

Interviewee: Gus Mercaldo
Interviewer: Dorothea Penar
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Born in Burlington and raised in Shelburne, Gus Mercaldo served as the principal of the Shelburne School from 1964 to 1994. Outside the school, Gus showed his love of the Shelburne community through his involvement in countless other activities.

Topics discussed: Shelburne schools, Shelburne teachers, CVU, Korny Kapers, Saint Catherine's Church, Shelburne Craft School, Special Education, multi-age classrooms

Dorothea Penar: Gus, could you tell me a little about growing up and how you came about to be working in Shelburne?

Gus Mercaldo: My grandparents lived in Burlington for years. Actually, I was born in Baltimore, Maryland. We moved back to Vermont – we used to come each summer to visit, but moved back to Vermont to live in 1947. I went to High School here. Burlington High was actually Edmunds High School. I went to the University of Vermont and got my bachelor's degree. I then went to Troy, New York and taught for five years. I move back to Vermont in 1964 and taught fourth grade at the Village School for one year. I was promoted to the principalship in 1965. I remained in that position until I retired in 1999. I watched the school change, grow and reform in many different years. The Champlain Valley Union High School opened the year that I came here to teach fourth grade. It opened in 1964.

DP: Before that, where did Shelburne High School students go?

GM: All students went to school here in the Village. It was (Grades) 1-12. That was the school that is right on Route 7. In 1966, we added kindergarten as part of the public school. Before that, it had been private but we felt that it should be part of the total education of the town.

DP: Did you ever live in Shelburne?

GM: I lived in Shelburne from 1968 to 1986 and at that time, when my mother died, I moved to our family homestead where she was living at the time. That is in Burlington, on Perrotta Place.

DP: Where did you live in Shelburne?

GM: I lived in Locust Hill. I was the first occupant in that condominium complex. That was 1972, I think it was.

DP: You mentioned lots of changes in the school. First of all, the dividing out high school. Was that because of the population?

GM: Yes. They joined the Union with the other towns – Charlotte, Williston, Hinesburg and St. George. I think that union was formed in 1962 and 1963 and they passed the bond for the High School and the facility itself. I think at one time, South Burlington was wooing Shelburne to see if they wanted to join a Union with them and then this Union came up. I wasn't really involved with that.

DP: Was Barbara Snelling on the school board at that time?

GM: Barbara Snelling was on the School Board at the time. She probably has more history on how the union actually came about.

DP: So you moved into the High School in 1964.....

GM: So we were grades 1-8 at the Village School. In 1967, our school population was growing 25%-28% every year, so it was really growing crazy each year. The High School just moved out and we immediately started looking into what we would do with our increased enrollment. We knew we needed another building so in 1967 the Middle School opened. It started off as grades 5 –8 and the fourth grade moved there the second year it was opened because we were overcrowded at the Village School. Just before the Middle School opened, one-fifth grade was in the old Town hall – in the basement and two fifth grades were over in the Methodist Church in their old Fellowship Hall – before they put on the new addition. We had two mobile classrooms on the school's village property itself. Before the Middle school, we were all over the place.

DP: The smaller schools had already been consolidated?

GM: Yes. And then we added Kindergarten in 1967. Kindergarten was held at the Episcopal Church. They had some classrooms - I think they are offices now. Where the dining room is now, that was where the Kindergarten was. Like I say, we felt that it should be part of the school. State law still did not require that towns have Kindergarten but we felt that we should. In 1994, all the grades switched to the Middle School.

DP: One of the things Shelburne is known for is having multi-age classrooms pretty early one?

GM: In 1972 was the first year. It was actually a project that Barbara Snelling wrote a grant for. It was a cooperative effort between Charlotte and Shelburne. Our (Grades) K-4s went to Charlotte and their (Grades) 5-8s came to the Shelburne Middle School. That was actually called Alternative Education and that was the multi-age program.

DP: What made Shelburne want to do that?

GM: There was some grant money available. We were really looking into the idea of multi-ages for a number areas. When this money became available, Barbara Snelling had been in touch with Marianne Stroud. Marianne was actually down at the alternative school in Bennington. She was from England and had been in the English primary schools. She was into this whole idea of alternative education for multiage groups. She was hired as director for this project that started in 1972. She did a lot of teacher training and parent training on the topic of the British primary school. They had been doing that for years where they had mixture of ages together.

DP: Were you looking at a special type of student to do this?

GM: Anybody could choose it. It was very popular – we had to create a waiting list because we could not accept everybody in it that wanted to be there. More in the primary grades than in the upper grades. In the upper grades it was more of social pressure to be with your peers. The demand was not as high in the 5-8. That became stronger with the whole history of Alpha. Alpha was the older grades and Explorers were the lower grades.

DP: Now we have several lots of ages, but there were only two then....



Figure 1 Class of 1889

GM: It started off K-4 but then when we permanently moved the fourth grade to the Middle School, it was really difficult to keep the fourth graders in that younger unit because the rest of their peers were over at the other building. So we eventually decided that we would make it a K-3 and then make the older kids...but then what they did, they started a (Grades) 4-5 and (Grades) 6-8 was an Alpha. They thought that (Grades) 4-8 was too much of a span so they broke it down (Grades) 4-5 and then (Grades) 6-8.

DP: And that has been more of a trend these days – instead of the straight grade format. That made it so that the school building had to be different.

GM: Oh yes. When the Middle School was built, they actually had some flexibility. Certain walls were movable so that they could make larger spaces. They did that for a purpose, because when we were looking at schools around the nation. We saw some of those in the Chicago area when we went out and visited some schools that were already

doing some of this more open setting and stuff like that. That was something that we thought was the future of education. I remember, we were real cautious. We wanted that flexibility as far as mixing kids but we felt it shouldn't be just a permissive kind of atmosphere. We felt that there should be more structure than you might normally have just in a regular classroom. Some people really were concerned about the whole idea that kids doing whatever they wanted to do and not really having any structure to the curriculum. We made sure that there was structure but the kids were directing what they were learning more than the regular classroom.

DP: Please talk about how you went about deciding that the Village School be retired as a school and what was the thinking?

GM: One of the main reason that we felt that the Village School had to be retired was that many of the classroom spaces weren't even 500 square feet – they were very small. Those old original classrooms with the walls and tin ceilings – they were the standard back in the 20s when the school was first built. The newer wing of the school – those classrooms were 900 square feet. So that you could easily put 20-25 kids in those rooms and not have it look like one you were one desk on another. That was the main reason. I think if the town had appropriated money and allowed us do some of the things they did after the school moved out. To knock down some walls – that was pretty expensive thing to do because some of them were bearing walls so you had to do some kind of a different treatment. The whole idea of moving out of there was that the space itself was not adequate – the size of the classrooms. While we were looking at that we said 'Look, if we are going to create families of kids – families of learners with a group of teachers then we should have classroom spaces that lend themselves to make that work.' If a group of kids were going to be with a teacher for 3 or 4 years, then lets build something that would accommodate that. They could stay right there and the teachers could configure the kids that they were working with. That is when the whole idea with the Kivas¹ where they could have their little performance areas. They would gather each morning first to start they day and then go off to their various academic activities. That is how the whole concept of the pods came about. While we were doing this, we wanted to look at what we will we be doing with classroom spaces in 20 years. So we were looking to the future. Of course, we had a superintendent then that was a futurist. Bill Crocoll was a real futurist – he had been doing that for a long time. That was his whole thrust – this idea of families of learners with a number of teachers that they would stay with. The teacher, the families and the kids really became a unit. Seeing that a family was going to be with those teachers for a number of years, build up a relationship also with those families.

¹ Kivas were an integral component of early Southwest cultures. They provided meeting areas where all members the members of the community could communicate and participate.



Figure 2 The Village School

DP: That was a big change...

GM: Yes. Of course, intermingled with all that, was this Special Education stuff, which was just peering its ugly head. I hate to say ugly but it really was because people just did not know what to do and how to handle these kids. We were one of the first schools in the state to really have integrated learning. We actually 'mainstreamed' – that's an old term – kids with special needs. They were an integral part of the classroom. If they needed special services, either those services would come to them or they would go to the services. But they would spend the majority of the day with their peers.

DP: You started doing that before the Federal mandating....

GM: Oh, yes. We started doing that the second year I was principal. We were involved with UVM for training regular classroom teachers to work with special needs kids. Now it is all mandated. The Federal Government then started to give us a little teeny bit of money so they felt that they thought they could tell you how to run all that. I am an advocate for kids that have special needs but I think that we went too far. Because we went so far that way, I think some of the kids in the middle are not getting some of things that they should be getting. And the kids on the top end of the spectrum. We saw some of the problems with the organization with the slower learner – we did not want to make those same mistakes with the kids at the top. At one time, and I think some schools still are in the nation, are testing kids to go in to special groups at the top. To me, that's not the way to do it. They have wonderful things to share with these kids and also with these slower kids. They can be a real inspiration to a kid that has special needs. Take them under their wing and they are going to learn just them.

DP: Do you think that the whole pattern of mainstreaming is going to be too cumbersome?

GM: We can see that it has gotten too expensive. We can't afford to put that much money into one group of children. We've got to find a way to put that across to the board and still meet the needs of those kids. That was another one of our main thrusts

when we started reorganizing was lets develop individual learning plans for each child. Not just for the kids with special needs or the kids who were smarter – lets do it for each child. We started to try to do that but once gain, that got very overwhelming.

DP: With Shelburne continuing to grow, just as it did in the 1960s, do you think the school system will change?

GM: I personally don't think that Shelburne can afford a high school of its own and offer the kind of things that CVU is offering our kids. Its too expensive and we don't have enough kids to do it. We couldn't have those special things – orchestra, band, 5 or 6 different courses – you know all those things those kids have – honors sciences and honors math. That takes personnel and then your budget is really shot. What I see us doing is keeping the high school and maybe building a neighborhood school in the north end. We own the land behind the orchard and Long meadow. Possibly putting a primary school there and having two K-8s. I don't think we have enough kids in the primary school to make the middle school a primary school. Maybe make the Middle School for middle grades – make it for 6-8. I feel that we should keep some kind of unit with some of those ages. I don't think the 7th and 8th graders should be alone. I think the 6th graders should be in there so that they slow down some of that stuff that 7 and 8 graders get into when they be close to getting into ninth grade. So it kind of slows that down and then they also have some good interaction with those age groups. So maybe K- 5 and 6-8 in that unit and then maybe another k-5 somewhere else feeding into that. They go that land – too bad they can't use it. They have 30 acres there. I think that was forward looking for them to say that 'Ok, we are going to need more land at some point for a school. Let's make it part of that bond.'

DP: You have been involved with Saint Catherine's Church for many, many years. How did you get involved with the church?

GM: I think it was in the early 1970s. Mrs. Grandey was directing the choir at the time and doing the music here in Shelburne at Saint Catherine's. When I was younger and still in high school and college, I was taking voice lessons from her. She directed the choir at Christ the King Parish and I was part of her choir. I got involved, went away and taught and then I lost touch. She was starting some music here at Saint Catherine's. At the time, I was living up in Colchester temporarily before I moved to Shelburne. She called and asked if I would join the choir so I said " Oh sure I will help out' – for Easter and Christmas. In the later 1970s, Gloria decided that she couldn't do it anymore.¹ We though the choir was going to disband and then some of the choir members came to me and said "will you keep going for us?" So I did and kept going and got really involved in other things. Actually, I was excited about doing it not just because of the church because I felt it was good for me as the principal of the school to be the kid's lives outside the school. A lot of them were going to church here so I got really involved. I then became a Lector and an Eucharist minister. As far as the choir, that all grew too because I didn't just do the choir, I was doing leader of song for other Masses. It grew because Father Morencey kept on saying: 'what don't you do this.'" It kept growing. At

¹ Leonard and Laura Grandey owned a home on Pine Haven Shore Road.

one point, I started the Deacon Program – I was accepted into that program – but it got to be too much to do that and do school principalship and with all my meetings. I dropped out of that and I thought I would go back to that after I retired so now they tell me I am too old. I am over 60 so they say that you can't do that.

DP: You also teach?

GM: I teach religion which I have been doing since the mid 1970s. That was another way of connecting with the kids. I did that with a lot of things. I would go to soccer games and I got involved in the tournament, when they had it. Scouts.....Cub Scouts and all that. When they had things going on in the community like the parade, I tried to get involved. I thought it was really important for the kids to see me as another person in the community – someone who was an adult that had their interest in heart. I was willing to give that kind of time.

DP: We know you have a famous role as Santa Claus.

GM: Oh yes. It is funny. One of the teachers, Phyllis Pitkin, who taught second grade and she always wanted to play Mrs. Claus. She talked to me and asked me to play Santa and I said "oh sure. We can do that - It will be good for the kids." This was before all that stuff not mixing religion with school, not mixing all these holidays and not offending the Jewish people because they did not celebrate the same holiday we do. So, I got into it whole hearted. I went to each classroom. We did that, oh gosh, at least 20 years. We even went to the Nursery School, the Cub Scouts and went to the Fire Department and played Santa for them as well. It really got big, and they said we can't do that anymore. We had to pull that back.

DP: Are there any other organizations that you have been involved with?

GM: Korny Kapers was a part of the PTO. It was a fundraiser for the PTO. That is started off as a little vaudeville act, like a little talent show. That was before I came. That was back in the....I think they started that in the late 1950s. A group of parents and townspeople got together and put some different acts together. As it evolved, there was always a group of men did a men's ballet. It was supposed to be a fun thing. But then as people were starting to get their acts together, some people started to do lip synch. As that evolved, they thought "Gee why don't we do a whole show that is lip synched." Instead of having individual acts, they put three or four shows together– Broadway shows - and took songs from them. Mary Lou Sutherland and her husband Bob Sutherland were the people who did a lot of the creating of putting these songs together and writing the lyrics.¹

DP: Where did you do these?

¹ Robert and Mary Lou Sutherland lived in the village on Harbor Road next to the railroad tracks. This land was formerly owned by Vanderbilt Webb.

GM: We did these in the gym at the old Village School because that was the only performance place in town. They did it a Thursday night, a Friday night and a Saturday night. They did it three nights and they packed the place. 400 people each performance. They did that till the 1980s and then a lot of live theater came around. Like Lyric started and it pulled a lot of people out of it.

DP: Was the talent show an extension of the Korny Kapers?

GM: It was just people could sign up and do whatever they wanted to. It started in a time when the community and the school weren't working together well. We felt that this is a way to bring them together so even the school board got an act together. We tried to get various people within the community to do acts as well. That only lasted for four or five years. It did not last as long. This other thing had been going on for years. I was also involved with the Craft School at the time. We sent our kids to the Craft School for art for a number of years.

DP: When was that?

GM: We were doing that in the 1960s until the late 70s or early 80s. What the kids would do would be to walk over to the Craft School and they had woodworking, they did some pottery and they did some other things. Then it got to be a real hassle with walking the kids from school. We thought we needed to have someone supervise that and it got to be a real hassle. And that point, the Craft School was starting to change too. They were having some trouble with some of their older buildings—they weren't meeting codes. The superintendent was concerned about what happens if something happens in one of those buildings. We decided not to continue that relationship. They were talking about it again just recently.

DP: So at that point you had to hire teachers to be in the school?

GM: Yes.

DP: Barbara Snelling has often mentioned that she feels like that she gave you your start?

GM: I often say that whenever I am introducing her. She did. I did not have my Masters Degree yet when they made me principal. I had started to study during the summer and she really gave me a chance to show what I could do with that responsibility. She really took a chance on me and I was really give a lot of extra time so that I could do that. If it hadn't been for that, I do not know where I would I be at this point. The kids and the school and the community were my family. They really were. My mom used to get so mad – not mad – but she would say: “You always down at the school and you never spend any time...” I would say “hey mom, the kids are important.” I want them to know that I want to be part of all of their life – not just their school life. I want to be part of what they do on weekends and what they do at night and what they do on special holidays and all of that stuff. Then they say “Gee, this man is really part of my life.”

DP: And this hasn't changed, even after retirement?

GM: I am still involved. I am on the Freeman Foundation Community Education Fund Committee. Actually, I am the acting President right now. I feel a little uncomfortable with that because I think people would rather have somebody who actually lives in the committee be the leader of the committee. But that committee may not last much longer. That's why I said that I would take over for a while until we decide our direction – if we are going to continue with Fair Share or continue with some of that private funding of education. I am keeping my finger in that because it does keep me involved. An of course, I go to school a couple days a week.

DP: What do you do know?

GM: I am in a mentoring thing with some seventh graders. I meet once a week for an hour/ hour and half with a group of seventh graders along with some other folks from the Pillars and Wake Robin. We talk and play games. We talk about what education was like when we were in school and try to get them to open up and express some of their feelings about what is going on in their lives. Plus, I wander in ever so often and ask “do you have anything for me to do?”

DP: Do you know any teachers who are links to the early school days of this Century?

GM: When I first came, Alice Bennett was there and she still substitutes once in a while now. I remember Alice a lot because of all the help she gave me. She was really good with special kids. She had a lot of knowledge and information to share. She and Kathy Perlongo – she was a Pillsbury. She left quite a while ago. And Florence Horsford who was actually principal for the lower grades long before I came to town. She was the person who really helped me a lot. She knew the things that had to be done and she always willing to pitch in and help.¹

DP: In the recent years, it seems like that a lot of teachers that you started off with have started to retire.

GM: Ellie Messier and Joan Penrod. Joyce Havrika, Theresa Cilloe². A lot of those folks came once I started. Joan Penrod actually did her student teaching with us and then we hired her as a second grade teacher. Bonnie Douglas was the same. There are still some there who were there when I came - Pam Wiese. Mary Beth Harris was one of the original teachers who was hired for the middle school when that first opened. David Southworth was one of the original folks. Jason Lewis was one of the original Middle School folks. Sue Kiniry – she started in the late 70s. We are starting to get a turnover now where there are a lot of new people coming in which is good because they have new fresh ideas and new fresh energy to use.

¹ See Florence Horsford Interview

² In addition to working together for many years, Joyce Havrika and Theresa Cilloe spent their retirement years together in a Gardenside Condominium.

DP: Have the kids changed since the 1960s?

GM: The kids have changed. Some of the kids, when they come to us – the behavior of some of the kids. Things that we really have to work out because it really gets in the way of learning. It is behavior and emotional needs that they never had years ago. So much of it has to do with the times and the idea that the nuclear family isn't what it used to be.

DP: Are they growing up faster?

GM: I don't know if they are growing up faster. I think there are more demands on their emotions than there have been in the past. It is rough when a child, before they are four or five years old, goes through a divorce or a separation. That really affects them and forces them to actually accept responsibilities that they may not normally have to. It makes demands on their emotions. I think it is difficult for a child to spend five days a week with mom, and then spend the next two days with dad for the weekend or vice versa. Or spend a week here and a week there and then back again. They have to learn the expectations of both those environments. There is so much of that. Consequently, we get kids who emotionally can't handle the requirements of a classroom. "We have certain expectations – these are your limits." They don't understand that and sometimes I think adults overcompensate. It is a whole different environment.

DP: How have academic expectations changed over the years?

GM: I think we raised expectations for kids. I think one of the main reasons is that we know that all of them will go onto college so we want to give them those things that we feel they need to go out and get a job and get out in the work force earlier. And to still do well even if they don't go onto college. I think that one of the biggest hurdles is before these kids can learn academically they need to get over these emotionally things they have that really get in the way of learning. If you are all worried about what happened last night at home, the arguments that went on and all that stuff and then getting your mind down to learning is hard. I think we need to see some changes there. It has its toll not only on the family but the school as well. Teachers are having to handle behavior that they never had to handle before. I would have never thought that a five year old could say some of the things or do some of the things to adults that they do now twenty years ago. It would not have been acceptable. Nobody, not even the parents, would accept it. Now they come and they say, "We don't know what to do with them." You can understand the difficulty there are in. We try to work with the parents to get them to understand and say, "Let's work together. This is our line and we are all going to handle it the same way. So if you deviate from it, these are the consequences you are going to have. That is hard to do."

DP: Is there more contact with parents these days? Or is it just different?

GM: I think in some ways it is more but it is different. I think there is a lot more now where the interaction between school and family is necessary to keep a lid on things. Whereas before, it was people coming into help sharing some of their expertise with kids and giving them some enriching experiences. Whereas now, it has been done because if not, the lid blows right off. I think that is really vital that we keep those lines open even though things are harder now as far as some of things we have to deal with as far as discipline and all that. It is actually vital for that interaction to happen so I hope we never do away with that. The demands of everybody's time sometimes causes us to cut back on some of those school/family relationships – the parent teacher conferences and stuff like that. I don't know if it has to be every six weeks or eight weeks or whatever. When it is necessary, do it. Just don't let it slide. I know parents have a rough time. They do not handle those situations sometimes. So talk to someone that sees them more frequently than you do. Maybe between the two adults, the three adults or six adults – whatever number come together to work on it – can come up with a plan. The kids need the help, they are crying, they want it. They cry for that help. Three or four heads sometimes can come together with a plan.