



WINDSOR
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Randy Graff:
Share Your Windsor Story

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L.P Wilson Community Center, Windsor, CT

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Michelle Tom

OK, so did you have something that you wanted to say specifically? Or do you want me to just ask you questions?

Randy Graff

Probably easier if you just start asking questions then who knows what else will come up.

Michelle Tom

All right. Then let's start with you saying your name and how long you've lived in Windsor, maybe where you live?

Randy Graff

Names Randall Graff. Go by Randy for the most part. I've lived in Windsor for basically 74 years tomorrow.

Michelle Tom

Isn't your birthday tomorrow?

Randy Graff

Yes. [laughs] Yeah, I grew up here. My parents moved to Windsor in I think 1946 and I was born in '47. Father came down here to work at Pratt and Whitney after working at the Boston Naval Yard during the war. So I'm the youngest of four kids. [00:01:00] Three older sisters. Pure hell [laughs], but –

Michelle Tom

And where did you grow up?

Randy Graff

_____. I downsized and bought the house from my parents' estate. Bought my sisters out. I've lived in a number of places in town, but I've lived in Deerfield the longest.

Michelle Tom

And tell us a little bit about what your neighborhood was like when you were growing up.

Randy Graff

It was a quiet, peaceful neighborhood. Pretty much everybody knew everybody else. I went to Deerfield School, it was just around the corner. Which was fine, other than my first traumatic day when I was going to kindergarten. It was a little traumatic. Traumatic for a young, four-and-a-half-year-old, I guess.

Michelle Tom

You have to tell us why it was traumatic.

Randy Graff

Ah, I just I didn't know [00:02:00] what to expect, you know? Typical kid on the first day of school, I guess.

Michelle Tom

Even with three older sisters? They didn't tell you?

Randy Graff

Oh come on. They used to beat up on me. One of them still lives in town. But yeah. Started at school, Deerfield School. From year to year, classes didn't change much. You knew the kids. You knew all the good kids and bad kids in the Deerfield area. And, you know, so it was good. Yeah, one thing I remember now about going to Deerfield school is just – I guess maybe relevant, given the pandemic we're in and all the controversy over the vaccinations or whatever. We were just marched down to the cafeteria in the school and lined up for shots. Nobody asked the parents for permission [00:03:00] or anything else. For polio shots, the way it was done. That's the only way they got rid of polio, and nobody thought anything about it then. And obviously it worked.

Michelle Tom

What did you think about it then?

Randy Graff

I was just a kid. I got in line and took the shot. You know, no big deal.

Michelle Tom

Like okay! Just a needle.

Randy Graff

Whatever. So I went to Deerfield school. You know, kindergarten through 6th grade.

Michelle Tom

And what did you do for fun when you were a little kid?

Randy Graff

What did I do for fun? For the most part, after school almost every day, we'd go out and play sandlot football on a field that would have rocks and glass and trees as part of the goal line until it got dark. And then you'd wander home for supper.

Michelle Tom

Where was the field? [00:04:00]

Randy Graff

Right at Deerfield school. So other than that, you know, we'd wander down to Wilson to the Sugar Bowl and get a greasy cheeseburger on occasion and go to Sid's down there, which was the everything store, and sometimes get kicked out because he didn't like us looking around when we weren't buying anything. But you know, we'd walk down or ride our bikes down there. You know, other times we'd go out and catch frogs and tadpoles in the swampy areas around the Deerfield section. One of which was pretty much across the street from where I was, which is now part of the Deerfield Apartments. Or we'd go over to the old golf course. That's where we went sliding in the wintertime. Other times we would wander along [00:05:00] the tracks all the way down to Loomis and [we] did that during one of the Hurricanes. Everybody wondered where the hell we were? [laughs] But we went out and played most nights, you know. You'd go over to a friend's house and no problem. Ride your bikes around town on the streets. And everybody pretty much knew everybody.

Michelle Tom

Did you play football or any other sports when you got to high school?

Randy Graff

I did for part of one year. But no, not really.

Michelle Tom

Why was it only part of a year?

Randy Graff

Well, it was the first year of football and they had a minimum squad they could carry. Unlike today where it's unlimited. [00:06:00] Very restricted budget that year. That was my junior year they started the football team.

Michelle Tom

And then did you do for fun when you were a little older and you were like in high school or after that?

Randy Graff

Things I won't talk about. [laughs] I don't know I used to hang out, do things. Even played football, sandlot football, even through part of college. A bunch of us would get together and play other teams from other towns. No equipment. Crazy. Couldn't do these things today. Can't play in your own neighborhood anymore, unfortunately. It's like the neighborhood I grew up in. I live there now and I really don't know any of my neighbors now. I used to know all of them. You know, it's turned over. [00:07:00] It's unfortunate. It's not as intimate, not knowing your neighbors and they, you know, come and go. It's changed a lot. What used to be the Deerfield market, it was the food store, it's now a liquor store. And Deerfield School is no longer there. Matter of fact, I was on the Board of Education when we voted to close it. I got grief for that. But it was the right thing to do at the time. And now what Deerfield School was is now a park. And, you know, that's good for the kids in the neighborhood.

Michelle Tom

You're a teacher?

Randy Graff

I taught for a while, yeah. Windsor Locks High School.

Michelle Tom

Oh, Windsor Locks okay.

Randy Graff

Yeah, I did my student teaching in Windsor High. [laughs]

Michelle Tom

Oh really? [00:08:00] What did you do?

Randy Graff

History, social studies.

Michelle Tom

How was that? Doing your student teaching at your high school that you went to?

Randy Graff

It was kind of strange. [laughs] Some of the same teachers were there. Some teachers I had were my mentor teachers. The vice principal who disciplined us called my mother on me a few times, who was then the principal. And you got to know the teachers on a different level. You know, it was a little different. Student teaching in the same school you went to.

Michelle Tom

You were probably not that much older than [the students].

Randy Graff

No, I wasn't that much older than the students, [00:09:00] which is always a little difficult at first, you know? When you're only about two or three years older than some of them, seniors. You know it's like you almost gotta watch your boundaries [laughs] type of thing. But it was a good experience, student teaching, and then I did a little teaching over at Windsor Locks before I went into the business world. But I spent a lot of time, since I came home from college, involved in the community in one way or another. I guess I blame it on my high school physics teacher. He got me involved.

Michelle Tom

And what was your teacher's name?

Randy Graff

Everett Doe. He was friends with my mother, and he invited me [00:10:00] to come to a Democratic function and encouraged me to speak up and run for the Board of Education. I was a nervous wreck. I didn't know what I was doing. But I got elected. At the time, I was the youngest elected official in the state of Connecticut. I was 21. I guess you could be 18 now because you can run for office at 18. You couldn't back then. And I served on the Board of Education.

Michelle Tom

For how long?

Randy Graff

That stint was four years. I had another two-year stint later on. Then I served on the town council for eight years.

Michelle Tom

For how many years?

Randy Graff

Eight, and since then I have served as Town Treasurer, I've been on the Economic Development Commission, [00:11:00] Wilson Deerfield Advisory Commission, Capital Improvement Committee to name a few.

Michelle Tom

What's the Wilson Deerfield advisory?

Randy Graff

Well, there's a strange history. It really was put together by the town council after the turbulent days of the I-91-291 expansion, which was called the 'Berlin Wall dividing the town'. OK. And a group of people in the Oakland Hills and Deerfield [areas] were so against it, and part of giving these people a voice, they founded the Deerfield Wilson Advisory Committee. And it changed over the years. I served on it for a number of years. [00:12:00] For a lot of years, we had trouble giving it quorum, and I've dropped off of that since. Even though I'm back in Deerfield. Some younger people are more involved with what's going on in the community need to be involved. They don't need me. I've been around too long.

Michelle Tom

So were you on town council when the 291, all that?

Randy Graff

No. I wasn't at the Council then. I was on the Council later.

Michelle Tom

How did that affect you where you were living? It's a little bit in that region.

Randy Graff

I guess I was torn. I was for and against it. I knew the need for the highway and everything and, you know, the unfortunate thing with 291 is they didn't build the whole thing, which would have been [00:13:00] much better for the whole Hartford area. But I can remember when they first did it, Bissell Bridge had a toll. Doesn't anymore. Progress sometimes is both good and bad, but most people have a tendency to resist change rather than to embrace it for the good it might be. I'm not here to be a philosopher. [laughs]

Michelle Tom

Did you know anybody who lost their house or anything like that from building either highway? Did they have to tear down a lot of houses?

Randy Graff

I don't remember. I know a part of the settlement was building [00:14:00] the sound barrier, which, I don't know how much good it does. But it's still there, even though it's deteriorating. But part of the compromise was building that, and one of the bad parts is that effect of the highway has caused the problem at Clover Street Field School with flooding. It was wet enough as it was and now they've done some stuff to improve it recently. Hopefully it has.

Michelle Tom

Well, did you want to see if any of these questions sparks anything? Any memories? [pause] Did you always know you were going to come back to Windsor [00:15:00] after you went to college?

Randy Graff

No, I had no intention of coming back here.

Michelle Tom

What happened?

Randy Graff

Well, I went to school in Virginia. I was going to stay there but it was the time of the Vietnam War and the draft. Where I was in Virginia, the numbers were not good for being drafted. They didn't have a large pool to choose from, whereas up here it was much better. So I came back here hoping to stay out of the draft, and I did until they had the lottery. It's the only lottery I ever won. I had the number 18. But I avoided the worst. I joined the National Guard.

Mike Cook

Got a good one. Windsor Lions Club [00:16:00] and the involvement with the community.

Randy Graff

[laughs] That's a loaded question. We are involved with the community. We give scholarships every year. We're up to four scholarships now, and [we] do a lot of other things for the town in terms of helping the food and fuel bank and a lot of other civic activities. Yeah. When I served as President, what, five times? Something like that?

Mike Cook

Yeah, yeah.

Randy Graff

So yeah.

Michelle Tom

How long have you been with the Lion's Club?

Randy Graff

About 35 years, I think.

Michelle Tom

Why did you join in the first place?

Randy Graff

Oh. I joined the same time as Bill Chiodo. [00:17:00] We were encouraged by Jack Waters, who was on the town council, and we were on the council with him. So we joined. Been there ever since. Everett Dowe got me involved in politics. He also encouraged me to go to Trinity College to get my master's in education.

Michelle Tom

He was the mayor?

Randy Graff

He was later mayor after teaching. His son is still in town practicing law. [pause] [00:18:00] Oh, children. You want to know about children?

Michelle Tom

Yeah!

Randy Graff

I have a daughter and two stepsons. Both stepsons graduated from Windsor High. They were the first two males in the jazz show choir. The older one went to the Naval Academy and graduated from the Naval Academy. He's out in paradise in San Diego. My daughter went through Windsor schools, Oliver Ellsworth, and the high school. She now lives in Kansas with her three kids. She was my hippie daughter.

Michelle Tom

Hippie ended up in Kansas huh?

Randy Graff

Yeah, that's a long story. But her daughter is sort of like her. Sort of a new world hippie, you know? [00:19:00] What else do you want to know?

Michelle Tom

How is it sending your kids to some of the same things you went through?

Randy Graff

It wasn't bad, it was fine. You know? I think they enjoyed their time at the high school. Both boys were involved with soccer and the jazz show choir. My daughter was on the softball team. She was a pitcher, a starter pitcher, for at least two years. They're all right. Things have changed. Now after I retired from Northeast Utilities, I went back to the high school and monitored some classes to see if I wanted to go back to teaching and my first reaction was, "No way in hell." It's changed so I just, you know, I was away from it for so long I didn't see myself [00:20:00] being able to go back into it and so I spent the last few years before I fully retired working at the probate court.

Michelle Tom

Your kids were in school though when you were on the School Board of Ed?

Randy Graff

Yes. If I remember correctly, I think my daughter was still – I was still on the council when she was in high school, I think back. I can't remember. Too many years, come on. Get to '74, they all get compressed, you know? What year's which year? And I'm now involved with the Historical

Society. That's a new involvement. I was a history teacher. I majored in history so I got involved, and I think it's a [00:21:00] good organization and hopefully want to see it thrive into the future. So, but no, I like Windsor. It's a nice community. It's changed over the years. It hasn't gotten as big as some of the surrounding communities. It's much more middle class than some. And, you know, I think we are very lucky in respect to the fact that former town manager, Albert Ilg, who I had my differences with, had the foresight of the Dale Road Industrial commercial area. That's been the envy of many a town, which is good in terms of our tax base. But that's been good, and I think, you know, overall, the community's a good community. [00:22:00] It has changed like all communities have and unfortunately, it's not as free willing as it was when I was a kid.

Randy Graff

You know, it was much easier times, I think, for kids growing up. We didn't have as many activities but we, you know, made our own fun interacting with each other constantly. Not organized. There weren't as many organized sports like there are today for the kids. But you grew up in your neighborhood, you knew all the kids in your neighborhood, you played with the kids in your neighborhood, and stayed out of trouble. Got in trouble with the same kids. I think it was a good time. The parents knew each other, so if they didn't know where you were, they knew who to call. [00:23:00] I was one of the first students to go through L.P Wilson when I was in junior high. I went through the first Class, seventh, eighth, and ninth. So yeah, got a lot of memories around town. Worked on tobacco back in the day, you know? What did I start at? Seventy cents an hour? Had a paper route for years. Learned how to drive on my paper route. Sunday mornings, my mother would come out with the car and drive me around and let me drive around the neighborhood afterwards. Nobody was up so it's no problem. It's how I learned how to drive. I think I don't have to worry. I think the police aren't concerned about it now. It's so many years. [laughs]

Michelle Tom

Statute of limitation.

Randy Graff

Statute of limitation, that's [00:24:00] what I was trying to think of. Now, I got to know even more people in the neighborhood because I delivered the papers. They're actually a couple streets away from me, and I got to know those people and it's much different today. Much different. Some of it's good, some of it's not so good.

Michelle Tom

Well, thank you so much for sitting down with us.

Randy Graff

Whatever. [laughs]

Michelle Tom

Whatever.

Randy Graff

I didn't say any of the bad stuff.

Michelle Tom

Well, you said bad stuff too.

Randy Graff

No, I didn't. Not the real bad stuff.