

Oral History: Ronald L. Culbertson

Faculty 1973 – 2009

Head of Middle School 1986 – 2009

Recorded: June 19, 2009

Interviewed by Nancy Gilpin

Culbertson Discusses the Evolution of the Middle School Building, from the Original Open Space to the Modern, Two-Story Building

Gilpin: Could you give us some insights on the open classroom experiment here at school? We had a couple of experiments and that was one of them.

Culbertson: Absolutely. When the building was built in 1972, it was built using what was then sort of the current trend of having an open space. We always used to laugh and say the Middle School was built like an A&P-ish supermarket. It had no walls at all, except for the science labs, and a center core of the Middle School had teacher offices and the foreign language lab; otherwise everything was wide open and I can't tell you that my first reaction was a very good one to it, and actually it was really quite an unreasonable situation for a school as traditional as Gilman.

However, I've always said that I thought the open space was responsible for creating an incredibly open community, and that if we had never had open space the kind of atmosphere and relationships between the adults here would never have been the same. It really allowed us to work together. It forced us to be able to interact with other people and it really helped us as a young faculty to come together and figure out exactly the kinds of things we wanted to do. But, it was quite an amazing situation. I've been known to be loud at one point or another and I would be teaching in my corner classroom, and I would say something funny and from across the building there'd be laughter, because they were hearing all my jokes also. It was quite an amazing place.

We tried to do all kinds of flexible groupings so that there'd be a sort of a core group—it could have been a large group—and then we broke those into separate groups and teachers would do those separate groupings. We'd rotate those groups around. We did a lot of different kinds of work trying to make open space do what it was supposed to do. It was good fun as a young group; it was a fun place to be.

But very quickly we realized it wasn't the kind of place we wanted and I'd say by 1975, we began to put up partitions and walls to separate the big spaces into classrooms. We took the lockers and created a center media center surrounded by lockers so it actually had walls. Previous to that time, the kids were running through the media center to get from one side of the building to the next. Drove poor Charlotte Taggart, our librarian, right up the wall. And then we began putting in partitions. Soon we had—part of the rooms were walled off, and of course it didn't really work because the air handling system wasn't

created to have separate rooms, and so there would be rooms where there was just intake and no outtake, or vice versa.

I can remember it was sort of interesting because in my room if the other corner room wanted to show a movie or a video or something, they'd turn off their lights, but it also turned off the lights in my room as well. And the building was just never made to do that. So, it was a tough time in terms of making that transition from the open space and what that meant to a more formal traditional setting. It was a difficult time that way.

Gilpin: When did that all change, when they rebuilt the school? Is that when it really—

Culbertson: It was pretty interesting. Mr. Montgomery had taken over as the Headmaster and he called me up to his office one week and he said, "I'm tired of you whining and complaining about the building and about things that don't work or things that do work. Just get on with it." And I said, "That you, Mr. Montgomery. I'm really glad you said that—" because there had been talk about doing something and so this was really going to settle us down and I said, "You've heard the last from me. You'll never hear me complain again. We'll make do because Gilman is not about bricks and mortar and rooms."

Anyway, the next day he called me up. I came up to his office and he said, "Oh, never mind." He said, "We've decided to knock down the building and build a new one." [Laughter] And I thought, "Wow. That was easy." So, that was 1992. Ninety-three, we began the planning. And, of course this time the approach that we took was a very different approach. When the first building was built, of course there was no Middle School; there was no Middle School staff. The only people that we involved were trustees and Mr. Tickner in designing the building.

But, the second time around, of course, we were—the faculty was intimately involved in the construction and design of the building. So, we had meetings all through the year where we were talking about what we wanted. We met with architects. They designed various kinds of patterns that we would argue about and talk about and actually, I think the second time around we got it right and we opened the building in '94 to rave reviews. And now fifteen years later, I think it's safe to say that we really did a good job of putting the next one up.

Gilpin: So, it's a process of learning. You go through and sort of see what works and what doesn't work and so forth.

Culbertson: Absolutely.