



Diane Neesham
ROBS History Project
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Diane was born in Johnson City, New York, but she grew up in Endicott, which is part of the Triple Cities in Upstate New York. She lived there until she was 24. She doesn't know how she got her name. There was nobody else in the family with that name, and neither she nor her siblings had middle names. Her maiden name was Grassi, and her mother's name is Mary and is currently living in a nursing home in Johnson City.

Diane is married and has two children. Her son Patrick is 23 and just graduated from Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts in North Adams in the Berkshires. Her daughter Katie is 20 and is attending Strasburg College in Pennsylvania. Her children are very, very different. Her son is very quiet, introspective, and her daughter cannot be alone for a minute. She's got tons of friends, and she's always on the go. She's much more independent than he is.

What are Diane's children's interests? What direction are they going? Her son is looking for a job right now having gone to school as a theater major. He didn't have a lot of friends in high school, so when he went to college, he just decided that he was going to change everything about himself. He stopped using his first name and used his middle name, which is Clayton. So, everybody at school knew him by Clay, and he became very involved in college, and very involved in the theater program. As an actor he never got big parts, but he was always very involved in the theater. If he wasn't acting, he was doing stage work building sets and that type of thing. He made a lot of friends and had a great college experience. Her daughter is majoring in education much to Diane's surprise, because she used to come with Diane into school, and she'd say the kids

smelled and she didn't like being around them. The past two summers her daughter worked in a daycare center working with little two-year old kids, and she loved them -changing diapers, kids spitting up on her, the whole thing- and she just absolutely loved them. She'd come home and tell the family all about her day, and it reminded Diane of when she was teaching. Diane couldn't wait for her daughter to come home each day to hear about her day.

Diane is the third child of four born in her family. Her oldest brother's name is Gerald, but she doesn't have that much contact with him. The last time they got together was at his daughter's wedding about 6 years ago. She and her sister were very close growing up, but due to distance not so much now. She had lived in Johnson City for many years but just moved to Buffalo, NY to be closer to one of her daughters. Diane is closest to her younger brother, although there is a 13-year age difference between them. Of her other two siblings, she was the closest in age to him. They were very close even when they were younger. When Diane was in high school, she worked in a camp that he would attend. When she worked in the playground she would see him there.

What is Diane's earliest childhood memory? Her earliest childhood memory is when her family lived in a house out of town with all woods behind them. At the time they were putting in sewers, so the road was all muddy. There was a kid that lived across the street who used to walk home from school with her. They had quite a long walk to school. Because there was so much mud, they had to put their boots on. At the end of the road there was a mail mailbox where they kept their boots. So they put their boots on and continued on to school. Her mother told her not to walk her friend home that day because she knew she would have to go to the end of his property and then cross where there wasn't a way to cross. But, she did walk him home and wasn't able to cross the street. She stepped in the mud, and being very little, the mud came up to her waist. The men that were working on the road came over and picked her up. She remembered her boots staying in the mud and it was like they were sucked in. They carried her to the house and knocked on the door. The worker said, "*Is this yours?*" Her father said. "Yes," and obviously was not too pleased.

What do you know about your mother's family history? Her mother's family was from Southern Italy, and she was from Syracuse. She had one brother that died at a young age from diphtheria, so she had three brothers, and they

were three girls. Diane's grandmother was the oldest and took care of the family. Their grandfather was a very mean man. He lived for a while in Albania, which was part of Italy and came to the United States first, and then he brought her grandmother. Diane's grandmother was almost like a mail order bride. She didn't know him before they married. It was a dysfunctional family. Every time they visited there was a lot of yelling and screaming, *"that kind of stuff."* Diane's father would say, *"We're leaving"*, and they would pick up and go home. It was always like a big chore to go to Syracuse for some reason, because that was before the highways, so it seemed like it would take forever. So, there was not a lot of contact with them.

Diane's father's family was from the outskirts of Bari, Italy. They came to the United States and settled in Pennsylvania where they owned a market. It was a coal-mining town. During the Depression things got really bad there, so one at a time (there were 15 children), they started moving up to Endicott, N.Y. where there were shoe factories, and they started working in the Endicott-Johnson Factory. There were about twenty-something years between the oldest and the youngest. Diane said that her grandmother must have had a baby almost every year. When the youngest was a little baby, Diane's grandfather died, and shortly after that her grandmother died. They were in their 40's. They didn't want to split up the kids. Diane's father was the oldest boy and was not married. His two older brothers were married, and his two sisters were not. They had a family home, so her father and his two sisters took care of the younger kids. Diane's father supported them, and her two aunts were the mothers. This way, the family didn't have to split up.

What did Diane's mother enjoy doing? What gave her pleasure? She was a real housewife. She was a real 50's kind of housewife. She took care of the house. She took care of the family. When Diane and her siblings were a little bit older, her father, who was into a lot of different things, decided one day that he was going to open a store. So, he tore down the porch of their house, and they built a store. It was a luncheonette. Diane remembered being very embarrassed. It was a luncheonette for a while, a grocery store for a while and then an antique store. That was in the 60s, right before Diane was in high school. Her father did a lot of different things like working in factories, tearing down houses and did some catering stuff. He did everything.

Diane's earliest memory of her father was that he was always working. Diane's father and his brothers built the house that Diane grew up in. She said it was the house where she had the memory of when she got stuck in the mud. With such a big family, she had lots of cousins. She had two aunts that lived next door and an uncle that lived across the street. Diane remembers her father coming home from work each day, and he was always very tired, because he worked a lot with his hands and his body. Her father was 58 when he passed away. Very few of his siblings lived to an old age.

Were there other adults other than Diane's parents that had a formative influence on her early life? Diane said that her father's family influenced her, because they did a lot together. Her cousins lived across the street, so she and her siblings were always playing with them. She had an uncle that lived across the street who set up a movie projector in the middle of the street so they could all sit and watch movies. Their houses were at the end of a dead end street. They also used to build something called Jitneys, which were like go-carts. They lived at the top of a hill, so they would use the Jitneys and go down two or three blocks. They also used to go sleigh riding in the winters, and play tag and Hide and Seek. Her father built a playhouse in the back of their house. They always played outside. Some of the indoor games were Monopoly, Sorry and various card games.

Diane said that she was also greatly influenced by her Kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Davidson whom she remembered vividly. Diane recalled specific days in Kindergarten. She remembered that she did not want to go to school, and her mother used to walk her down to class and stay, because Diane would cry and not let her leave. Then one day, her mother told her father to take her. He took her, and she started to cry, so he opened up the door of the classroom and kind of pushed her in saying, "*Here she is.*" Diane slid in and was lying on the floor with her hands covering her face. She looked over and there was another kid, Joanne Esposito next to her on the floor too, so they started talking to each other. She remembered the first fire drill and the teacher telling the class what was going to happen. The teacher said the bell was going to go off and to walk very quietly down in a line and that they were going to walk on the sidewalk down to the end of the block. Diane said that when the bell went off, she and Joanne Esposito grabbed hands and ran out of the building and down the block. They thought they were smart and that the teacher would be so proud of them, because they got out of there the fastest. Mrs. Davidson didn't yell at them but

told them this was not the way you went for a fire drill. She never yelled, but she was very stern. Diane also remembered that the teacher used to kiss you goodbye. Diane remembered nap time and looking at the teacher's dolls all along the window ledges. It was Mrs. Davidson that started Diane thinking of teaching.

We all have decisions to make in life. Diane was asked if there was any decision that was particularly tough for her to make? She said it was moving down here to Long Island that was kind of tough. She had taught Upstate for two years, and her friend worked in Brentwood. They were planning on going to Europe to go teach in an American school. Her father said she could only go if she went with her friend Kathy. She inquired to see if they could be together, but they said they couldn't guarantee it, so they didn't go. That's when she decided to move down here, which was a pretty big decision for her to move away from home.

What's one of the nicest gifts she had ever gotten? She remembered a very funny gift. Diane remembered receiving a gift when she first started teaching as a young teacher up in Endicott. She was teaching kindergarten and a parent gave her a slip and a bra as an end-of-the-year gift. She remembered opening it and just saying, *"Oh! Thank you very much."* That was one of the funniest gifts she'd ever gotten. So when asked about a gift that's what popped into her head but didn't know why.

Do you remember your first paying job? Her first paying job was at a playground in the back of a Catholic High School. Her brother used to come up and they would play Pinochle inside and just throw balls to the kids. Her starting salary as a teacher in Endicott was \$5,700 and in Brentwood \$6,300.

Did her family have a custom of getting together over the holidays? Was there a holiday that seemed to draw everybody together? Diane said they used to visit a lot on some of the holidays. Visiting was a big thing. They used to visit a lot on Easter and Palm Sunday for some reason. That was when they got all dressed up. Christmas was spent with their own family. It was such a large family with 15 aunts and uncles, and everybody had four or five kids and lived in the same general area. Christmas and Thanksgiving were usually celebrated at her house.

What did Diane like to do when she came home from school each day?

She used to like to watch American Bandstand on TV. She also liked to roller skate with her friends. They had the skates that you put on with a key. Diane remembered that the only time her mother spanked her was when she and her sister went roller-skating, and her sister lost her skate key. They were around the corner looking for it forever. When they came home her mother was furious and gave them a spanking. Her mother had never spanked them before and never spanked after that. It probably wasn't because of the lost key, but because they were gone for hours, and her mother was really worried. She never had a bike, because her father feared that they could get hurt.

Did you have a favorite subject or subjects when you were a student?

Diane said, *"Yes, I liked reading, and I liked history. I Hated math and still do."*

What about a favorite toy?

Diane said she was big on stuffed animals. She would sleep with a whole bunch of them. They'd be all around her, and she would be all scrunched up into bed in the morning.

What was your favorite season growing up?

Diane said spring, because she loved playing outdoors in the nice weather. The winters Upstate were pretty bad.

What were the schools you attended?

She first attended George W. Johnson Elementary School, and when she moved attended Broad Street Elementary School. She went on to Henry B. Junior High School and then Endicott High School. She attended undergraduate and graduate school at SUNY Cortland where she got her Masters in Elementary Education. She has permanent certification to teach Nursery, Pre-K, K - 6.

Is there something that has made you proud?

Diane said it made her proud when students would come back and talk to her or when they would say she was their favorite teacher. They would also tell her all the things they remembered when they were in her class. If they had an assignment in the 5th or 6th grade to write about a favorite teacher, they would write about her. Things like this made her feel proud. Not too long ago she ran into a former student, now an adult, working in a local store that remembered her as his Kindergarten

teacher. He then mentioned some of the things he remembered that had happened in Kindergarten.

Was there one bad day that you remember at work? Diane said she had a really difficult kid in the first grade. She liked him a lot, but he just made things very difficult all the time. She remembered a particular day when he kicked her, and she felt so helpless, because she couldn't get to him. That was a real tough day, because Diane said she really felt very discouraged, like she wasn't or couldn't do her job. She couldn't reach him and couldn't get to the other kids. So, that was very discouraging.

What year, and how was it that you came to Brentwood? She got the job in Brentwood through her college friend, Kathy, who was all ready teaching there. So Diane moved down to Long Island, and she, Kathy and another friend rented a house in Oakdale to live. The first person she met in Brentwood was Bob Lockra, the P.E. teacher. As Diane was walking into the building for the interview, Bob met her and told her he was the principal and started asking her all kinds of questions. Diane thought that was kind of strange. He later told her that he wasn't the principal and was interviewed by Peter DiMento, who was the principal at Southwest.

What was your first impression of Brentwood? Her impression was that it was very different from where she had taught Upstate. She taught in Endicott, which was not necessarily an affluent town, but the school she taught was in a fairly affluent area where a lot of the parents worked at IBM. Diane said she was always surprised with the poverty, the difference in it, but just the teachers were *"so phenomenal, and the kids were so phenomenal."* She enjoyed working with the kids and really loved the people that she worked with like Dolores Osborn, Jan Ehrler, Bob Lockra and Kathy Doyleston. Diane first taught 2nd grade at Southeast then moved over to Southwest where Austen Harney was principal. There she taught 1st and 2nd grade then taught Kindergarten when it became full day. She said that it was very hard in the beginning. The first year they had the psychologists and other support staff helping the kids go on the lunch line and other things, but after that year, the Kindergarten teachers were on their own. Diane remembers it being very tiring. Her college education courses didn't prepare her for this. She said you had to learn *"in the trenches."*

Diane was then presented with following question: **You had a job description, and you had a grade and building assignment, all that, so you knew why you were there, but in addition to that, you came with your own purpose. You came with your own objectives . . .your mission. What was yours? What made you get up every day?** Most of the time Diane really loved it. Yes, there were bad days especially when she got to kindergarten, but she really, really loved it. The part she didn't like so much though was when she taught 2nd grade, because it seemed like she was constantly correcting papers. It wasn't as physically demanding as Kindergarten, but she just didn't like correcting papers. She loved teaching Kindergarten up until retirement. The last year was just as good as the others. Some years were better than others. She said her last year was a really a good year with really good kids. The year before she had a real tough crew, but the year before that she had a really good group. What made a year tough was when the kids didn't gel. That was the hardest. She could teach any kid, but when you had kids that didn't gel and didn't become a cohesive group, that really made it a miserable year.

Were you an active participant in the Teachers Association? Diane was a Delegate for 3 or 4 years. The issues she remembered were about the teacher's contract. It was during the bad years. The teachers almost went on strike. Those were tough years. The fact that they extended the contract was good. She didn't have to worry about when she was going to retire, because she was going to retire under this contract making her life a lot easier.

Was there somebody that you worked with who was very helpful along the way? Diane said Dolores Osborn, whom she worked with, was always very helpful emotionally. If Diane was having a bad day, she could help. Dolores would tell her to look past it or find the humor in it. When things weren't working out it was so helpful. She said it was the same with her friend Rose Daley. She was another one of the teachers who helped her. Rose taught Resource when Diane was teaching kindergarten. *"Just when you were having a lousy time, you know, things were not going well, they could kind of get you past it."*

What was the actual year of your retirement? Diane retired in 2005. She never thought about retiring. Diane said she never wanted to think about it. Her children were young and she said she was the *"old mom."* She had her son when she was 36 and her daughter when she was close to 40. So, she never thought

she would retire. She loved it. Little by little Diane's friends were retiring. Her friend Rose and two other friends Anita LoPiccolo and Robin Weiser talked about retiring in two years. So, she started thinking about it since they were younger and had to put in their papers. So, that's when she said, *"I think I'll go when they go."* Diane said that the decision to retire was mainly because her friends were going. She had taught 36 years in Brentwood with a total of 38 years in education altogether.

Was there something that you can point to that you can say that you really felt a sense of accomplishment? Was there something you really felt professional pride in? Diane responded, *"I think in my last couple of years that I taught, there was a girl that taught next to me, that we were partners. I felt a lot of pride in being able to help her, and she was an excellent teacher, but she was new. I always felt a lot of satisfaction I guess in being able to help her, and you know giving her ideas and yes, very satisfied, very satisfied. I think mostly because you weren't required to do that now, but she was very appreciative. You know, and I would pop in and say, 'Oh, look at this lesson' and such. 'I just did it, it's really good.' She would do it, and she would come back and say 'That was great'. So, that I got a lot of satisfaction out of."*

What was the most fun of being a kindergarten teacher? Diane said it was always fun. You could just act like a *dope* and they just thought you were terrific. You could stand up there and sing off key, and they just thought you were great. No matter what you did like sitting on the floor like an Indian and all of that stuff. She could put on an activity record and hop around with them and *all of that stuff*.

Did you have heroes growing up? Diane said her dad was always a big hero to her. He always worked very hard. He had a really tough life and only had a fourth grade education, and yet he managed to support the family and give them a good life. Diane got a lot of her work ethic and values from him as well.

What were some of the historical events that occurred while you were in the classroom? When Diane was teaching Upstate she remembered when Bobby Kennedy was shot down here. She remembered walking into the office and hearing when Reagan was president being shot. She said of course being at work on 911.

What do you miss most about active teaching? Diane said, *"I miss, I really do miss being with my kids. I have gone in to visit, and it's not the same, because they're not my kids."* *"I miss having a relationship with the kids."* She doesn't miss things like making sure each day that the kids have their bus passes tagged on and any of the paperwork . . . *that kind of stuff.* *"The stuff that doesn't have anything to do with teaching, that I don't miss."*

Is there something that you could have accomplished before your time was up and didn't get a chance to? Diane felt that she had accomplished all she set out to do. She didn't want to go into administration or any other area. She was very happy in the classroom. *"That's were I like to be."*

Diane was asked to complete this sentence: Brentwood teachers are . . . She responded, *"among the most dedicated, hard working loyal people I've ever met."* She was then asked to complete the sentence: ***Brentwood students for the most part are . . .*** She responded, *"the best. They really are. They're loving, they're curious, they're hard working. They have a lot of things to deal with, and they do it. They deal with it, and I think they're very successful."*

What about advice that you can offer an incoming first year teacher who is going to be doing primary grades teaching at a primary level? What would you suggest based on your experience that they should do? Diane said that they should remember that they're kids, that they're little kids, and that they come with a lot of baggage and a lot of problems even though they're little. She said, *"You kind of have to think like a kid and remember what it was like to be a little kid. I think that's probably the most important. You have to like them before you can teach them. There are very few people I have known who are good teachers that didn't like kids."*

How would you like to be remembered? Diane responded, *"I'd like to be remembered as a caring, caring teacher and a teacher that really taught me something that, you know, I learned this because of Mrs. Neesham."*

In concluding the interview, Diane was asked if there was anything she wanted to add, anything that was left out. Diane said, *"One of the things that I will always treasure about Brentwood teachers is that I know teachers that have*

gone through very tough times, personally, and Brentwood teachers are always there to support them whether it's emotionally or financially or what. When my son was born two months premature, I had so much support during that time from everybody. I've seen that over and over and over again. Brentwood teachers, they are the most giving people that I've ever met. If someone's having a hard time, that envelope will come around, and they don't think twice about opening up their wallets and taking out everything they have if somebody needs help. And that's I think, is one of the best things about teaching in Brentwood."