

Obama Kansas Heritage Project

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Interviewer: Teresa Baumgartner

Interviewee: Margaret Shirk

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Run time: [36:09]

Q. -- For, uh, for your husband, so. Are we ready? [We're ready.]
Okay. So, umm, we'll just start by -- if you can say for the
camera your name, your age, the date - it's April 24th -- and
where we are.

MS. Okay. I'm -- I'm at the El Dorado Junior College, but I'm
Margaret Shirk, or Mrs. David L. Shirk. My birthday is August
the 18th, 1917, and today's date is April the --

Q. The 24th.

MS. -- 24th, 2003. I mean, 2013.

Q. Good. And -- and since, also, you're sharing David's memories,
would you also just say for us his full name and his birth date?

MS. His full name was David Lee Shirk, and his birth date was
November 14th, 1915.

Q. And what year did he graduate from El Dorado High School?

MS. 1935.

Q. Excellent. Okay. So where were you both born? And I'll just ask you that first. Where were you -- where were you born and raised, and where was your husband born and raised?

MS. I was born and raised in Lawrence, Kansas, where I still live. My grandfather came there from Missouri with teacher -- school teacher in Missouri during the Civil War. They shot a hole through his jacket, and he started moving. He lived there. My father was born right where I live, and I was born right where I live, and I still live there.

Q. Wow.

MS. David was [sound of audio crackling] -- well, he was born in Salina, Kansas, but beyond that, they moved a lot. And when -- when he was in the second grade, he lived in five states, so I couldn't begin to tell you where all he's been.

Q. How do you remember -- do you -- do you know how old he was when they moved to El Dorado, approximately?

MS. How old he was?

Q. Mm-hmm.

MS. Well, I think he was -- he started, I think, in the second grade after he had moved five times.

Q. Okay. So when and how did you two meet?

MS. Well, we met -- I went to -- I graduated from Lawrence High School in the class of '35, and I was attending KU, and he was

attending KU. Of course, he was a football player. I did not know him at that point, but he -- when he finished his senior year playing football, he had to work, and he worked three jobs to even go to school, so he would -- worked at the filling station that my father and I bought gasoline and had our tires worked on. He put gas in my car the Christmas after he was through playing football, and it was Christmas vacation.

Everybody was gone, so we decided to have a date. And so that's how I met him.

Q. That's a lovely story. (Laughs.)

MS. He -- I mean, he was -- he could have been my football hero, but I mean, he wasn't. I met him there, but of course, I watched him play all the time.

Q. You just didn't know that he was going to be --

MS. I did not.

Q. -- Your future husband -- or that he was your future husband?

MS. Yeah.

Q. Well, since you were talking about his working three jobs to be in school, and since you were here today to give a scholarship to the Rotary Club in, in your husband's memory, let's just start with that. Can you tell the story? Tell us the story of how that scholarship came to be, and what happened to him, and why now you wanted to come back and remember that.

MS. Well, the Rotary Club and I -- probably through Jack Bond, but anyway, that was an attorney here at that time, but anyway, he

was -- he -- he wanted -- he was a good football player in high school, and he went to Citizens' Military Training Camp in Fort Leavenworth, I think probably just to save money, put food on the table for the rest of the family. But anyway, Ad Lindsey, the football coach from KU, happened to be up there to train some of them, you know, for physical education and all, and he had heard about David anyway. And then, I think he was a friend of Jack Bond's too maybe, but he said, "Would you like to come and play football for KU?" And David said, "I'd love to play football, but I have no way of coming to KU," and so that was dropped.

So he came back home, and -- and I think probably through Jack Bond -- the Rotary Club contacted him and said that they would give him a loan of \$60 to buy a few clothes to come, and you know, he'd -- I mean, at that point, there were no scholarships. You had to pay all of your expenses -- all of your expenses -- your matriculation, your everything: books, board and room, everything. So he said, "I wouldn't have any way of going to KU," but Jack -- I mean, the Rotary Club said, "Well, this \$60 would help. If you want to try to go, we'll give you the \$60 loan if you will pay it back in five years with no interest." So they gave him this loan, and he kept it with him all the time, had -- had all his life, and so he said, "Well, I will attempt to do that."

So he -- he bought a few clothes, put them in a paper sack, and got to Lawrence someday, I don't know. He probably thumbed his way, I don't know. But anyway, he got to KU, and he made the team, and from there on he just made it.

But he had -- they said they would find him a job, you know, that was in -- that would be what now they'd give you a paid scholarship, but then, he said, "Well, we will try to find you a job." Well, he got three jobs, yeah, on his own. He got one that they found, and then two others that he found for himself.

He was having -- he was taking three -- had three jobs, going to school, playing football, going to class, never missing a class, and he did that all through school, and got his first degree, then he got his master's. He -- he just did it.

Q. What were his degrees in?

MS. What?

Q. What were his degrees in?

MS. Oh, well, his first degree was in just --

Q. Liberal arts?

MS. What?

Q. Liberal arts?

MS. Well, it was in just a college, but he had to go a fifth year to get an education so he could teach. And then, he got -- his other degree was in education, master's, but entomology really is what he studied until he got into the physical education part.

Q. My son-in-law is an entomologist, which has nothing to do with this, but --

MS. Well --

Q. -- I find that interesting.

MS. The instructor with entomology wanted him to stay with it, but when they played a football game in Washington D.C, she told him to go to see something, and he went down. He said he went down in the basement of some building, and saw all these stuffy old bugs, and things, and he said that was enough, 'cause he was an outdoor person anyway. So he came home, and that's when he decided, and Dr. Allen -- Phog Allen said, "You need to really be a coach," so that's when he took his education.

Q. So he didn't just have a relationship with the football coach, but also with Phog Allen?

MS. Oh, Phog Allen was at our wedding. He was a real good friend of David's, and so was Dr. Naismith, the inventor of basketball. He said that David was -- well, he, he said he was -- he gave him, David a picture of himself, and wrote on it to David, and so did Dr. Allen. But anyway, he thought a lot of David, and he performed. He was -- Dr. Naismith, you know, was a minister, he was a doctor, and he was also a student of physical education.

Q. Interesting.

MS. And he was also a personal friend of our family. He married my aunt and uncle in our house when I was five years old, the house that I live in yet now, and I was flower girl. I was five years

old. (Laughs.) So his -- his children and my aunts and uncles went to high school together, and all through school.

Q. Okay. So you would say both Phog Allen and Dr. Naismith were sort of mentors to your husband -- mentors and friends? They, they inspired him --

MS. Oh, yeah.

Q. -- And helped him along the way?

MS. Sure. Oh, Dr. Allen thought that he should be a coach from the get-go. He said that David was good with kids, and students, and -- yeah.

Q. So -- well, and you did say in his coaching career, he taught three -- or he coached three years at Augusta High School, and that was at the time that Madelyn Payne, the President's grandmother --

MS. Grandmother.

Q. That was at the time she was a student there. Tell me a little about that.

MS. Well, he didn't, of course, have her, but she was in school there, because at that time -- because he taught physical education to boys, and of course, he didn't have her, but she was there in school, and he knew who she was, and all. And of course, he knew Obama's grandfather, because he was in his high school class.

Q. Right. Well, if he knew -- it's interesting that he knew her. She must have stood out in some way when he was coaching there.

Did he ever say why -- why she came -- why he would have even known who she was if he didn't teach her?

MS. Well, no, but he knew the family. Augusta isn't that big. You know all the family. And she had a sister and so forth that was in school. No, at that time, he didn't know anything about that connection, but he knew the family, and so forth.

Q. Okay. And were you married then? Were you married at that time to each other?

MS. Yes. Well, we were married in 1940.

Q. Okay.

MS. And then, he went to Augusta in 1940 to '43, and then went to the service for four and a half years. He was drafted.

Q. And of what branch did he serve in, and where?

MS. Army. Army.

Q. Army. And he was where during the war?

MS. Well, he was all over, but he was at Fort Benning. We were - we lived at Fort Benning for a while, and then he got -- when he was discharged, he was a captain.

Q. Okay. So did he go in at the, sort of, at the end of the war, or after World War II, or --?

MS. Well, he went in in 1943.

Q. Okay. So --

MS. I mean, he was drafted in 1943.

Q. Right, right, right, but he didn't have to go overseas?

MS. Well, he was -- yes, he was supposed to, and was all ready to go, but he had a spinal fusion in the service, and that kept him on stateside for a while, but then he got his orders to go, and, but some way, he didn't ever. I mean, it was too late, I guess, and so forth, but yeah, he -- he did get his orders. And had -- he was all packed. In fact, I think his trunk already went over but without him. But, anyway --

Q. Okay. Well, that's very interesting, too. So if you lived in Augusta for three years during that time period, did you -- and you knew Madelyn's family, the Payne's, did you socialize with them, or go to church with them?

MS. With who?

Q. With Madelyn's family.

MS. Oh, no, not to my knowledge.

Q. Just -- just like you wouldn't know who somebody is in your community?

MS. Sure, sure.

Q. Okay. Well, let's back up a little bit then. I just thought while we were talking about coaching, that would be a good time to bring in that connection, but your -- your husband grew up in El Dorado. You said he came in the second grade. What are some of the most memorable things that he shared with you and with his daughters about what it was like to grow up in El Dorado during that time period?

MS. Well, he never talked about it. He never talked about his past at all, and I never insisted.

Q. Do you think that was because the family was poor?

MS. Well, no. I mean, I really don't know, because he and his family -- he had an aunt that had a son that was his age that died after he was in college with a kidney infection, but beyond that, his family really -- he had a brother that was -- went to the service, and never came home, you know, finally married a girl in California, and he never saw him much, or -- his family really didn't -- he didn't connect with them too much, because when he left, he left. And, and of course, you know, if you don't have any money, you don't -- you can't call, and you don't write, you don't have time. He was -- had three jobs and all, and so really, I never heard much about it. And, course, they came when he graduated to our house and stayed. He, and his mother, and sister -- one sister, but beyond that, they didn't even come to our wedding, so I just -- I don't know why.

Q. So he had a -- well, customs were different during that time period, too. I know that, but he had a brother and a sister?

MS. He had two sisters, and a brother, and two half-brothers.

Q. And, but he was the only one of all those siblings to go to college? Is that right?

MS. He was the only one.

Q. And it was because he could play football and the Rotary Club gave him that scholarship?

MS. Yeah. I mean, you know, that's the only way he would have gone to college --

Q. Mm-hmm.

MS. -- was because of that scholar- -- that \$60 that they loaned him.

Q. Mm-hmm. So, okay. Well, he's in high school now. I assume he probably didn't know Stanley Dunham until he was in high school, or did they go to school -- did they go to grade school together, or anything like that?

MS. Who?

Q. Your husband, David, and Stanley Dunham, the President's grandfather.

MS. Oh, yeah. Well, I don't know about that, but they did go to high school together.

Q. Mm-hmm.

MS. Yeah.

Q. So you know some things about -- oh, things that your husband told you about Stanley as a student, and can you share any memories that you can rem- -- that he shared with you about -- about Stanley?

MS. Oh, no. I mean, when we were in Hawaii, and we were house-sitting over there, when David hurt -- and fell off the roof, and he came to see us, and that's the only time that I ever heard about him, really. I mean, David didn't talk too much about people, you know --

Q. Mm-hmm.

MS. -- unless they were his really good friends.

Q. But that visit, or that connection, in Hawaii brought back -- he was sharing his memories?

MS. Yeah.

Q. Well, I have to ask you, because you mentioned it, and lots of adolescent boys get in trouble in high school.

MS. Yeah.

Q. What about -- he didn't graduate with his class?

MS. No. Stanley -- and this was in the newspaper at one point. Stanley some way slapped the principal. (Laughs.) I don't know why, but then he later graduated, but not with my husband's class, but that was -- that's when he should have graduated was in our class. But that was never brought up anymore that I'd ever heard. But then, when we were in Hawaii, he spent a whole day with us. He was real charming and nice.

Q. So how did you know even that he was in Hawaii? How did you make -- how did you guys make that connection when you were house-sitting?

MS. Well, I -- I don't know, probably Stanley found it out through somebody in El Dorado. I don't know, because we weren't -- he wasn't communicating with him or anything, but probably through the El Dorado Times or something.

Q. Mm-hmm.

MS. I really don't know.

Q. So he spent a whole day with you. What did you do?

MS. Well, he came and stayed at the house with us, because my husband, you know, couldn't do anything. He'd -- he'd broke, I mean, he'd hurt his leg, and was -- well, the doctor said, "He can go over there and rest," he said, and I -- he gave me a doctor's name over there, but he said, "Just -- just keep off of it." And he couldn't really walk very good, or anything, but we just stayed at home, and went out to eat lunch, I think, but stayed in the car. And of course, we could use these people's car and everything, so -- and then, of course, Stanley had his car, so we went out to eat at noon, and then, and we didn't do a thing but just talk, they did.

Q. Mm-hmm. Well, what did they talk about?

MS. You know, I don't know. I probably didn't listen too good.

(Laughs.)

Q. But you remembered a couple of things about Stanley that Stanley said about his own family?

MS. Yeah. No, he didn't. Oh, well, he did tell us about this boy that was living with him that was in high school at that point, and he said, "He is really a smart kid," and he said, "I think he'll go a long ways," and that's all he said. He was just saying how nice he was, and all. He said, "Our daughter's a little different," but he said, "He's a real nice boy." And I think his daughter was away from home at that point. So anyway,

he was telling us about this boy, but we did not get to meet him.

Q. Did you get to meet Madelyn then, or did you see her that -- when you were in Hawaii?

MS. No.

Q. No. So you spent that day --

MS. She was working.

Q. Okay.

MS. I mean, she was in -- she worked in a bank over there.

Q. Mm-hmm.

MS. I think she was Vice President or something. Anyway, she had a pretty good job.

Q. Mm-hmm. Well, Stanley turned out to be a prophet, I guess. "He'll go far," if he said that.

MS. Yeah, yeah.

Q. Let's see. After that visit, did you -- did David and Stanley stay in touch at all?

MS. No, no. I mean, that was -- you know, our lives were different, and we just -- but he was very nice while we were over there.

Q. So what year did your husband pass away?

MS. Beg pardon?

Q. When did your husband pass away?

MS. Oh, in 2009.

Q. So he was still living when Barack Obama became President for his first term? That was in 2008.

MS. Oh, well, then he would have been, because he -- he passed away in November the 2nd of 2009. If he'd have lived, I

think -- well, until the 14th, he would have been 94. So --

Q. I see. So -- but was he -- do you know if he was aware that that was the same person?

MS. Oh, yeah.

Q. Okay. Did he have anything to say about that?

MS. Well, my husband had his mind until the very last.

Q. Uh-huh. So did you talk about it at all?

MS. It was just that he'd broke his hip twice, is what happened to him.

Q. Well, that's a blessing that he -- not that he broke his hip, excuse me, but a blessing that his mind was sharp.

MS. Yeah. Oh, I know. Yeah.

Q. Did you talk at all about how interesting it was that Barack Obama was Stanley Dunham's grandson, or --?

MS. No, I don't think so.

Q. Okay. Um. Let's see. Um. We've --

MS. We might have, you know, I don't know. But his interests were basketball. That's the main thing we talked about, cause he went to every basketball game. I took him in a wheelchair his last two years, and I took him to all the basketball games, and if he'd have lived about four more days, I'd have taken him to the first game in 2009.

Q. Ah. (Laughs.)

MS. He was looking forward to it.

Q. Well, and he had a long, successful coaching career, too, didn't he?

MS. Oh, yeah, sure. That's all he did.

Q. He coached a lot? Mm-hmm. He must have loved it.

MS. Administrator, coach, and teacher.

Q. Okay. Is there anything else -- we've heard a lot from people about growing up during the Depression, and the war years, and how -- what an influence that was on their lives. Is there -- are there anything from that time period that -- anything from that time period that stands out in your memory that would have been an important influence?

MS. In his life?

Q. In his life, or in yours.

MS. Well, his -- his life -- I mean, he didn't -- they didn't have anything. Well, he lived in a boxcar, and they didn't have food for one day. They'd get -- go down and get free buttermilk, and that's all they had one day a week. And his father worked on the railroad if they had a job, and so it was just touch-and-go, really. They had beans, and maybe a little pork once in a while in it. I mean, they really were like -- Clarence Kerns, you know him? He's --

Q. Mm-hmm.

MS. Well, he was -- he was one of David's best friends. He could tell you everything about him, and he said that he was the poorest of the poor.

Q. Wow.

MS. So -- and then, they'd go, and, and the kids would, you know, make faces, and do that to the engineers on the trains, and they'd throw coal to the kids, and the kids would pick it up, and that's the only fuel they had to stay warm and to heat with, or to cook with. I mean, he grew up poor, and that's why I started this scholarship. I just -- you know, if you could change somebody's life like his was changed, it would mean a lot.

Q. And the scholarship is -- do you want to maybe finish by telling us what -- what -- what -- what is -- what are the terms of the scholarship? Who does it go to, and what do they have to do?

MS. It doesn't necessarily go to the smartest, because they have other avenues to get scholarships. This is supposedly to help the poor people.

Q. And so students write --

MS. The ones that need it.

Q. Mm-hmm.

MS. The neediest people.

Q. Okay.

MS. Of course, now, it's different than it was then. I realize that. The poor people now have it easy compared to what my

husband had. I know that, but then, still, they're too poor to go to college.

Q. Mm-hmm.

MS. And if they can have a little bit of money to start college with, it --

Q. Sure. Well, are there any -- this might be an appropriate question since you just gave two young people a scholarship to start their education -- their higher education: Are there are words of wisdom you'd pass along to -- to the students who receive those scholarships?

MS. Any what?

Q. Any words of wisdom you would -- you would like to give those students who get the scholarships?

MS. Well, yes. I would like to see if -- I mean, I would hope that they would some way pay part of it back, at least. I don't know the terms that the Rotary Club gave them, but David said that he wanted them -- that it was to be paid back in five years with no interest. I have no clue what the Rotary Club did to this --

Q. Mm-hmm.

MS. -- But I would hope that in some way they would pay something back someday.

Q. And I don't know if you said for the camera, David did pay back the scholarship in five years?

MS. Yes.

Q. Your husband paid the scholarship back.

MS. Yes, yes. And he can -- he wrote on the back of it how he paid it, \$10 at a time, and so forth, and then I gave him back that note.

Q. So now the Rotary Club in El Dorado has the receipt from that original scholarship?

MS. They have it.

Q. Mm-hmm. I think that's wonderful.

MS. I didn't -- I mean, he kept it all the time because it meant so much to him.

Q. Mm-hmm.

MS. And so when -- when I decided to do this, I said, "Would --," I called, and I said, "Would you like to have a -- a note that you gave -- that the Rotary Club gave my husband when he graduated from high school," and they said, "We've never done that", and I said, "Well, I beg your pardon, but I have a note that you gave my husband in 1935." And they were -- they couldn't believe it. I said, "Well, I have it, and you can have it if you want it, because --," I said, "-- I really don't need it now." So they -- they accepted it, and realized that they did do it, but she said they had never done it before, or since, I guess.

Q. So is there anything -- any memory, or story, that you were thinking about sharing that I haven't asked you about? Any --

MS. Oh, not really, but I'm glad to do it all. I want to pay back, if I can, some of the things that -- I've been blessed in a lot of ways, and so --

Q. Well, just sharing your experiences is a --

MS. So I just want to --

Q. -- in addition to the scholarship is an important way of doing that. And those two students will become contributing members to society, and that's a way of paying back, too, huh?

MS. Well, yes, and I volunteer a lot with --

Q. Mm-hmm.

MS. And, of course, I worked at the Alumni Office at KU for 50 years, and volunteered there, and the endowment, too, sometimes. David and I both -- he would -- he would make trips to Kansas City to pick up people all during commencement, and everything, and to the athletic department. We have volunteered more at KU than you can believe.

Q. Well, what you do in your free-time says a lot about what is important to you, and I would say education has been an important thing--

MS. Yeah.

Q. -- To both you and your husband.

MS. But I just got my degree two years ago.

Q. Tell us about that.

MS. You know why? I mean, officially got my degree. I graduated in '35, walked down the hill. I was in the program and everything, but I had a job at the Board of Trade in Kansas City the next day, and I didn't go pick up my diploma, therefore, they never put me in their records as a graduate. (Laughs.) And we were

talking -- my son-in-law and I were talking with the -- when he was in the legislature at that time, and he said -- I mean, we were talking, and the fellow that he was talking to asked me, he said, "Did you graduate from KU?" And I said, "Well, I -- I walked down the hill, and I was in the program, and I think I did, but I didn't ever pick up my diploma," and he said, "What?" And I said, "No, I didn't," and he said, "Well." I said, "I always thought I'd go back, and see what I'd have to take to catch up, you know, and make it official." He said, "Well," and then that was dropped. And that was about four years ago, or so, or five.

And so he and my son-in-law decided that they'd find out, because he worked with the college. The other guy worked with the college at that time, and the college, they -- he said that they took one of their women, and they put her on my name. Took her three months to figure out why I didn't get a diploma, and they couldn't find any reason, so -- (laughs) -- so they finally gave me my diploma. (Laughs.)

Q. Well, good for them.

MS. But the next -- the next week in the paper -- it was in the Lawrence paper how if you didn't pick up your diploma in 10 years, you had to take some more classes.

Q. Well, I'm out of luck then, because I never picked up my KU diploma either.

MS. Oh!

Q. I have it that I graduated on my transcript though.

MS. Well, but so what? I did, too, but I mean, I never needed a diploma, so I didn't pick it up. So see, I'm not any dumber than you are. (Laughs.) I thought I was pretty stupid, personally. Well, I'm glad to know there's a few, but I know my neighbor, she has two kids, and they're, you know, young now, and they -- neither one of them picked up theirs. And I said, "Now, look, Eileen. You got to get them their diploma, because," I said, "they maybe don't need it now, but someday, they might." And I was never listed as a -- a C '39, I was always just a '39. Now, I'm a C '39.

Q. Class of, I guess. Graduating class of 1939. Well, congratulations on getting your diploma, and thank you so much for sharing those memories with us, and thank you for -- for giving back to the community where your husband grew up with these scholarships.

MS. Well, I know he'd be pleased, and I'm pleased to be able to give it to you.

Q. I wish we could have met him, but you are a fabulous representative of, of him, so thank you very much.

MS. But you better go get your diploma.

Q. Oh, it's too late. It's been more than 10 years. (Laughs.)

MS. She doesn't wanna. You don't want to take any more classes.

Q. Besides, I managed to get my master's degree without having a diploma saying I had my bachelor's degree.

MS. Really?

Q. Yeah.

MS. How are you --?

Q. Well, it says on my transcript that I graduated.

MS. Yeah.

Q. So I always thought, well -- and I got a teaching job, and I graduated in December, so I didn't walk down the hill, and I always regretted that.

MS. Oh, I walked down the hill.

Q. I made both my daughters walk down. You turned that off, didn't you? [No.]

Q. No? Oh.

MS. I walked down the hill, and I was in the program, and everything.

Q. I made both my daughters walk down the hill, because I wished I had, but I was working by then, and --

MS. Well, I worked at the Board of Trade, and I eventually sold stock and bonds, and I'm still in the stock market.

Q. Are you? My brother-in-law --

MS. That's probably why you can get this money.

Q. My brother-in-law is a stockbroker in Lawrence.

MS. What?

Q. My brother-in-law is a stockbroker in Lawrence.

MS. Who's that?

Q. Steve Edmonds.

MS. Oh, I know him. Your brother-in-law?

Q. Yes.

MS. Oh, for heaven's sake. Yeah, I know him.

Q. Ah.

MS. I mean, I've known the Edmonds' for a long time.

Q. Well, yeah, because his dad had a grocery store there.

MS. I know it, and the -- Norman Edmonds was in my high school class.

Q. And, yeah. Norman and Wanda were great people.

MS. And -- and the girl, Barbara -- Barbara Edmonds, that's Norman's sister.

Q. I didn't know her.

MS. Well, she sang at my wedding.

Q. Oh! So -- but -- but I know the Edmonds boys, because the oldest one married my oldest sister.

MS. Well --

Q. So -- well, thank you so much.

MS. Okay.

Q. This has just been delightful. I'm so glad you came down from Lawrence for the day for this. And thank you, too, Nancy.

[END]

[Note: Nancy is Margaret's daughter.]