

George Joseph Pierron

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George Joseph Pierron

Will you state your name?

My name is George Joseph Pierron Jr.

What do you do for a living?

I am a judge on the Kansas Court of Appeals.

And do you remember a name Gracie Myers?

A...Grace Myers? Hmmm, it's not Grace Bilgers we're talking about?

She was secretary of the draft board.

Now I remember her...now I remember her...yes, now I remember her *(as he shakes his head yes and laughs)* she was on my card. Yes.

You went to Olathe High School, right?

Right.

Has the building changed any?

Very much so.

How would you say it has changed?

Well it's a...spread out all over the place. When I was here we just had those two wings. A...and the gym was over there, but a...it was separated, if I recall right, from those two wings. You had to walk outside to get to it and since that time there has been a great deal of change and additions to the building. A...going off in all different directions. Couple times I have walked around here I didn't have the slightest idea where I was.

Has Olathe changed since you were in high school?

Oh yes, tremendously. We moved here in 1948 when I was just one year old. And I can remember in the early 50's when Olathe had 5,000 people in it. Now Olathe almost grows that much by that amount every year. *(He laughs)* A...maybe three or four thousand. A...and I think by the time I graduated from high school it wasn't quite 15,000. And I am not sure what the population is now, cause it keeps growing so fast that I think it's probably about 115,000 or more. So a...the...a...change is of course tremendous 'cause it's like seven times bigger than it was when I was a student here.

Why did your family come to Olathe?

Well my father was a physician and he had graduated from the University of Kansas Medical School in 1947, I believe. Then he did his internship at a local Kansas City hospital. He then had some job offers, one of which was out in California. We went out there, it was Castroville, I believe. I was an agricultural community among other things it bills itself as the artichoke capital of the world. I have no doubt that it is. But apparently my parents weren't real excited about it and they were out there and my mother wanted to Monterey which is just an absolutely gorgeous area not too far from Castroville. And they went there and she fell in love with it and told my dad that she and I would stay in a tent you know if necessary while he found a job. But a...he allegedly looked at the telephone book found out at least to his satisfaction that there were too many doctors in the Monterey area and so he took the other job offer he had which was Olathe, Kansas. He had grown up in Kansas City, Missouri. So we moved here in 1948. He went into medical practice with Dr. Jones...was getting ready to retire. My dad practiced here until he died in 1985.

Do you remember how students and teachers dressed when you were in high school?

A...not with great detail. Now a...we were not nearly as casual. A...I do not believe we were allowed to wear jeans. If I recall properly. I don't think we were allowed to wear tennis shoes either. I may be wrong on that, but I don't think so. But you had to have clothing that was considered appropriate. A...I don't think clothing with any letters on it or words or anything like that was thought to be appropriate. And so that was quite different what we have today, which is, you know pretty wide open.

What was the reaction in Olathe to the Vietnam War and the draft and everything that went along with that?

A...I was in college a...and law school during most of the unrest over Vietnam. I graduated in '64 from high school and graduated from law school in '71, and by that time a lot of the issues had been resolved one way or another about what we were going to do. A...I think there was less political unrest in Olathe than there was for instance at the University of Kansas where I was going to law school. A...there was of course a great deal of concern over it because a lot of mainly boys a...from Olathe were in the service. I recall that we had a...program, a... "home for the holidays" where the community took action to a help get a...service men, mainly men, at that time, home for Christmas. And one of my good friends a...was a...in the service at the time he came home and he was opposed to the war, and he told me that a...a...when they were interviewing him they didn't want to hear anti-war statements and so he didn't get quoted very much (*he laughs*) in the papers. But a...a...there was of course discussion of the war here but I would say much less pointed and much less anti-war than I saw in other parts of the country.

Did you see any effects of the civil rights movement in Olathe?

Well a...there were a...some obviously. A...Olathe at that time...a...at that time had a large black population. A...it was relatively small I don't know what it would have been percentage wise. And a...most of the black citizens lived in what would have been called the northwest part of Olathe a...around a...the AME Church and Second Baptist Church, you know on Spruce heading toward K-7. So there was de facto a...racial segregation. There were very few blacks who lived outside of that area, if my memory is correct. In fact as, I believe I was a senior in high school when an officer from the Naval Air Base who was black attempted to rent a house in an area outside of what had been traditionally been black area and there was a lot of pressure being put on him not to do that. Now there were a lot of other people telling him to go ahead and do it but he finally decided that it wasn't worth the effort and so he didn't. And that came with somewhat of a shock *(he laughs)* to me that people still felt that way. I remember my father who was also in the service said his problem was that he was trying to move into a "red-necked" neighborhood. *(He laughs)* He is better off trying to move into probably a high socio-economic neighborhood. There would have been fewer problems.

One of my classmates, Bernice Henson, her father was a postman, and her mother worked in this area. Her family moved out of the black, traditional black, neighborhood and moved into a few blocks from where we lived on the west side. A...at least on the west side of Olathe at that time it was to the east of K-7. But I believe they were the first family to do that was probably in the late 60's.

Arbie Glover, who was the barber, here on the square a...a...was a...actively involved in fair housing. A...and a...if you haven't interviewed him, you really need to because he is a treasure trove of information. A...the...a...a...civil rights efforts here were lower keyed because of the smaller black population and a...because of a...that a...I think there were fewer tensions because of that. A...but there was more there than I knew.

And our high school class of '64 has started to get together now every year. You know a lot of high schools classes just do it every five years or ten years, but for some reason this group has been a...starting to see each other every year including black students. And they are now telling us things that were going on concerning racial discrimination that we had no idea were going on. A...one of my classmates a...actually won a spelling bee when she was in grade school but was not allowed to compete at a higher level because she was black. And we had no idea that that had happened. A...some of my other classmates had stories like that for instance, one of them a...wanted to go out for the cheerleader, and I remember she did. A...well...she cheers pretty good. A...but she was told by a...some teachers and administrators that Olathe just wasn't ready for a black cheerleader yet. You know, they sure didn't mind having blacks play on the athletics teams, but for some reason a black cheerleader was out of the question. A...didn't

stop her she went out and did it anyway. But they a...apparently found ways to keep her off the squad.

How did you find yourself on the Court of Appeals?

Oh...a...well, if you take a look at my high school year book you will see that I wanted to be a U.S. Senator. And I kinda held that idea for a long time. When I got out of law school, a...I was looking around for a job in this area wanted...I came back to Olathe. A...I interviewed with law firms, and with the county attorney's office we didn't have a district attorney's office yet. And I was hired to be an Assistant County Attorney. My idea was that I'd eventually become the county's prosecutor and from then who knows what would happen, you know. A...but a...my first boss was Jim Wheeler and he was defeated two years later by Margaret Jordan and she was defeated then four years later by Dennis Moore and then Dennis Moore looked like he was going to be District Attorney forever.

And meanwhile I was, although I still enjoyed politics a lot, I decided that maybe that was not what I wanted to do more than anything else. A...I really enjoyed the appellate side of being a prosecutor and doing the research and writing. And a...when some judicial position started opening up I began putting my name in for those and I think on the 3rd time I was appointed a district judge after ten and a half years serving as a prosecutor. I was a trial judge for eight and a half years and I put my name in for the Supreme Court and I made the panel of three to be looked at by the governor but another person, who was the chief judge court of appeals, got it. I called and congratulated him he encouraged me to put my name in for his position not as chief but as a judge on court of appeals. And I decided that a...I think I can do that, I think I would enjoy it so I did and I was selected by the governor that led to a long term situation where I was living in Olathe and commuting to Topeka. So that meant a lot of road time. But I have never regretted it. Court of Appeals is a wonderful place to work. I had very stimulating interesting fun colleagues. We have a lot of good people working for us. We get to travel to various parts of the state. So it's a wonderful job, and I am very happy to be in.

Do you recall any memorable cases?

Many...many cases. The ones that always cause you the most stress I think when you are a trial judge especially is a...are a...cases involving children. Especially child custody issues where perhaps child abuse is being claimed by one party or the other. I had a couple of cases like that where I really had to make some hard decisions. A...and those don't make headlines or anything but in many ways they may be the most important cases a...that you handle. A...I worked with Dennis Moore a...he was the D.A. on a big bombing murder case that took place in Olathe where a number of people were killed. And there were numerous other criminal cases that

were quite interesting and in their own ways were quite horrendous when you considered what happened.

On the Court of Appeals, I have had some extremely interesting cases. I had a case rising out of northwestern Kansas, St. Francis, actually is where a lot took place involving a physician who was convicted of supposing killing and/or attempting to kill another person who were patients except that when you read what happened you couldn't understand why anyone thought there was a crime. And number of physicians came in to testify in his favor that he had done nothing wrong. The jury still convicted him much to the amazement I think of many people. A...when the case finally got to us on an appeal a...he had already been released on parole which was amazing when you think he had been convicted of killing one person and attempting to kill another. But a...a...what happened was everybody realized there had been an extremely miscarriage of justice. A...we simply declared that the state had not met its burden of proof. No reasonable person could of found him guilty. And we simply vacated the verdict found him not guilty and released him. A...the medical society *(he laughs)* immediately reinstated his medical license and the legislature was so upset about the injustice that had been done that they awarded him \$250,000.00 in compensation. And a...Bill Curtis who does a television show, *American Justice*, did a one hour program on the case. I would say that was an extremely interesting case. A...in the fact that I have had many relatives including my father who was a physician and my first wife who passed away who was a nurse it gave me a pretty good insight into that.

The other interesting case I had that even went up to the Unites States Supreme Court was State vs. La Moan, a...in which a...borderline mentally retarded young man, he was 18, was charged and convicted of having consensual sex with another young man, who I believe was 14 at the time. And a...we had...we have...still have what's called a Romeo and Juliet law, which is that if the ages of the people engaging in consensual sex are close enough at that lower age level, you know closer to 16 that the penalties are less, but it only refers to heterosexuals sex. And so the first time it came up to us they were saying that this is unconstitutional because it discriminates. And our decision was well under present U.S. Supreme court decisions a...homosexuality is not a protected class under the constitution so they can discriminate. The case went up to the United States Supreme Court, they reversed our opinion and sent it back for us to reconsider it in the light of the new decision that they had just rendered that year before we made our decision. A...and a...we looked at it I thought they were dropping a very broad hint and I said that we should reverse the sentence. My two colleagues disagreed but went up to our Supreme Court and they reversed and turned him loose, well not turned him loose, they found that he had already served the appropriate sentence. If the person he had engaged in sex with had been a female his sentence would have been 15 months, because it

was a male it's over 17 years. So a...that was also an extremely interesting case. And it's the only one that I have had that went up to the Supreme Court and then came back down.

Have you noticed a change in crime since you first started practicing law?

Yes, yes, a...the amount of drug crime is much, much higher. And a...a...I'm not sure exactly why there's got to be a sociological or psychological reason. A...we of course had a...drug use in the high school, but it was very, very rare. If it was going on most of us didn't know about it. A...we remember a big scandal of one guy got kicked out for sniffing glue. That was it. A...I'm not even sure I would even know marijuana if I saw it. We heard about heroin addiction in cities, a...but a...a...we didn't really see very much of it around here. You know, there was a lot of alcohol abuse you know people could get drunk and things like that. But not near the level of crime that we have attributable to drug prosecutions that we have today. I don't know what the percentage is but a very high, very substantial percentage of the people in prison are there for drug offences.

A...another big change is in the area of abuse of children. It wasn't really until the early '70's that it was really acknowledged that child abuse and neglect was big problem. And I came along just at that time and happen to be in a position where I was involved in prosecuting those. And I got involved in citizen's efforts in the prevention of child abuse and since that time the awareness of child abuse and neglect has gone way up and so now a lot of the crime that used to be brush aside or thought to be something else which is now correctly identified as what it is, especially sexual abuse of children. A...which was far more common than we ever thought and now a significant fraction of the appeals that we see in our court involves sexual abuse of children. So I would say those of the two biggest changes that I have seen.

Also, I would note that the number people we have in prison has skyrocketed. A lot of people don't realize that I think. In 1960, I did a speech on this once so I dug up the statistics, in 1960 Kansas had 2.1 million people and at that time they had 2,100 people in prison which just happened to work out to 1 out of 1,000. A few years ago, a...I was also going to give a speech and so I called up and asked how many people were in prison and at that time there were over 8,000 in our state prison. And the state population had only gone up to 2.75 million. So if we are locking them up at the same rate we were in 1960 when everybody thought we were being tough on crime and we didn't have the exclusionary rule, etc., etc., we would of only had 2,750 people in prison, but we had over three times that many and it may be a lot more now a...because we continue to put greater and greater numbers of people in prison for various problems.

A...often times when we have problem instead of doing something about the problem we just make it a greater crime. Like we had a...somebody who killed a child and it was a...a...very sad

and a...there was a lot of publicity about it. I thought well, maybe now we will finally get them so we'll have enough child protective service workers to go out and investigate these things fast enough. But unfortunately we didn't get that we just tacked another, you know, 10-15 years on to the crime (*he laughs*). A...which really doesn't help the child any. And a...you know, it doesn't have any impact on that guy because he was really going to be in prison for a long time anyway.

I was wondering...you talked about a bombing or something. I have never heard about that. What happened?

Well, let's see, it was...what was the year of that? That must have been, probably 1980. A...Danny Crump was the person who was eventually convicted and he was a...having great difficulties with, I believe they were divorced by that time, his wife, and she was with her relatives. It was just several blocks north of here of the high school. A...I am trying to remember the name of the house...of the street, Van Mar. But anyway, what he did was he and probably somebody else at least that's what we thought, we could never prove it. A...constructed a bomb and put in it a package that looked like a present. And then he went over and left it on the hood of the vehicle outside the house and someone came in, brought it in opened it and it blew up. And killed a number of people...including children, I believe it was five people who were killed. And a...his present...his girlfriend at the time, when she found out what had happened she didn't know it was a bomb, she just thought he was leaving a present for his child and then when found out what had happened she immediately came in and told the police what had happened. And they went out and picked him up, and he confessed as to what he had done. And that was really horrifying.

'Cause I was on call that weekend, the assistant district attorneys are on call. Go out to scenes help get search warrants and things like that. And someone called and told me you need to come up, I was at the courthouse to do warrants and he said you need to come up here we've got a house that's blown up and we are afraid a bunch of people have been killed. And I thought, oh my word I wonder if it's a gas leak or anything. So we went out and it took a while. Dr. Bridges was the coroner came out and they were going through the rubble and when they finally reached the bodies he could see right away that it had been a bomb blast. He could tell the difference between that and what would have been a gas fire something like that. A...and a...that was terrible, that was probably the worst case that I was ever involved in. Dennis tried that, I helped him, but he did the trial work on that.

You have lived here most of your life. What are the significant (this is an open ended question) what are the significant changes that you have seen that either please you and that don't please you. How do you perceive some of the major changes that you've seen in this community in the time you have experienced it?

Well, Don Eura, was an old time Olathean, a...he and his wife used to run a mom and pop grocery store up there near the old Frisco tracks. He was a bailiff, a...at the courthouse for a while for Judge Carr. And he once commented in the early 70's a...a...when I was starting there he said, well Olathe just used to be a tiny little sleepy country town where the farmers came in to die **(he laughs)**. That was a pretty close description of Olathe up well into the 50's and it was a very quiet town. You know, like I said, I can remember when it had 5,000 people in it. And a...just the monumental growth. You know it's over 20 times the size of the town as it was back then is a tremendous change. We didn't even used to have interstate 35. We took the old Kansas City Road and you can still follow it for a ways that's the way you got out there it was kinda of a winding road.

A...but interstate 35 brought a lot of changes. A...we had very little in the way of industry. We had Hyer Boot Company, well, that was probably big industry. That was pretty much it. And then we had the Delco plant which came out, 'course we had the air base. A...but a...with the interstate and the fact that Olathe was a good place to live and the Mid-American Nazareth College at that time, now a university, going in on the east side helping to spur development then there.

All those things in addition to the fact that Olathe was a great place to live, housing cost were very competitive with other areas, you could get downtown pretty quick on the highway. Just caused an explosion. Most of the housing east side of I-35 was country, deep country. You know, it was gravel roads, farms until relatively recent times. A...I think the developments have been good. You lose a little of that small town atmosphere. A...I don't think we have that by any means anymore. There are some neighborhoods where you can still get that feeling. A...but that's changed.

There are so many things you can do now. That you couldn't do back then. A...and a...I think Olathe is even more than most places has reflected the growth in population and technology and we have benefited from our location being close to Kansas City. By the fact that we have had good government and good schools, reasonable taxes...although some would argue with that. A...and a...it's just being great place to live. So a...I think a...I am very happy that I grew up in Olathe. I probably did better than I would have if I had been out in California. Could have been **(he clicks his fingers)** a surfer boy. But a...I could've ended up really messed up too. **(He laughs)**

So a...a...Olathe is a great place to live but I don't think the people who live here now can really conceptualize the way it was 50 years ago. It's just too difficult. I remember when we had our centennial back in '57. Now we are going to have our sesquicentennial. It's just a totally different town, just a totally different town. You know everybody pretty much knew who everybody else was if you didn't know them for sure they knew how to find out who they were. Mr. Compton, who was a teacher here in Olathe, kinda said it real well, he was an English teacher and when the school really started to boom. He also became a school librarian at the old Carnegie library. And a...he said yeah, you know when the high school grows you lose a lot because you don't know everybody anymore. You just don't have that sense of closeness, now maybe that is not always a good thing. But a...when you gain some things, sometimes you lose things. I think we have. But by in large I prefer living in the Olathe now then the Olathe 50 years ago.

Where do you see Olathe going? Where would you like to see it go?

Well it's hard to say. I a...moved out of Olathe three years ago when my first wife passed away tragically and a...the lady who I worked with in committees and I all of a sudden discovered each other. And a...we got married three years ago so I moved to Lawrence and all of my three children are living in Lawrence now. So a...that's worked out well. So I haven't lived in Olathe in the last three years. So, my...a...views of someone who used to live here, although my mother and a number of my siblings still live here. Olathe is going to continue to grow the way it has. It has a lot of room to grow. There's especially there is room to the south and to the west. Not as much to the east and north because you bump into the other cities. But I have been told quite confidently that Olathe will grow to 150,000. I was told that a number of years ago. I think it could grow even bigger than that.

The question would be will that be the best way to handle growth. A...city that continues to get bigger and bigger. I think it's probably a good thing. A...we've got some good examples here in Johnson County. I think Overland Park has handled their growth extremely well. A...and I think Olathe could do the same thing. It is mind boggling for me to think that we now have four high schools, will have five probably within the next decade. Because I can remember when the entire high school and the city's junior high school were contained in one building or at least one connected building. Down...the old John P. St. John across from where the library is now. And the fact that we now have four high schools and I don't know how many junior highs...what is it eight? *(He laughs)* Something like that. It's just very difficult to believe there are more people in the high schools than there were in the town when I got here. So a...a...I think Olathe will continue to grow. They seem to be showing a really good, a...a...real good touch for what kind of development is best.

We are a suburban community. We do serve as a bedroom for outlying areas. But we also have a lot of businesses right here. So...a...I'm not in charge of growth around here and you can never tell what's the right plan. A lot of us remember urban renewal that happened in the 60's and the thought then was what we have to do is reengineer downtown Olathe. A...to make it more of a commercial hub. A...that turned out to be totally 100% wrong for the most part. If you see what has eventually happened. A lot of those buildings that were rehabbed have been torn down and replaced. A...the...a...jail now occupies what was an entire block of buildings. Pretty much the same thing with the City Hall and the Administration Building. So sometimes when we think we're going to do long range planning we are doing long range planning but we don't really don't know what's going to work best. And a...like in that situation what we did turn out to be kinda a waste of money I think was the consensus. So...I don't know what Olathe is going to do but it certainly has done a pretty good job so far. I am rather pleased with the way things have turned out.

Was there a popular hangout when you were in high school?

A...I don't want anyone smirking in here but a *(he laughs)* I was not a wild and crazy guy. *(He laughs loudly)* I didn't go out and hang out a whole lot. A...I was the oldest of nine children. I had obligations at home you know among other things. I was involved in a lot of extracurricular activities. And a...actually my parents just didn't want me out there hangin' out. A...there were some places, but there weren't very many. There weren't many at all. I could probably direct you to a few of my classmates who could tell you where the places were to hang out. But Custard's Last Stand was big, that's where...oh what's there now...used to be the Olathe State Bank. It's there on Santa Fe cross from the saving and loan. I think that was big. You could go to Custard's Last Stand, and the A&W, go down to the courthouse square, a...you could kind of rally down there at the courthouse square as I understand it and then maybe go out to the lake, a...drink some beer and watch out for the cops cause they were always looking for you. That was part of the fun...trying to elude the cops *(he smiles)*. That was as serious as it got. *(He laughs)* A...so there really wasn't a whole lot. You know we had "A" movie theater, but you know it a...showed a show, a...but there really wasn't a whole lot to do.

Did you see a whole more community involvement in the high school sporting events?

I don't know if there was any more than there is now. For one thing Olathe was much smaller and we were not a sports power house. That didn't happen until the big growth hit. A...sports was just an activity like any other. You know we didn't have any state champions...didn't dream of even competing for a state championship I don't think. A...but a...you know, it was something to do...something to do.

Where did your family live?

Well we started out on what's was called Navy Hill. I don't know if you know where that is? A...that a...is a...is to the south of a...here and a little bit to the west. A...this was housing that was built around WWII, therefore Navy Hill. That's why none of the addresses make any sense what so ever if you look at the numbering system. And we live there until 1959 I believe. And then we moved...a...we had lived in some other places for brief times before that...but in 1959 we moved over to what was the west side on Wabash Terrace, near K-7. And my mother lived there until my father passed away in '85 and then a few years later she moved to the east side. So that's where we lived.

I attended Catholic schools. St. Paul's when it was downtown and then it moved out to within a few blocks of where we lived. A...and I went there for grade school. Then I went one year at St. Joseph's which was at that time in Shawnee and it has now morphed into Aquinas. *(He laughs)* I went there for one year. And then attended Olathe Senior High for three years.

Is there anything you would like to add?

Well there are distinct communities in Olathe that sometimes you don't even realize they are there. You know like the deaf community. A...it's always been here, you know it's one of the oldest institutions in Olathe. It's not a huge community, but a...I don't think a lot of people are aware of it. You know for various obvious reasons communication can sometimes be difficult and that can be unfortunate. Leonard Hall who's a lawyer here attended the school for the deaf and works for the city of Olathe now. He can tell you a lot of interesting stories about that. Leonard Hall, works for the city of Olathe.

A...the black community has always been separate, I mean there has been some integration, but I think there still a great deal of de facto social segregation. A...I don't know what to say about that one way or another. But I think it's a fact. We also have now very, very significant Hispanic population. It's probably bigger than the black population. And, they are not necessarily a...visible.

I remember a few years ago the first time it really hit me that by golly we do have a big Hispanic population here is when I went to Dillon's and there was an entire row devoted to Mexican food. I said well what...then I said well cause people are buying it that's why. And...a you know I lived on the east side and I found out my old parish, St. Paul's on the west side was very heavily Mexican...Hispanic. And I said and I didn't know this was going on. It's very sobering when you have something like that.

And we have a significant Asian population here too. A...and it pops up in rather unusual ways and it shake your awareness. A...I think we need to understand that's that a fact and see what

we can do to make sure that we don't isolation of these communities. Because in the past I think we have.

The deaf community here we see more people signing. We always had people signing in school. Did you have that?

Yeah, we didn't do that when I was going to school here. We didn't have people signing. And a...I think that was a reminder that a...if you did something like that well...there are people out there that have a disability and we didn't want to hear about it. We didn't want to hear about it.