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Dean Nicholson interview

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Kathleen: Okay. Are you rolling?

Jeff: Just a second.

Kathleen: Okay we're just going to ask you about, first of all, when you were a student and all that stuff first so. Relax. If you want to stop anytime, just say, "Stop." You've done this before.

Dean Nicholson: Okay. All right.

Kathleen: Okay. The first thing I want to ask you about is when you were a student. What brought you to Central? Your dad obviously, but tell me a little bit about that. Did you want to go somewhere else?

Dean Nicholson: My family lived here. Of course, I started in the fall of '46. That was right after World War II. I graduated from Ellensburg High School in 1944. I probably would've gone away to school if conditions had been normal, but after two years in the Navy I was ready to stay home. Those were real interesting times at Central of course.

Kathleen: Talk to me a little bit about the war years as far as what was felt on campus.

Dean Nicholson: Well, from 1941 on all the guys especially, were in the service, or certainly most of them. So, you had several graduating high school classes all back at the same time starting in the fall of '46, probably backed up with five or six graduating classes. This made it very competitive, especially in athletics, but everybody was glad the war was over, glad to be back and going to school.

Kathleen: Was sports a big thing then because guys finally were back and they had a team; they could get teams together?

Dean Nicholson: Right. Central dropped athletics pretty much from '42 on through to '46.

Kathleen: Okay, so you were involved in the war?

Dean Nicholson: I was in the Navy. I didn't win the war.

Kathleen: So then you came back here. Now when you came back here to go to school, were you going for an Education degree?

Dean Nicholson: Right. Everybody, of course the GI Bill was a savior for a lot of us at that time and I wanted to play basketball and the degree was the end result. I don't think I saw that as a real purpose right away, but a couple of years down the road it certainly became one.

Kathleen: So the big thing for you was sports? At that time then, when you came back, were you playing for your father?

Dean Nicholson: Right.

Kathleen: Tell me what that was like?
Dean Nicholson: My dad was, well, that has its drawbacks, but it gave me a great deal of satisfaction. My father passed away in '67. He had done so much for me, both he and my mother, and I was glad to be able to come back and contribute. We had four real good years, so I felt a lot of pride in that. I was glad to be able to help my dad out, so to speak.

Kathleen: Was it then later on that the pavilion was named after him?

Dean Nicholson: '58, I think the building was dedicated. We used to play all our games in Morgan Junior High School. That was where it was at for everybody in town at that time. We turned out in the college gym, which is the present student union building. That is where my career took place and all the others on those teams. In '58 this building was dedicated and that was a great tribute to my father.

Kathleen: That's great. So he was not alive at the time?

Dean Nicholson: Oh yes.

Kathleen: Oh, he was alive?

Dean Nicholson: Yes. He coached until '64. He came here in '29 and coached until 1964. I came over in the fall of '64 and coached until 1990. We had it in the family a lot of years.

Kathleen: Right. What was the campus like when you were a student as to when you were a faculty member? What were the biggest changes?

Dean Nicholson: Well, of course the northern end of the campus didn't exist at that time. The football field was down where Boullion and the Education Building are now. There was a Vet-ville for all the married vets that came back. That was up on the other side of the tracks. It was a much smaller campus and a much cozier campus, I guess you could say, but there've been a lot of improvements. The pavilion was certainly one of them and then the new library; big change.

Kathleen: Do you think that with the change we've lost some of our hometown appeal or lost some of our community spirit?

Dean Nicholson: Well, the school was much smaller. I don't know exactly what the student body was. I would guess it was around 1500 at that time. Then it grew progressively, it grew very fast. I think with the growth of a school you lose a little bit of the familiarity and you know everybody on campus and certainly knew everybody in town, but it's still a great atmosphere and I think there's still a real good relationship, for the most part, on campus.

Kathleen: You came back to teach in what year?

Dean Nicholson: '64. I graduated in 1950 and took a job as a Math teacher and a basketball coach at Puyallup High School. I taught and coached there for 14 years and then came back to Central in 1964.

Kathleen: What did that feel like, coming back?

Dean Nicholson: A lot of nostalgia and I'd always had a warm spot in my heart for Central and Ellensburg. I was raised here and went to school here so it had a lot of meaning for me.

Kathleen: Okay. What was your philosophy when you were a coach? Did you have a certain philosophy that you went with?
Dean Nicholson: I got my basics from my father who I played for and then learned from other coaches in the profession and everybody copied. In those days John Wooden was the god. Everybody took as much as they could from John Wooden I think. Bob Boyd at Seattle University and Lionel Purcell were two that I learned a lot from. It's pretty basic. I think I was defensively oriented as a coach and everybody wants the team to play together and play hard. Those are the two cornerstones.

Kathleen: How many championships did you take your team to?

Dean Nicholson: Well, you're going to get me mulling here. I think we won the district title 22 times and went back to Kansas City 22 times. We were in 6 Final Fours, which is a record of our players and our fans, our program can be extremely proud of.

Kathleen: Terrific. Well now you have your own dedication out here. You have your own street. How does that make you feel?

Dean Nicholson: Well, that was a surprise and good friends in Ellensburg spearheaded that. I thank them for that. It has special meaning for me because it does run in front of Nicholson Pavilion so that was a real nice touch and my wife and I and family deeply appreciate it.

Kathleen: Great. Where do you think the university should head, first of all in sports? Where should our sports programs head?

Dean Nicholson: I've been gone two years, so I don't have a real current looks at things and I've been in other involvements. I don't really know. We have a history of NAIA, but talking with some of the other coaches I know there's the NCAA, Division II is a definite possibility now and the NAIA is going through changes also, but I can't really speak to that with very much expertise.

Kathleen: Are we doing a good job as a university as far as education goes, or do we need to branch out and diversify, in your opinion?

Dean Nicholson: Well, I go back and I'm probably not qualified to speak on that level either, but I go back to when Central Washington State College and then it became a university and before that going all the way back to a Normal School. It was basically a teacher's college and I think the change of times has opened up the liberal arts program and I think it's all for the better, but I'd personally like to see Central maintain a strong Education program and continue to train teachers and coaches.

Kathleen: Do you have any questions Jeff?

Jeff: I've got a couple. To get you thinking back, when you were a student and then you came back later as a faculty member, is it like there were two Centrals? You were gone for 14 years. Does it seem like there were two schools or was there still the Central that you remembered as a student on campus?

Dean Nicholson: Oh, there were a lot of basic core things that still remained, but of course there was tremendous change. My dad coached all the time when I was in Puyallup so I kept in close contact with Central and knew a lot of the players and some of my players from Puyallup came back over here and played on my first team at Central in 1964-65. I was blessed to have two players who had played for me at Puyallup; Bill Kelly, who went on to his own great coaching career, and Jim Clifton who is the present basketball coach and a very successful one at Puyallup High School. That was a real pleasure for me also, but I don't know whether I've answered your question or not, but there were still some similarities, but tremendous change.

Jeff: You were here through all the changes of Central's name from Normal to the State College to the university?
Dean Nicholson: Oh, my dad moved here in 1929. I was three years old at the time. It was a Normal School at that time and so I wasn't a student through all those changes, but I was here in town.

Kathleen: You were College of Education then when you first came?

Dean Nicholson: In '46 through '50 it was Central Washington College of Education, from whence came Sweesy.

Kathleen: Right.

Jeff: What position did you play?

Dean Nicholson: I was a guard.

Jeff: What was your number?

Dean Nicholson: Huh. I think I wore different numbers. I remember 10 and I looked in a picture out in the hall and I had 9 on, so I evidently wore that unless it was a rescue of that jersey for the picture.

Jeff: Okay, now this tape is going to be pressed to a video disk. We're going to put a copy of this finished product into a time capsule which will be sunk into Edison Plaza. One hundred years from now they're going to open it up. Anything you'd like to say to the people 100 years from now, either at Central or even family members?

Dean Nicholson: Wow. [Laughing] I hope everything is going well and we still have our environment and the ozone layer hasn't been pierced. I hope everybody is still enjoying the same type of life, with a lot of changes obviously, that we were able to in my time.

Jeff: Okay. Do you have any wishes for Central in its next 100 years?

Dean Nicholson: Oh, just to continue to do a good solid job. I'm definitely interested in the Physical Education end of it and the athletics, but also I hope it continues to maintain its health as a fine academic institution.

Jeff: The last thing I'd like you to do is look right into the lens of the camera here.

Kathleen: Ignore me now.

Jeff: Ignore Kathleen. She's off. Give Central any birthday salutation you'd like to do and then if you would end that thought with "Happy Birthday Central."

Dean Nicholson: To the faculty, the people of Ellensburg, the students, everybody connected with the university, I wish you well. I hope things are going well and Happy Birthday Central.

Jeff: Great.

Kathleen: Terrific.

Jeff: Super.

Dean Nicholson: I appreciate the opportunity to do this.
[End of interview]