

Montauk Library Oral History Program

Interview with Jack Perna

July 26, 2024

Interviewed by Virginia Garrison of the Montauk Library

Virginia Garrison [00:00:00] Today is Friday, July 26th, 2024. My name is Virginia Garrison and I'm a library assistant at the Montauk Library. Today I am conducting an oral history interview with Jack Perna. This interview is part of the Montauk Library Oral History Program. We are conducting this interview in the Sound Studio of the Montauk Library in Montauk, New York. Jack, I just want to confirm on tape your consent to participate in and be recorded according to the oral history informed consent and release agreement.

Jack Perna [00:00:35] I agree, I consent.

Virginia Garrison [00:00:37] Could you please pronounce and spell your first and last name?

Jack Perna [00:00:40] Okay. My name is Jack, JACK, Philip PHILIP, Perna, PERNA.

Virginia Garrison [00:00:46] Thank you.

Virginia Garrison [00:00:49] And I know there's a story behind your name.

Jack Perna [00:00:53] Actually, professionally, I use J. Philip Perna. I have dropped the Jack. When I was, when I first started teaching, Mr. Bob Fisher suggested that Jack was too informal of a name, so he suggested just use the first initial J and it would be much more formal. And actually, when I was at Catholic school in the city, the nuns wouldn't call me Jack. Because they insisted my name was John. But it wasn't, it was Jack. So it's funny, the nickname. They thought Jack was a nickname and they wanted it to be the baptismal, you know, John from the evangelist. Anyway.

Virginia Garrison [00:01:35] So they called you John.

Jack Perna [00:01:38] A lot of times they called me John.

Virginia Garrison [00:01:39] That's funny. And where are you born?

Jack Perna [00:01:42] I was born in Westchester Square Hospital in the Bronx.

Virginia Garrison [00:01:46] And what year?

Jack Perna [00:01:47] 1950.

Virginia Garrison [00:01:48] Okay.

Jack Perna [00:01:50] As were most of my first cousins, by the way, or from the same doctor, Dr. Squitieri. I think our family was his whole business.

Virginia Garrison [00:01:59] How ... do you know how to spell his name? Just for the transcript.

Jack Perna [00:02:01] Squitieri, I think is SQUITIERI.

Virginia Garrison [00:02:07] Okay. And what were your parents' names?

Jack Perna [00:02:11] My mother was Theresa, THERESA, Giordano, GIORDANO.

Virginia Garrison [00:02:20] Okay.

Jack Perna [00:02:20] Perna. My father was Jack Thomas Perna.

Virginia Garrison [00:02:25] Oh, so you were named for your father. And can you tell me a little bit about your family heritage and where your parents and grandparents came from?

Jack Perna [00:02:36] My mother's parents came from Naples, Italy. Actually my grandfather, her father, as a young man went to Brazil. His family went to Brazil. And then they came up to New York. So he came to New York speaking Italian, Portuguese, and learned English here.

Virginia Garrison [00:02:56] What was he doing in Brazil?

Jack Perna [00:02:58] I think it had something to do with the war, back then.

Virginia Garrison [00:03:01] Okay.

Jack Perna [00:03:01] We had a lot, a lot of Europeans, Germans, and Italians went to Argentina and Brazil, I believe. Yeah.

Virginia Garrison [00:03:12] So that was so he was fluent in.

Jack Perna [00:03:14] In Portuguese and in Italian. Yes. And then learned English here.

Virginia Garrison [00:03:20] Wow.

Jack Perna [00:03:21] And then my, my mother's mother from Naples, moved into New York City. And they met in New York. Got married in Utica, I believe. My father's parents were both born in Sicily, and they came to New York and, actually, my father's father was a baker.

Virginia Garrison [00:03:51] And were they in Manhattan or they were in the Bronx?

Jack Perna [00:03:53] Everybody started I believe in Harlem.

Virginia Garrison [00:03:55] Oh, Manhattan.

Jack Perna [00:03:56] Yeah. And then they moved out to the country, which back then was Pelham Bay.

Virginia Garrison [00:04:04] Okay.

Jack Perna [00:04:06] In the Bronx.

Virginia Garrison [00:04:07] That was the country, right. And what did your parents do?

Jack Perna [00:04:12] My mother was really a mother of seven. She worked during the season as a waitress, usually at Pizza Village. I remember her, actually, well, when we lived in New York for a little while we lived in City Island so she was the manager of that restaurant for her father in City Island.

Virginia Garrison [00:04:39] Her father had a restaurant in City Island.

Jack Perna [00:04:41] Yeah.

Virginia Garrison [00:04:41] Okay.

Jack Perna [00:04:43] He was actually an undertaker in the Bronx or in Harlem and then in the Bronx. And that's still in the family. One of my cousins owns that now. He was a funeral director.

Virginia Garrison [00:04:55] In the Bronx and Manhattan.

Jack Perna [00:04:57] And it's only in the Bronx now.

Virginia Garrison [00:05:00] Okay. So. And she was mother of seven, which is.

Jack Perna [00:05:05] A job.

Virginia Garrison [00:05:06] Yeah.

Jack Perna [00:05:07] And my father was an upholsterer. And during the season when we were in Montauk, he was a, I guess, a line cook at the Lakeside. My grandfather owned Giordano's Lakeside Inn, which is now the Surf Lodge. Actually, my grandfather was a, I believe a charter member of the Montauk Chamber of Commerce.

Virginia Garrison [00:05:28] Oh, wow.

Jack Perna [00:05:28] And of the Montauk Lions Club.

Virginia Garrison [00:05:30] And his last name was Giordano.

Jack Perna [00:05:32] Ralph Giordano. Yeah.

Virginia Garrison [00:05:33] Okay. And then I know you have siblings.

Jack Perna [00:05:38] I have several. I have a sister, Nancy. She's a year older than me.

Virginia Garrison [00:05:43] Okay.

Jack Perna [00:05:45] A sister Jeanne, who's a year younger than me.

Virginia Garrison [00:05:47] JEANNE

Jack Perna [00:05:49] Okay. My brother Vito, who actually passed away last May. My sister Terriann. One word, no E at the end.

Virginia Garrison [00:06:01] And an I, right? And no E, right? Okay.

Jack Perna [00:06:04] I had a brother after her. We had a brother, Mark. Who died as 2-year-old. A long time ago. And a sister Tina. How many's that? That's everybody.

Virginia Garrison [00:06:19] Five. Nancy, Jeanne, Vito, Terriann, Mark, and Tina. One. Two. Three. No.

Jack Perna [00:06:26] Six and me.

Virginia Garrison [00:06:27] That's six. Yep. And two of them, oh, one died in infancy, no as a toddler.

Jack Perna [00:06:35] Yeah, everybody else is still here. The those four sisters are still okay.

Virginia Garrison [00:06:42] And you used to have a huge number of cousins in Montauk, right?

Jack Perna [00:06:47] When we were young. Actually, I have 45 first cousins on my mother's side. So. Yeah, all on my mother's side, and when we were young, before half of them were born, I guess, we used to live in Ditch Plains. My grandfather had a house on the corner at Ditch Plains, and each family had a room. And he had property around it and some of the families built houses around it. So there were six houses around that big house.

Virginia Garrison [00:07:21] That's all around what was then later Mary Stewart's house?

Jack Perna [00:07:24] Mary Stewart lived in the little house. The big house was where there was a big house in the little house. Mary Stewart was my mother's sister. She lived in the little house, which has been redone, actually, now, but they her children still own that house. Maryellen and Chip or Calvin. And they're both, they're both out here. They're in East Hampton. They both teach in Sag Harbor. Actually, Maryellen retired, I think, two years ago. And Calvin is just newly retired this year. Chip.

Virginia Garrison [00:08:03] Are those houses still there, the ones that ... ?

Jack Perna [00:08:04] All the houses are still there. One has been rebuilt. It was next to Mary Stewart's house. Just east was a little green house, that was my Uncle Phil's house. But he sold it to, after they passed away, their family sold it to one of the nephews, and he rebuilt it.

Virginia Garrison [00:08:31] So it stayed in the family?

Jack Perna [00:08:32] Yeah, it's still in the family. That house. So three of those, two of those houses, are still in the family. Ours we sold to the Galcik family. You know, the Galciks? Yeah. So I think they've recently sold.

Virginia Garrison [00:08:46] Walter, Matthew, Peanuts.

Jack Perna [00:08:49] Yeah. My parents sold, yeah, Peanuts. Yeah.

Virginia Garrison [00:08:52] You were saying that across from that house used to be the Coast Guard station, right?

Jack Perna [00:08:59] When we were kids. We used to go, we were the only people at the beach. It was just I, we felt like it was only our family. But it used to be a Coast Guard station. And as you walked towards the beach on the left was the Coast Guard station. On the right was the garage. Behind the Coast Guard station was a tower, that we, you know, if you go up, it was an overlook, I guess. A flagpole. I remember being young. I think it was Hurricane Carol. They were, you know, flying the hurricane flag and stuff. So yeah, we I guess we walked right through their property and went to the beach every day. Nobody questioned anything. We were just there.

Virginia Garrison [00:09:41] And you were saying the moms mostly didn't work and would go down and the fathers would sort of take turns coming out?

Jack Perna [00:09:48] Coming in in the summer, in the summertime, most all the mothers were here with us. And there was always one, at least one father in the building. Because, they all worked in the Bronx, but one was always out at the big house in Montauk with the rest of us, and, yeah, I guess by design that's why they did that, you know, kind of. So. Yeah, we all we all had one room, and then we all each of us, some of us moved into bigger houses on the side, so.

Virginia Garrison [00:10:21] And what what what drew your family ...

Jack Perna [00:10:23] My parents sold that house, by the way, in 1972, and they moved to Florida.

Virginia Garrison [00:10:28] Their house that.

Jack Perna [00:10:30] The house that they built. Yeah.

Virginia Garrison [00:10:32] So that was actually quite a while ago.

Jack Perna [00:10:34] Quite a while. Yeah. From the '50s. Well, I was born 1950, so I remember, you know, being little. And then in high school. Yeah.

Virginia Garrison [00:10:43] And then so it started out with your, your, your own sort of nuclear family coming out to Montauk for summers and then when did they move full time?

Jack Perna [00:10:56] My, my parents moved here, I think, in 1957. I because I was in second grade and actually did actually I had Mrs. Bellefontaine, I wanted to talk about all of those teachers when we get to the school.

Virginia Garrison [00:11:10] Okay. Yeah. Help me remember, okay?

Jack Perna [00:11:12] Okay. I had Mrs. Belle, who? Later one, actually, when I became the assistant principal, wound up, you know, we worked together, but I was at a different level than her. But, she was always the boss.

Virginia Garrison [00:11:24] So she was your ... she was your boss when you were a kid. But then you were her boss when you were the superintendent ...

Jack Perna [00:11:30] Yeah, but we won't tell her that.

[00:11:31] ... at the Montauk School.

Virginia Garrison [00:11:34] Okay. So the family came out, and you, I think you had said that what drew your family out here was, which I thought was kind of unusual, was to work, actually.

Jack Perna [00:11:43] Actually, my my, parents. From City Island, my grandfather in Montauk had the Lakeside. And then he bought a little place in town called Jean's Motel, which was four motel units. A little Cape Cod house and an apartment next to it. So there were five units, actually, and we came out to run that year round. And, it was never, you know, we only had rooms available or we only had no vacancy when everybody else was full. It was a tiny little motel. And actually, Mrs. Jarman, Lucille Jarman, you know that name?

Virginia Garrison [00:12:23] From the Wavecrest.

Jack Perna [00:12:25] The Wavecrest? Yeah, she was behind us, and she would always, when she was full, she would send the people over to us.

Virginia Garrison [00:12:31] Okay.

Jack Perna [00:12:32] So. But he didn't really buy it for the motel. He bought it because he intended to open a pizza place on the front lawn, which is what he did. The front lawn of the house became where you walk in now to the restaurant, and where the pizza is being made at Pizza Village.

Virginia Garrison [00:12:49] At Pizza Village.

Jack Perna [00:12:50] Yeah. That. So that's really why he bought that.

Virginia Garrison [00:12:54] He had that in mind all along. This was your grandfather?

Jack Perna [00:12:58] He was my grandfather.

Virginia Garrison [00:12:58] Okay, yeah.

Jack Perna [00:12:59] He was my grandfather. He had, actually his youngest son, and one of my mother's first cousins, were two young guys in their late 20s. So they ran that place when they when it first opened.

Virginia Garrison [00:13:15] That place being Pizza Village.

Jack Perna [00:13:17] Pizza Village. Yeah.

Virginia Garrison [00:13:17] And and also Giordano's.

Jack Perna [00:13:20] It was Giordano's Pizza Village. Actually, it was Giordano's Pizza Village.

Virginia Garrison [00:13:21] Oh really?

Jack Perna [00:13:21] That's what it was called.

Virginia Garrison [00:13:24] But they had Giordano's Lakeside as well.

Jack Perna [00:13:27] They did. Yes. He sold, my grandfather died in 19, maybe 1960 and um, 1962, the family had it for a few years, but sold it eventually. So.

Virginia Garrison [00:13:45] So and that property, Jean's Motel, is also where Vasti's dental practice ...

Jack Perna [00:13:51] Actually that property, after after my grandfather died, Anne and Dan Vasti bought the building and the business from the rest of the family. Pizza Village, and the, the little motel unit became Dr. Vasti's dental office.

Virginia Garrison [00:14:09] And that's still the same building?

Jack Perna [00:14:11] Same building, it's still the dentist's office.

Virginia Garrison [00:14:13] So now, Dan Vasti's relation to you, for example?

Jack Perna [00:14:20] We're first cousins.

Virginia Garrison [00:14:21] Cousins. Okay.

Jack Perna [00:14:22] Dan's mother, Anne, and my mother, Theresa, were sisters.

Virginia Garrison [00:14:27] Okay. Gotcha.

Jack Perna [00:14:27] So she was Anne Giordano. Mary Stewart was Mary Giordano.

Virginia Garrison [00:14:31] Okay. The Giordano women.

Jack Perna [00:14:33] So. Yeah.

Virginia Garrison [00:14:34] Okay. So Pizza Village was in your family for, like, decades, right?

Jack Perna [00:14:42] I mean, from 1959 until we sold it.

Virginia Garrison [00:14:47] You and Ray Waleko.

Jack Perna [00:14:49] Me and Ray Waleko. Ray Waleko and I were working for Anne and Dan Vasti when they were ready to retire.

Virginia Garrison [00:14:54] At Pizza Village.

Jack Perna [00:14:55] At Pizza Village. And we bought it from them.

Virginia Garrison [00:14:58] Around what time?

Jack Perna [00:14:59] We bought it in 1980.

Virginia Garrison [00:15:01] Okay.

Jack Perna [00:15:02] And we sold it in 2000 to actually one of the two of the boys who worked for us. So to me, it was still in the family. And that was Mike Raweiser and Brendan, Brendan Stein. Brendan Stein.

Virginia Garrison [00:15:20] Do you know how to spell Mike's last name?

Jack Perna [00:15:23] Mike RAWEISER. Also known as Wax, he's a surfer.

Virginia Garrison [00:15:33] Okay. And the other guy is?

Jack Perna [00:15:36] Is Brendan Stein.

Virginia Garrison [00:15:37] Brendan Stein.

Jack Perna [00:15:38] Yeah. You know, Harry and ...

Virginia Garrison [00:15:41] Oh, okay, Harry Stein?

Jack Perna [00:15:42] And Janet Stein, right, now Janet Kohlus.

Virginia Garrison [00:15:46] I'm not sure.

Jack Perna [00:15:47] Yeah. Their oldest boy. Okay, so they both worked for us, and then. Actually, Brendan sold out to Mike. Mike kept it until last year. And he sold it to Rene Guitterez. GUITTEREZ, who also worked for us when he was young in high school at Pizza Village. He worked for Ray and I. So to me it's still in the family.

Virginia Garrison [00:16:19] Yeah. And you put your time in there, that's for sure.

Jack Perna [00:16:21] Oh, I worked there. I was there actually, the day we opened, the day my grandfather opened it, my cousin Chip and I walked through the village delivering free pizzas to all the businesses on Main Street.

Virginia Garrison [00:16:31] Hilarious.

Jack Perna [00:16:31] Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Virginia Garrison [00:16:33] That's a good idea, actually. And we've got to get you in the Montauk School so you can be working there at the same time.

Jack Perna [00:16:42] Right. Okay. And, when when Pizza Village was closed in the winter, I worked at Gurney's Inn as a busboy, for about three or four years, about three years. And I say this to people all the time. It doesn't matter what you're doing. You never know who you're going to meet and how it's going to change your life. So I was working as a busboy. There was a Lions Club event. Bob Fisher, who was the principal of the Montauk School, was a member of the Lions Club, saw me clearing tables, asked me what I was doing other than that, knew I had just graduated.

Virginia Garrison [00:17:26] You had just graduated from college.

Jack Perna [00:17:27] From Southampton College that June, so it was now January.

Virginia Garrison [00:17:31] Okay.

Jack Perna [00:17:32] I went, from the time I graduated till that time, I worked at Gurney's, Pizza Village, and the bursar's office at Southampton College.

Virginia Garrison [00:17:41] And I have to catch you up by going backward for a minute. So after you moved out to Montauk, you went briefly to the Montauk School and then to Little Flower?

Jack Perna [00:17:51] I went to Montauk School for one year or the end of second grade. Okay. I had Mrs. Belle, and in third grade I had Mrs. McCaffrey, who left and went on a maternity leave. And then we had Mrs. Burke. So in that one year we had the two teachers. Nancy McCaffrey actually was a town councilman a couple of years ago, so she used to teach at Montauk School. And then, when I was going into fourth grade, the Catholic school opened. Father Carew was the pastor who opened St. Therese's, little Flower School was.

Virginia Garrison [00:18:33] Do you know if it was CAR...

Jack Perna [00:18:35] EW. And that school building actually was a little white stucco home across from. On the east side of the church property? No, the west side of the church property across from Johnny Kronuch's tackle shop, which is, which is now a coffee shop. That's where there's a garden there now, one of two gardens. It's the garden on Main Street. That's where we went to school. That was, four rooms, four nuns, and each each of the teachers had two grades. So it was grades one and two, three and four, five and six, seven and eight. And it was at the time it was small. I mean, we had nine kids of my seventh grade or eighth grade, but there were nine kids in the other room too, so there were 18 children in the room. So it must have been 40 kids in the building.

Virginia Garrison [00:19:31] And it no longer exists at all. Went all the way up to eighth grade.

Jack Perna [00:19:34] Gone now completely. They cut out seventh and eighth grade first. And then they cut out fifth and sixth grade. And then they closed altogether and just did preschool. So.

Virginia Garrison [00:19:47] And then you went to East Hampton High.

Jack Perna [00:19:49] Went to East Hampton High School in 1964, graduated in '68.

Virginia Garrison [00:19:54] So you went to what's now the middle school.

Jack Perna [00:19:57] It was in the middle school on Newtown Lane. Yeah. Okay. Yeah.

Virginia Garrison [00:20:01] And it wasn't too much of a kind of shock coming from Montauk?

Jack Perna [00:20:04] I was just saying this to someone, I got lost the first day of school, the first class. I couldn't find my homeroom. So, you know, my old school, we walked in the building, it was like, you look one way or the other and that was your room, right? And Mr. Barry's room was somewhere way in the back on the second floor. I had no idea where I was. So.

Virginia Garrison [00:20:29] Okay, so now we can go back to Gurney's, I think, with Bob Fisher.

Jack Perna [00:20:32] Oh, so I was working at Gurney's, and Mr. Fisher asked me what I was doing. And, about two weeks later, I got a phone call while I was working at the college from Mr. Fisher. He told me he had a fourth grade position open. Was I interested? So. So I stupidly told him I'd get back to him. And, my boss, Sylvia DeMayo, she was the bursar at the college. She said, "Are you crazy? You call him right back." Which I did, accept the position. And I started February 12th, 1973. No interview. Just got the job and started and it was the best thing that ever happened to me, actually.

Virginia Garrison [00:21:22] So let's see. We should go quickly through. So you taught until.

Jack Perna [00:21:27] I taught two years.

Virginia Garrison [00:21:29] Two years. Okay.

Jack Perna [00:21:30] And then I was excessed.

Virginia Garrison [00:21:32] Oh, that's right.

Jack Perna [00:21:32] Because the enrollment dropped, and I was the last person hired. But Dave Webb, who was on the school board at the time, came to talk with me and said they wanted me to take administration courses. So I started to take administration courses. They gave me a teaching administrative position. Which wound up to be my internship for school administration from C.W. Post with Mr. Fisher as my mentor. He retired in 1978. Fred Philly became the superintendent. I got my certification as a district administrator, and they made me the assistant principal for Fred Philly. And so it worked out.

Virginia Garrison [00:22:24] Did you? I mean, I don't know what his style was, as a . . . You okay with sound?

Jack Perna [00:22:30] I'm sorry. I thought I lost you for a minute, but I think I got it.

Virginia Garrison [00:22:35] Do you feel that you and he had different styles or you and Mr. Fisher?

Jack Perna [00:22:39] Mr. Fisher was. Was more like, you would say, a traditional principal. Strict. But he had a heart. And to me, he was always, always good. People say, oh, don't go to him, don't go to him. And any time I went to him, he was, he'd give me whatever I needed. And he was a supportive principle. And obviously I still talk about him. We talked about him throughout my whole career, and when I was the superintendent and when I was the principal. I would say, well, Mr. Fisher used to, where actually Mickey Valcich will say to me, "Well, Mr. Fisher used to." Mickey was a former student also. Right. So. Anyway. I'm sorry.

Virginia Garrison [00:23:24] No, don't be sorry. So what about Fred Philly?

Jack Perna [00:23:27] Fred Philly came. He was a couple of years older than me. So he was a young, new, different person.

Virginia Garrison [00:23:35] Different from Mr. Fisher?

Jack Perna [00:23:37] From Mr. Fisher. Because, you know, when you start something. And I guess I could say that with my own career, although I felt like, I felt like I stayed involved the whole time and Mr. Fisher was involved. I can't say that he wasn't. But Fred got right in there into the classrooms and, you know, worked with the teachers and, and then he got more and more involved with state and county superintendents. So he spent a lot of time out of the building. But he had me. I was his assistant. So what was going on in the building? I was there for it.

Virginia Garrison [00:24:16] And how would you sort of describe your style as an administrator?

Jack Perna [00:24:24] I always try to and I always described myself too, still: I'm a teacher first. And then I'm a counselor. And then I'm an administrator. Always tried to be the teacher. Have the teacher in me be there. I guess I was more flexible than other people. Some people might say hands off. Some people might say lazy. I don't think it was quite lazy, I trusted what my people were doing. You know, the teachers were professionals. They know what they're doing. They don't need me to tell them every single thing to do.

Virginia Garrison [00:25:04] To micromanage.

Jack Perna [00:25:05] Yeah, yeah. Well, in classrooms and actually, too, another thing I used to tell them. And if you have good teachers, you'll understand this. You know, listen to me. I'm going to tell you what to do. You're going to go back to your room. You're going to shut the door. You're going to do what you want. And that worked. Because they all have different styles and they're all still to this day they're all great. And when I started teaching, to me, some of the great teachers, Peggy Joyce. Actually, Peggy Joyce, I'd like to put this on tape, actually. When I was young and she knew I was broke. I was going to Florida for the February vacation, driving. She called me down to her room, and she gave me her credit card.

Virginia Garrison [00:26:00] No.

Jack Perna [00:26:00] She said, "Take this with you in case you need it. "

Virginia Garrison [00:26:05] And how old were you then?

Jack Perna [00:26:06] 23, 24?

Virginia Garrison [00:26:08] Wow. So you were teaching then?

Jack Perna [00:26:10] Yeah, yeah. So she's.

Virginia Garrison [00:26:12] So generous.

Jack Perna [00:26:13] Yeah. She. That was that was very kind of her to do. And I and I actually said that to the children sometimes about Mrs. Joyce because, sometimes. Anyway, Mrs. Joyce was one. Marge Bellefontaine was a great second-grade teacher. A lot of kids my age had Mrs. Belle. Betty Reutershan was a great teacher. She was there. Betty's still alive. Mrs. Kent, she became Mrs. Ruggles, Jean Babcock. She's still alive. I always liked Jean. Trevor Kelsall was the English teacher. John Tagliavia, did you have him for science? A hotheaded Italian like somebody else I might know? But those are some of the names that I remember as the teachers at Montauk School.

Virginia Garrison [00:27:12] And this was when you were.

Jack Perna [00:27:14] When I was a student and a young teacher. What a.

Virginia Garrison [00:27:16] Strange thing, in a way, to both.

Jack Perna [00:27:18] Strange.

Virginia Garrison [00:27:18] Yeah. And you were saying that when you were a young, I guess, teacher rather than, like, superintendent or principal? The seventh- and eighth-graders were, seemed a little tough to you.

Jack Perna [00:27:31] I don't know if it was the time in the late '70s or in the in the early '70s or here. It would have been the late when I was dealing with them, because earlier I was teaching fourth grade. And then when I was a teaching administrator and assistant principal, I was dealing with everybody. So now you're dealing with kids who are 14 or so, and um, oh, yeah it would be like I would discipline them and they would look at me like, well, you know, who do you think you are? Yeah, I'm only a few years older than them. You're a young teacher. You have to save face. So you do stupid things, and then the kids do more stupid things, and you get yourselves into a battle that was never necessary in the first place. You don't learn that till you're older.

Virginia Garrison [00:28:17] Right? It's like trying to prove something?

Jack Perna [00:28:19] Yeah, yeah. So.

Virginia Garrison [00:28:22] And, oh, you go.

Jack Perna [00:28:24] Know, you're. Those kids are now 60 years old, late 50s. So.

Virginia Garrison [00:28:31] And you've, then you had their kids.

Jack Perna [00:28:34] Oh yeah. And everything's genetic too, by the way, because even I remember dealing with certain students and just even watching their movements. And then their kids 30 years later, their movements are exactly the same. Your father used to do the same thing. Or your mother used to do that too.

Virginia Garrison [00:28:56] So funny.

Jack Perna [00:28:56] It is. I swear, everything's genetic.

Virginia Garrison [00:28:58] It's so small town too. How many students, around, now.

Jack Perna [00:29:04] How many are there now?

Virginia Garrison [00:29:06] Yeah, enrollment, I guess.

Jack Perna [00:29:07] I think it's around 320.

Virginia Garrison [00:29:10] It's a small school.

Jack Perna [00:29:12] Yeah, when I remember. I remember when I started, I remember seeing on the blackboard 305 was the total enrollment. When I started as the administrator, as the superintendent, we went from 325 to about 425 in the year 2000. And then it started to go back down again.

Virginia Garrison [00:29:38] And 2000 was when the addition was built, right?

Jack Perna [00:29:41] The addition was built in 2000. And it was full immediately. You know, as soon as we opened it, we were full, where every room was taken.

Virginia Garrison [00:29:50] And the pre-K came shortly afterwards.

Jack Perna [00:29:53] But after that, when enrollment started to drop again, that's what we were talking about, that the enrollment started to drop. We had rooms available and I was going to have to let two teachers go, and I spoke with the board and they said, this is the time. If you want to do preschool, now is the time to do it, because we have the space and we have the teachers, we're not adding to the budget. Of course you could have cut the budget, but, you know, everybody should, I think everybody should have a preschool, least a 4-year-old program. So we started that. And actually, I want to give Wendy Flanagan the credit for, stepping up to me to tell me that she wanted to do it, and, and Wendy to me was more like a fifth- or sixth-grade teacher and I didn't think she would be good with the 4-year-olds, but she insisted she wanted it. I gave her the chance and it was the best, one of the best decisions because she put that program together. And she did a great job. Unfortunately, we lost her about two or three years ago.

Virginia Garrison [00:31:08] That's too bad.

Jack Perna [00:31:09] Yeah. Young, young woman.

Virginia Garrison [00:31:12] But that must have been a challenge to get that in place. And.

Jack Perna [00:31:15] You know. You know what? I had the money, I had the teachers, we had the furniture, and I had Wendy. And she did it. Well, she did it. So.

Virginia Garrison [00:31:27] And you said you've always had pretty good school boards. Oh.

Jack Perna [00:31:31] Montauk. Yeah. Very supportive school board members. Diane Hausman was that Terry Watson was the president for a long time. Terry was always supportive. When she left Diane became the president of the school board. And she, Jerry Cutillo was the president for a little while as well.

Virginia Garrison [00:31:53] Okay.

Jack Perna [00:31:54] And then, Diane, all of them were supportive and the board members. Montauk's board works very well. They they do everything together. There's very rarely disagreement. And if they disagree, it's afterwards or, you know, in private. But it's when they're in public, they present a united front and, and they're not just presenting they are a united front. And that to this day is the same.

Virginia Garrison [00:32:21] So and we're lucky out here in terms of property owners and taxes and stuff.

Jack Perna [00:32:27] Our taxes are fairly low compared to Nassau County. It's we're not as low as Amagansett, but we're certainly not as high as the Springs, which is another whole topic, I mean I could go on: equity of education locally and nationwide, but I'm not going to go there. But the system is so unfair that Montauk would have everything it needs and Springs has to scrape to get what they need. I don't even want to talk about Mississippi. You know?

Virginia Garrison [00:32:58] Well, and and I know like Montauk and Springs, I was just saying that they used to be very comparable because they have the same grade population like pre-K to eight, you know, and they were about the same size and.

Jack Perna [00:33:15] Not any more -- Springs is about twice the size of Montauk, Springs has about 700 and something kids. And that's because the property value, the property, the cost of buying a home in Montauk, compared to the cost of buying a house in Springs. You can buy back then you can buy something for half the price in Montauk in the Springs. Their taxes though, are higher. But to become a homeowner, that's why a lot of people moved away from Montauk and they moved to Springs.

Virginia Garrison [00:33:48] Because it's more affordable.

Jack Perna [00:33:50] More affordable. Yeah.

Virginia Garrison [00:33:51] And they don't have the the commercial tax base that we do.

Jack Perna [00:33:55] And they don't have the commercial tax base that we do.

Virginia Garrison [00:33:57] So those schools have really evolved very differently in the last.

Jack Perna [00:34:02] Yes. Yes. And actually Montauk's tax base could be double than what it is because half of the property in Montauk is off the tax roll because it's preserved lands either by the state or the federal government or the town. So every time the town of the county buys land, that's off the tax rolls.

Virginia Garrison [00:34:24] For preservation or parkland. Yeah. We talked yesterday about about your visibility and sort of like open door being, you know, greeting the kids when they got to school and seeing them off the parking lot.

Jack Perna [00:34:45] I always thought that it was important that they see me in the morning, or even in the afternoon. And actually, I walked through the building twice a day, almost too predictable. But, you know, as soon as the all the busses were in, I would walk and say good morning to all of the teachers in all of the classes. And then I went home for

lunch. Actually, that's from Mr. Fisher, because Mr. Fisher said to me a long time ago, he said. Go home for lunch because you're going to be eating lunch in your office and you're going to get a knock on the door and they're going to say, I know you're eating, but. He said, just go home. So I went home for lunch every day, half an hour, 40 minutes, whatever it was. But when I came back, I walked around the building again.

Virginia Garrison [00:35:31] Oh, okay.

Jack Perna [00:35:32] So everybody knew that seventh period Perna is going to come in. But I visited every classroom twice a day, and I thought that was important that the kids know who I was. You know, that's what you're there for.

Virginia Garrison [00:35:47] And the kids were your. That was your favorite.

Jack Perna [00:35:49] Well, that's that's the. Yeah. Well, you know what? That's why you become a teacher and. And let me say this too even like I never thought of retirement when I was 22 years old. I never thought of money. You know, I'm going to teach you how to make money. You do other stuff, especially these days if you're into computers. My nephew started his first job with six figures. Yeah. So, you know, that doesn't happen in teaching. So most people who are young people who go into teaching are dedicated people that want to do that. Yeah. And that's good. So. Yeah. When you look at the superintendency, it's ... you have so many different groups to try to please. You have to keep the board happy and on your side. You have to please the community because they have to pass your budget. You have the teachers union. You have to keep them happy, because if you don't have your help, you don't have anything. And then, of course, you have to. You have the kids.

Virginia Garrison [00:36:58] And the parents.

Jack Perna [00:36:59] Parents and, yeah, the parents and the kids. And that's what I said before. Everything you say, literally and figuratively, has to start with the words "the kids." Do "the kids come first" and everybody else will fall into place eventually. So that's how I approached it. But one group might not have been so happy at the time, but like I said, it falls into place and they realize we're lucky in Montauk. The board always knew, the community always knew, the AARP, they were always supportive. You know, I understand what it's like to pay taxes and you don't have a kid in the building. But they came, and they were supportive of the school for the most part.

Virginia Garrison [00:37:49] Were you saying it was the first time you had to present the budget? And it was at the community church?

Jack Perna [00:37:56] Yeah. The AARP used to invite the superintendent and the board to present the budget every year. And I started in 1995 as a superintendent. And I think two years before that, the budget had gone down. And a lot of those budget meetings were very volatile. A lot of screaming and yelling, you know, Montauk can be like that sometimes. That's who we are. So it was our first meeting with the AARP at the community church, and we weren't sure what we were getting ourselves into. I had just turned 45. Oh, and I had the budget in my hand. Actually, we sent the budget to them a month in advance.

Virginia Garrison [00:38:44] Okay.

Jack Perna [00:38:45] Because they used to complain that everything was secretive. Well, I wanted them to have everything, so they had a whole month to prepare. So they had everything. April 1st they had it. May 1st or whatever we went to the meeting. And I stood up to start talking. And I had the paper in my hand and I realized I couldn't see anything because I forgot my glasses. I had just started wearing glasses and I didn't bring them. And I turned to Maura and I said, I can't see a thing.

Virginia Garrison [00:39:13] That was Maura Mirras, the treasurer?

Jack Perna [00:39:15] Yes, she was the treasurer. And a woman in the audience said, here, take mine. They were blue bejeweled glasses with like, pointy tips and a chain. The chain went down and that's how I presented the budget, wearing them. And I think we won them over by that.

Virginia Garrison [00:39:41] The sympathy vote?

Jack Perna [00:39:42] I think so. Yeah.

Virginia Garrison [00:39:49] You're telling me.

Jack Perna [00:39:50] That was Mrs. Turgis actually. I think that's what it was. You remember the yellow cab? The the checker cab?

Virginia Garrison [00:39:57] Kinda.

Jack Perna [00:39:58] There was a checker cab here. And I think Mrs. Turgis the one who gave me the glasses.

Virginia Garrison [00:40:03] Mrs. Church, that was her name?.

Jack Perna [00:40:05] TURGIS.

Virginia Garrison [00:40:06] Okay.

Jack Perna [00:40:07] I think it was her.

Virginia Garrison [00:40:13] I don't know if this is at all related, but you were telling a story yesterday about something to do with trying to work out percentages. Maybe a kid?

Jack Perna [00:40:26] Oh, you're talking about one of my former students?

Virginia Garrison [00:40:29] I think so.

Jack Perna [00:40:29] In fourth grade.

Virginia Garrison [00:40:30] Yeah, it's totally unrelated, I'm sure.

Jack Perna [00:40:33] Michael. Vigilant.

Virginia Garrison [00:40:35] Okay.

Jack Perna [00:40:35] Who is?

Virginia Garrison [00:40:36] Who died? And he.

Jack Perna [00:40:37] Died. He was one of the three men who went down years ago. But Michael was in my fishing.

Virginia Garrison [00:40:43] Fishing boat.

Jack Perna [00:40:45] Fishing boat. Michael was in my fourth grade. And a smart, smart, smart kid. And he came up to me. And he wanted to know if the, he thought that the, he wanted to make sure that the bank posted his interest correctly. So I'm thinking, oh my God, this kid knows posted my interest correctly and I'm worried that I'm not going to be able to give him the answer. And he had more money in the bank than me. So, you know, I had just started teaching and this kid who had been working on fishing boats, you know, with his family. The Vigilant family were fishermen. Well, fisher. And. Yeah. So? I never did figure out his interest. I just said, Michael, you're looking good to me.

Virginia Garrison [00:41:37] In fourth grade.

Jack Perna [00:41:38] Fourth grade. And I had to cash a check to eat that that winter. I had to cash a savings plan.

Virginia Garrison [00:41:53] Yeah. You were working a lot of different jobs when you were young.

Jack Perna [00:41:58] I did, yeah, well. And at the same time. So.

Virginia Garrison [00:42:02] Yeah, that's a.

Jack Perna [00:42:03] So I'm really enjoying retirement, actually.

Virginia Garrison [00:42:06] I'm sure, I had asked you yesterday about, changes if you see changes in the kids themselves, their parents, the, the teachers, you know, as time goes on over with.

Jack Perna [00:42:20] The teachers. Of course I see them as children because they're former students now, a lot of them at Montauk School

Virginia Garrison [00:42:28] Yeah, I didn't think of that.

Jack Perna [00:42:29] But I see the dedication and I see, you know, I know they're all going to be good, and they're all going to be as good as the the master teachers I talked about before. The parents, some changes we talked about, where we all do talk about helicopter parents at times. And yeah, there are there are a few, but a lot of them have special reasons why, you know, some kids have different allergies that I don't always think of. So they have to be the advocate for their, their child. Sometimes you agree, and sometimes you disagree, and sometimes you agree to disagree.

Virginia Garrison [00:43:13] With the parents.

Jack Perna [00:43:14] With the parent you know. You know that they're doing what they think is the best. You are doing what you think is the best. And if you can come to some

kind of agreement, that's the best for the kid. That's what you do. And if they're right, they're right. They know their kid. So for the most part, sometimes they don't see what we see. And that happens the other way around too. You know, that's so.

Virginia Garrison [00:43:36] And the kids themselves?

Jack Perna [00:43:38] Kids are kids. You know, to me, they're not much, I think back in the '70s, and that might have been me as a teacher reacting like I talked about before. I think the seventh-, eighth- graders back then were more brazen maybe, than they are now. I think the kids in Montauk are so, fairly naive, although it's a little more open now, like with the internet and everything else. I remember being a teenager in Montauk and then going back to the Bronx, where my cousins were, and they knew what to wear and all that stuff. And I'm from Montauk, I didn't know what the new stuff was. It's different now because of the internet and everything else. You know what I'm saying? Culturally?

Virginia Garrison [00:44:22] Yeah, I think so, yeah.

Jack Perna [00:44:27] But other than that, I think, you know, kids are kids, and they haven't really changed all that much. So.

Virginia Garrison [00:44:34] And the teachers are pretty much the same.

Jack Perna [00:44:38] The teachers, they have the same commitment

Virginia Garrison [00:44:41] Yeah.

Jack Perna [00:44:42] Yes. They have the same commitment that the older teachers did at the time that I started teaching.

Virginia Garrison [00:44:46] Do you think it's gotten harder for the teachers with the new, you know, the standards?

Jack Perna [00:44:50] Well, you know what? I know some teachers who started to leave because of the testing. And it was that part that was getting ridiculous. When you, Montauk, nobody, no parent ever asked me for the teacher's score. Ever.

Virginia Garrison [00:45:09] That's interesting.

Jack Perna [00:45:10] But statewide.

Virginia Garrison [00:45:12] We're talking about the performance scores for the that are based on the tests that the children take.

Jack Perna [00:45:17] TPER is based on your teacher observations and a big part of it is on the results of the state tests.

Virginia Garrison [00:45:24] The students' performance.

Jack Perna [00:45:25] That the students take, the tests and parents are graded accordingly, teachers are grading accordingly. And then the state comes up with the score for the teacher. And that's score is public information. If a parent wants, they want to know what the score is of my teacher's kid or if if, if you know you're going to your teachers, your

son or daughter is going to have a specific teacher the following year. You have the right to find out what that teacher's score was. Which I guess informally gives you the right to say, I don't want that teacher. See what I'm saying? And that could cause a problem. Nobody, nobody in Montauk ever asked for a teacher's score.

Virginia Garrison [00:46:07] That's interesting. So now they they have let up, the state I guess it is?

Jack Perna [00:46:13] That was recently given up by the Board of Regents. And schools can now come up with their own way of measuring, and it's not based on the state test anymore. And it still has to be developed, but I would be willing to bet that no school is going to come up with a way where it says you want to know teacher's score, here it is. You know, that's that's just off the table as far as I'm concerned. And that's what I think they should do.

Virginia Garrison [00:46:43] It's too invasive.

Jack Perna [00:46:44] Yeah, yeah, yeah. And Montauk and other small schools. I'm not sure how many, how they do it, but. some schools that I know, superintendents who, if you ask me for a particular teacher, for your kid, you get the other teacher.

Virginia Garrison [00:47:04] Really?

Jack Perna [00:47:05] Yeah. Yeah, I don't know. To me, it was more like you asked me for this teacher. My thinking is, you know your kid. You know that teacher. You think that's a good match? If I can do it, I will. And that was the approach I always took. And not based on teacher scores based on hearsay or experience with the teacher from an older child. You know, why not do what the parents, if they know and they have a request, why not meet it? If you can see what I'm saying.

Virginia Garrison [00:47:42] I do kind of.

Jack Perna [00:47:43] And not purposely the other way around which I've seen that happen too.

Virginia Garrison [00:47:48] I mean, I wonder if that's like a sort of like make your kid learn how to deal kind of philosophy.

Jack Perna [00:47:55] Well, that's that's true also. I mean, I've had I've had people ask me, can I move the kid once they're in the class. And that almost never did, I, did I remember doing it once. That came because the teacher said, please do it.

Virginia Garrison [00:48:13] Oh, boy.

Jack Perna [00:48:15] Yeah. Because there was a friction there that it wasn't going to do any good for anybody for the rest of that school year.

Virginia Garrison [00:48:22] Bad chemistry kind of thing. So it's an interesting thing with parenting. I think that, you know, there are different ideas about making the environment conform to the kid or making the kid conform to the environment. I don't know if you have any thoughts about that. Nah?

Jack Perna [00:48:38] Well. I am not a parent, so I can't speak from my own experience. But. I do feel you have to let the kids grow up, and you do have to let them face certain things. Of course you want to protect them as much as you can. But there are certain times when you have to let them fight their own battles. And you have to let them deal with certain people because you're not going to always deal with, oh, here you go. Here you are. That's not always going to happen in life. And you don't have to do it at four years old. You shouldn't wait till they're 14, you know, age appropriate, certain certain things. So. Yeah, I think parents should let their kids learn on their own sometimes.

Virginia Garrison [00:49:37] You want to talk about East Hampton High School at all, your experiences there, both as a student and well.

Jack Perna [00:49:43] As a student, I wasn't the greatest student at all, to tell you the truth. And I wasn't a great athlete, so I didn't always fit in all of those things. Matter of fact, I remember. The first time, when I was a freshman, we went. It was, across the street is Herrick's field from ...

Virginia Garrison [00:50:04] Herrick Park by the middle school? Yeah.

Jack Perna [00:50:07] So we went across the street and they're telling us we're going to play soccer. No instruction. I came from the Bronx. To me, soccer was what we call soccer baseball, which you guys call kickball. So we played soccer baseball in the street, and it was first base, second base. It was like baseball with your foot. Like kickball. I thought we went out to play kickball. And they tell me I'm a fullback. I had no idea what they were talking about. Not a clue what they were talking about. Yeah. So there's something say, you know, the kids came from the middle school or Springs or the Montauk School they had phys ed. And I came from Little Flower, we didn't have phys ed and I wasn't the best athlete in the world anyway. So I didn't know what soccer was. This. I shouldn't talk about this, but we had gymnastics, and the teacher goes, okay, show me your routine on the horse. What are you talking? I don't even know what the horse is.

Jack Perna [00:51:13] Nobody ever taught me anything. So. Yeah, that was my experience there. By the time I was a senior, I got to know a little bit of stuff and some of the kids, and. I have gone to my 50th year reunion. I smile more now when I leave the high school than than I did when I was a kid. But. But overall, I would say the high school is a good place.

Virginia Garrison [00:51:41] And you were happy with it.

Jack Perna [00:51:44] Ultimately, I was happy.

Virginia Garrison [00:51:45] And then with the students in Montauk, you were happy with their experience too?

Jack Perna [00:51:48] Oh, yeah, yeah. Montauk students go there. A lot of them are involved in sports at Montauk School. So when they get to the high school, they know some of the kids because they were opponents on other teams. So they know some of them that way. And that's always a good thing. And then, you know, at first they didn't want to leave. Of course.

Virginia Garrison [00:52:13] They don't want to leave Montauk?

Jack Perna [00:52:13] Leave Montauk School. And by the time three months goes by they're they're involved in East Hampton High School and and they know what they're doing and things are good and they do well. You know, we've had a couple of valedictorians, couple of salutatorians over the years.

Virginia Garrison [00:52:30] And you know. we talked about this yesterday too, like keeping the seventh- and eighth-graders still or sixth, seventh, you know what would be middle school in many districts?

Jack Perna [00:52:42] Oh.

Virginia Garrison [00:52:44] I think you.

Jack Perna [00:52:45] Yeah, I kind of like having those, those 12- and 13-year-old kids in the building because it gives you the opportunity to do some things with the younger kids. It also, I think we talked about this too, it gives you the opportunity for the 13-year-olds to teach the 4-year-olds certain words that they shouldn't learn yet.

Virginia Garrison [00:53:07] Right. Like on the bus.

Jack Perna [00:53:08] On the school bus. But, but other than that, like, during band and chorus, well, if you're not in the band, if you're not in course, we had a program so that you could either work in the library to help Ms. Kleinberg or work with Miss Flanagan or, now, Miss Waleko and Miss Corron in the kindergarten. You could be a kindergarten helper or a preschool helper. So. And they would go down and read with the kids, and actually some of the other classes would, on a regular basis, go down. Miss Pfister, Judy Pfister, her class always went down and read, Mr. White would go down and read, Mr. Consentino's classes.

Virginia Garrison [00:53:51] What grade?

Jack Perna [00:53:51] Fifth grade.

Virginia Garrison [00:53:52] Sixth grade. Okay. Yeah.

Jack Perna [00:53:54] Even Miss McGuire's seventh- and eighth-grade English now. Not Miss McGuire anymore, Miss Tupper. She would bring her kids down and read with the little ones so they would read to the little ones, which is always good.

Virginia Garrison [00:54:08] Must be kind of a thrill for the little ones.

Jack Perna [00:54:10] It's a thrill for the little ones. And you know what else is? It's fun to watch. When the little ones are having gym class and the period changes, and you see the big kids walking by and they all stop just to look at the little ones, and it's just fun to watch. So all that, you know, especially eighth-graders who think it's too cool for anything, and God forbid they get caught looking at a little kid and smiling. But they do. And then they realize, oh, I'm too cool for this. Keep walking.

Virginia Garrison [00:54:39] That's adorable. That's adorable too. Two different ways. And you want to talk at all about doing the religious ed at the church?

Jack Perna [00:54:50] Oh.

Virginia Garrison [00:54:51] At the church.

Jack Perna [00:54:52] I taught, actually Kathy Keller got me, she roped me into it. Way back in 2000 while we were running out of space at Montauk School. And Lather Libasci, Peter Libasci.

Virginia Garrison [00:55:09] Yeah.

Jack Perna [00:55:09] He had just become the pastor. And I went down to him. I said, we need space. Can we rent it? Part of the building down at St. Therese's? And we had our kindergarten there for two years, I think, before we could get them into the the building. So it wasn't like if you rent us the building, I will teach religion, but because they rented us the building, and they asked me if I was interested, I did it and it worked. You know, I did it for, I think, 18 years. I went to Catholic school for most of my life, and, not that that I'm a master of theology, but I know the basics of the Catholic religion. So it was easy for me to do. It was easy for me to have control over my class. Whereas you know, some of the other teachers had a hard time when the public school kids come in and they're like, not so well behaved. I was the superintendent of the public school, so I was lucky that way.

Virginia Garrison [00:56:13] Yeah you had authority.

Jack Perna [00:56:14] And it kept my hand in the field, I still was teaching, so.

Virginia Garrison [00:56:21] Right, right. So even though. Yeah. So you were teaching.

Jack Perna [00:56:24] So I remember having this talk to where, you know, some teachers were complaining about the time they had to teach their class if it was in the afternoon, and then my answer was, you come in, teach religion at 9 o'clock in the morning on a Sunday to a teenager, and then we'll talk later. So they couldn't win that argument.

Virginia Garrison [00:56:41] That's that's good.

Jack Perna [00:56:45] And you know what else.

Virginia Garrison [00:56:47] You.

Jack Perna [00:56:47] Got? Can I just. We talked about the preschool. Another thing that we did was we did the elementary science program at Montauk School, which we never had one. But it was another time when another person was going to have to lose their job. And people had told me before, oh, you should do elementary science, you should do elementary science. And I always never did. And it actually became because the town bought Fort Pond House. And they asked me if I had a need for it. And I thought about it and I called. I can't think of his name, he's the Australian guy from CCOM. From the Concerned Citizens.

Virginia Garrison [00:57:39] Andy. Yes. Of Andy and Sally. Yes. Harris. Sarris.

Jack Perna [00:57:46] Yeah. Yes. Andy Harris.

Virginia Garrison [00:57:48] Something like that. Yeah. So. Okay, so Fort Pond House is really close to the school.

Jack Perna [00:57:54] Close to the school. And they had just bought it. And Andy asked me, do you have any use for it? And I said, well, let me get back to you. And he said, if you give it to me all the time. I'll put a science program down there. It'd be all day, every day. Well, of course, the town just didn't want to commit to that. But that got me in my mind saying, okay, let's do it some other way. Let's do this science program. So we had two computers, two computer rooms at the time. We didn't need them anymore because we had laptops. And so my classes would go. So that room became available. I had a science teacher, Todd Brunn was or is a certified science teacher. Always want to do an elementary science program. So we made the elementary science program and it worked out great, actually. It's got an aquarium, a big aquarium, or lots of aquariums in the back. He has double periods for science for grades kindergarten through six. And then the teachers they each had it once a week. We filled up his schedule, but they they were to carry on whatever he did for those two periods they had to do for the other three during the week. It's a great program.

Virginia Garrison [00:59:11] And is it still in place?

Jack Perna [00:59:12] Still in place.

Jack Perna [00:59:14] I don't think it would go anywhere.

Virginia Garrison [00:59:14] So is it unusual for science programs in elementary grades?

Jack Perna [00:59:19] No. Springs has one.

Virginia Garrison [00:59:20] Okay.

Jack Perna [00:59:21] A lot of elementary teachers don't like to teach science.

Virginia Garrison [00:59:24] Why?

Jack Perna [00:59:25] Just because they're not comfortable with it. I was there was one of my favorite subjects. So I when I was an elementary teacher, I did teach science, but that was one of my favorite things. I could do without the math, but don't tell anybody. But but, and I noticed that, you know, a lot of the teachers did not like to teach science. So it's a way to get the science in. And that's important, especially for young boys who like that kind of stuff. I don't want to be sexist about it, but a lot of the science program is hands-on stuff and get your hands dirty. And even girls will get their hands dirty too. A lot of them love it. As a matter of fact, most of our science fair winners are girls, and most of them go on to I know of one who's gone on to higher education in science, a woman. But the elementary science program was more attractive, was very attractive to the young boys and keeping them involved.

Virginia Garrison [01:00:24] As opposed to like a sort of more verbal kind of thing.

Jack Perna [01:00:27] Much more. Yeah. And I mean, that's true. It's not sexist at all. Girls, girls, a lot of girls read and write.

Virginia Garrison [01:00:35] That's a strength. Yeah.

Jack Perna [01:00:37] They speak first, too, even in life. I mean, that just happens, right?

Virginia Garrison [01:00:46] Oh. So the the biggest challenges are, we I think we touched. I was thinking to, in addition to, like, say, Covid or the whole school security

Jack Perna [01:00:59] Covid, Covid came almost as a surprise, actually, because, you know, we heard about it. Of course, the state kept telling us things. And then, was it Utah Jazz? One of the basketball teams, Major League basketball teams, canceled the rest of their season because one of their members had Covid. I remember saying to one of the teachers, this is a problem. And the next day we were told we were going home and we thought we were going home for two weeks. The state closed all the schools was the next thing. It was the day right after that, that thing. So it sort of came as a surprise. Our teachers were just about ready to do it online anyway. But we went home on a Friday. Tricia Cusimano, Regan Moloney. Those are the two that I remember. You know, the teachers?

Virginia Garrison [01:02:07] Yeah, the two teachers.

Jack Perna [01:02:08] Those two teachers, they came up Saturday. Tracey Jones, a lot of teachers did come up Saturday, got all the kids' books and everything together. And as parents drove up, we handed out their things. That all happened on a Saturday. We went just to make sure everybody had what they needed, the Chromebooks went home. So that happened Saturday. We thought we were going home for two weeks, winds up the rest of the school year.

Virginia Garrison [01:02:36] And this was what, March 13th? March. Okay.

Jack Perna [01:02:40] Yeah. And everybody thought, okay, two weeks, we'll be back. Two weeks didn't come. They said one, one week, one more week. And then Governor Cuomo announced that the schools would be closed the rest of the school year. We, the superintendents, had to come up with different plans for them, especially in that summer as the plan to reopen. And there were, at least twice I got notified at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, that something was due by 5. Yeah. We fought that.

Virginia Garrison [01:03:11] What did that involve? Like, like safety measures?

Jack Perna [01:03:15] Yeah. Like, you know, we had to be six feet apart. If you were going to open, you had to be six feet apart. You had to have less than a certain number of kids in the room.

Virginia Garrison [01:03:25] So this is all like kind of space and things like that. Yeah.

Jack Perna [01:03:29] Because when we, we reopened, we had three sections of everybody. We went from two sections to three so there were, I think, no more than 11 kids in anybody's grade.

Virginia Garrison [01:03:40] Oh, okay. So you okay? Section being like a class.

Jack Perna [01:03:44] A class. Okay, so we rearranged different classrooms so that everybody we used the multi-purpose room, we used the special ed rooms, classes that could be held in the regular classroom. The music teacher had to start to travel the French teacher to French. The Spanish teacher who used to teach French a long time ago. The Spanish teacher had to travel to each room, the art teacher traveled to each room because

we used all of those classrooms for regular classes so that the kids would be spread apart and everything. And that was a challenge. The nurse had a lot of things that she had to do. And then of course, that to me, the school shootings were over the past couple of years. Parkland was the school in Florida that affected me the most, Parkland School. They, I think I told you this, that happened on a Thursday, and I had that day called two security firms, interviewed them both, one on the phone, and one person came in. We were out of school on Friday. Monday I was in Delray Beach and those kids from Parkland had a, a rally. A lot of people were there. I went there. After it was over I went to give my condolences to some of those kids who were speakers. When we came back, we had security in place at Montauk School, that Monday.

Virginia Garrison [01:05:16] And you had started the process for this prior to that.

Jack Perna [01:05:20] Just because of that shooting? Yeah. I said have to do this here, even though it's Montauk and it's never going to happen here, we have to do this. But while I was there, I called the company while I was in Florida. I said, start Monday. They started Monday. When the kids came back, we had security. And then it took a couple of months, a couple of months, to get legally to get legally carry a gun in the building. Our security, the same people, are retired police from East Hampton Town or New York City. And at the same time they work for the court, East Hampton Town Court.

Virginia Garrison [01:06:10] As security.

Jack Perna [01:06:11] It's security. So they train with the Hampton Town Police. So to me, it was an extension of the town's police force.

Virginia Garrison [01:06:17] Right.

Jack Perna [01:06:18] Just and just to reduce response time. You know, Mike Sarlo, as the chief of police, all of them, Eddie Ecker, anybody who was the chief, Todd Sarris, was always great to the school. But when this particular stuff happened, it was it was Mike Sarlo, always cooperated with us. Whatever we needed. Kim Notel was the DARE officer, she always brought police officers, they knew the building inside and out.

Virginia Garrison [01:06:46] And you were talking about the response time. And that was part of the reason.

Jack Perna [01:06:51] Well, the part of the reason why I thought they should be carrying a weapon is if there was a perpetrator in the building and that person had a gun. And the other person had a jacket that said security.

Virginia Garrison [01:07:06] Right.

Jack Perna [01:07:07] You know, you're still waiting for the police to come. Montauk, usually we still have two policemen on duty. And one could be up at the docks. By the time they get to the dock, from the docks to Montauk School. Three minutes, four minutes. Yeah. And if you have one of those AK, whatever those things are. I tell you, that's a lot of damage that can be done in those few minutes. And having somebody on site doesn't guarantee anything, but it sure as hell makes you feel a lot better, right? That at least you're close by. And, again, I just heard it on the radio. I said it yesterday. It was in the paper yesterday. Riverhead is now one of 20 schools on Long Island that will have armed

security. Whereas when Montauk did it, Miller Place was first on Long Island and then Montauk was second. Wow. So. And then I think Harborfields.

Virginia Garrison [01:08:00] And does this East Hampton have?

Jack Perna [01:08:03] Not guns.

Virginia Garrison [01:08:04] Not guns?

Jack Perna [01:08:07] Not yet. Tuckahoe just added them. So it's another small school. Yeah.

Virginia Garrison [01:08:13] Another thing that, you know, that's more like a present-day challenge, I guess, is social media as far as kids go, I don't know what kind of ...

Jack Perna [01:08:25] Well, I know it's. Well, first of all, the whole library science, and that whole curriculum is changed and developed and evolved into also cyber-knowledge.

Virginia Garrison [01:08:42] Oh, so that that's part of the curriculum basically?

Jack Perna [01:08:44] Oh yeah. Yeah, we have, you know, library and computer classes. And part of that is to make sure that they know, you know, proper etiquette, first of all.

Virginia Garrison [01:08:53] Oh, you were telling me about like getting up. Oh, your schedule in terms of getting up really early, checking the weather, stuff like that with snow days.

Jack Perna [01:09:07] So before Covid and before shooting, the biggest worry was always, snow days and actually, I was never worried about the school bus. The school bus and the bus drivers were fine. It was everybody else who thought they could do anything in a four-wheel-drive car that would make a bus do something suddenly. That was always my worry about it. But yeah, I would. I would do what Mr. Fisher did. Wake up in the morning, 4 o'clock or 4:30. Take a ride. See how the roads are.

Virginia Garrison [01:09:43] Before they were even plowed.

Jack Perna [01:09:44] Unfortunately, it was before they were even plowed. So I have to make a decision before then. But also, you know, we had a bus on the road by 5:30 going up to Westhampton Beach.

Virginia Garrison [01:09:56] Right, for BOCES?

[01:09:56] Yeah, for BOCES. So you had to make the decision. And actually, when I first started, it was more difficult because, we had a phone chain, the superintendents, we called each other. Of course, as technology got better, we now are texting each other. And a lot of times we, we all made this decision together so that everybody did the same thing. although sometimes in Montauk I would close just like everybody else. And then of course in Montauk it would rain. So we had rain days that happened at least twice over the years. But

Virginia Garrison [01:10:36] So with texting it improved because that enabled the superintendents to make a decision in tandem.

Jack Perna [01:10:41] And actually, you could be in contact with the police more easily, and the highway department more easily because the technology was there, it was better.

[01:10:50] With telephones, if you called the police then you couldn't get through because the phones were busy or East Hampton Town they weren't answering, but everybody, you know, just like everybody else, you're call all of a sudden all the time, right? So. So yeah, this is the school buses. School buses were never the problem in the weather. It was always to me the other cars that would make somebody do something.

Virginia Garrison [01:11:18] And so you were saying too though that like Montauk at this weather after the schools to the west.

Jack Perna [01:11:25] You know, our weather fronts usually move from west to east. And, if something is in New York it's going to take two and a half, three hours to get here, ust take you're driving. Matter of fact, there was a time when, I didn't say this yesterday, they used to tease me about closing more than everybody else because of the snow. But there was a time when there was a hurricane coming and they all closed. And I said to the guy in East Hampton, I said, It's in North Carolina. It's not going to be here for 12 hours. If we close that day right now all my people are going down to the beach, half of them are going in the water. Sure enough, by 4 o'clock in the afternoon, everybody was down at the beach looking at the surf. And, you know, we stayed open. They closed in the middle of the day for whatever it was because they were scared and, yeah, we lived here in Montauk. Not that you go through a hurricane, right? But you know, it's 12 hours away. But anyway.

Virginia Garrison [01:12:29] Oh you go well, I.

Jack Perna [01:12:31] Just want to you know, I was talking about some of the teachers before too, and I just want I want to add to that list of master teachers, Mrs. Borth, sixth grade, and, and Mrs. Winski in fifth grade. Both of both of them were teachers when I was a young teacher. Actually, Mrs. Borth, we, Fred Philly started a program called Meap, MEAP, Midwinter Enrichment Activity Program. That was to accommodate families that went away in February so that they wouldn't miss, you know, if they if they went away for an extra week before the February break, they wouldn't miss the basics. So we had a special program that week and I all the teachers taught different things. Mrs. Borth and I taught the U.S.S.R., that was the whole topic. The whole week was the U.S.S.R. Two things happened with that. I had written to the embassy because we were going to go to the United Nations, and we we met with the Russian embassy or Russian whatever you call it I had his card at school his name is Isaac something we they called us on the intercom at the United Nations for the Montauk School to come into into the back room. We met with them. It was before because, Gorbachev and the opening of the U.S.S.R. I forget those two words that they used the Russian words. But we met with the Russian ambassador at the time.

Virginia Garrison [01:14:21] Yeah.

Jack Perna [01:14:23] This is when Mrs. Borth and I, Mrs. Borth and I had taught fifth-grade MEAP, U.S.S.R. All week long. And there was another time we decided to show them what communism was like when the kids were lunch at gym, we took all their lunches out of their closet, and we made a buffet out of everything. So nobody had their own lunch anymore because now you get to share things like communism, and the kids were not very happy.

Virginia Garrison [01:14:53] No?

Jack Perna [01:14:53] They didn't have their lunch anymore, but.

Virginia Garrison [01:15:02] I forgot what I was gonna say, we should probably tell me the biggest challenge and the best part of this long career. What you liked best.

Jack Perna [01:15:15] The best part is now when I see former students. Something I used to say to kids: You're all going to learn how to read, you're all gonna learn how to write. I want you to be happy. If you choose to be parents, I want you to be good parents. And I want you to be good people. That's my goal for all of you. And now living in town. And when you see kids who are successful, I always ask them if they're happy no matter what they're doing. And almost every one of them are. If they have kids, I ask about their kids and I say, are you a good parent, make sure you're a good parent. To me, that's the best thing is after, you know, it's great interacting, but to see the results of it years later.

Virginia Garrison [01:16:06] Just see them as adults. Yeah.

Jack Perna [01:16:08] That that's a it's a great, great feeling. The biggest challenge would be the politics, which we don't have much of here. But there are times when you feel like. I know what I'm doing. I know the school. I know the teachers, I know what I need, when I need to get certain things done. I don't need you people telling me. And I don't mean the board necessarily. It's some people who write letters to the Star because they know better or people who don't like you, for whatever reason, who all know better and then they, you know, that kind of thing I could do with that for sure.

Virginia Garrison [01:16:50] Right? Is that so when we say, like in retirement, would you say that that's the thing that you miss the least?

Jack Perna [01:16:57] Yeah. The politics of it in the and the worry, you know, the worry. I miss the worry the least.

Virginia Garrison [01:17:05] And what did you worry particularly about?

Jack Perna [01:17:05] You, you know, the worry is and especially the last several years when you think it would never happen is, is hurting someone else's child somehow or being responsible for a hurt to happen to another child. To somebody else's child. Because you're responsible for these other people's children all day long and God forbid some something should happen.

Virginia Garrison [01:17:34] So it's it's their life, their health, their emotional well-being?

Jack Perna [01:17:38] Yes. Well, well-being comes down to life, actually. I mean, I hate to say it, but these days, you just never know. You just never know. And how many small towns have you seen, Sandy Hook? Yeah. You know, small elementary school first-graders? Oh my God. And. And the battle, the battle to get guns out of the hands of people who have no right to have them. Let me talk about Fred Thiele for a minute. Let me tell you, and let me give him some credit for it. Sorry. Fred Thiele was was our assemblyman for a long time. Fred was always involved in politics as long as I know. But Fred, anytime I called or emailed him, always, always got a response. Always, always, always. And, in order for us to get our, our full time armed police at school. Because they were retired

people, there was their salary was capped. So for them to keep working, I had I had to get a special dispensation about five years in a row. And with Fred's help, I always was able to.

Virginia Garrison [01:18:59] In order for them to have an armed security guard.

Jack Perna [01:19:02] For them to be working full time, to get the full time salary, right? Otherwise, they'd have to stop after \$35,000.

Virginia Garrison [01:19:09] Because they had a pen ... yeah, gotcha.

Jack Perna [01:19:11] So we always we always got the special dispensation, I'm going to say. And I would, I would attribute that to if I called Fred Thiele, he would call whoever he had to at civil service to get that to go. And then in the Assembly itself, in the State Senate as well, for the past several years, that's been waived for everybody because all the schools are in the same boat. If you want to get police who are retired, you have to be able to pay them and their salaries were capped. So right now that's still not a worry. But I attribute that to Fred Thiele. I don't know if it's true but to me it was.

Virginia Garrison [01:19:54] So and that's. And that you don't miss that.

Jack Perna [01:19:59] I don't miss the worry about about that at all.

Virginia Garrison [01:20:02] And what do you miss?

Jack Perna [01:20:04] I miss, I miss actually I miss the interaction with teachers a lot. Of course I miss, I miss the children. I always sound like. Oh, yeah, but I do, I was there the other day and it's, you know, they, they come up to, they still remember me. They hug you. And some people say, oh, you can't hug kids anymore. Come on, they're children, they're kids.

Virginia Garrison [01:20:30] What are you saying about second grade was your favorite grade?

Jack Perna [01:20:33] Oh, well, it's a second grade because you don't have to worry about the tests, state tests start in third grade. So if you give me second grade, I don't have to worry about the test. They already know how to read because the first grade teacher and kindergarten teacher did that. So you don't have to teach them how to read. They can read. They don't have to take a test. Shut the door. We're going to have fun and we're going to learn. So. And there still this big. And they still like being there.

Virginia Garrison [01:21:00] Yeah, that's sweet. Yeah. So about retirement, but yet you're still trying to learn how to play golf.

Jack Perna [01:21:10] Well, I'm trying to learn Italian. I do it almost every day on Babble.

Virginia Garrison [01:21:13] Oh, Italian, I forgot.

Jack Perna [01:21:13] I do it almost every day on Babbel. I fully intended to learn how to play the piano and to play golf. Italian I'm working on. I have a piano in my house. I still don't know how to do everything, but I'm getting there a little bit.

Virginia Garrison [01:21:36] Are you taking lessons?

Jack Perna [01:21:37] No, but I have to do that. I have to do that. And, golf, I golf. I just haven't done yet. And I, you know, I live in Montauk I can go play golf here. I can go to Poxabogue and in the winter in Florida, there's plenty of public golf courses. Just have to get up and go.

Virginia Garrison [01:21:56] Get up and go. Get up and go.

Virginia Garrison [01:21:58] Maybe you just need to rest for a while.

Jack Perna [01:22:03] I can't believe I haven't worked in a year and a month, at all. This is a this is like the second closest thing I've done to a job since then. This day.

Virginia Garrison [01:22:13] This day. What? Sorry. So you're, like, half and half with Florida now, with Delray Beach.

Jack Perna [01:22:22] Not half and half, really more Montauk.

Virginia Garrison [01:22:24] More Montauk?

Jack Perna [01:22:24] Just the winter months so far in Delray Beach. I do have three sisters there and one in Mississippi and a couple of cousins live there as well.

Virginia Garrison [01:22:37] And what brings you back to Montauk?

Jack Perna [01:22:39] This is my home.

Virginia Garrison [01:22:40] That's fair.

Jack Perna [01:22:41] Yeah, this is my home. You know, especially Montauk. In the summertime, people pay a fortune to come out here. Why would we go somewhere else if we have a house here?

Virginia Garrison [01:22:52] Especially if you're not working.

Jack Perna [01:22:54] Especially if you're not working. Yeah. So.

Virginia Garrison [01:22:57] Yeah. Anything you want to add or, you know, talk about that we haven't talked about.

Jack Perna [01:23:02] I just want to thank you and thank the library for for doing this and including me in your history.

Virginia Garrison [01:23:11] So all right. That's it. Thank you so much for doing this, twice.

Jack Perna [01:23:15] You're welcome. Thank you.

Virginia Garrison [01:23:16] This is the end of the Montauk Library oral history interview with Jack Perna. The interviewer was Virginia Garrison. This recording can be found in the Archive Collection of the Montauk Library. Thank you again.

