lot of times—Conrad mentioned this morning, you know, on the weekends, you know, you would sign up and so, you would go to Carson City and wherever, whoever, wherever, you were doin' yard work, from helping, cleaning up and all of that. I did a lot of that to earn extra money 'cuz you didn't have it, you know. Yeah.

And was Novake kind of a hangout when you were there?

I wanna say yes it was, yeah. They also held dances in there.

Oh!

Yeah.

Sorry to repeat myself from this morning's questions, but did you have a favorite class, Ron?

I did. I liked my science class and I think her name was Miss Drummond.

Drummond?

Drummond, I think, yeah. She was an older lady, and then, I think the . . . I want to say Newman; I don't know if that's the right name, but he taught math. Math, and that was a favorite, but also the shop—the shop teacher was Ellis. I can't think of his first name.

Mr. Ellis.

Yeah, Mr. Ellis.

When—what kind of shop was that?

Um . . .

Wood?

Wood, wood.

So, those would also be your favorite teachers or did you have other teachers that you really liked?

Well, coach was always, and, and . . . Mr. Oliver. Mr. Oliver was, you know, when I first went to school there, I played eighth grade ball and he was the coach, Mr. Bill Oliver. And then he just—he took me under his wing. He was like a dad away from, you know, dad away from home, you know, and he would sneak me over to his house, feed me breakfast or somethin' like that, and as you got older, every year, that was our relationship. You know, he was special, and you know, when Chucko Williams—I don't know if you knew or remember Chucko Williams—Mr. Williams, he stayed on campus and he was one of the dorm, whaddya call its'. When he passed away, I did go to his funeral service in Carson. Yeah, but I didn't make the, um, when they took him to the grave. When you catch that plane, I mean, plane down; you're on a tight schedule and I thought we had time but we didn't. You know, they do some things that we don't normally do and everybody's different that way, you know, but I did, I did go and I did see Oliver probably one of the last times ever, you know, and he gave me his card, and he said, "Well this is an old card," because at the time he was the—he was somethin' to do with the state. I can't remember what it is.

He was on the Nevada Indian Commission.

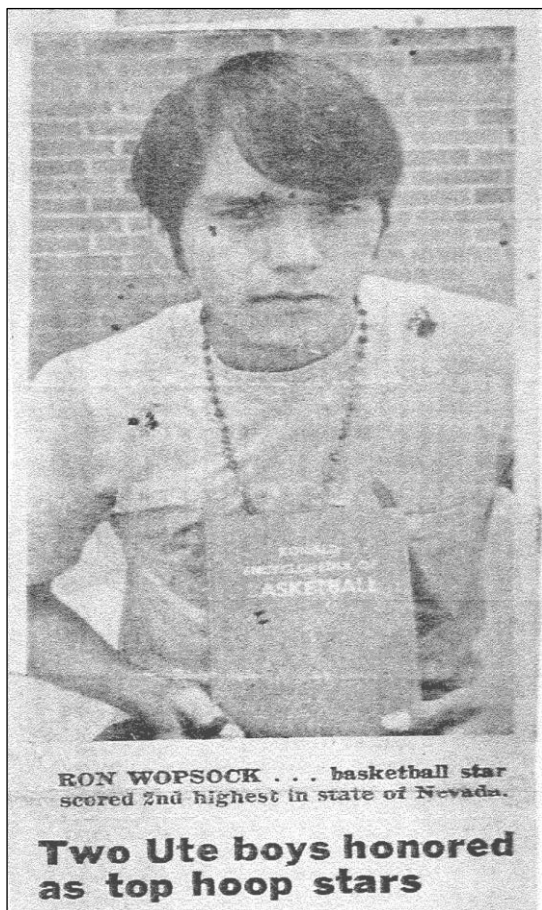
There you go, that's what it was, and he said, "But you can call there and they can get me a message." You know, and the only other one that I did see there was, well, there was two; I saw Pearl Sammaripa there, yeah, and she's been one of the . . . they used to do the same, too. Sam, Pearl . . . when I got to be a junior, they'd invite me over to their trailer. You would eat, it was always a good experience, you know, and then the other one that I did see there was Montoya. Merle Montoya, it was. He worked in the dormitory too. Yeah, so, that's . . .

Were you involved in the school agriculture at all?

No, I wasn't.

And you did graduate in the year, the class of '72.

Uh-huh.



Ron honored as 2nd highest scorer in Nevada. *Nevada Appeal*, date unknown. Courtesy of Ron Wopsock.

This morning we talked about some of your teams that you played with. You played basketball, Ron?

Yep.

And please tell—tell us what other sports you participated in.

I ran cross country and I also participated in the, um, track and field.

What'd you do in track and field?

I ran, um, the half mile, the mile; I pole vaulted; I was the only one to pole vault, by the way.

(laughs) And then we high jumped, we high jumped.

Okay.

And you know, I don't know, there, there was four of us . . . there was myself, Bryson, and I think there might have been an Apache kid and I just—it's been so long. We did set a state record with the half mile; the four of us runnin' the half mile. We all run it pretty fast, yeah, and I think that was over in Yerington. You know, that's been so long, yeah.

Okay, so was that—that was a relay, then? The four of you or . . . ?

It was, it was like a relay so everybody ran a half mile each.

Right. Pass the baton.

We did place first in state. We did, yeah, and then I did go out for football when I was a senior and my coach just chewed me up and down and so I—I had to step back and not play football. (laughs) He didn't want me to get hurt, my ankles and my legs, you know, so . . .

Right, he wanted to save you for basketball.

Yeah, that was it, right there.

Okay, all right!

Mm-hmm.

So, it sounds to me like you didn't have a lot of time to be a spectator at the games.

No, huh-uh.

But were those fun? I mean, you had cheerleaders and the band playing and . . .

It was fun, for me, you know, it's only about, but the little young men, or young boys. What was unique wherever we went, uh, down to Gardnerville, all over—they would bead, you know, they would bead, and after the game they would come over and give you that necklace that they beaded, you know . . .

So, they were fans?

Well, they were fans and, you know, what I had, was, when I got through as a junior like this and as a senior, but you know, I don't know what happened to 'em.

Uh-huh.

I don't know what happened to 'em. Wow. And then, when I'm a junior and John's a senior, you couldn't dunk the ball in a game. You couldn't, they wouldn't let you do that, and here I am, John's six-four [6' 4"] and I'm about, almost six [6'], you know. So before, when you're warmin' up, we were in . . . we did it over in, um, White Pine, we were jammin' the ball and them kids were just lovin', you know, kids just love that stuff and so just one time at home, he says, "Go ahead, do it." (laughs) I did it! You got a technical foul on you and the coach was so pissed off at me, you know. I slammed it but you, know, they . . . you know, everybody just loved it. But in high school you couldn't, couldn't do it then, but now you can, you know, you can, yeah.

Why couldn't you do that in high school then?

You know, I don't know, to be honest. That was a—what is it, interscholastic rule; yeah, a high school rule, you couldn't. But before the game, you could, and I did it when we played South Lake Tahoe because their lineup, their smallest guy was six-five [6' 5"], and the tallest was six-nine [6' 9"].

Um-hmm.

Yeah and my brother, John, says, "Go ahead, do it!" (laughs) "I dare you!" Yeah, well!

When your older brother does that, you have to do it!

Well, you know, so, you look now days, everybody's got tattoos. So, one time we missed an assembly! We did. Yeah, so, what were we doin'? We were doin' tattoos. So he tattooed a skull on my arm right here, (laughs) so I tattooed his initial right here on him, you know. Man, we

went to practice . . . he chewed me up and down, you know.

[Recording paused, telephone rang]

What kinds of events or activities did you attend in the auditorium?

Mostly movies. And there was the older movies, um, when I first got there, meaning—meaning , for some reason, Hank Williams, Jr. was always there!

(laughter)

I'm not kidding you!

See any John Wayne in that auditorium?

And what else was there? Um, and they always played a lot of the Beatle music. And Halloween, Halloween was always special because they had a movie there and Christmas, you know, they had the Christmas movies, but a lot of times it was just the Saturdays, um, movies.

Saturday movie night.

Yeah.

Were you in any groups or clubs on campus, like—okay, you were part of the Lettermen—what about other clubs?

Yeah, the band group and I, I did play with the band. I did the first—when I was eighth grader when I got there.

Okay, what'd you play?

It was a trumpet. Yeah.

You played trumpet first year.

Yeah, and it was cool because your hats didn't fit you, none of your and we did march in the uh . . .

. . . *Nevada Day Parade.*

Yes right, yeah. October 31st or somethin' like that. (laughs)

Yes! It's still—it's still a city favorite! So you were a letterman, you were in the band. . . . Did your tribe have like a—I know that some tribes had like, the Hopi Club . . .

Yeah, Hopis had their club and you know, we didn't have a club but Apaches their club 'cuz they always did that crown dance.

Yeah.

The Pima had—the Pima, everybody, kinda had their, their own—their, what they did at home, you know, their, like their culture, I guess, and our group was small. I'm gonna say our group was small.

Okay.

Until my brother—they got together and so they started to dance, meaning the, I want to say turkey dance, but your pow wow dancing, you know, all of that, yeah.

And you would, what, do those, perform those on campus?

I didn't participate but my brother, John, did. So, he, he danced quite a bit, even before or during halftimes at our, some of our games.

Oh, okay!

Yeah, so.

Regarding buildings on campus, any experiences in a specific building stand out in your mind?

South of the gym, okay, they had an athletic dorm. So, if you were playin' sports, you, you were stayed, you stayed there and the rules, they weren't as strict as others. So you watched TV a little later at night and, you had an advantage, I'm gonna say that, you know. (laughs)

A few more privileges, maybe.

Yeah!

Okay, huh! That's the first time I've heard anybody tell me about that.

Yeah.

And did you get sick while you were at Stewart? Did you have to stay in the infirmary?

I, I did. I did. I spent time in that. One time I fell along that sidewalk. Just peeled my knee all the way back, you know, and just, so, you had to stay in the, that clinic that they had there. Probably was one of the coolest clinics ever. (laughs)

Well, what was that like? I mean, were the people nice there?

Well, you know, it was, for me, it was a good experience because you were—the nurses, they were being taught somethin' there. They were basically, uh, the young ladies, you know, they might have been seniors and what not, and so they, they were takin' care of you and all of that, just like a nurse, a normal nurse would, you know, yeah.

Did you attend church while you were at Stewart?

Attend what?

Church.

Cook?

Church!

Oh, church? I, you know, I never got totally involved in church other than, um, LDS. They had a gym and so, sometimes, one of the—it was the football coach. He would go up there and say, "Hey, come on, I need some players." So, you'd go up there and play. Well, there was no referee and guess what? It was rough. So, I'd go up there and just play, but other than that, that was it.

So, you'd play casual football or basketball or . . . ?

Basketball.

Basketball.

Basketball, yeah.

What do they call those, pickup games?

Pickup games, yeah.

I'm learning. So you left campus to do odd jobs in town, and did you use your weekend privileges to go in town and do other things?

Well, I think that was like a priority because, mom and dad couldn't send you money and you needed shoes. If not, your tennis shoes, all they were was the Converse, and they were provided for you. You know, I guess the athletic department had enough funding to purchase, and they were just nothing like today, nothing like today. It was just the old Cons, you know, so, so, you needed the extra—if not toothpaste and if you could, buy soap, your washing soap. Otherwise, what a lot of us used to do is they gave you the bar government soap. So, there would be some rags. So, you take the soap, put it in a rag like this, [clasps hands together] then pound it so it's powdery so you could use some of that. You know, so you had to make, you had to make things work, you know, but if you were able to get the soap from uptown, well everybody was your best friend! (laughs)

Did you come home for the summers or did you stay?

No, I didn't. I wonder what? I'm a junior . . . when I was a sophomore I came home but when I'm a junior and John graduated, we went to a fire camp in Hobart Mills, Truckee, California, okay? So, we—you had to pass the test and everything, and so we were part of a Hot Shot crew. Okay, so we worked all around Lake Tahoe. We did! And so when you weren't battlin' fire, you're plantin' trees or you were cleaning out some of the tributaries, some of the streams that came in. They take those big—but if you got called on the fire, and sometimes he would go, I would go; we'd be part of the helitack crew and you wouldn't believe the people that would be there and make a fire, and all of a sudden it gets out of hand. You know, but that's what we did for the longest time. That whole summer when he was a senior. And so, I

came home for one week and my mom said, "What are you doin' and where you been?" and, you know, so, I'm like, "It's time for you to go back to school." You know, it was quite—we stayed in Truckee, California, and we would go down, we'd catch a ride down to—I can't think of it—it might have been Truckee, to catch the train to Reno. Go spend a weekend, you know. You couldn't gamble, so what else did you do, you know, it was quite the experience, you know, and when you'd be walkin' on the . . . people would know ya, people would know ya. You'd go down to the colony, Reno Colony, yeah, and you were just . . . we were well-known, you know what I'm sayin'? So, um, we had fun. You had fun, yeah.

So, any memories of particular classmates?

Memories?

Mm- hmm.

I guess those that I played ball with are gone, and, you—you know like everybody else, anybody else, you had a girlfriend, right? Yeah, some of, um, your classmates—a lot of them are gone! I could easily say maybe it's half of our class, you know, yeah, wow. But my brother, he—wherever I've been, he's followed where it's kinda like, you know, we've been pretty tight, you know, pretty tight, and he chose to do what he wanted to do later on within the last ten years.

[34-second interview segment redacted upon request of Ron Wopsock]

But the point was, is that you had a core group of friends, especially on the basketball team, but you were really tight with your brother.

Yeah.

And, so, because you went to school about the same time, he was your go-to guy there.

He was big brother, too. Yeah, wow, I just . . . and then later on, you know, early Eighties, we're wakin' up. Enough goofin' off, let's get back in shape, start playin' ball again. So, we

did that, like I said, hundreds of tournaments, you know. We hardly for like, four years—we never lost a game, never lost a game, and then, in Wyoming that's got a big tournament; it's called Harris Memorial, and the school up there, the school, uh, the boys, they win State every year. So, there was one year, Sports Illustrated was puttin' 'em on the front cover and everything, you know. So we turned 35, there's ten of us, and some of our friends in Indian country that you met playin' ball, one guy, uh, played for the Dallas Cowboys, he was a linebacker. Big guy, six-four [6' 4"], just solid, and then what's really unique, I'm just—I wanna say his name was Mort—but you know, he tried out with the Detroit Pistons, okay? And, so, it came down between him and Isiah Thomas.

Oh!

And, so, he got cut, okay? So, he played with us and he was just one heck of a ballplayer, and so, we're playin'—we played in two tournaments, 35 and over, men's, and then a young man tournament. So, we won the 35 and over, and we played—there's only ten of us, (laughs) and we split, five and five, we'd go back and forth like this and so, we ended up playin' for championship. We played at the school and, um, it went right down to the wire, last three seconds. We were two points behind, and so we set him up. Tough guard, good outside shooter, and we set him up, set up a door, put him through it, gave him the ball and he let it fly. There wasn't any word but that one. All net. We beat 'em by one point. And there was nothing, they did not sing! And they didn't have the tournament no more!

(Laughter)

Imagine that! Yeah!

Anyway, so, that's kinda what we did. Wherever, BYU used to have a big tourn—we went and did the same thing. Salt Lake had a big tournament, too; big, and the western states, same thing. They don't have those tournaments

no more, so, yeah. John, he couldn't play softball very good so, I work with him; I work with him and I get him . . . so, we get a softball team.

Mm-hmm.

And, so Fort Hall used to have the nationals, big tournament, and they had a big—Florida and Minnesota would come from the casino tribes. Powerful teams, and we got nowhere the first two years but it was practice, practice; somethin' your coach taught you, you know, and so, the one year we went up and we won; we took the nationals for softball, you know. That's somethin' that you think about those things and you're thinkin', wow, you know, but we did it!

Right, as adults, that's good to keep active. So besides—there's a couple dozen people that, from Ft. Duchesne, that went to Stewart that you know of—other people from other tribal communities that you kept in touch with after school?

Fort Hall. Some of them that—they were there, and one, one, you know, his name was Nathan Small. He was there and, um, he was the chairman for his tribe up there for two or three years or two or three terms, you know, but I think the last couple a years, he lost his wife and he just let it go, you know, uh, but there are some students that we kept in touch with and we saw 'em all the time because we went up there and played ball.

Okay.

Yeah, um, but other than that, down south, you know, the Apache boys, sometimes we'd run into them and you'd be blockin' hard to somebody and you know, from San Carlos. That's a rough bunch! I ain't kiddin' you! Oh, dang! Yeah. So, we went the rounds but we're still on top, you know. But other than that, you know I haven't seen anybody from Arizona for a long time. Wow, for a long time, but the guys from Fort Hall, yeah, then the guys from Elko, yeah.

What kind of student were you, Ron? Were you shy, mischievous, really out-going, ambitious?

Well, you know, my grades were, you could easily put them as straight A student, you know, and I always wanted to do somethin', you know, and it was work; you know that work ethic was kinda installed in you at Stewart. You just couldn't be lazy and not do somethin', you know, 'cuz that's what our coach, you know, taught ya, on the court, off the court. You know you have a responsibility and you find a job and do the best that you can, you know, the whole nine yard. And, so, when you were there, you didn't have the money, well, it meant to go work. I coulda graduated as a junior 'cuz everything was there but I didn't. I think, uh, I'm glad I didn't because I went through somethin' that is always in my mind, you know, and I guess if I had to do it over again, maybe you'd do somethin' different. Somethin' different is that one night when those scouts. . . . You know, I had that card for a long time and it just got washed in my wallet, you know, but so, we, you know, you didn't brag about it either, you know, you—it was just, about four months ago I was askin' Johnny, I said—you know, he's hurting, his knees are bad. He had a major surgery and he's-- I think he woulda came but it bothers him so dang bad, you know, um, and so I said, "Hey, I'm gonna test your memory." He says—and you know, we talk pretty rough to one another, you know, friends do that, you know, and he uses those four-letter words sometimes and so, uh—and he says, "Okay, lets . . ." I said, "Remember that time when those, when we, Max—we were playin' ball with Maxwell Inton(?) and we talk about the peer pressure that he put on us, maybe it got us steered in a little bit different direction, you know, and peer pressure is what changes everybody, you know, 'cuz we were—I'm gonna say we were on the right track but, you know, he's an older individual. He's a senior, I'm a sophomore, John's a junior, and I think, maybe it's teachin' us bad habits. But I can't blame it on him, you know, I have a

responsibility too. You know, um, but, everything was starting to change and the school was becoming more lenient.

Yes.

The parents were complaining about how you're treatin' my children or this, and you see some of the Council people from other places comin' into check just to make sure, no one was gettin' abused, you know, uh, beat up, things like that, you know, and it got more lenient. You know, when I first got there, it was pretty, pretty solid, pretty, um, pretty tough on you! (laughs) You know, uh, they used to take kids swimming up to Reno and it was like a swim club but there was no competition, but I got to go quite a bit, you know, um, but, I don't know, they stopped that after the first two years. You know, they didn't do that no more.

So, when you were a student, think back to what you thought you were gonna do when you grew up. What were your goals? What were your plans? I know you were—you had a draft card.

Uh-huh.

So, that maybe put a damper on what you thought you were gonna be able to do, but did you—what did you think you were gonna do when you got out of there?

I think first, my priority would be to play ball, even if it was college ball. I still tried after the four-year period, six-year period, and, um, like I was sayin', our Extension Service, Utah State, they had a junior college team so I was the only tribal member. I made the team and so we did play against uni—and it was a JV. You know back then they had the JV but now it's all just varsity, you know, but we did play University of Utah, BYU, Utah State, Weber, some of the major here in Utah and we, we didn't lose! We didn't lose, so that I guess . . . you know, after the first year, um, I got word that Bud was sick so I did go to Carson City to see him. He was in the hospital.

Bud Herrin?

Bud Herrin, yeah. So, I sat down and I talked to him for a long time and he said, “What’s your lineup?” What’s your lineup, well, he wanted to know how tall everybody, and he says, “You still playin’ guard?” I said, “Well, sometimes I play the, the back line and then up front, you know, forward and then a guard.” So, I was just tellin’ him, you know, still havin’ fun, you know, still havin’ fun, so, he says, “I think I’m gonna be all right,” you know, but, you know, you didn’t have what you have now, technology, meaning your cell phone, you know, when my mom called me when I was at Stewart—it was a pay phone in the hallway and somebody’s yellin’ for ya, “Hey, you got a phone call,” and, uh, I didn’t even know he passed on. You know, otherwise I think I would’ve went but, wow . . .

Do you think there’s a sense of connection between Stewart students, like a sense of camaraderie that you all went through something unique?

I’m gonna say my experience—I’m gonna say yes, because wherever we went, we drew a crowd and if it wasn’t playin’ ball, wherever we went even after, um, people knew you. Yeah, and it was, even when we turned thirty, Owyhee would have an all-Indian tournament, Owyhee. So, we started goin’ over there and we won that so many times. Yeah, it was so . . . and they knew you! And Owyhee, for me, was a very unique place ‘cuz, um, nothing but respect. Invite you to their home, feed you, and John went the first year and I couldn’t go the first year so I went after that about five or six years in a row. He would get MVP, I would get MVP, we’d go back and forth like that. But he would tell me . . . You’re not going to believe this but in the casino—that’s where we went to eat, Mountain City, I think it is—the power will go off. The power will go off and so, when I walked in or you saw the lamps, these old lamps, and we’re thinkin’, “No . . .” (laughs) After the first night, the power went off and we were there eating. Here they come out, they’re lighting up the lamps. So, I don’t know, whenever a storm, snow storms, the power does

go off. And so the people over there, they were set back in a certain time. Real cowboys! And you know, um, and they treated you with a lot of respect if they knew who you were. You know, they knew us and it was just, uh, never been treated that way, never have. It was all my adventures, other than Wyoming, you know, but just invite you in and feed you and take care of you, the whole nine yards. Gee!

So, that’s a perfect segue into my next question which is what was it like for so many people from different tribes to all be in one place like that?

Yeah, you know, I roomed with, uh, with some, I think it was like, maybe three members from the Navajo tribe and one from the Pima. So, it, it—we all didn’t get along, I’m gonna say that because they were together. He was, the Pima guy, and I’m by myself and sometimes it—I guess it’s kinda hard to explain, but after a period of time, after you get to know one another then, uh, then you can move forward and there’s not too much, whatever it is, you know, um . . . You know people from home and, and they’re, they’re the same way, you know. They’re, they’ve been put into a situation where they don’t know you. What is Ute like? What is Navajo like? You know, what is Pima like, you know? Yeah, so . . .

So, you got over stereotypes.

Yeah, well, you know, for some reason, there was always problem with whatever was ongoing with the Navajo tribe, you know, and uh . . . I don’t know, it just sometimes it were crazy, you know, but more of us from Fort Hall, Shoshone-Bannock, the Utes and even Shoshone from Elko and whatnot, you were like this. [crosses his fingers] You know, the Apaches kept to themselves. They did! They had their numbers, like I said, you know, we played a lotta ball against them on a Sunday. We—one of us would sneak and leave that window cracked so you could, and away we went in, you know. Yeah, so . . .

Right, those were the unofficial games that you guys played . . .

Yeah.

. . . at night or on the weekends?

On the weekends, but I think they knew, you know, but for us, maybe it was a form of practice and getting to know one another more, but it was Apaches against everybody else, you know!

(Laughter)

So Ron, talk to me a little bit about what did you do after leaving, after graduating from Stewart?

I guess, you know, the hardest part was the draft. So, um . . .

So, you were drafted.

Yeah, I was drafted, and I had to basically go, right? I'm, wow!

You served—you served in the National Guard, correct?

Yeah, the Army National Guard, yes. You had an option, okay? At the time your option—you could go that route or you could go full-time. Yeah, and it was because, you know, the lady here, her name was Sonja, she was married to my brother, but they did get a divorce. I didn't want to be where he wanted me to be, and he didn't want me to go through what he went through.

Right.

Yeah, and he spent two tours in Vietnam, right there, you know, and so we had a big fight and him and Mom won, I'll say that. I listened to my mom, you know, 'cuz I just all the time had that respect for her so, I didn't want to but . . . and it wasn't til, um, boot camp that everything ended and, it didn't make a difference anyway. You know, they quit sending, yeah.

Right.

Yeah, so . . .

So you just barely missed Vietnam.

One month.

Okay.

Yeah, they—I went to boot camp and after you finish boot camp, they can, you can make that decision and that was gonna be my decision. I came home and I was gonna—and I got into it with my brother, you know, and I listened to my mom, I loved my mom a lot. Probably wouldn't be anything I'd ever disobey, you know . . . yes, I miss her, you know. So, that's what happened to me. It just put a damper on what I wanted to do. Wow.

So, you served your six years in this general area?

Yeah, in this general area. That was it.

Okay, so, that, so, National Guard is like weekend warrior stuff, right?

One weekend a month.

Okay, so what did you do the rest of the time?

I worked for the—I started to work for the, at Recreation and at that time, we were having . . .

Tribal Recreation?

Yeah. We were havin' a new gym built so really the tribe, the tribe had two gyms, one in Randolet and one at White Rocks. The one in Randolet burned up, so this was the new gym down here and—

I'm sorry, did you say Round Luck?

Rand, R-a-n-d. Randolet. Yeah, and so, after that the new gym was built and that was where I started and I worked for the Recreation Department for 23 years! I was the Recreation Director probably for maybe twelve years, and I got John to work for me. He worked for the Maintenance Department, so I had—he was workin' for me for about four years. He says, "Hey! You need to run for Council!" There you go, buddy-buddy system, right? Big brother,



Ron Wopsock, Fort Duchesne, Utah. April 12, 2017.

little brother. I said, "I don't wanna do that!" He said, "You got good training here!" I said, "What's good training?" "Well, people come here and just chew you out and you take it!" Well, I said, "What did Bud [Hurrin] teach us?" you know? So, okay, and that was in '93 and so . . .

So in '93 you ran for Council for the first time?

And I got on Council.

So you've spent most of your adult life working for your tribe.

I have, most of it.

Did you go steady in school, at Stewart Indian School?

What do you mean study?

Steady. Did you go steady with a girl?

I did, I had a girlfriend.

Okay.

I did; her name was Jeryle Johnson from Salt River.

Oh, yeah!

Yeah.

And, so, did you marry your girlfriend? Or you were just boyfriend and girlfriend?

I'm gonna say we were about to be married, and I've got a girl from her, but I think the, the service issue really messed me up . . . and so, you had to take control of yourself again. Right! And we didn't get married. We were going to get married and I didn't get married until maybe '78, somethin' like that, but I think she got married not too long after that, you know, I don't know, to be honest . . .

So you waited to get married several years later.

Mm-hmm.

Do you think attending Stewart affected your life after your time there in a significant way? Do you have like a pre-Stewart life and a post-Stewart life?

Well, you know, um . . .

Did it affect your career choices or your goals or . . . ?

For me I guess, my experience was positive. If I was there to be negative, I don't think I would have enjoyed playing ball, knowing all the people that I knew, it—I guess after being dumb, I guess, maybe, when you're young, right?

Right, mistakes.

I never got into drugs! I never, you know, and I think that was a positive for me and that's 'cuz your coach pounded that into my head. Maybe the others, it didn't work, you know, I didn't—so, I guess maybe that's why I've survived so long.

Yeah, I've been a diabetic for seventeen years. So must be doin' somethin' right, otherwise—a lot of my friends, they're gone. They're not with me anymore, you know, so it is what it is, you know . . . I'm not a Type-2, but you know, someday it's gonna change and I guess, I wanna say I've lived my life to the fullest; maybe I'm at the end of my trail, you know how that goes? I'm gonna be 65 here pretty quick, and I've enjoyed life! My hobby on the side: I hunted a lot. Yeah, and I've taken some big animals. Let's say some big elk, big deer, and I got my brother to come huntin' with me, Johnny! (laughs) So, we did a lot of that, you know, and, and more recently, the last four years, my wife—I've got a son, he's 14; my daughter's nine, that's the second marriage. From the first marriage I've got my oldest daughter. She ran for Tribal Council and she lost out! She's both her mom; sometimes she knows you, sometimes she don't, you know what I'm sayin'? But I've never disowned them and she's—she started to go to college and she's working on her second Master's degree. That's somethin' everybody wants, you know. My son went away to Kansas;

he went to Haskell, graduated, um, and he's been there for about twelve years, if not thirteen. He's got a young family.

In Kansas?

But the only thing is just before Christmas he lost his wife so he may come back here soon. So, I think all in all, maybe I've done all right, you know . . .

Right.

I don't know. Sometimes makes you wonder. I started a charter school here! That's why I asked the question, "What are they doin'?" I started a charter school and two years ago, our boys, they took State and they were all Native Americans. They were playin' just the way we played ball. You know, five or six, one time and they took State! Last year they didn't do very good. This year our girls' team; you push 'em, you push 'em, you push 'em, and there was a point in time our girls, eleven, twelve years old, that's as far as they were going. So, once you keep pushing the school, now you've got 'em in high school, meaning ten, eleven, twelve and they're—this year they should have won State! They had a bunch of our people there to support 'em, you know, just like—it reminds me of being at Stewart because you saw on our side all Native Americans and that's the way it was. They lost but they're all back again this year so, I'm thinkin' the boys are gonna do good again and the girls.

Every year they give me the picture, the picture of the teams and an autographed basketball. Yeah, they present that to me because I'm the one that pushed for the school. You know, it's just to give our students that opportunity because some of them go to the public school and they're not—if you're not son and daughter of the town, uh, maybe the auto dealer or bank, whatever, you're not gonna be selected! And our kids are just as talented, you know, and so, we had some good boys and good girls comin' up. Gee whiz, so, and not only that, academic wise, we had one that placed first in the whole State, computer

somethin'. Yeah, so that's . . . and he's a Native American! Right here. So, wow! I mean the school, it's a dream come true for me.

Well, it instills confidence in them so that when they go out into the bigger world . . .

Yeah! Yeah, so, my next goal here—I've got two years left [on Council]—but I'm gonna start pushing for our school. We have a location here up by the lake, so, I'm gonna push for a new high school for our kids. Yeah, so that's my next project. Wow!

I have a feeling that some of your best memories of Stewart are the basketball memories.

And running.

And running. What about some of the less happy memories.

Some, some of my best memories, is bein' in the gym and your coach is tellin' you what to do, how to do it, and you know, we were taught . . . because, you know, the officials are not always gonna call the game your way and it's because of your color. So, what he would do to, like me, he'd put three guys on me. So, you're dribblin' the ball, you're low to the ground and you're just leg steppin' and they're trying to steal the ball and pushin' you. So, that was his way of teaching you that officials are not gonna call it your way. That was very important and so, it's, it's in your head, you're playin' seven, not five, you know, so . . . one of the times, Hawthorne, okay? And that was the year we played 'em and we beat them to get into State, but we beat 'em at home, too, and so what happened was, they just roughed us up really bad but we were holdin' our—and we were ahead by one point, stuff like that, so, that kid just come across the end line. You could run the end line, you know, but you're supposed to give a distance, maybe two or three feet away and he would push me and the referee wouldn't even call anything so the coach said, "Man, just let it fly," so, I grabbed the ball and, you know, instead of goin' down between his legs like I could have, I threw

it, like this, and that kid jumped up and it hit him right here and that almost caused a riot! And they're African Americans, a lot of them, and all of them were from Schurz, Walker Lake. Some of them still remember me (laughs) 'cuz we beat 'em there, then we beat 'em for the playoffs too.

Okay.

But, anyway, so after the game, we won by one point anyway. We did and so, we're going out, okay, and there's just a big line of them, the African Americans. I kid you not! So, I'm the last one and the coach says, "Hurry up! Let's go!" and he was goin' already and I'm the last one and man, I got pushed, spit on, hit with oranges, and I'm tryin' to make my way to the bus. Them guys, John was already in the bus. "You were supposed to be, come on, guys . . . !" Well, I thought we were all a team, you know? (laughs) And I got hit with anything and everything—it's sad. It shouldn't happen but, you know, we're like them, if you know what I mean.

Competitive.

But it was bad. It was that summer after we beat 'em in one of the State final games, to get into State, there was a bunch of 'em at the Reno Rodeo, at the Reno Rodeo, and there was one kid came down to me and said, "Hey, somebody wants to talk to you." Well, who do I know, you know what I'm sayin'? Oh, my goodness, so John said, "Go see what he wants." I said, "Come with me." "No, you go on," so the whole bunch of them standin' over there. I went over there. There was a big kid, he said, "I know you, and I just want to tell you, you're a hell of a ball player." Everybody shook my hand. Oh, I'm gonna get beat up, you know, but that's all there was to it, you know. So, scary? Yes. Some of the times that we had, real scary.

Sometimes goin' to Fallon you had to go to the bleachers like this and they'd spit on you! You know, wow, but what could you do? Nothing you could do, but those are good memories, good memories, especially if you won! You

know, anyway, in practice one time, we had this one kid, his name was Sammy. He's like a janitor, cleanin', and so coach is talkin' to you and he wants everybody quiet. We're all quiet and he's up there and the steps go like this, come up to the balcony on top and pretty soon that ball came flyin' down and then the bucket and then the janitor! He came flyin' down. (laughs) Everybody just started laughin'. You know it just broke everybody and made everybody laugh, you know. . . . Then one time Al Tyler would come there and so, he's teachin' you how to dribble the ball the way you should; and so, we're all settin' down there and he's just yellin' at us and everything, and then he says, "All right, throw me a ball!" Everybody threw him a ball! (Laughter) Everybody threw him a ball and Johnny thought it was funny. We were laughing and then he says, you know, he would kinda swear, "God damn, Wopsock, you need to get over here, and everybody else line up," and we got swatted for it. But you know, I don't know if you want to call that discipline or not, but he said, everybody, "Throw me a ball," you know.

Everybody did!

(Laughter)

Everybody did! You could see him standin' there. Everybody just . . . John always brings that up now and then, you know. It was crazy.

That's cool. So do you talk about your memories with—like younger family members—talk about Stewart?

You know, I, sometimes with John, we'll talk about it but with family, I really haven't. I really haven't, except, um, that those clippings, [his scrapbook] um, my daughter Ronnie Kay—she had that book, and so I just wanted to get a copy of it from her, you know. So, it was hard to do, 'cuz she, when you got a divorce, she hated me. Wouldn't talk to me or anything like that for a long time, but only 'til this year, I'm able to get it and I'm able to get some better copies made of it, and so we started lookin' at it

and so I started asking Johnny, testin' him, "Do you remember," "Yeah, I remember that!" You know, just, I harass him like he would harass me. So, we've been in so many fights, so many—all of this, all of that—in our Indian country, won a lot of tournaments, and it goes back to what you were taught. You can't play around if you're gonna be playing for your championship, you know what I'm sayin'?

Right.

You can't be drinking or do anything like that. You've got to—the sacrifices, you can't be drinkin' or you have any sex, girlfriends or anything like that. You gotta be straight. Then you're gonna win a championship. You know, that's what we did.

And that's fun! Right.

And that's what we did and, um, wow!

So when's the last time you visited the campus, Ron?

I wanna say '86, I think it was, and that's when they had a pow wow and the Hall of Fame induction. My dad went. My dad went with me and Johnny went with me. And so—and my brother.

Your other brother?

What's that?

Your other brother?

My—well, he's an older brother. His name is Hank. So, he—they drove and we went on the plane, and that was probably the last time. And there was all, there was always the invites on your alumni, what'd everybody call it, you know, so many years. I never did go. And just the one time when it might have closed. I'm thinking there was students there when they had the all Indian tournament, and we—I took a team down, invited—they invited us, invited me, and we went down, played in the new gym, you know.

Was this in the summer or during the school year?

School, school year just at the end of, maybe the second week of May. Second week of May, they had a tournament there and it was in the new gym. I think, I think we played Gardnerville the first game and then we had, we had to play Pyramid Lake and we knew, I knew some of the players. Well, I knew 'em all, you know . . . and then we played Owyhee, yeah, the Jones boys. They were tall. We played them for championship and we won, so, yeah.

What, more than anything, Ron, needs to be told to visitors who aren't familiar with Stewart who may come to visit the site as tourists? What do we really need to get across to them?

Well, there would be a positive and a plus. The positive would be, you know, what the accomplishments that are there, were there, and like I said, the sports, the sports, um, and some of the the accomplishment, some of the tribes, tribes that came there and they participated, what they did, you know, I think that's really important. It—for me, it's like a legend within itself. The negative is that, you know, like I said, for the longest time ever the United States has never apologized to any Indian tribe for taking the children and placing them in boarding schools. You know, how many graves could be unmarked? And how many of them—we don't know what happened! We don't know what happened to 'em and when you were placed in that setting, your culture, your language, was taken from you. You know, you were taught to speak just one language and that was English, you know, but yet, you know, Native Americans always more than honored to serve our country here. And, like Sonja said, a lot of them joined, they enlisted. You know, I mean—they were gone, you know, and that's the way it was when I was there. You know, when I was a sophomore, there was some, and when the Vietnam War was going on, they enlisted. They . . . "I'm goin'," you know, so . . .

Any other thoughts? All thought out?

Yeah.

Thank you very much for sharing your experiences with me. I really appreciate it!