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Karen Hasara Memoir

Hasara, Karen

Interview and memoir
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UIS Alumni Sage Society

Hasara, former state legislator and Mayor of Springfield, was the second person to register for classes at the newly created Sangamon State University in 1970, working for a Psychology degree and a teaching certificate to obtain her goal of becoming a teacher. Class credits were in quarters, grades were only pass/fail, classes were small (10-20), professors were cooperative, and the atmosphere was casual and easy going. She attended a class on Women's Liberation and two of her professors were Judy Everson and Jackie Jackson. Karen returned for a legal studies degree in the early 90s and saw many changes at SSU from the early days.

Interview by Drinda O'Connor, 2009

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Narrator: Karen Hasara
Date: August 11, 2009
Place: Springfield, IL
Interviewer: Drinda O'Connor

Q. Hello, my name is Drinda O'Connor and I have the distinct pleasure today to interview Karen Hasara. Karen is a former mayor of Springfield, a legislator, both house and senate. I could go on and on, but we'll let her talk about some of her accomplishments later on as we're getting started. Karen, thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed today.

A. You're welcome, looking forward to it.

Q. Good. Prior to attending Sangamon State, what was the extent of any of your post secondary education?

A. Well, I had enough credits obviously to get into the university, so I pretty much had two years' worth of credits. I'd gone to Marquette University for one year. I went to Springfield College in Illinois for a semester and then picked up the remaining credits that I needed at Lincoln Land.

Q. I see. What circumstances prompted you to apply to Sangamon State? What made you want to come attend this new college?

A. Well I've always said as I remember it, I was the second person in line to register at Sangamon State University. I wanted to teach school, so I wanted a teaching certificate and really did not have an opportunity to finish my college education because of my family circumstances. So I really looked forward to Sangamon State opening and, of course, it was big talk of the town here. And so as fast as I could, I got down to register to be a student so I could teach school, which I ended up doing.

Q. So you were in the first graduating class?

A. I was.

Q. How exciting looking back.

A. It really was. There were a lot of us. The average age at that time was 29, and that's exactly how old I was at the time.

Q. What years did you attend? Did you go full time or were you a part time student?

A. I went full time. I took some day classes and some night classes. I started obviously in the fall of 1970 when it opened and graduated in the spring of 1972, so right along with my class.

Q. And what was your degree in?

A. My degree was in psychology. There was not a major in elementary education, but I had the credits to get a teaching certificate. So that's really what I was after. But the psychology certainly has come in handy both at the time and later in life. In fact, I always tell people if they're not sure of what they want to major in, psychology fits well with whatever you do in life.

Q. That's an excellent point. So you were married at the time and had children? Tell me their ages.

A. Right. I had four very young children ranging in age from three to eight. And my mother was a valuable asset and really wanted me to finish my degree. So she told me she would help me a lot, which she did. And then I always took at least one night class, so my husband was home in the evening and that was helpful, too.

Q. So perhaps you weren't able to be as involved in the extracurricular activities then because of having your children, such young children, and going to school full time?

A. Right, there and I was probably the norm at that time. Or since the average age was 29, I really don't remember a lot of extracurricular activities. And of course, with four small children at home, I really didn't participate in any. But it seems to me from my memory that that was pretty typical at the time because most of us were either raising a family and/or working and were just so happy to have the opportunity in Springfield to get a college degree.

Q. Can you remember your initial impressions of the campus or any of your classes? Can you remember your first day or your first week, something that you could talk to me about?

A. Well, it was very, very different. It was, as is well known now, very different than it is out there now. It was very unstructured, which for me was perfect. You had a lot of flexibility in your class work. I had always attended class, but looking back it seems unusual the way, how loose everything was.

Q. Sure, did those impressions change over the course of your classes or was it pretty constant since you were a full time student and went for a shorter period of time?

A. I would say getting my bachelor's degree, that it stayed pretty much the same. But I did spend a quarter, and we were on the quarter system at the time, doing my student teaching at a little, three-room schoolhouse in Old Berlin, Illinois. So that, of course, took me off the campus for that quarter before I graduated. Then, in the eighties, I did go back to get a master's degree. I was elected Clerk of the Circuit Court in Sangamon County and thought having a legal studies degree would be helpful, which it was. It took me a long time to get it. I graduated in, I believe it was 1992. But things had changed a lot by then. We were on the semester system. Almost all my classes then were at night, of course, because I was working

full time during the day. And it, truthfully, was a lot harder then and a lot more structured. And I think that has continued through time and that's pretty much the way it is today, probably even more structured today than it was then.

Q. I think it's interesting that you were able to see those first years with that looser structure and then coming back for your master's and seeing maybe more of a traditional experience.

A. Very much more.

Q. Can you talk about two or three professors, good or bad? Are there folks that you remember or that you particularly liked or disliked or want to talk about?

A. Yeah, I really had a very good experience with all of the instructors. As part of this philosophy of the university, they were all very friendly and cooperative. You could become very close to your instructors. The classes were small, and they were there really to teach, and that made it a really unusual and good atmosphere. Everyone was pretty close, and they were just very, very helpful. The two that I remember the most were Jackie Jackson and Judy Everson. And they taught a class in women's liberation and you have to remember this was 1970, and it was a wonderful class. There were a lot of women who took the class. And I also remember Judy Everson and took other classes from her. One that I remember the most was called, was a speech class in persuasion. And that's the class I probably remember the most. We surveyed our class about how they felt on a certain topic. And then we gave a speech on that topic and then we surveyed them again to see if we had persuaded.

Q. How interesting.

A. Yeah, it was very interesting, and I find it so interesting now in that I did my speech on year round schools, which were almost nonexistent at the time and were for years and years. But I have always felt so strongly about year round schools and finally almost 40 years later I'm beginning to see them taking off in our own community.

Q. I think this morning's newspaper headline talked about the number of schools that are on year round.

A. That's right.

Q. We're finally getting there.

A. Right, so that's a class that I remember probably better than any other.

Q. Okay. Did you have a favorite classroom on campus or maybe downtown? I know I hear stories occasionally about the structure of the classrooms and how it was so different.

A. Right, we'd often sit on the floor in class so it was again just very, very informal, and just really a very pleasant experience. Again by the time I was working on my master's, it was a lot more traditional. I did have some classes downtown, which that was very helpful to me working downtown.

Q. Have you stayed in touch with any of the students or staff members or professors that you knew either of those times?

A. Well, I see the students off and on. I can't say I have gone out of my way to keep in touch with them. But through the Alumni and other groups in the community, I see quite a few of them off and on. And then getting my masters, Frank Kopecky was my adviser and through my paper that I did, and of course, I still see him fairly often.

Q. Some of the professors, they've all started retiring now. Lots of them have moved on.

A. Right, and Judy Everson still is active in our community and I see her. It's nice being able to live here and to have seen all the changes. I still do keep in touch with a lot of the people who were there.

Q. Where there any campus practices like pass/fail grading, or the casual clothing you could wear, or the unstructured class discussions, any things that impressed you strongly?

A. Well certainly, things that are different now and were unusual at the time were the pass/fail. We did not receive grades. You just passed or failed. Of course by the time I got my master's, that had changed. Also being on the quarter system was different, twelve week class. One of the nice things about that was if you really were having a very hard time with a class or didn't care for it much but needed it for your degree, it was over pretty fast so you could usually get through it.

Q. You mentioned the Alumni Association. As a member of that, I assume as a member of that you get back to visit the campus occasionally.

A. Actually I'm pretty involved at the campus both through the Alumni Association, I'm actually on the Chancellor's Advisory Committee and we meet and I'm also on the Development Committee. So I'm quite involved at the university and really enjoy what's going on there now. It's so good to see freshmen and sophomores and even a PhD program there. Springfield should really be proud of what's happened out there.

Q. And do I remember that you received a prestigious award a couple of years ago?

A. I did, for outstanding alum award and I'm very honored to receive that.

Q. I'm sure that was very memorable for you. We're kind of switching gears a little bit in retrospect. Can you define the value of the education you received? Having been a teacher, I would assume that you probably can articulate that value better than many of us.

A. Well I think when the university opened, the reason most of us went was to get the degree. I mean I can remember thinking, "Gosh, I'm going to be eligible to be in AAUW now." And a college degree is something no one can ever take away from you. And it's going to open lots of doors to me, which it did. So I just think the experience there has been valuable for a number of reasons. After that first wave of graduates who were there because it was really the only way to live in Springfield and get a degree, things then of course began to change. People went back to enrich their careers, to just enrich themselves in a number of ways by getting a master's degree. And even a lot of people got more than one master's degree.

So I always say I think the university changed this community so much for the better. It broadened our horizons a lot, gave us opportunities to look at things more differently than we'd ever looked at them before. And I just think Springfield has been such a better place because of it. And I look at all the careers that have been enhanced because of the opportunity. Many, many teachers, for example, who got master's degrees were able to move up the ladder in education administration that they would not have been able to do otherwise with the increases in salaries. And, of course, a benefit to our schools by having these people have the opportunity to get master's degrees in administration. And, of course, at the government level, all of the wonderful internships that have been available, many of our elected officials came into government through some of the internships in the Public Affairs Programs at the university, so its value is beyond belief.

Q. Talk a little bit specifically about how your experiences at Sangamon State influenced your career and the opportunities that you had because you were able to get your degree.

A. Well certainly, my original goal was teaching school and I did that for about five years off and on while I was raising my family. But then I did get into government and, of course, having a college degree running for office, especially as a woman, I think was very, very helpful in letting me get ahead in that respect. And then the relationships that I was able to make at the university certainly helped my career in many ways. And it also helped me be able to help other people. I had lots of interns in my office all the time I was in elected office. I loved watching other people grow and blossom in public service, which I think is so very, very important. So it certainly enhanced my ability to get ahead both in education and particularly in public office.

Q. I can't help but think that early class about the art of persuasion had to come in very handy when you served as Mayor of Springfield.

A. Yes it was very helpful to learn how to persuade people to do things, that's for sure.

Q. Another thing I often wonder about is what would have our lives have been like if we hadn't attended Sangamon State University. Have you ever thought about where would your path have gone if you were not able to complete your degree? And I'm assuming perhaps you couldn't have, with young children you might not have wanted to travel a distance to go to another university.

A. I do think about that. I believe that eventually I would have been able somewhere to get a degree, maybe in Jacksonville, which is probably the closest place to Springfield where you could have gotten a degree. So I think with my parents support I probably would have been able to do that eventually, but I believe it would not have helped me get into a political career so young as I was able to do. I was 34 when I was asked to take a seat on the County Board and that was the beginning of my political career. Women were just beginning to get into politics. Political parties were realizing that, you know, it was a good idea to have some women.

Q. So you were one of the earliest women to be elected in Sangamon County, is that correct?

A. Certainly one, Josephine Oblinger had been a board member, but I was the only women on the board by the time I got on out of 29 members. That was quite an experience.

Q. And I know we share a common friend, Marilee Lindley. Wasn't she running for office at the same time as you?

A. She and I did run together, and I believe even Marilee received two different master's degrees, if I'm correct, at Sangamon State. And she certainly has been, was a wonderful alum, and loved the university.

Q. I know we're both saddened that we were not able to interview her.

A. Yes, we certainly are.

Q. Can we talk about other connections to your career, maybe information about your master's thesis, things that you did that then related or helped further in your career?

A. Yes, actually my master's thesis became very well connected to my career. I was a legislator at the time, a full-time legislator and was working on an interesting issue about adoption. And it seemed to fit in with the legal studies, so I conversed with Frank Kopecky, my advisor, about whether that would do for the thesis topic. And he agreed it would be and so I actually wrote my thesis based on not only what was in the legislation but probably more importantly how it got passed and what all you go through to get a bill, which was fairly controversial at the time, how you get it passed. It took me several years to pass this bill, and so I wrote about all the things I had to go through to get it passed, which I finally did. And the other interesting thing about it was that it, the issue actually came to me from a constituent. A constituent who had been adopted and she wanted to know who her natural parents were, which is of course very

common. This is quite awhile ago now and the laws are much more relaxed about people having access to that information. In fact, if you wanted now you could pretty much get it.

Q. But it was very difficult back then to get any information.

A. It was, it was very difficult. So the law that ended up passed was a compromise like so many pieces of legislation. It provided for either the natural parent or the adoptee to be able to have what we called a confidential intermediary, someone who was not associated with either party contact the other party to see if that person or persons was interested in having contact with either the parents or the child. And if they were, then the information was shared. We had to narrow it to say health information cause I couldn't pass it any other way. But, in fact, health information can be anything. It can be mental health, physical health, emotional health, so it pretty much covered everything. But it was very difficult to pass because at that time, most parents who had adopted a child didn't particularly want contact with the natural parents. That's the way it was then. It's changed a lot now. But you had to respect that and there were a lot of legislators who had constituents who had adopted who didn't want that information out and you had legislators, too.

Q. I'm sure.

A. You have to remember the average age in the legislature was probably in the 40s, at least, and they didn't grow up having the information about natural parents. So it was hard to convince people that it was the right thing to do.

Q. I think the social stigma may have weighed into that as well. Often people did not want others to know they had a child they'd adopted.

A. That's true. But anyway, it was a very interesting experience that worked out well, and it was very connected to my career and, of course, my education.

Q. Absolutely. We can switch gears again. Now talk to me about how much the campus changed. Describe it when you first went when it was just the small, simple buildings to where later when you got your master's degree when I'm sure there were lots more of the larger buildings.

A. Right, well it was called Plywood U. when I first started. There were just a few temporary buildings. I say temporary in parenthesis because most of them are still there and functioning to some degree. But of course now we have a beautiful campus with many, many new buildings that have been put up through the years. The library came along and our graduation, in fact, was outside where the library is now, but it's just amazing to look now and see. The one thing that hasn't changed is the cold wind in the wintertime. UIS is certainly known as it was, it was even colder back then because you didn't have so many buildings to help protect against the wind. But it was very plain and very simple in those first days.

Q. Okay.

End of Interview

25 minutes 32 seconds