



Michael (Mike) Lambert
ROBS History Project
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My name is Michael Lewis Lambert and I retired from the Brentwood School District in 1996. The middle name didn't come from anyone else. Lewis was simply a name for which my parents gave approval and to which they both agreed. I know my mom never liked the name Mike so she nicknamed me Mickey. We lived in Vermont until I was about ten years of age after which we moved into New York State. I never liked the name Mickey so I made her promise that my name would be Mike from that time on and from then on she agreed.

I have a sister who is three years older than I am. Her name is Carol. She's living in Westchester, New York. Our mom is deceased. She passed away about eleven years ago. My dad is still living and we get together almost every other day. We moved him down here about a year ago to a nursing home in Port Jefferson. My mom's first name was Margretta, her maiden name was Parks. Originally both parents were native Vermonters, from the northern part of the state, up in the cold climate. They were about thirty miles northeast of Burlington and twenty miles south of the border. That's where I grew up until I was about ten when we moved to the Adirondacks and I got my college degree in Plattsburg. I came down here because I heard districts were then hiring teachers like crazy.

We moved to Oakdale for two years before settling in Sayville, Long Island. We moved there in 1970, to where I currently still reside. I've been living there for approximately thirty three years. My wife is Alice who I met when we both began teaching in Brentwood. Our romance began then and she taught up until our first child was born and she took a leave of absence to raise our two children. When they got of school age she went back to work at the William Floyd School District.

Gayle was first. She's my oldest daughter and is named after her grandmother on Alice's side. She was born in 1970 which makes her thirty three years this year. Of course being my little girl and the apple of my eye she could never do anything wrong - at least that's what my wife always says. She's had quite an interesting life. She's a Social Worker with a Bachelor's Degree from Potsdam; a SUNY School and a Master's Degree from Boston University. She worked in Boston for two years following her graduation and then worked for two or three years in Minnesota. She's now back on Long Island where she and her husband live in Sound Beach.

She's quite a person and you're speaking to someone who is decidedly prejudiced. In her social work she is a dedicated advocate of macro social work in a shelter for the homeless. She helps them get all their different claims acknowledged from social services and assists them finding houses to live in. When she was in Boston she did a lot of community organizing in the projects and places like that. In Minnisotta she worked with children at risk after school and took them on trips and counseled them and so on. Like her father and her mother before her, she is very much a people person.

I also have a son whose name is David and he was born in 1973 and is three years younger than his sister. He'll be thirty this year. He went to Keene State up in New Hampshire. He studied computer drafting and mechanical design and got married and built a beautiful big home up in New Hampshire which is where they gave us Shea, who was our first granddaughter. We spend quite a bit of our time up there now. I believe he got at least some of his mathematical drafting abilities from the inclinations of his father. Our daughter and son were both graduates of Sayville High School. They are gentle people and are very concerned about others. They are both nice people about whom over the years we've received many strong compliments. We have a lot of contact with our children, sometimes visiting my son and his family for three or four weeks at a time.

When I was a boy growing up in Vermont we lived outside of town. My father started raising chickens. We had two huge chicken houses but even so he never quite ever made a go of it. He always needed a second job. He worked in a lumber mill for a time and then in the asbestos open pit mines for a long time until the chicken farm almost put us under and my father went down to Connecticut where he heard they were hiring and he could find a job. He got as

far as the Crown Point Bridge going to New York and he found out they were hiring in the iron ore underground mines in the Adirondacks in a little town called Port Henry and Mineville in the Weatherbee area and that's where he found a job and we wound up moving. He was a blacksmith in the Adirondacks for a while and he also drove a truck there.

As previously indicated my mom, was born in northern Vermont and attended school in Swanton Vermont. Her father, my grandfather, had many different jobs. He had a kind of shirt shop in Burlington. I know he worked for Burlington Free Press for a long time when I knew him. She went to Johnson Normal School and that's where she met my father in Johnson Vermont in the town where he lived. She was a school teacher who taught in a one room school house in Vermont and then she taught in New York once we moved to New York State. My father met her there. He worked for a tree trimming company at that time and was working on a lot of the estates in Old Westbury. There was a dance going on at the college where my mother was attending classes. That was how they met. My father was the one gifted with a mathematics gene while attending college my mother was an English major. She became very involved in church. She was the organization person in the family and eventually became an elder in the Port Henry Presbyterian Church. She was President of the Teachers Union for a number of years and after she retired became President of the local Chamber of Commerce. She was, very much, an organization person.

My father's father my grandfather, had been a carpenter in Vermont for a number of years. He was a carpenter with the railroad there and also had what they called a small "*Gentleman's Farm*". He lived right on the edge of town with a cow, a couple of chickens and a very large garden so we had our supply of milk. His wife and my grandmother, was an active church participant and always helpful to anyone in need. It was an ideal location in which to grow up. We had the chicken farm but there was a farm right below us that had cattle and there was the farm on the other side that had cattle and horses and things. We pretty much had the run of the place between the three farms and did what we wanted. We had a big river running through the farms and did a lot of fishing down there.

I mentioned my sister Carol earlier. She has two girls. My niece's names are Lisa and Linda. Lisa lives here in Center Moriches. She was just visiting with us this morning. She has two little boys. One is in Kindergarten and one is in second

grade. Linda, the younger daughter has one little girl who is about a year old now. When asked to describe what his life had been like growing up Mike asked us to imagine a rural scene with kids running free through open fields of tall grass in any direction they turned, doing whatever came naturally for the day.

The greatest adult influences upon me and my sister after our parents and grandparents had been some of our teachers. That was true not so much in Vermont as it was in the Adirondacks after the family relocated to New York. It was especially true of my math teacher who had a great influence on me and that includes my coach for whom I played three sports in high school. Emotionally and mentally I think my coach taught me quite a bit really; how to handle myself in adverse situations, knowing how to apply myself by putting one hundred and twenty percent into whatever I did. All that I think I got from my coach. My math teacher prepared me more than anyone else to know what I had to do when I came to Brentwood and faced unfamiliar situations here. We had a very small school. It was a Village School. They consolidated three different villages in the one Township but when I went, there were three little Village schools and we only graduated between twenty and forty students a year. By the time I got to my junior year I was only one of five in my class and by my senior year I was one of only three in my math class. It was very much like having individual tutoring. I always liked math and my teacher had a special way of working with us. He made math exciting. That's when I decided that was what I wanted to do for a living. I considered becoming a Minister but I wasn't all that good with words and my teacher showed me I could make math exciting and I could reach people that way.

My first paying job was when I was in eighth Grade or maybe ninth Grade and I got a paper route. The town that I lived in was built on the side of a mountain. You never went anywhere but uphill or downhill. Except on Main Street where you went across for maybe two hundred yards. You usually ended up pushing the bicycle uphill and coasting it downhill because with about sixty papers in front of it you were never able to go uphill. There were days when it was twenty below and it was a morning paper. Collecting money felt like it was a chore sometimes. My second job was during the summer between my junior and senior year of high school. I worked in a restaurant washing dishes in Plattsburg when I was attending college. I got the job through the same person that got me a job delivering papers.

Thanksgiving was always a big holiday. It was one where all the relatives and both sets of grandparents came. We always spent Christmas with my father's parents. That was a pretty good holiday too.

As a kid, I loved sports. I played baseball with three other guys all summer before I got my job. We'd go to the ball field with three guys and play ball. During the winter time there was a concrete slab where a building had been torn down. We'd put up a basket and play basketball there all winter long. I followed the Brooklyn Dodgers where team sports were concerned and I was a fan of theirs because Johnny Padres was from my home town and we all had to route for him.

Over time I've changed my perspective on some things. I used always to be a night person for example until I got older. Now I find myself much better adapted to mornings. I begin to fade later on in the day. I figure it has to be age related.

When I was growing up as a young child I had some favorite toys I loved to play with. It's been said we love those things that contribute to our growth. I loved building blocks. I remember my grandmother had a box of spools. She used to do a lot of sewing. I loved playing with those. I had Lincoln Logs naturally, and I had an erector set that I played with for hours and hours on end.

When I was younger I liked the fall of the year a lot more than other seasons. I now take more pleasure in summers. I remember when our children were young we decided to take a trip back to visit Johnson, the town I grew up in. At that point I hadn't been there in about thirty years. We were walking down the main street and stopped into the drug store. I'm telling you the smell, the aroma that walking into that store triggered for me was like a visit to the *Twilight Zone*. At that same time the woman came out from behind the ice cream counter and was wearing the identical pink apron that I remembered they used to wear back thirty years ago and it felt so strange. We ordered ice cream cones for the kids and on Long Island they sold down here at the time for about a dollar and a half and she charged us ten cents each. They were small cones of course, but we did a double take and noticing our reaction she said, "*We just raised them from a nickel about a year ago.*" It felt almost like we were in a time warp that had taken us back to an earlier time in history for a few seconds.

My first full day of school attended was First Grade. We didn't have a Kindergarten. But there was a State College there and my aunt (my father's sister) was going there at that time, and they did take in children for a month or two, I don't remember exactly how long, to practice with them. So this was interesting because we lived about a mile from the college. My mother didn't drive yet. So the first day, my mom and my father drove me there but my father had to get to work right away. So they decided to drop me off. They said *"You just go through the front door and your Aunt Jenny will be there waiting for you."* They dropped me off and watched me go up to the front door and then they took off. Well I reached up to the front door handle that was way over my head, grabbed it but couldn't budge it and then I panicked. I didn't know what to do. My parents were already gone and I couldn't get into the building. I thought the only thing left for me to do was go straight home. So I ran for about a mile all the way home until I got there. To this day, they don't know how I ever got home because I'd never done it before. Then my mother who didn't drive yet was home alone getting phone calls from all the neighbors and given that in a small town everybody knew everybody, saying things like *"I just saw a little boy who looks like your son running down the road, but it's okay because he's coming in your direction."* That was my memorable first day at school. I've never forgotten it. I can visualize it still and feel what it felt like trying unsuccessfully to open that door and not being able to get inside. It wasn't until about Third Grade that I began to feel as if that school was even for me. I wasn't too keen about going back to school at all after that experience.

I attended the elementary school in Johnson Vermont and there was a teacher there who played a very important role in helping shape me into the kind of teacher I became. They ruled with a very heavy hand and I can remember sitting there, watching and thinking to myself if this were me I would never do what this person is doing. It's wrong. I could never be a heavy handed disciplinarian. That's why I ended up teaching 11th and 12th Graders because my approach to discipline is to get them interested and keep them busy. I can't yell. I can't hit. It's just not me. That played a big part even though it was negative it provided a very positive role in my life. Good things come out of everything.

After that we moved to New York State and I went to Port Henry High School, as I mentioned before I graduated from there and got my Bachelors Degree from Plattsburg State, began teaching and got my Masters Degree from

CW Post and went back up to Plattsburg during the summer. In Plattsburg I'd been very involved in student government. I was Vice President of my Freshman Class. I was Vice President of my Sophomore Class. I was Vice President of Student Government in my Junior Year and lost the Presidency of my Senior Class by only five votes. When I started looking for a job I had an interview at Smithtown High School and my roommate had an interview at the Junior High at the Sachem District. While I was there they also invited me to interview, so I did. I also interviewed at Smithtown. They told me the Board wouldn't be meeting for a month so they wouldn't be able to get back to me. When I got back home I'd received a telegram that was waiting for me from Sachem informing me I already had a contract to sign. Thinking "*A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush*", I thought "*How hard can it be*"? to accept a Junior High position over High School. I almost quit teaching. It was the worst decision I ever made. I hated teaching junior high. It just wasn't my age group. It wasn't my personality. I started looking for a high school job when one opened up here in Brentwood. My Department Chair put in a good word to Mr. Kiriluck who was the Principal here and I got the job. I came down to Long Island in 1963 and worked for one year in the Sachem District and then the opportunity in Brentwood opened up and I came here in 1964 and was interviewed in one room by Mr. Kiriluck, Mr. Yankowski and Mr. Weaver. The interview was routine. They asked questions about handling discipline. I was honest with them' told them I was not heavy handed in my approach and that I was not enjoying the junior high in Sachem and looking forward to being in a high school environment here.

I felt as if I had gone from hell straight to heaven. What a difference in the atmosphere coming from junior high school to high school. I loved it. I had a math eleven class and Stan's daughter was in that class. They were young adults not children. For the first few years I got involved with Class Advisor-ships, the Junior Class and Senior Class and in fact I worked with John Sherin with the Junior Class and then there were a couple of years when we rented entire LIRR Trains to take an entire class with food and live musical entertainment out to Orient Point on the North Fork one year with John Sherin and the next year with John Leeman. The hardest part was chaperoning the students so that they didn't sneak alcohol aboard from Brentwood to the east end & back. Then there was the western barn dance where we learned what not to do when John Sherin bought several bales of fresh hay to spread on the Sonderling cafeteria floor attempting to replicate an authentic barn floor only to be told by Administration that we had to sweep all

that hay up “immediately” and get rid of it because there were students with hay fever allergies, asthma and bronchial conditions that might be severely and adversely effected if we didn’t change course immediately.

Then in 1966 I became Senior Class Advisor. In those days we were assigned those positions because they were appointed and not the paid elective positions they later became. I was teaching full loads of 10th, 11th, and 12th Grade subjects. Alice was appointed that year as Senior Class Advisor and that was how we met and eventually married. We went on one of those train rides together. We went on a ski trip together. There was another teacher here at that time whose name was Andre Lamarre’ and he’d seen Alice at some of our meetings and heard me comment at one of those times, *“Someone as gorgeous as that must have a thousand boyfriends.”* I was always too bashful to ask her out. One day when she came for a meeting Andre called her into the room where we were and asked her, *“I have a question to ask you. Are you dating anybody?”* She looked at him and said, *“No. Why are you asking?”* His reply was, *“Good! Mike wants to know.”*

That was the beginning of our dating. We hit it off and the rest is history. Actually a lot happened since then. She is Jewish. Religion to me is important but which religion is not important. I think they’re all the same. I have my own feelings about religion and I’m a very religious person but how I go about it is inside of me and not what the institution says. So, I converted and have been very active in our temple over the years. I’ve been President of the Temple and I’ve been Treasurer several times and in fact now for the last several years I’ve been Chairperson of what they call the President’s Counsel of all the different Synagogue’s in Suffolk County. That keeps me pretty busy.

I want to brag a little bit about my wife too. She’s run our religious school and has been Principal I believe for about the last thirty years. We grew from about fifty students to about three hundred students now. She voted on the Suffolk County Human Rights Commission and the Women’s Advisory Commission of Suffolk County, so she’s involved in a lot of things.

I always felt Brentwood was like an extension of going to college. We were all hired about the same time and were all approximately the same age. So, when we sat down and talked and did things together, first we were single and went to parties together and then we got married and had our children about the same

time and talked about children. In fact when Alice retired from Brentwood to raise the children they had what we called *playschool* because Bev and Ralph Reggerio, Paul and Mary Koretski, John Durant and his wife because they all had children at the same time and they were all home instead of being home and pulling their hair out every week they got together and went to somebody else's house. All the children got together and played and it became a Brentwood thing.

I helped volunteer coach baseball for a couple of years with Dick Roth. I did umpire for a number of years too with Gerry McCarthy and I enjoyed that. I've been keeping score with the basketball team here. I started my second year in Brentwood and I'm still doing it.

Believe it or not some of the people I began with are still here and have remained here down through the years. Mike Campanile came here a couple of years after me and we've remained very good friends. Paul and I still go to Saratoga every summer for three or four days and have remained the best of friends. We have a lot of laughs and talk about Brentwood.

I don't really think of what I did as having to do with purpose. I grew up always believing that my life's work would ultimately have to embrace doing something I enjoyed thoroughly and I always enjoyed working with people. That's what I liked about teaching because it wasn't the same every day. Even the subject matter changed since I had so many different groups. I could have two classes back to back and have the same subject yet teach them totally differently because the clientele was different. It was just enjoyable being up there. Sometimes I was a ham in the class and other times I needed to be very serious. I just enjoyed every minute of it. However, I don't know if I would have enjoyed it as much in other school districts as I enjoyed what I did in Brentwood

Brentwood is such a melting pot of different nationalities (*and I've told this to so many people over the years during which there have been different upheavals throughout the world*). We've had the Vietnamese that came in for a while then we had the Cambodians and then we had the Haitians that came in, the El Salvadorian's came in and I got to know each group. I mean I didn't have to travel anyplace. I got to know their personalities, their culture and they all just kind of melted here into one big family and I enjoyed that a lot because I grew up in a small isolated town and I never had that exposure. I loved studying people I

guess and trying to understand their personalities and now I understand more than that, the combination of their personalities, where they grew up and their customs. Brentwood offered me that. I would have had to have paid to get all that education. Brentwood gave it to me. I got a tremendous education without even traveling out of the zip code.

Since there is a limit to everyone's time, I was never able to take on active participation in union matters or run for local or regional office. I trusted others to represent me well which I believe they did.

When Alice and I were senior class advisors and I was working with John Leeman at the time we had a Class President whose name was Tommy Smallens. He was probably one of the most vivacious of all the class presidents. He just did everything. We went to his house. He bubbled with enthusiasm. That was 1969 and I lost contact with him. I asked different students that had come back to teach in the district that were from that era if they'd heard anything about Tommy Smallins. One person that came back said they thought they'd heard that he'd passed away. As it turned out he hadn't. It was another Class President from later on. Then maybe about six years ago we hired a part time secretary in the Temple when I was breaking in the fulltime secretary there I got to talking with her and I'd always known her name was Karen but I never knew her last name. It was then I first noticed her last name was Smallins. I asked if she knew a Tommy Smallins and she said her husband's name was Tommy Smallins. First, I had asked her if she and her husband had gone to Brentwood High. She said Yes! I didn't know exactly how to ask, *"Is your husband still alive."* "Well", she said, *"He was this morning when I left."* That's the Tommy Smallins I'd been looking for. I couldn't believe we'd been so close all along. She and her husband had been very active in their church, St. Ann's in Brentwood. Their Church and our Temple do many joint projects together having to do with anti-bias celebrating services together some times. The two religious schools get together to talk about their respective religions so I realized it's a very small world. And now I learned that the insurance company he had been working for went under so he got another job but he had to take quite a pay cut and was looking for a part time job and we were looking for a part time custodian so now he's a part time custodian and his wife is our full time secretary.

I retired in 1996. At first I didn't know I was ready. I always thought I would die here "*with my boots on*" as they say. Everybody started talking about retirement and incentives came down from Albany and I started putting numbers down on a piece of paper and I found out that my take home pay in retirement would almost be the same as my take home pay for active service. We had to turn in our paperwork a year and a half before retiring but I waited until the last possible moment because I really enjoyed teaching that much. I appreciated the fact that I had had one whole life and had the possibility of having yet another but was still hesitant to lose what I loved so much. Fortunately for me, the class that I had in that year that we had to submit our paperwork was one of the most difficult I had ever had so it didn't make it as hard as it might have been to let go and move on. Had it been the following year which was my last year of teaching I probably wouldn't have retired because I had some of the most delightful kids I ever had in my entire career which otherwise might then have continued unabated.

One quick story I'd like to leave with you, he said. I was coming back from upstate with Alice on the ferry to Greenport and we were sitting by ourselves during the crossing when suddenly a booming voice called out "Mr. Lambert" --- A man who I swear looked older than me approached and proceeded to introduce me to his entire family and tell me I was the reason he stayed in school to graduate. He was a wrestler who told me that my class which he loved had kept him in school. He assured me that he credited me, his sports and his coach as being the only reasons he stayed in school. Hearing that gave me a lot of joy.

The total number of years I spent teaching was thirty three, thirty two of which were in Brentwood. I taught summer school for eighteen summers when money was really tight. When I first came to Sachem I made \$5,200 and when I came to Brentwood I got a whopping increase of \$5,800.

Since retirement it has seemed there's not a second in the day that my calendar is not packed. I am still really involved in my Temple and I do a lot there. I've been vice president in charge of administration for about three years now. Since my son moved up to New Hampshire we go up there to visit a lot, my granddaughter was just born so we spent a long time there. My son-in-law, my daughter's husband started a construction business and when he's shorthanded I help out there. In fact this past week we helped out with finishing remodeling

somebody's kitchen, by ripping out walls and installing cabinets and keeping our carpentry skills in practice. In addition to spending time with family my Rabbi has introduced me to the game of golf which I'm enjoying and trying to improve my score. My wife joined a gym just before she retired so we've been going to the gym together two or three times a week and actually I ran in the Sayville four or five mile race last summer in ninety degree heat and came in third in my age bracket. That heat kept the number of people running down some so that helped me in the field. I have no regrets about anything I have done or accomplished. I've seen my life as a number of plateaus and never wanted to repeat anything once I'd completed it. I consider myself as having been very lucky. I like reading How to Books but I don't like reading fiction. I read a newspaper from cover to cover whenever I have a chance. Politically, I consider myself to be a diehard Liberal. I very much enjoy reading political books. Within the past three years several of the books I have read are *Sleepwalking through History* by Haynes Johnson, *The Reagan Years* by Stephen E. Knott & Jeffrey L. Chidester and *Bush at War* by Bob Woodward.

I've been quite taken by the young teachers the district has hired to replace those of us who are retiring. They're very good. I think they're better than we were when we started. They're more qualified and have more background than we had. We were thrown right into the hopper without much if any experience. It's a very different job market today. That's true. I thought I became a good teacher when I started having my own children. I used to play the role of a teacher basing what I experienced on my own feelings. It wasn't until I began to experience teaching from the perspective of my students feelings did I truly become a better teacher. I never had that real sensitivity to students feelings, I always based it on my feelings, it wasn't until I started basing it on how I wanted them to treat my children that I became more compassionate and a much better teacher by understanding what students needed. Instead of looking at them as a classroom of students I began to see them as a class full of individuals and I think that was when I really became a much better teacher. I started seeing them as a class of individuals not simply as a classroom full of students.

If there's any advice I could offer to young people coming into the profession it would be from something that was handed out on a sheet given out at one of our meetings that said to us, "*It's not your fault. Don't take it personally.*" When a student comes in and s/he's having a bad day, ninety nine

percent of the time it has nothing to do with you. Most young teachers I know, (I did it myself as a first year teacher), took it personally. Once I stopped taking it personally and realized it had nothing to do with me, I was able to work with that student and get him or her to defuse a little bit. If there was any advice I could offer it would be to always remember they're all individuals. Remember to talk to everybody as an individual and not as only one member of a class. It sounds easy to do but it's not. It's also always easier to reflect and become an armchair quarterback than it is to being there and under fire.

My life and career has definitely been an extremely happy one. One aspect of it all that I have neglected to talk about as thoroughly as I might have liked was to have better represented the importance my wife Alice has played in my life and career. She has without doubt been the best friend I ever had in my life. In a word, she's wonderful. I'm going to have to wipe away a tear pretty soon if I keep talking about this. I realize I'm a very lucky man. You've met Alice and you know she's just a wonderful person; she's talented, she's intelligent, she's loving, she's justI don't know how I deserve her but I've been very fortunate and our children have grown because of her and I've also been very fortunate having been able to teach in Brentwood. It's been like a home away from home to me and I've loved the opportunity I've had being here and for that I'd like to thank you all very much!