

**Dr. Juan Gardner, Principal of Madison Senior High School, Long Time
Resident of Madison, Illinois
Transcript of Interview for the Madison Historical Society Oral History Project.
Interviewed by Phoenix Butler, Madison Senior High School Social Studies Student
Date: November 6, 2023**

Phoenix Butler [PB]: 00:01 [Recording Starts]: Hello, my name is Phoenix Butler and I'm here with

Juan Gardner [JG]: 00:03 Dr. Juan Gardner, Principal of Madison Senior High School.

PB: 00:07 Today is October 27, 2023, and today we'll be discussing growing up in Madison, Illinois. My first question for you, Dr. Gardner will be, how was life growing up in Madison as an early child?

JG: 00:20 As an early town in Madison, better known as Newport, better known as West Madison, North Venice, was wonderful. The community was magical. Everyone looked out for each other. No one really had to go without. family members, extended family members for example, my oldest sister, is not my biological sister, but she's my oldest sister in every way. In those days, when families went through a trauma such as her mother died in childbirth, 11 children were split up. Joyce, better known as Big Joyce, was taken in by my mother and grandmother. They raised her as if she were my own sister long before my mother was married. So big Joyce was like a sister-auntie to me. She's 84 years old. And again, people took the time to look out for each other. We had our set of issues. In East Madison, as you know it, it was all white; in North Venice in West Madison, it was all black. There was a school called Dunbar School, and then there was Madison Senior High School that didn't integrate until 1952. And at that time, both schools were supposed to merge. The colors that we know are green and white should have been green and gold. That was a secret letter that was hidden, and it was disclosed by a wonderful former coach, state championship assistant coach Dave Hodges, who brought it to the board meeting to let us see Madison's colors really should have been green and gold. That's a little unknown fact for many people, and I thought I would include it in this question.

PB: 02:11 Okay, that's really interesting. Did you attend Madison School District?

JG: 02:16 Yes, I did. From kindergarten through 12th grade, I attended Blair school for kindergarten through third grade, Dunbar School for fourth grade through sixth grade, and then Madison Junior High School, which was standing at the corner of Alton, and Third Street where the baseball diamond is--a Hamm Sports Complex is--that's why I went to junior high school for seventh and eighth. Interestingly enough, they were building what you know is Bernard Long, that was our sixth, seventh, and eighth grade center after that building was completed. That became known as the junior high school. Now, when I was in junior high school, we only went to school three hours a day, three hours a day because they had to bring in seventh grade in the morning and eighth grade in the afternoon. Why? Because they were constructing a new school due to seg-desegregation, blacks, black and white kids got together. I'm proud to say my class of 1978 where I graduated as senior class president and play three

sports and was on JV on the state championship team that won our first championship in 1977. We had a wonderful run, and the high school as we know it now used to consist of well over 800 kids for high school alone. Nowadays, we only have 133 kids and senior high, 150 kids in sixth, seventh and eighth, of course housed in the junior-senior high school building.

PB: 03:53 How would you say that Madison has changed since you've been a child with the kid's lingo, hangouts, all of it?

JG: 04:01 Well, kids are kids! Kids enjoy their friends. They enjoy hanging out with their friends, relationships, kids start... all kids love who they love. One of the biggest changes I've seen over the years is with how we have accepted as a nation "All-inclusiveness." Students who are trans, bisexual, would love-love and same gender. A totally, totally different time. And totally, totally acceptable, because as we know it, God loves everyone and there should be no judgment. What I've seen mostly over the years is the great migration of the population. Madison used to have 20,000 people. We are now around 3000, 4000 folks, people move on, they don't come back. People grow up and say, "I'm never coming back to Madison," oh, I couldn't stand it. That's not me. My existence was I love my hometown. I came back eight years ago after being away for over 35 years and ended up being the high school principal where my wonderful father, sitting on the ledge over there, was a teacher downstairs in Room 118 for over 18 years. He taught here for 40 years. So, Madison is my home, my pride, my joy. People ask me where I'm from. I don't say St. Louis. I proudly say, "Madison, Illinois."

PB: 05:28 That's amazing. What are some of the positive things that Madison has to offer...when going to Madison School District?

JG: 05:36 Family, family! Madison is a place that looks out for its own. Once you become a Trojan, a Spartan, it's really personal. Teachers care, and I know with you all, until you find out a teacher cares, you can't give them your best, you have to know that teachers care about you. And that is one of the biggest attributes. We're small, we have small sizes, which allows us to be a family. Some of the other positives, there are great places like the Joe Roberts Center, a lot of the churches are still very, very small. People move on but they still come back. They might live in the St. Louis Metro Area; they may live in St. Louis County, Edwardsville, Collinsville, but they come back home longing for the days that will never come back, but mostly about Madison is family and love.

PB: 05:48 What do you say are some of the negative things about Madison that we should change?

JG: 06:36 Tough one, Phoenix! I need my parents. I need my fathers to step up. This job is really difficult. I need fathers in their rightful places and then some of our students wouldn't go through some of the things they are going through. I wish I could change social media. I wish it could go away. I'd like to see people having opportunities and exposures that I had so that they can see a world outside of Madison, don't think that it can't be you. Can any good thing come out of Madison? Yes, indeed. So many wonderful people have come and gone. You guys know Coach Maurice Baker. He went to the NBA. But there were other notable people who left here and they're judges, they're attorneys. Miss Linda Thorpe, downstairs--did you know her daughter is Snoop Dogg's attorney-agent?

PB: 07:38 Oh, wow. I did not know that.

JG: 07:40 We have a lot of famous people that went to Madison; low key, under the radar, who've done incredible things. Did you know that we had a man who was in the Hall of Fame in basketball? He is 85 years old. His name is Reuben Perry, we're going to induct him into the Hall of Fame. He went on to win a championship in college in Division IIA. And there are so many wonderful aspects of our place that the story just needs to be told. And I'm grateful for this historical project, because we have to tell our story.

PB: 08:21 That's true. Do you think that people have the potential to make Madison better?

JG: 08:26 Now Phoenix, you already know the question! But on record, Dr. Gardner believes the potential is there. Where you can see it, you can achieve it, when you can reach it, you can be it. Such as Mr. Long taking kids through the Illinois Music Educators Association "across the pond" to Europe. And kids like Everett Malone's lives have been changed forever, Phoenix, you will benefit from going a year from now on the tour, the Ambassador's Tour where you guys are traveling through several countries in Europe. And it just opens your eyes. So, what I would love to see, what we need are just sponsors to just stack up and dump money into the pot here. Because our kids are amazing. You guys are amazing kids. And when you have opportunities, I don't have to worry about you behaving yourselves, you guys know how to do that. Most of you have mothers and grandmothers and aunts and Big Mommas that would kill you if you don't. And then, I'll be here hitting you with the other thing called suspension if you don't. We're going to take good care of you because we want your very best, pure and simple.

PB: 09:38 Okay. What do you think is something that we as kids and students can do to help improve this town?

JG: 09:46 By paying it forward, by just being good model students. Volunteerism goes a long way. For example, if your neighbor is ninety-years old and you're outside raking your leaves, why not rake her leaves too. Or if you're taking out your trash in the morning, why not take out her trash too. In other words, when you live a life of service, giving something---giving of yourself without expecting something in return---that is going to be the best payback because I know this, you will be rewarded richly when you do things like that. You, you make one good thing, it's like making a deposit. And it pays you back years later. Makes sense?

PB: 10:32 Yes, it does make a lot of sense. That brings me to the end of this interview. Is there anything you'd like to discuss or is there something you would like to elaborate on?

JG: 10:40 I would just like to thank the SIUE, Madison County Historical Project for taking time to do an interview or interviewing sessions with our wonderful students here at Madison Senior High School, so that they can dig back into the past to see where they are headed. For, if a person doesn't know where they've been, they can't possibly know where they're going.

PB: 11:05 So very true. Thank you, Mr. Gardner, for your time and that is the end of my interview.

JG: 11:13

Very good, Ms. Butler.

Phoenix Butler 11:15

Thank you!