

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSIONER
ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Maxine Helen Cegelski Phelan**
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Interviewer: Karl Baumgartner
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Transcript:

BAUMGARTNER: Today is April 8, 2021; my name is Karl Baumgartner and I am interviewing Maxine Phelan in Rosenberg, Texas. This interview is being presented on behalf of the Oral History Project of the Fort Bend County Historical Commission. A second supplementary interview took place on May 13, 2021.

By way of introduction, for over 30 years Maxine has been one of the most widely recognized and respected school teachers in Fort Bend County. She describes the historical background of her family's arrival in the area during the 1870's, what it was like to grow up here during the 20th century, and her personal insights into the educational changes that have taken place and the schoolteacher's role in shaping the lives of our youth.

After a school was named in her honor in 2019, Mayor of Rosenberg Bill Benton recognized the occasion at a special Rosenberg City Council meeting by declaring April 30th, 2020 as Maxine Phelan Day and rewarded her by presenting her the symbolic key to the city.

Maxine, what is your full legal name?

PHELAN: Maxine Helen Cegelski Phelan.

BAUMGARTNER: Your place of birth and date of birth?

PHELAN: Date of birth was December 5th, 1942, and the place of birth Rosenberg Texas.

BAUMGARTNER: Oh, you were born in Rosenberg? I thought you were from the Brenham area.

PHELAN: No, my people were all from that area but my parents had moved here to Rosenberg.

BAUMGARTNER: Were you born with a midwife's assistance or in a hospital?

PHELAN: My mother's first two children were born at home but there were problems with my birth. So, she ended up giving birth in the old hospital set back off Avenue H across from the Wells Fargo bank. The hospital building is no longer there.

BAUMGARTNER: Yes, I remember the old hospital building. It had been abandoned; the doors were hanging off it and I walked through it once and toured it just out of curiosity. It was a dilapidated old building back off the main street that was finally torn down during the 1980's.

PHELAN: The bank was across the street on the other side of Avenue H; it used to be First National Bank, now it's Wells Fargo. I used to tell my sons and people that the old broken-down hospital across the street was where I was born. My, how everything has changed.

My younger brother also was born in the old hospital, in 1946. I had three brothers. The older two were born with a midwife, my cousin Mary Felchak. She was a self-appointed midwife who assisted pregnant women in giving birth, not a certified midwife.

BAUMGARTNER: What were your parents' names?

PHELAN: My father's name was Max Cegelski and my mother's name was Genevieve Kopycinski Cegelski. They grew up in a Polish community which is still there today, a little town called Chappell Hill down the road from Brenham on Highway 290 in Washington County. It was a very Polish community. St Stanislas Catholic Church was the center of the community. They went to a Catholic school with Polish nuns.

My grandparents on my father's side had come there from Poland in the 1870s.

BAUMGARTNER: Oh, that was pretty early. That was earlier than a lot of the Polish, and many Czechs didn't arrive until around 1900.

PHELAN: It was very early. There were thirteen children we know of for sure on my father's side, the Cegelskis. My father was the youngest. He and my mother were both born in Chappell Hill. His parents were older when he was born. They lived on their own farm which they owned in Chappell Hill.

On my mother's side, the Kopycinski's, her dad also farmed there in Chappell Hill on rental property.

BAUMGARTNER: You said your grandfather had come there from Poland. Were you close to your grandparents? What were they like?

PHELAN: My mother's parents were Frank and Helen Kopycinski ; her maiden name was Sopchak. They were born in Chappell Hill. My father's parents, who were Jacob Cegelski and Constancia Nowak, were born in Poland and they came here separately as they did not know each other at the time. They came here about the same time through Galveston as teenagers, young teenagers in the 1870s.

The family has always told a fascinating story about my mother's great grandmother, Rosalie Ciemnoczatowska. As a twelve-year -old, she was stowed away on a ship to America with other younger children from Poland, dependent upon the mercy they would receive. The food that she received came from the dining room. The dining room people realized that there were stowaways at the bottom of the ship and they would take the food that was left over to them and that's how the children ate.

The rest of the family, according to family lore, managed to find their way to Chapel Hill. It makes me think of how migrants are coming to this country today. You know, you send your children and then you catch up with them. That's very much how my mother's grandmother came here.

BAUMGARTNER: Wow. That is interesting.

PHELAN: But they all ended up in the Polish community around Brenham. From what I've read and what my parents have said, there were several Jewish businessmen who were helping to sponsor and bring people to that Chappell

Hill /Brenham area in the 1870s and 1880s. You had to have a sponsor in order to come here. It was necessary to pay someone who would sponsor you to come here.

BAUMGARTNER: My friend Benny Wleczyck from Rosenberg told me that Czech immigrants were required to have a sponsor to assure financial support. I'm surprised we don't hear more of these approaches being recommended for the current immigration crisis.

Was Polish spoken by your family at home when you were growing up?

PHELAN: Yes. Neither my mom or dad spoke much English because in their whole community, everything revolved around the Polish church. The nuns who taught there were Polish.

I've had my students whom I've taught ask me, well, why did you grow up with your parents speaking a different language even though they were born here? I said, because where they lived, in the 1900's through the 1920's, they didn't go to town much and everyone spoke Polish. And so English was a second language for them, even though they were born here in America.

BAUMGARTNER: Do Hispanic students in Rosenberg ask you that? They may have similar circumstances.

PHELAN: Yes, and I often understood totally when they would tell me, "I can understand Spanish, I just can't speak it." And that's when I would relate to them that I can understand some Polish. I just can't speak it.



Maxine's parents
Genevieve Kopycinski & Max
Cegelski

BAUMGARTNER: But growing up, you must have been able to speak it.

PHELAN: I did. My two older brothers spoke mostly Polish at home before I was born. The year before I was born, my mother's father Mr. Kopycinski came to live with us when he was widowed. So, the whole time I grew up in my house, my grandfather, who spoke Polish mostly, lived with us. We would hear our parents and my grandfather speak to each other in Polish so we could understand it. Yet they would ask us something and we replied in English. And after my two older brothers started school at Holy Rosary School in Rosenberg, they had difficulty because they weren't speaking English at home that much. Then my mother, by the time I and my younger brother Ed came along, kind of changed things and we spoke English more in the family.

BAUMGARTNER: Benny Wleczyk also told me that his mother spoke Polish and not English but his father who was born in Poland spoke four languages, Polish, English, Czech and German.

PHELAN: Yes. And Benny tells me I'm the only person in town he can walk up to and say "Jak se mas" ("How are you") and I say "Dobry jak te" ("Good, how are you?"), phrases in Czech and Polish. And he laughs. So, we may be the only two left. There is practically no one else in town who can say our little bit that we still know.

BAUMGARTNER: I remember forty years ago when I moved to town lots of Czech people around here used to have that for their bumper sticker on their car-- Jak se mas.

PHELAN: Jak se mas. "How are you?" Yes. Very seldom seen anymore.

BAUMGARTNER: Your brothers were a few years older than you?

PHELAN: My oldest brother Thad was born in 1936 and Daniel in 1939, and Eddie my younger brother was born in 1946. Thad has since passed away and my next brother Daniel is 82 and he's still living in League City. My younger brother Ed, Eddie as we were growing up, lives in The Meadows in Houston. The ties with Chappell Hill were cut in that we four were born here in

Rosenberg.

My mother's Kopycinski and Sopchak family came to the George Ranch in the mid-1920s with several of the Kopycinski families including my grandpa Frank and two of his brothers, Walter and Henry. Some of them and their children stayed and worked at the George Ranch and lived there for many years until it became what it is today, a working ranch museum and commercial property. And the George family was very kind to them. They were provided a home in which to live, and they sharecropped some farmland and raised their families.

My mother lived on the George Ranch from the time she was 17. She and her boyfriend, who remained in Chappell Hill and was to become my father, stayed in touch and communicated long distance until they married three years after she came here.

The George Ranch is a huge 25,000-acre ranch that was established by Texas pioneers in the 1820's in the earliest days of Fort Bend County. Mrs. Mamie George was an original descendant of the ranch. My mother would tell us stories about Mamie George. My mom had never been anywhere outside of Chappell Hill before moving to the George Ranch; she grew up in Chappell Hill. They came here and she and her sisters and some of the other younger girls of the sharecropper families would work at the farm house for Mrs. George.

My mother's first trip to Houston was with Mrs. George when my mother was 18. I remember a story she told about Mrs. George taking her on a trip to Houston. There was a driver and my mom sat with Mrs. George in the back seat. They stayed at the Lamar Hotel in Houston and Mrs. George had my mother help her in the shops and to run errands. My mother said the first time she visited Houston she was so excited. She thought they were on the fourth floor, and the windows to the hotel were up. No air conditioning, of course. And she just couldn't believe the number of cars that she saw on the street below. It was all new to her. Her first experience with the big city was with Mrs. George.

BAUMGARTNER: What was the age gap between Mrs. George and your mother?

PHELAN: I would have to do some math, but mother was eighteen and so Mrs. George would have been some thirty years older.

BAUMGARTNER: And you said your mom was still in touch with her boyfriend Max Cegelski in Chappell Hill?

PHELAN: Yes. They kind of corresponded. And then he came to Rosenberg when he was 20 and my mother was 20, and they got married here in Rosenberg at the old Holy Rosary Church in 1930. They returned to live in Chappell Hill with his parents who were very elderly.

MOVING TO ROSENBERG

And then in 1935 they moved here. My dad put mom on a train to Rosenberg and took his buckboard wagon and two mules and everything they owned and put it on the wagon and came to Rosenberg. That is how they came to live in Rosenberg.

I can remember asking my dad, what route did you take? And he looked at me funny, like, "What Route?" He said "I just got in a wagon and went." He brought the wagon because they needed the wagon here and the mules in order to be able to bring their belongings and to have the mules to do farming. Here was the road, he thought. Follow it.

I wish I had asked how many cars were on the road. How many cars would have been on the road in 1934? It's kind of hard to fathom a trip by buckboard today from Chappell Hill to Rosenberg.

BAUMGARTNER: That was seven or eight years before you were born. What did they do when they got there?

PHELAN: That was 1935. They rented a house off Old Richmond Road and he found work in farming. And this was depression days; this was a time that was hard on everybody.

BAUMGARTNER: For the rural communities and farmers it was really hard. It would have been a terribly difficult time to get started and try to make a living.

PHELAN: They moved to another rent house, if that is what you would call them. If you look at a couple of pictures we have saved, they were just basically little frame shacks. There was no restroom, just an outside one, and no running water other than a pump for the well.

In later times my father would tell us stories about the depression years. He walked everywhere he went. Walking was the only transportation available to him and he said you were always looking for a job. Always.

My father mostly found farming work that he could do with people who lived on their own land, and he walked to town from the rent house off what is Bamore Road now, west of town. He said he walked to where the Bass House was being built which is kind of a showcase house on our Carlisle Street. You got paid a dollar a day if they hired you for the day and my father said that was top pay in those days, huge for him. The contractor was Bob Bass's father or grandfather, what was his name?

BAUMGARTNER: Nelson Bass.

PHELAN: Of course. It's hard to imagine what it was like trying to provide for a family then. I've tried to recreate these circumstances just for my own sake, to put myself in my father's and mother's shoes. They had no place to go, you know, there was no safety net or a savings account. It was surviving day to day. You got work where you could. My father worked at Bailey's Feed Store here in town, too, but he would tell you there was always the farming. They moved closer to Louise Street which then was way out of town in the other direction. My father would be amazed if he saw how that's developed today.

So, they were still farming, still renting another shack which was bringing them closer to town. I never asked my father how he was able to get an old car. I know at one time he said they kind of shared it with a neighbor and I have no idea what that meant, maybe that they both bought it together. But at

least they had transportation into town. The rent house was still out in the rice and cotton fields on the south side of town.

BAUMGARTNER: He had a family by then, didn't he? Your two older brothers had been born.

PHELAN: Yes. And then in 1941, Mr. Schultz, Herman Schultz and his wife Olla Schultz, changed my family's life. Mr. Schultz owned an abstract title company here in town, and I've thought back many times how his kindness to my father changed our family's life.

My dad was still farming and had also started working a regular day job doing janitorial work at the post office. It was the depression and he was told, you need to work for the government because it's a secure job. He knew he could do that, and he could count on getting his hours. So, Mr. Schultz approached my dad and told him about 60 acres that was for sale nearby. It was called Jurcik Road then, but today it's Louise Street.

Mr. Schultz lived in a nice home that was across the street from the sixty acres and an old farm house. I had been born by then and our grandfather was coming to live with us.

Mr. Schultz told my dad, "You have a growing family. Buy the 60 acres that is for sale, 30 acres, which is near where the house is, and 30 acres across the street. I will cosign for you and I will help you and in two or three years you're going to be able to sell half of it and pay the whole thing off."

My dad said many times he would never have done that had Mr. Schultz not helped him do it. And within four or five years my dad did just that. He sold the 30 acres and paid his whole note off. And that's the first land that he and my mother owned. Through the years they remodeled the house, and they were still there on that property when they died.

BAUMGARTNER: Wow. Well, you're right Mr. Schultz. Talk about profoundly impacting somebody's life, their heritage and everything else.

So, you grew up there?

PHELAN: Yes. I didn't leave our house until I married.

EARLY CHILDHOOD IN ROSENBERG

BAUMGARTNER: What was it like around here in those days? I'm talking about pre-school, about when you were three and four and five. I mean, where I grew up in a different community, I used to go fishing day in and day out with a little cane pole and bobber and worms we would dig up, and walk to the pond there across our pasture. Always outdoors.

PHELAN: Oh yes, there was pasture and the Schultz family lived across the way and they had three girls, Sunny Lee, Jeanie and Susan, and we would run across to their yard. The road was just an old gravel road. There were deep ditches. We would go crawfishing all the time when the ditches would fill up with water.

And the Schultz's are the ones who introduced us to television. They came and told us we had to come over to their house to see what they had. My brother and I figured out, that was probably about 1951 or 1952. They were the only kids around us at the time, and we marveled at seeing their box with all the snow flurries. They would have us over every Friday night to watch Paul Bosch and Houston Wrestling. They would pop popcorn and we would sit and watch Danny McShane, Ray Kunkel and other wrestlers.

Other people my age have told me the same thing-- that was their introduction to television. I have no idea why wrestling was such a popular show. But you have to remember, there were not many shows available in early television. There was no daytime programming here; it would come on at 5:00 or 6:00 in the evening.

Today (laughing) when I get upset about excessive technology and its effect on young people, I try very hard to remember the effect of television coming into our homes. When you lived on a little farmhouse on Jercik Road and suddenly a celebrity like Dave Garraway appears on the set, and you could see New York City, you could see California . . . For me it was truly as good or better than a book because suddenly it was like going to the movies where you could

see that there was something else other than this little country town where you're growing up...

And let me add another story about growing up in our house on Louise Street. That house is still there, the white house on the corner of Louise Street and Rychlik.

BAUMGARTNER: That is the house you grew up in? It is set way back quite a way from the street. It has the big oak trees.

PHELAN: I've only been by it about four or five times since my family sold it, and it was a very tearful leave for me. My father told me this story about it.

In 1946 my youngest brother Eddie was born and my father was at the hospital to see his new son and Raymond Rude was also there at the hospital. Mr. Rude owned Rude & Sons Sporting Goods on Third Street just off Avenue H in downtown Rosenberg. Mr. Rude had a daughter, Linda, who was born at the same time as my brother Eddie. And when he was at the hospital to see his new daughter Mr. Rude was talking with my dad and he asked my dad, well, did we have a refrigerator? And of course, we didn't have an indoor refrigerator. We had an icebox. I grew up without an indoor toilet in that house until right before I went to school.

So, Mr. Rude was talking and he told my father. Look, you got to have a refrigerator; you got a baby and you need to keep the milk cold. Come down to the store and get a refrigerator. You can pay me as you can, you can pay it off.

In 1947 or 1948 my dad and grandpa and my brothers totally remodeled that white house. It took a long time; they did most of the work themselves. So, we got electricity into the house and we got a bathroom in the house. Mr. Rude made sure we had a refrigerator, bought on time.

And that is how Mr. Rude operated. He told my dad to come get a refrigerator, and my dad got a refrigerator. And what's just kind of amazing, this was the way business was done in those days. On the shake of a hand. You pay me

what you can, when you can. My father told me that story so many times. We charged groceries until I left home. And then in the 1950's, there was a man named Cyril Humpola who owned Philco Television on Third Street across from where the Cole Theater is. They went to our church and he told my dad you've got to have a TV. He sold my dad our first Philco television, it was a small square screen. And again, they shook hands with you pay me how much you can when you can.

My dad did janitorial work at the post office here. That was not a menial job to him. He loved it; now he had a civil service job and it allowed him to get financially ahead as he continued to sharecrop a farm on our side of town. My father had very little education at all, but he knew what hard work would bring you. And as our family's financial needs grew larger, my father would leave the post office, he would walk to First National Bank and he would clean First National Bank and then he would go to KFRD Radio Station and he would clean there. My older brothers would go with him and help.

BAUMGARTNER: And just the idea that hard work pays off in many ways. We have lost a lot of that attitude in this country.

PHELAN: Much of that mindset is now lost. The sense that I'm going to pay my own way. And to me, the biggest loss is the relationship that Mr. Rude and my dad had and Mr. Humpola and my dad had, Mr. Schultz and my dad. I mean, if that opportunity happened to my dad, it probably happened to others in this town. With the help of others, my parents provided a home for our family.

SCHOOL

BAUMGARTNER: Maxine, your vocation and so much of your life has revolved around schools, it's like it has been the cornerstone of your life.

PHELAN: Yes, it has been my life. I've been so blessed.

BAUMGARTNER: What was your own school experience like? Did you go to kindergarten?

PHELAN: No. We went to Holy Rosary, a private Catholic school. There was no kindergarten.

The Holy Rosary School was opened in 1941 through the beneficence of Mary Gubbels and the Gubbels family and the parishioners. Father Tydlacka was the pastor here and Holy Rosary Church at that time was a mission style church. The school building is still at the corner of Avenue I and Fifth Street. Across the street from it is the brick building where the Dominican nuns lived who came here to teach.



Holy Rosary Catholic School
4th Grade 1954

BAUMGARTNER: What is a Dominican nun?

PHELAN: The Dominicans were a religious order of teaching nuns from Houston. A religious order is generally made up of a group of Catholic followers who have chosen to live under the structure of certain Christian religious vows and commitments. In Rosenberg this religious order dated back to the early 1940s when four teaching nuns Sr. Anastasia, Sr Edwardo, Sr Samuel came here to teach. I cannot remember the fourth nun's name. It is my understanding that Mrs. Gubbels built the two-story brick convent which is still there; you can still observe the bricks over the front door in the shape of a cross. The Catholics in this community, and some non- Catholic students as well, would go there. If you were growing up in the 1940s in this area of Rosenberg you either went to grade school at Robert E. Lee Elementary, or Holy Rosary.

BAUMGARTNER: Robert E. Lee was already there?

PHELAN: Yes. That's the oldest elementary school in town, still located over on First Street. It's still a school. And then in the late 1940's Travis Elementary opened.

BAUMGARTNER: So Holy Rosary was grades one through eight?

PHELAN: One through eight, no kindergarten.

My parents always knew that we were fortunate because we had eight grades in a Catholic school here, Holy Rosary School. My father would have to drive us to school every morning. We lived way out in the country, so my father would come to work at the post office in the morning, they'd let him leave to come home and pick us up because Mother did not drive; and he would take us to school. When school let out, he'd pick us up and take us home.

BAUMGARTNER: What was the school like? How many teachers did they have?

PHELAN: That's the amazing part. There were only four Dominican nuns who taught us eight grades, with over 240 students.

When the Holy Rosary school was opened, the Catholic Church from Houston was willing to send four teachers here as long as the parish would provide a home for them. Their first home was where Herfort's Jewelry is now. There used to be a house there and the nuns lived in it, and the parishioners would provide the groceries for the nuns.

BAUMGARTNER: The parishioners...?

PHELAN: The people who went to Holy Rosary Catholic Church and the families who attended the schools. They provided the groceries for the nuns who taught us.

The entire school was comprised of four classrooms, and each classroom had double grades. First and second grade was in one room, third and fourth in another room, fifth and sixth, and seventh and eighth. There were usually over sixty kids per classroom. You would "double seat" in a desk with someone,

sharing a seat with another student.

And so, if you were a slower student you got to listen to the first and second grade and if you were a faster pace student, you could finish your first-grade work, listen to the second-grade work and do it.

I think of how those nuns did classroom management with 60 or 65 kids in that room. How amazing that they could do that. A typical class today has 20-25 students, all approximately the same age.

BAUMGARTNER: I remember growing up in an area in Oklahoma where they had one-room schoolhouses.

PHELAN: Yes, they had those in Texas also; in fact, that's what they had on the George Ranch. The George family provided it. It was a large, one room schoolhouse. My mother's young cousins, the Kopycinski family, moved there and farmed. Their children younger than my mom went to that one room schoolhouse and they had one teacher for all of those grades. Eventually they got busing and the junior high kids started coming into town for school. But at the ranch you had one teacher grades one through eight.

BAUMGARTNER: Yes. And in the one room schoolhouse they would call upon the older students to help teach the little ones.

PHELAN: That's how the nuns would do it. She would get some of the second graders who were caught up in their work and who had already seen the second grade work the year before, to help set her up with the first graders.

The thing that amazed me about the nuns: their entire life was teaching. They took a vow of poverty. So, their wants and needs were very simple, they were very ascetic people in that sense. But how devoted they were to teaching!

BAUMGARTNER: What did you mean, they took a vow of poverty?

PHELAN: When you join an order like Dominicans, Franciscans, you take vows. If you're really strict, you even take a vow of silence in the sense that when you're in the Mother House, you aren't even allowed to speak unless you have permission. But you do take vows of obedience, chastity and poverty. And obedience, of course, means you will go where the Mother Superior sends you.

You will do as they ask you.

BAUMGARTNER: Who is the Mother Superior?

PHELAN: She's kind of the leader of the whole group. The Dominicans' Mother House was on Almeda Road in Houston and they served schools in Beaumont and the greater Houston area. The administration of the Mother House is a hierarchy based on capability and how much education you have and that sort of thing.

And that was my education through the eighth grade.

BAUMGARTNER: Did the nuns have a set curriculum?

PHELAN: Yes. I think it's important to point out the value of having gone for eight years to the same school and gain the experience that we had of the approach that nuns used for teaching. It was constructive to share the classroom experience with students of the same background. We had a tiny library in the middle of the building with several sets of encyclopedias. The nuns were huge supporters of using the encyclopedia approach to learning.

We did not have books at home in my house, but the nuns would let us check out encyclopedias to take home on the weekend. I credit the nuns with having offered the kind of approach to us that fostered the love of knowledge.

The nuns were remarkable. My brother Dan and I, we always loved using the encyclopedias to learn. We would just look and read through the little tiny print, and learn. And I know I have thought about this. My grandchildren have a little box, a little cell phone in their hand that they can punch in any word they want. That encyclopedia is in their hands.

BAUMGARTNER: Yes.

PHELAN: So, before we criticize and talk about how excessive the technology seems today, Karl, maybe the part of it that's not so bad is all the knowledge of the world that it puts into their young hands.

BAUMGARTNER: And with the nuns, you had a variety of teachers. You didn't have a single teacher for eight years like some one-room schoolhouses.

PHELAN: Yes, the sisters changed during the years. I had Sister Regina in third and fourth grade; she died when I was in the fourth grade and it wasn't like you had just one teacher through your term of school there.

Remember we had over 200 students at Holy Rosary. When I finished in the eighth grade, there were 31 of us who graduated and are still very close today. And in some cases, we went through the whole eight grades together. Our families went to church together. Life in Rosenberg in the 1940's and 1950's for most of us was uncomplicated.

BAUMGARTNER: I know that racial segregation was still in effect then; was there any integration in the schools?

PHELAN: I know I didn't discuss A.W. Jackson, the school which served the Black and Hispanic community who lived in the neighborhood on the other side of the railroad tracks. Integration came in the mid-60's. Students were given the option to stay and finish their high school education at A.W. Jackson or they could come to Lamar High School. I think that 1965 was the first year that Black students enrolled in Lamar High School. Of course, I was out of high school by then. I graduated in 1961.

BAUMGARTNER: Was there segregation of Hispanics?

PHELAN: There were Hispanics in the elementary schools at that time, and we did have a few Hispanic students in Holy Rosary School while I was there.

DISCIPLINE

BAUMGARTNER: How were you disciplined in those days?

PHELAN: Not the way that you always see in the movies with a nun standing there with a rod in her hand and you put your hand out. I never saw that a single time. I don't remember the teacher spanking any of us, but the principal would, quote, spank you.

BAUMGARTNER: With a little paddle?

PHELAN: I don't know, I've never experienced it. I don't know if she did it with her hand or a little paddle, but you would go to the principal's office. And of course, when I went to public school, paddling was accepted behavior, and that was just a whole new world for me.

BAUMGARTNER: Did you have meals at school?

PHELAN: Tom McNutt, a good friend, and I once visited for the longest time about what it was like to go to lunch when we were in school. We would rush home to get full meals our mothers would have ready for us; he would jump back on the bicycle to get back in time to take advantage of recess.

We laughed about how we always had a sense of Richmond kids as opposed to Rosenberg kids. We were Rosenberg kids because we said you would eat dinner at the noon meal and at night, supper. But in Richmond, at the noon meal they ate lunch and at night, dinner. I guess they didn't eat supper? There was a perception of how it seemed that somehow the people and the kids in Richmond acted as though they were a little better than we were. Of course, that wasn't true; it was just perception.

BAUMGARTNER: I moved here in 1973, you know, and it was my impression that Richmond considered their town was a slightly more sophisticated class.

PHELAN: Part of that perception I think is because Richmond was such an old town. Richmond had the history, they had the original Old 300 settlers, and so on. Looking back on it, it was silly.

BAUMGARTNER: Was Tom a Richmond boy?

PHELAN: No. Rosenberg always.

BAUMGARTNER: To get home from school, did you have school buses then?

PHELAN: Yes, there were school buses, and of course going to school they went out in the country to pick up students, but we did not ride buses because we were in Catholic school and school buses were for public school kids.

THE OLD ROSENBERG COMMUNITY

BAUMGARTNER: So, following eighth grade you graduated from Holy Rosary and moved on to Lamar High School.

PHELAN: When I started ninth grade at Lamar High School, one of the scariest days of my life was the day I had to go out to the end of that driveway there on Jurcik Road and get on that school bus. I had never been on a school bus. I'm 14 years old and going to public school for the first time in my life and getting on a school bus with my books in my arm.

The Richmond and Rosenberg schools had been combined and the new high school was built in 1948 out there in the middle of a pasture. In 1998 we celebrated Lamar High School's fiftieth anniversary with the members of its first graduating class. They talked about how the new school brought the two old schools and the community together. They had been bitter enemies as only two high school football teams could be; they just did not want to commingle. And they brought us together as one, the two groups that would comprise the senior class that year.

BAUMGARTNER: Did the principal dictate that?

PHELAN: No, superintendent of schools, Mr. Franklin Herndon. The principal was Guy Traylor. The stadium is named after him.

It has been so interesting to observe -- the Lamar High School that I went to, left, and was gone for ten years, then returned and taught in for thirty-five years. It changed during the sixties. I left Lamar in 1961 and came back in 1971. And it was a dramatic change, just as during the sixties there occurred dramatic changes everywhere.

The high school was the focal point of life for the community during the fifties. Everybody went to the Friday night football games. You had bonfires; it brought Richmond and Rosenberg together. The two towns weren't as separated after that because it was one high school. Consolidation was a very smart move and it was good for the community. Of course, we were extraordinarily lucky for the era we grew up in. If God had picked a time and

a place for me, were we not blessed to have the 50's?

BAUMGARTNER: Our generation was just extremely fortunate. It was the luck of the draw. I think we now recognize how lucky we were to grow up in the 50's. In those days of course we took it for granted.

PHELAN: What we call Old Rosenberg now was just wonderful. I mean the 50s. It was not the same as the 60s. I'm not a 60s person. I'm a 50s person. Tom McNutt and I talked about that period, too; as an era, it was the most idyllic place and time. And the innocence of it!

BAUMGARTNER: Yep. Everything was black and white. Right or wrong. Clear rules to go by.

PHELAN: I have said there was home, school and church. That's what formed you. And there were other good influences --you would have scouting and you would have Little League Baseball and on and on.

Living out in the country, I knew if I went to town with my younger brother Ed there were rules, we had to follow. I couldn't do something I wasn't supposed to. People in town knew we were the Cegelski kids. We would not want to embarrass our parents.

My mom would go to the IGA grocery store on Third Street and give us a quarter. With that quarter, we would go to Borings. If it was Ed's turn to buy a comic book, we probably got Archie or a war comic book. If it was my time to buy it, we got Little Lulu, and then we would go down to what's now Another Time Soda Fountain. But at that time, it was Pickard and Huggins, and then Frank's Pharmacy, and for the fifteen cents we had left over, we could split a chocolate malt.

And it was just such a good time. My parents would go to the grocery store. The Hadjik family owned it, or you could go to White House Grocery where the Stavinoha family owned it. My father could charge groceries there. The Mensik family also owned a grocery store in town.

The Cole Theater in "Downtown Rosenberg" was the center of all the activity for me personally; I went to work at the Cole Theater the summer after my

ninth grade. The movie theaters were the hubs for all the dating and all the social activity. Everything was kind of oriented to the high school.

I remember reminiscing with a man named Richard McDaniel, a longtime government teacher who retired from Lamar High School. He told me, "There's something I kind of regret. Talking to kids today, you'll ask them where they live and they'll say Running Water or Whispering Oaks or this and that subdivision. You ask me where I grew up, I'll say, Stafford, and you would say Rosenberg."

He bemoans the fact that the identity of the town where he grew up, Stafford, is lost. He could talk about downtown Stafford the way I can talk about downtown Rosenberg. That was my identity. That was my town. It was an extension of myself.

Karl, did your kids go to high school here?

BAUMGARTNER: Stephen F. Austin. They grew up in Pecan Grove. Their high school doesn't mean anything to them compared to what Stillwater High School meant to me where I grew up in Oklahoma.

PHELAN: That was Richard's point. I grew up in Rosenberg and that's where I was from, and Herb and I raised our two boys and that's where they were from. Our boys grew up and lived in our house here, we lived in old Rosenberg and always felt secure. In the summer my boys would get up in the morning, get on their bicycles, and they would disappear. I didn't worry about them. Today we worry about children playing alone in their own front yards.

NEW YORK, NEW YORK

PHELAN: Even in larger cities back then you didn't feel everything was dangerous. May I tell you about my grand adventure when I was growing up?

When I was 16, my oldest brother Thad got engaged. Thad had gone to Texas A&M, then he went into the Army and he ended up at a Nike missile site in Westport, Connecticut. He meets a pretty young girl named Dorothy Sala and they set the date for August, 1959.

My parents had never even been out of Texas but one time. We kids had traveled nowhere and so my parents decided we're all going to the wedding, together. I'm making us sound like country bumpkins, but we had no idea what we were doing. My father calls Thad and my brother Daniel who was a student at A&M at that time and tells them we're going to New York for the wedding.

Daniel is driving with my father in the front seat of our '57 Plymouth. Mom, and Eddie and I are packed into the backseat with an old ice chest that my mother stuffed with enough food that she hoped would get us to Connecticut. My father was following a road map that Gulf Station owner Mike Krolczyk provided us from his filling station; in those days you would write to Gulf Oil and they would send you a map and the route.

I could write a short story about this trip.

BAUMGARTNER: Sounds exciting.

PHELAN: It was. I loved this adventure. I mean, my nose was stuck to that window. I can tell you all our stops. We went through St. Louis. We went to Ohio. We are finally getting to New York. All I could think of is, Connecticut is near New York City. I had the biggest romance about New York City. I had read *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. I had watched movies. I was going to live in New York City one day. And then, we get to the George Washington Bridge and I see Manhattan over here to my right.

I mean, I'm thinking we're going to have to go where all those tall buildings are and my father is navigating my brother across the George Washington Bridge. We had no idea what we were doing. My brother said get on the Merritt Parkway. We have laughed about this ever since; we didn't know Merritt Parkway from Staten Island. We make it to Norwalk Connecticut. We get there, we check into a motel. This is a Thursday and Thad gets married on Saturday afternoon at Saint Mary's Church, over 1200 miles from Rosenberg.

There is another interesting part, an amazing coincidence. I'm sixteen and little did I know that Herb, whom I had never met, his mother was living just

six blocks from that church in Norwalk! My future mother-in-law. It's like our family came full circle by my brother Thad. My oldest brother Thad marries a girl from Norwalk, Connecticut in 1959, and Herb's mother lived in Norwalk, Connecticut six blocks away from that church in 1959. And six years later I would never have met Herb except through Thad and his wife introducing us. We always talk about God meant for us to be together.

After the wedding, there is more adventure. My mother had a first cousin, Cecelia, who had left Texas and did what I always thought I would do-- marry a guy from New York. She and her family lived in Brooklyn. So, Cecelia was at the wedding in Connecticut, our only relatives from New York. And Cecilia invited our family to go back with her and her husband and kids to their little apartment in Brooklyn. And that Saturday night, Karl, she took me, I was sixteen, and my brother Daniel, who was twenty, and she says, "I'm going to show you New York City."

And so, she took the two of us. The rest of my family, my younger brother and mom and dad stayed back at their apartment in Brooklyn. And she took me and my brother on a subway ride!

I just cannot tell you how excited we were! She took us down to Broadway, the theater district, in the center of midtown Manhattan. My brother took all the pictures of the lighted marquees extending out over the entrance to the theaters, playing Porgy and Bess and all the musicals and shows. And Cecelia waited with us as we watched the limousines stacking up outside. This is 1959, the people are coming out of the theater in their mink capes and furs and tuxedos and all the rest of it.

BAUMGARTNER: And just a block away, Broadway runs you right into 42nd Street and Times Square.

PHELAN: We watched all of it. Cecelia took us down to the automat and we got the little apple pie at the place where you put in a coin and the door opens and you take a piece of pie. And the throngs of people everywhere. We saw it all. And then it was time to get back.

BAUMGARTNER: Were you in Brooklyn then or still in Manhattan?

PHELAN: When we came into the city, she took us by subway from Brooklyn into Manhattan and I just can't tell you what it was like. And now, she said, now you'll have the full experience. We're going to take a taxi cab. We took a yellow cab all the way from Manhattan across Brooklyn Bridge back to Brooklyn. So that's at age 16. Yes. And Cecilia and her husband, they were hard working people. You know, they lived in a little tenement, the stoop in front, the whole nine yards. I cannot tell you what that experience did for me. Now I just knew that one day I was going to go live in New York!

BAUMGARTNER: Your mom's cousin was a wonderful tour guide. One of my theories used to be and still is in a way, is that everybody in the country should live in New York City for a while. Really just to see it, experience it, see all the different kinds of people and how they pile up against each other, everyone living in apartments, there's no lawns or grass, residents have no cars, you can see Broadway and Times Square, the Upper East Side where I lived for five years, Greenwich Village, Wall Street, the Statue of Liberty Just experience it for six months and then go back to Needville, you know, and live happily forever after.

PHELAN: And appreciate what you have.

BAUMGARTNER: For sure. Appreciate what you have, and you gain so much perspective. You were there only a weekend and it opened your eyes and you won't forget it. But I mean, you know the old song New York, New York . . . it's great but who the hell would want to live there?

PHELAN: Well, I've discovered that as I've gotten older. But at the time... Remember in the movies, Doris Day was always overlooking Central Park in a penthouse with a balcony. To me, that was where everybody in New York lived. That was New York!

COMPLETING HIGH SCHOOL

BAUMGARTNER: So, you returned to Rosenberg to start your junior year in high school.

PHELAN: Well, of course Lamar High School seemed huge compared to Holy Rosary. At Holy Rosary you would start first grade with anywhere from 20 to 30 other kids, and you stayed with that same core of kids all eight years. The nuns probably overall ran a tighter ship than some teachers in public school as far as the amount of homework they required us to have.

Teachers would sometime comment, she or he's one of those Catholic school kids. I remember Mr. Devine telling me that he always knew the kids who came from Holy Rosary when they came into his freshman math class because the nuns drilled basic arithmetic. Holy Rosary kids knew their math facts; they knew their multiplication tables. The transition from Holy Rosary to Lamar wasn't difficult academically.

Just as I was entering into Lamar High School, they started for the first time having advanced classes in English and math. That benefited me because as a prospective English teacher I liked language and I liked language studies. And Miss Campbell started the first English advanced class.

BAUMGARTNER: Now, why did you like the fact that they had an advanced class?

PHELAN: There were fewer students in the class, so you got more individual attention from the teacher. And we went along at a faster pace. I remember Miss Campbell would tell us many times her goal was for us to read one book a week or one book every two weeks.

There would be anywhere from eight to 15 of us in the advanced class at different times. We would discuss the books and we did lots of grammar drill on sentence construction. It was almost all girls in the class. There were a few boys who liked to read and some would try advanced English and say it was too much work, and were allowed to withdraw from the class.

BAUMGARTNER: What was Miss Campbell's first name?

PHELAN: Bess Campbell. There's an elementary school named after her, Bess Campbell Elementary. She and her sister were two maiden ladies who lived

here and taught here from the 1940's. Miss Campbell had served in World War II. When you thought of English taught at Lamar, it was Miss Campbell and Dorothy Brown. When you thought about math teachers, you thought of Irma Drew Hutchison and later Harold Devine.

There's a poem called "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," and it's one hundred plus lines. I remember Miss Campbell, she just would suddenly look out the window and get a gaze off in the sunset or whatever, and she would start and she recited that entire poem from memory. I cannot tell you how that impressed me. And she would do that with other poems. T.S. Eliot's, "The Wasteland."

I mean, she was someone who loved learning for the sake of learning, and therefore loved teaching. I've been around some wonderful English teachers in my life, but Miss Campbell was the first one. She introduced me to the fact that there are so many books out there to be read and analyzed.

She always said literature is for appreciation and application. And she's probably the first one who taught me to take seriously the study of reading books or literature and reading about the human condition.

BAUMGARTNER: What did she mean by application?

PHELAN: You would apply the narratives to things that happened in your own life. The moral dilemmas that people face, the choices they make. That's what a good book is about. No one had ever really taught that to me in that way.

BAUMGARTNER: Academically, would you say when you moved from Holy Rosary into high school, were the two institutions roughly equal or was one school ahead of the other in some respects?

PHELAN: I think I was ahead in language because the nuns really emphasized reading and language. They would take us and classify us as Redbirds, Greenbirds, and Yellowbirds. They grouped us in order to try to meet our individual needs. So, I always was grouped with kids who liked

reading and language and then we could move at our own pace.

BAUMGARTNER: What was caliber of teachers like when you were going to high school, compared to twenty or twenty-five years later?

PHELAN: Well, when I was in high school, as I said, the majority of my teachers were just excellent. It has been said in teaching: If you really love kids and love teaching, you'll probably become an elementary teacher and you'll get to teach all the subjects. If you really love a subject matter, you're more apt to become a high school teacher because you'll want to talk about a certain subject all day long, like history or math.

Through the 80s and the 90s, we were very, very fortunate to have had a faculty at Lamar that in my opinion was just first rate because people came there to teach a subject they loved.

And what was so unique and special about Lamar High School is that I have students who are now in their fifties who still come back and tell me today, you know, I wish my kid had a math teacher like I had. I wish my kid had a history teacher like so-and-so was. They really felt that what they got at Lamar High School in the 70s, 80s and the 90s was first rate.

People who were very good in their subject matter came and taught and they stayed because they liked the freedom they had as a teacher to be able to teach the course the way they wanted to. And I think another big part of what was special about Lamar is that we found colleagues who shared the same standards of excellence.

I believe this was especially true for high school teachers. They have things in common intellectually with their love of a particular subject and they love the influence they have on kids' lives.

When I retired in 2003, I considered it a huge privilege to teach with the people whom I taught with those three decades at Lamar.

BAUMGARTNER: The caliber of instruction remained more or less level during your tenure?

PHELAN: Absolutely. During most of my tenure there. I give the credit for that to the administration at Lamar High School throughout that 30-year period. Dedicated administrators. When I came to Lamar High School, the first principal there had been Guy Traylor, after whom the Traylor Stadium is named. Mr. Traylor retired and then Mr. J.W. Booher became principal and later became assistant superintendent. Mr. Franklin Herndon served as superintendent and Jake Rogers also was superintendent for a large part of my tenure.

BAUMGARTNER: When I was going to high school in my home town, I had no idea who our superintendent was or the significance of his job and how it affected the esprit de corps or the administration or whatever.

PHELAN: I think I can give you an illustration of attitudes that benefited the Richmond and Rosenberg community. Adjoining Lamar High School there is a long one block street that the city named Horace Mann Drive, and that was known as teacher's row. As you might remember, Horace Mann was a man known historically as an educational reformer and for promoting public education, and the city named this street after him. Mr. Herndon lived way down on the corner of Horace Mann Drive, and Mr. Traylor lived there, and other school personnel. The people who were running the school district chose to live right there where all they had to do was walk across the practice field to go to work.

And I think it is all indicative of their support and their involvement with the school. And when the Lamar School district was consolidated it took only one year for the community to reach together and help the new school become established. Lamar is a wonderful High School.

HIGH SCHOOL DAYS

PHELAN: And I loved my high school days. Lamar was the single high school then and your teachers knew you. They knew your brothers and sisters who came before you and came after you. Life in the 1950's in Rosenberg, Texas, was just wonderful. It was idyllic in every way. Families went to church on

Sunday. You went to town and the people in all the stores knew you. It was like town was just an extension of your family.

We all felt the same way, that we had the best here that America had to offer. You went to football games on Friday night; the Episcopal Church in Richmond had a teen canteen provided by the parish hall, which after football games and sometimes Saturday nights could be used for our sock hops of the 50s. And the teen canteen had a two-lane bowling alley, our teenager's introduction to bowling in town that was obviously intended to be a wholesome place for kids to come together.

We had a place called the Corral for the Lamar Mustangs. So, the hangout was the Corral, which was like a Dairy Queen, and the other hangout in town was The Rose where you could get a hamburger for fifteen cents. On Saturday night you got in the car and you would go to Riverside Hall in East Bernard because there was always a dance there. We had the group, The Triumph's that formed my junior year and they just retired and disbanded this last year. You are talking about a remarkable span of almost 60 years. The band finally quit playing together in the late 1970s, but they came back together in the early '90s and continued to play. They expanded their original group of five to as many as 10 at one time. But we Lamar 50s-60's folks always laughed when they would play for reunions and when they started to play a song like "In the Still of The Night," we all felt 18 again. For those of us who have remained here, we've been so fortunate in this community to maintain these memories.

BAUMGARTNER: I still recall a number of their concerts some years later, Don Drachenberg, Teddy Mensik all those guys.

PHELAN: Absolutely. Don is the only septuagenarian still with a ponytail and he has had a ponytail as long as I have known him. The originals included Denver Zatyka, Teddy Mensik. B.J. Thomas (Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head) who sang with them, and the two Griffith boys, Tim and Tom Griffith, and they expanded from there as they went along with Gary Koeppen, Ron Peterson, Doug Griffith, the Wendtland brothers. High school was just an idyllic time. I could not have asked for having a better childhood than where I

was raised and grew up.

WHARTON COUNTY JUNIOR COLLEGE

BAUMGARTNER: As you approached graduation you were making plans for the future. You were considering Wharton County Junior College?

PHELAN: I come from the era where it was kind of a cliché that if a woman was going to go to college, she would either be a nurse or a teacher. Or many girls from here went to business college in Houston, which would take a year or six months. Even though I was in the advanced English class, I was kind of on that track. And then Miss Campbell kept telling me, you can go to college. That's another reason I'm very grateful to her in my memory. Miss Campbell got the school counselor to explain to me that WCJC was affordable, which I really didn't realize at the time.

I learned that WCJC had a bus service! If you could get to the Rosenberg post office at seven o'clock in the morning, they had a school bus there, you got on it, it took you to Wharton, and it was free of charge! You could stay on campus until 4:00 p.m. and study in the library if you had finished your classes. And so that's how I realized maybe I can go to college.

BAUMGARTNER: How many kids used the bus service?

PHELAN: This is how it worked. The bus driver was a young man eighteen years old named Michael Shook who had graduated from Needville High School. He parked the bus overnight at his house, and in the morning the kids from Needville would get on it. Then he drove to Rosenberg to the post office and would pick up five to ten of us. I rode it every day, and he would stop in Beasley and he would stop in Hungerford and he would stop in Kendleton and he would stop and pick up kids literally alongside Highway 90 between Rosenberg and Wharton. There would be kids just standing out there and he would pull over and they would get in.

Traveling to Wharton like this, I could also add, was for me the first time to go to an integrated campus. Wharton County Junior College was integrated in

1961.

BAUMGARTNER: Oh really, that was pretty early.

PHELAN: It was early. For Lamar High School, it was the mid-sixties, '65 or '66, when they first integrated. Going to Wharton, the bus stopped at Kendleton and we picked up several Black students who rode on with us to the Wharton campus. It was my first experience with going to an integrated school and I thought for 1961 that was very commendable for WCJC.

I am proud when I think about the number of people in Fort Bend County who benefited from attending WCJC, who either got one year of college, or got an associate's degree too, or perhaps even went on and were able to finish college. It made a difference in their lives. For me, I don't know that I would have gotten to college and become a teacher.

BAUMGARTNER: It transformed your life.

PHELAN: It totally transformed my life. Buses would come from as far away as Freeport. My best friend, Caroline Mensik, married a boy from Weimar. He drove a bus from Weimar to Wharton, sixty miles, to come to WCJC. But my point is that for most of the kids who went to WCJC in 1961, they were there because they were in these far-reaching farm communities and they were bused to school.

Wasn't that wonderful? When WCJC celebrated its 75th anniversary about five years ago I drove over to Wharton and attended the dinner and you know, so many people paid the same testament that I did thanking the school leaders.

If WCJC did that for me, think of how many other people were helped? I can't tell you the names of the people who started the foundation there in Wharton and it grew and now they have satellite campuses. And you know, the college does so much in the way of vocational training also.

BAUMGARTNER: The President of the College, Betty McCroran, has done a marvelous job of leading that institution and demonstrating its potential. She

has had a large impact.

PHELAN: Yes! And then the other good fortune for me personally was that following graduation from WCJC in '63, I learned that in 1963 the University of Houston had converted from a private school into a state university. Which meant I could now afford to go to UH! The tuition cost per hour was prohibitive as a private university, and suddenly admissions opened up and there were people attending now who were commuting.

This meant that with my close friend Caroline Mensik, whom I had attended school all through Holy Rosary Catholic school, Lamar High School, and WCJC, we could now finish college at the University of Houston by commuting together to campus! She lives in Weimar now. She was the sister I didn't have.

BAUMGARTNER: Neat. That's a great story.

PHELAN: And so, it was like the stars aligned, if you will, as far as affordability for kids like me to go to college.

BAUMGARTNER: So, what was WCJC like academically compared to high school?

PHELAN: Well, I had Mrs. Goldsmith for English because WCJC administrators' kind of guided future English teachers to her class. They said, "We'll put you in Mrs. Goldsmith's class because she wants the more serious students and she is very, very good." She invited students to come to her house on a Sunday afternoon to have tea, and I had never been invited to tea by anyone.

BAUMGARTNER: Wow that is amazing. Could you imagine that now?

PHELAN: What a revelation to me! I was just awestruck that a teacher would invite us to tea on a Sunday afternoon. She had a lovely home and she had books everywhere. When I think back on it, I guess I was eighteen or nineteen years old, and she was a wonderful lady and very encouraging to those who wanted to go on and teach. Which of course I did.

Later, at Lamar, I taught ninth and twelfth grade and when I had twelfth graders tell me," Oh Mrs. Phelan I can't go to college, we don't have the money to go to school." I always reminded them of Wharton County Junior College and my experience there. And I told them, "You really can't say you can't go. You can go at night, you can work during the day, you can finish over time."

One of the biggest benefits of Wharton County Junior College was allowing so many women who were married and with kids to be able to take seven or eight years to finish. They started taking one or two courses, and it allowed people who had to get on with the business of life and work to get a college degree.

BAUMGARTNER: Is it equally productive and constructive for men as for women?

PHELAN: Yes, yes, I think so. It obviously served the kids who weren't able to afford to go away to school. And for me, it was always affordability. It had to be something that was affordable.

And my experience at Wharton County Junior College was very good. They were very good teachers; I never felt shortchanged. I think the junior college system, the community college system, is wonderful. It served me well.

BAUMGARTNER: Send a copy of this to Ms. McCroran. When they expanded and opened the Wharton College campus here in Rosenberg. I thought it was very important and a great benefit for the City of Rosenberg and the community.

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

PHELAN: So, you graduated from Wharton in 1963.

Yes. I received what's called an Associate of Arts Degree. I continued on to U of H and finished there in '65. I got my teaching certificate there. I received my bachelor's degree and teaching certificate in English and history.

BAUMGARTNER: How was U of H?

PHELAN: It was much harder for me. It was just more rigorous and more competitive. There were so many more kids.

I had always kind of looked at WCJC as an academic step- up and kind of an extension of high school because I got more help from the teachers and the class. They still took an interest in students and tried to groom us to go on and be an English teacher, that sort of thing.

But U of H was like any larger university. You know, every professor had a personality, their own little eccentricities and all. So, I had to study much harder to make better grades there.

BAUMGARTNER: You were a good student, I'm sure.

PHELAN: Well, I tried to work hard. I took my grades very seriously and I had always been used to making generally A's some B's. I did my student teaching at Dulles High School in Sugar Land in 1965, a high school that everybody was so proud of because it was relatively new and beautiful and thought to be state of the art. John Foster Dulles High School was huge. We're talking 1965 compared to the smaller Lamar High School that I came from here in Rosenberg.

MEETING HERB PHELAN

BAUMGARTNER: It was during this time frame that you met Herb?

PHELAN: I met Herb on a blind date arranged by my brother the second Saturday in October of 1964.

I was 21 attending U of H. I met Herb through a string of coincidences. As I told you, my brother Thad got married in Norwalk Connecticut where he was employed by a large electronics company named Perkin Elmer. Herb, who was born in Norwalk, Connecticut, lived in the Bronx through eighth grade, and by coincidence he also went to work for Perkin Elmer in Norwalk after he got out of the Navy and attended University of Connecticut. Herb and Thad didn't know each other but within a few years both got transferred to the Houston area, Herb to Baton Rouge and Thad to Houston. They met when Herb was

assigned to visit Houston on business. They were both service reps for the company, and they became friends. One night Thad and his wife Dorothy and I planned to attend a family reunion in Chappell Hill; Herb was in town with no plans and they invited him along.

Herb and I went to the reunion and he loved it. The whole thing with oompah music, and I mean, for a guy that's from Connecticut and grew up in the Bronx, you know it was culture shock. But he loved it; I mean, he just thought it was so great.

But I never figured I'd see him again. And he was a nice guy. He goes back to Baton Rouge which was light years away. There was no I-10 freeway. This is 1964. No cell phones or anything.

Then a month later, he comes back to Houston again, job related. And I always laugh. God just put us together. Because that night I was going to go to the University of Houston's homecoming game and I got stood up. My date never came out here to Rosenberg to pick me up.

BAUMGARTNER: Really.

PHELAN: And I was just really upset. Then Thad's wife Dorothy calls out of the blue from Houston and she says, do you remember that guy, Herb Phelan who went to the reunion with us? He's here again this weekend and we're going to go to Dance Town, USA tonight. Do you want to go?

And Herb got on the phone. He said, so would you like to go? And so, he came out to Rosenberg in my brother's car, picked me up, and we went out with two or three other couples whom my brother and his wife would pal around a lot with, Franklin Schodek. Karl, don't you know him?

BAUMGARTNER: Yes, he's a fixture around Rosenberg.

PHELAN: That night all of a sudden, Herb and I both say that we fell in love. On Sunday, he goes back to Baton Rouge and he says, "I'm bringing my car next weekend and I'm coming to see you." Anyway, he came the next weekend

and he asked me to marry him and I said yes on the third date.

We had much in common. Herb grew up in the Bronx and in grades 1-8 attended a Holy Rosary School. Of course, in grades 1-8 in Rosenberg I attended Holy Rosary School here. We were both used to being taught by nuns. Herb attended Regis High School an exemplary Strake Jesuit prep school in New York City, and we agreed that if we were fortunate enough to have sons and they might be educated at a Jesuit school, we would do that. Our two sons Herb and Michael went to Strake Jesuit College Prep on Bellaire Boulevard in Houston. Herb and I enjoy and share lots of common interests.

Our wedding was at Holy Rosary and our reception was at the Needville American Legion Hall. So, we married that June right after I graduated from U of H. It was June of '65, two weeks after graduation.

And as we were leaving town, remember there were no freeways then, as we drove through Richmond-Rosenberg I turned around as we went under the underpass and I dramatically yell, "Goodbye, Rosenberg. I'm never coming back here again except to see Momma and Daddy!

And we departed for Louisiana. Herb was working in Baton Rouge so we moved there and I looked for a job teaching.



Maxine Cegelski & Herb Phelan
married in 1965 in Rosenberg, Texas

BAUMGARTNER: So that's where you started your teaching career?

PHELAN: Yes. I found a job teaching third grade, in Baton Rouge at a Catholic school. I taught my first year at St. Pius Tenth in Baton Rouge on Plank Road. Every teacher remembers her first class.

I can almost name you all those little third graders in their little uniforms. Gosh, I was so green and so young. And one of the boys whom I taught; his name was Alan Melancon. A good South Louisiana name. He was really shy and just really cute. He'd like to kind of stand next to the teacher because he was so shy. So, years later I am teaching ninth graders at Lamar High School and I get a boy in class named Alan Melancon. Yep, it is the son of that boy that I taught all those years before in Baton Rouge.

BAUMGARTNER: Wow. How cool is that?

PHELAN: Alan Sr was living in Greatwood with his family and he recognized the Phelan name. I had just been married when I taught the dad in Louisiana. And when I saw them at a parent's night school meeting, I asked the son Alan Melancon, well is this your dad and he said yes. His son was fourteen. It was my own little personal story from my earliest teaching days. And it was just a homecoming that you can't imagine. That night was my own little personal story; it was just wonderful, it really was.

And there was a second chapter to that first year. There were two third grade classes in the Baton Rouge school and the other third grade class was taught by a seasoned teacher, a veteran, and she took me under her wing so again I was taught a lesson for life -- to always look out for rookie teachers and help them in the way somebody helped me along the way. Herb took a new job in the Dallas area and we moved there and I found another third-grade job, but then I got pregnant and I had my first baby, Herb III, in September of 1967. After a while living in Irving, we ended up coming back to the Houston area and then I had our second son Michael in 1970.

We were living in the Houston area, and I would drive out to Rosenberg and visit my parents. And one day I ran into Mr. Traylor, my old principal, at a grocery store. Oh, Maxine Cegelski how are you and all the usual. And he said, why aren't you teaching? And I said, well I have two kids.



Michael and Rhonda
Erica and TJ

Maxine and Herb

Amy and Herb, III

BAUMGARTNER: Why would the principal have the rapport with the students where he would remember?

PHELAN: That he would remember me?

BAUMGARTNER: Yeah.

PHELAN: Because that's what I spoke about a while ago. That's kind of the way Richmond and Rosenberg was at that time. I bet Mr. Traylor could have told you how many kids were in my class. And he told me he would get back to me and call me.

STARTING AT LAMAR HIGH SCHOOL

PHELAN: And so, Mr. Traylor called in October. We were living in Houston and he said, "I have a position you can't turn down. I told Mr. Booher that he needs to call you." And so, Mr. Booher, who had replaced him as Principal, left

it up to the retired Mr. Traylor to call me about the job.

Mr. Traylor told me the job is all senior English, which most high school English teachers would tell you would be their preference for teaching senior English. It's British literature. You get the older kids, the senior English class. And they needed a teacher.

I told Herb about the job, and he agreed if my mother keeps the kids, OK. I was going to do it. I drove in a little Volkswagen convertible from Houston to Rosenberg, let the kids off at my mother's house and I taught my first high school class, a senior English class.

BAUMGARTNER: And so, you went from two years of teaching third grade to teaching seniors.

PHELAN: And my first foray into high school! But I loved it. What really shocked me, though, was how things had changed. I had graduated in '61 and then of course had gotten married, we lived other places, and when I came back to Rosenberg in '71, I just cannot tell you the culture shock for me. From 1961 at Lamar High School to 1971 it was a huge dramatic change. I mean there had been 130 in my graduation class and we were graduating classes of 300 in 1971.

BAUMGARTNER: That was a long time ago of course, but even in those days people were already noting that the difference between 1960 and 1970 was like two different worlds.

PHELAN: Absolutely. I came back to where kids were allowed to go off campus for lunch at noon. I was shocked, I will tell you truthfully. And they came back and I found out that smell that I could smell on some students was marijuana.

BAUMGARTNER: Marijuana.



Maxine Cegelski Phelan

PHELAN: Yes. And when we had in-services, we were taught by the police how to recognize the smell of marijuana on kids. And kids would leave campus and they would have a beer before they came back to sixth period English or whatever.

And we were huge as far as the number of students in the building. When I had left Lamar High School you knew almost all the kids in the school, and now it was where I didn't know all the kids in the senior class.

But I loved the faculty, many of them. I got to teach with Miss Campbell. She retired in 1973, so I got to be her fellow faculty member for a year and a half. I loved that. Isn't it the effect that some people can have on your lives, where you just put them almost on a pedestal? I had a deference towards her. It really thrilled me that I was able to teach with her for two years.

BAUMGARTNER: Did you continue teaching the seniors, the older kids?

PHELAN: I taught seniors for nine years. And we always had three levels of learning. They called it Basic, General, and Advanced. They had an opening at the ninth grade for what would be the Advanced and they asked me to enter ninth grade teaching in the 1980s.

To go from 12th grade to 9th grade is not simple.

I hate to say this, but there are very few people who like teaching 9th grade. It's just something about the 14-year-old 9th grader that you have to kind of take to that age group. It's like junior high. You have people who love junior high age kids and spend their entire teaching career with 12-, 13- and 14-year-old kids. And then there are those who think, if this is where I have to start, I'll do one or two years and then I want to move on. There's so much more supervision involved in middle school and junior high aged kids. We all remember what it's like when we were 13 and 14 years old.

BAUMGARTNER: I guess there's a lot more discipline involved at that age group?

PHELAN: Oh, absolutely. Kids are crying one day and horsing around and laughing the next. When you're 13 and 14 years old, you're not a child and you're not a grown adult, you're an adolescent.

As an example, a boy who's 13 and 14 is just starting to get taller. And when those boys would come into my 9th grade class, as they came from the hall into my classroom, they would jump up and leave their dirty palm prints on the top door sill because they can do it. Because they're suddenly tall enough. They're not going to walk through the door. They're not going to sit in the chair. They're going to move the desk around a little bit. They are noisy. I'm speaking in general.

But anyway, I wanted to teach Advanced level and they finally told me, "You're either going to volunteer to do this, or we are going to make you do it." So, they made me do it and I loved it. So, the rest of my teaching career was 9th and 12th grade.

BAUMGARTNER: For the ninth grade, if you put a student in Advanced, do they stay in Advanced?

PHELAN: If they kept up their grades. They have to maintain a certain grade point average, too. It was more important in the 9th grade to give them the opportunity for Advanced and I always fought for it. There would be parents who would call and say, you know, my kid just did bad in junior high, but she's so smart or he's so smart. Can we just let him try advanced work?

And I was always a believer. You know, high school should be a new start. I don't care what happened in elementary or what happened in junior high. I firmly believe, and I fought for it, that if a kid wanted to try to be in the advanced class starting in high school, whether it was English or math or his science class, I think that kid should be given that chance to prove himself or herself worthy.

BAUMGARTNER: You never know.

PHELAN: That's right. You never know. And we had so many stories of kids

who would grow up that year and become more mature. And so, for the rest of my teaching career, I would teach mostly 9th grade. Some years I could mix and match so I would have three 9th grade classes and two 12th grade classes. And so, there was even a time when I had three classes of seniors, three classes of freshmen. I kind of liked that because I would get them coming into high school and leaving high school.

BAUMGARTNER: And you skipped the 10th and the 11th grade.

PHELAN: All the thirty-five years that I taught I never taught the 11th grade.

The kids would tell me later, especially the boys, with regard to behavior, "Yeah I redeemed myself in the 12th grade." They could be such a pain in the 9th grade and always a discipline problem and then they came in as a 12th grader and had matured.

BAUMGARTNER: Did you do Advanced in 9th and 12th?

PHELAN: No, I never taught 12th grade advanced. When I taught 12th grade English, my curriculum was the general and basic level. The academic and education programs in the 1980s throughout the country changed to an AP Curriculum, Advanced Placement. I taught Pre-Advanced Placement to my 9th graders from the early 1980s till my retirement.

BAUMGARTNER: Did the kids change much between 1970 and 2000?

PHELAN: I retired in 2003. The kids I taught in the seventies were still kind of small-town kids, without the same awareness of the world and the things that are out there in the world that are bad. There was just more innocence, in my opinion, in my early years.

The counter culture of the 60's and the Rock Culture of the 70's and 80's had huge influences on kids. Kids changed to the degree that I think as a culture we've changed. The kids in 2000 had become so aware of the world out there. And God knows now, twenty years later to 2020, there's just a real loss of innocence with children because of social media and technology.

And there's something to be said for the innocence that we had earlier. Because what seven-year-old is able to handle everything they see and hear today in movies and on TV? What 15-year-old is able to handle way too much information than they are emotionally ready to handle. Look at how things have changed. I can remember the night my father did not let us watch Elvis Presley on TV the evening Elvis was on the Ed Sullivan Show. It was his fear of what television would bring to us and he wanted to protect us from the influence it would have on us to see Elvis shaking his hips in front of the whole world.

And the changes in Rosenberg have taken place so fast. I've seen the changes. We have two boys. Our older son is Herb. He went to med school in Houston and he and his wife Amy live in New Orleans, and so when he does come back this way to visit, I kind of see Rosenberg through his eyes. On a recent visit he was coming out the Southwest Freeway. The landscape had so changed so much that he said he was halfway to Wharton before he realized, where did Rosenberg go? He said all his landmarks are gone. That kind of change makes me realize the changes we've undergone here in a short period of time. My other son Michael and his wife Rhonda live in Greatwood so he's kind of grown up with the changes but his children Erica and TJ go to what is now the sixth high school in our school district. I grew up in this district when all kids went to one high school.

It's been amazing to me to observe the growth.

BAUMGARTNER: Of course, your students at Lamar must have reflected the growth and demographic changes of Richmond-Rosenberg.

PHELAN: It's been a transition. First, I taught the children of the people whom I went to high school with. And I loved that. I could see Jan Elliot's daughter Dee and I knew she was a clone of her mom. Then I taught the children of students whom I taught. I could see Frank Johnson's son walk into my class and I looked at him and I said, "I bet your last name is Johnson." In the 9th grade he was a clone of his father. A clone. And he looked at me and he said, yeah, "My dad is Frank Johnson." I could have told you that without asking.

One day when I asked the 9th graders, “How many of you did I teach your mom and dad?” Hands went up. And one day, I had one girl say, “well, you taught my grandpa. “And I said, “No, I don't think that's possible...maybe I taught your dad?” She said, “No, my grandpa. He told me that you taught him. “So, I went home and checked and I had her grandpa in class back in 1971 and 1972.

And I did the math and it was possible. That little 14-year-old (You have to picture 14-year-olds, you know, they're just sitting there in class, they're all into each other's business.) And she just blurted it out, “You taught my grandpa!” It got quiet. It's like they looked at me thinking, “How old are you?”

It was so cute. I did teach him and it turned out I had been teaching others' grandkids for a while and I didn't realize it. What a joy. I mean, that was just icing on my teaching cake. It really was. I loved it.

BAUMGARTNER: Why were you so popular with your students in your teaching career?

PHELAN: I feel very humbled when you say that.

BAUMGARTNER: I know it's true, though, because, I heard your name for many years, although I have no involvement with Lamar schools. But I heard of you anyway because of your teaching, through Boy Scouts or other local organizations.

PHELAN: Well, I think I just loved what I was doing. I really do. I can tell you I would go to work in the morning and no matter what may have been going on in my life--and teachers do have lives that those kids never take into account-- when I would go through those doors, it's like I could just leave those problems behind. I'm telling you, other teachers who were there with me shared this same feeling when we walked through the doors of that school. It's like you come into another life. It's all of these kids and you're part of their life for one day at a time. You are like their mother or their big sister or their best friend. And if you're a people person, I think kids just can relate to that. And I will tell you, the vast majority of the teachers whom I've taught with for those 30 plus years at Lamar High School, I think they felt that way. They

came to school. They loved what they were doing with the kids, for the kids. Next to their parents, we were the most important influence in their lives for that school year. We tried to respect that responsibility.

BAUMGARTNER: Do the students recognize this?

PHELAN: And I think the kids relate to that.

But I think if I had successful kids, it was the fact that I just loved it. I like kids. I think kids are interesting. It's our better selves as we will all become adults, that we all admired. And you just have a chance to help mold kids to become good people and try to get them to learn to love learning. I tried to do it with my own two children and I tried to do it with all the students.

Especially in the 9th grade. I always told them there are many of you in here who are far smarter than I am as regards your IQ. But right now, I'm 40 or I am 50, or whatever. And because I've lived longer than you, I am smarter than you. Because I've had more life experiences.

And I would tell them all the time, "You're in here because you are smart and you've made good grades or you have a high IQ." And I always told them they can walk down the hall to the Special Ed Department, and observe students there and their disability was an accident of genes. I told the bright kids they could go down that special ed hall and those other kids would want to be them. They would want to trade places but they didn't get the same breaks when their DNA came together. And so, I always told the bright kids, "It behooves you to do something with those good brains that God gave you. You need to challenge yourself. You need to give back to the community. You need to do something with your life that is a credit to what you were given." And I approached teaching from that standpoint.

Yesterday I had lunch at a Mexican restaurant in front of the hospital in Richmond. A bunch of us teachers were eating there. As I'm leaving this gentleman was sitting there and he said "Bye Miss Phelan." It always goes like this. "Do you remember me?" And I look and he said, "I'm Pete. I was in

your 9th grade class.”

So, I'm looking carefully at Pete and it's like then the voice or the eyes will come back to me. But I have to always remind them, you were fourteen when I had you. And they'll always say, “You haven't changed.” Even though back then I didn't have white hair and all that.

But that is just the absolute joy of my life. I'm telling you; God has just been so good to me. I couldn't have asked for a better career. I don't even think of it as a career. It was just what I got to do.

BAUMGARTNER: Thank you Maxine, it has been a real pleasure.