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“I never planned to be a teacher!” An interview with Margaret Hill, President of the Board of the San Bernardino City Unified School District

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Abstract

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Keywords

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Author Statement

Dr John Winslade is a professor in the College of Education at California State University, San Bernardino.

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President of the Board of the San Bernardino City Unified School
District
John Winslade**

JOHN WINSLADE – So you are the chair of the board of the San Bernardino City School district, is that right?

MARGARET HILL – Yes, we call it president.

JOHN WINSLADE – President. My apologies, OK, so how long have you been on the board and how long have you been president?

MARGARET HILL – I am completing my sixth year on the board, and I’m completing my first term as president, which is two years.

JOHN WINSLADE – So when you say you are completing your first term, you intend to continue?

MARGARET HILL – Yes, the board, when we are elected, we are elected for four years. So I am two years into my next five years. It’s not that my math is bad.

JOHN WINSLADE - (Laughter.) OK.

MARGARET HILL – I was voted in, I came in on an odd year and we hold elections in even years. So four years would have been 2019, but they changed the rules and I am staying until 2020.

JOHN WINSLADE – I see now, you haven’t always been on the board. You had a career in education, is that right? A teacher, then a principal and so can you tell us a little bit about that?

MARGARET HILL – Sure, in 1971 I became a teacher at San Bernardino High School.

JOHN WINSLADE – That is close to when I did, it was in 1973 actually when I became a teacher.

MARGARET HILL – In this district?

JOHN WINSLADE – No, it was in New Zealand.

MARGARET HILL – I started in 1971 in this district and I was a classroom teacher until 1978. At that time, I was appointed teacher on assignment at the district office for those students who got into trouble and we had to listen to the reason they got in trouble because they had been recommended for expulsion. So I did that from 1978 to 1980.

JOHN WINSLADE – That is what the youth services team does now, correct?

MARGARET HILL – Yes, they call it the hearing panel.

JOHN WINSLADE – Right.

MARGARET HILL – So after that, or rather while I was doing that, I was working on a Masters in Administration and an Administrative Credential at California State University San Bernardino.

JOHN WINSLADE – Great.

MARGARET HILL – When I got my degree, I was appointed vice principal at Curtis Middle School.

JOHN WINSLADE – I know Curtis Middle School.

MARGARET HILL – Yes, I was there for three years and I was transferred to Serrano Middle School and I was there for two years, then I was transferred to San Bernardino High School, as the vice principal for two years. I was appointed principal of San Andreas, the alternative school.

JOHN WINSLADE – I have been there too.

MARGARET HILL – Oh really, it's a wonderful place. That was my longevity, because I was there sixteen years.

JOHN WINSLADE – Yeah, that's great.

MARGARET HILL – I retired in 2003 and I was an adjunct professor for Redlands University and Cal State San Bernardino. I was in retirement, full time retirement until 2006. I was appointed assistant superintendent of San Bernardino County School and I stayed there until July 1 of 2012.

JOHN WINSLADE – You have had a variety of positions in education over many years.

MARGARET HILL – I don't look at it as being employed, I look at it as being a learner.

JOHN WINSLADE – That's good, so what would you say, in the different roles you've done, what would you say has been your biggest contribution?

MARGARET HILL – I don't know one single contribution, the one that supports my vision was to be able to help students. Where ever they were... I would tell

everyone at San Andreas, when they asked who my students were, "I have the cream of the crop and the bottom of the barrel." I said my job is to make them all successful and I had a lot of joy to see students who struggled, who didn't have confidence in themselves or anyone else that were successful. That has been my biggest joy.

JOHN WINSLADE – Yeah, your biggest joy is a nice word. What sort of commitments took you through that kind of career? I am interested in the things that you would contribute to students to produce that joy and that difference. What has driven you to do those things?

MARGARET HILL – I think the driving force for me is primarily my own education. I went to school in the South and it was segregated. We didn't have hot or cold water, no lights and school was a struggle for me. I really struggled with elementary and high school.

JOHN WINSLADE – Did that give you a kind of empathy for kids that were struggling?

MARGARET HILL – Not really. I never wanted to go into the field of education because I struggled. I struggled and I can't say I had a teacher that made me a believer. I didn't have a teacher that I could say, what he or she is doing makes me want to become a teacher.

JOHN WINSLADE – Nothing like that?

MARGARET HILL – It wasn't like that, I struggled and I didn't have a teacher as a role model. I got my teaching credential... being a child who was disobedient, because I didn't want to go to college. I was good with shorthand and typing, but I wanted to go to a business school for one year and my mother said,

“No, I’m going to send you to Norfolk State, so you can get your secretary science degree in two years,” and because I didn’t want to go, I signed up for a four year program.

JOHN WINSLADE – Oh really?

MARGARET HILL – Yeah, I’ll fix her. She’ll have to pay four years instead of two. Except at the end of two years, she asked if I was going to get my degree and walk. I said, “No, I signed up for a four year degree,” and she said, “Good luck paying for it!”

JOHN WINSLADE – So what did you do?

MARGARET HILL – I worked at a beauty salon, I worked as a carhop, I worked in real estate as a clerk and I would go to New York and be a domestic worker during the summer. One of my sisters was already in New York, so she got me a job. I went to go work for the Jaray’s, who owned a bookstore and what I did was cleaned the house and babysat the kids. They were so generous, because I was trying to go to school and pay for it myself. They allowed me to live there, so I would work two days, babysit whenever they needed and I could work in other homes.

JOHN WINSLADE – So when did you decide to become a teacher?

MARGARET HILL – When I moved to California from Virginia. When I got to California, the only jobs I could find were for clerks. I said I’m going to do that. I was working for a community organization when a school board member came in and someone said I had a teaching degree. So prior to that, I had subbed two days in an elementary school and I said that wasn’t for me. This

gentlemen asked why wasn’t I teaching and I said, “Because I don’t want to.” He said, “We have a shortage of teachers,” and I said, “You still do, if you expect me to do it.” He said he needed me to teach and people encouraged me and I still kept saying I wasn’t going to like it. I finally applied, got a position and have loved it ever since.

JOHN WINSLADE – Really?

MARGARET HILL – Yes, I tell kids never say what you’re not going to do. I spent thirty years, almost forty now, in a career that I never wanted to go into.

JOHN WINSLADE – It wasn’t like you set a goal and chased it down?

MARGARET HILL – No, that wasn’t the case at all.

JOHN WINSLADE – So what would you say are the skills or expertise that you developed in teaching that animated your whole career, what would you say?

MARGARET HILL – Most of what I did as a teacher, because I was a business teacher, I taught shorthand, typing, recordkeeping and retail sales, because I had done work in that field prior to coming to teaching. The biggest contribution is teaching students to be patient, teaching students how to understand why people do what they do and sometimes it’s from teachers that you don’t like and you learn more from them. I worked with them on how to use the system to benefit you. I did a lot of that.

JOHN WINSLADE – You did that yourself?

MARGARET HILL – Yes, I share that with students. For example, if a student came in and was in trouble and usually

because of my experience at an alternative school they would come in and use profanity, saying or calling the teacher a name and saying, “I’m not coming back to this dumb school,” on and on. I would usually just listen to them to demonstrate patience and when they were finished, I’d tell them, “Let me tell you what you said that was unacceptable. You never call people names, because you don’t want to be called names. The good news is you did it in here and I’m not going to suspend you for calling the teacher a name, because, deep down, I don’t think you really believe that and I’m sure I can count on you to never do it again.”

First you do the corrective part and then you finish with, “Let’s talk about why you’re really angry,” and usually it doesn’t pertain to the teacher. It has to do with the night before or that morning or something that happened at home. I would say that happens nine times out of ten. It was something they were struggling with and so I saw myself in the counselor’s role. I told all my students and the interesting thing was I had a group of skinheads come in and I knew they were skinheads when they got there and I heard they were skinheads from other people. I just said, “At this school, we don’t have a principal, we have a mother. As long as you’re on this campus, I’m your mother.” So the students that were the skinheads would say, “You’re not my mother,” and I would respond then I guess you’re not coming here. So they always say, “You’re not my mother and I’m still coming here,” but I’d say, “You’ll see.” I was never frightened of students, because I knew they had their own individual concerns and I knew they could take it out on me, but I knew that wasn’t the case. I feel that I would listen to students and never judge students. If I found that the student had a sibling that was there, that was good or not so good, they would always say you’re going to

compare me to them. I told them that I had a sister who could ... if we both had a test, I had to study for three weeks and I would get a C. She would study on the walk to school and get an A.

JOHN WINSLADE - (Laughter.)

MARGARET HILL – I said I will never compare you. I never liked it and so one of the things that I do is I always share my story and I have said to administrators on school boards, when you share your story it helps the kids understand... They see where they are and where they can move. One story I am always proud to tell is that I wrote two books. I always tell about the girl who was in elementary school and she was very aggressive in her behavior. I called her out of the classroom, because the teacher was trying to ignore her. I invited her outside and when we got outside it continued and continued. She was using profanity and I said, “Do you need to use profanity to talk to me, because I’m not the enemy.” She started with, “You don’t seem to understand, because you don’t want me to use profanity, but everything I say you have something negative to say about it.” She told me to look over at the apartment and I said which one. The two-story one over there and she said you don’t want me to use profanity but that’s where I live and I hear it every single night at home. She said I hear shootings every day and every night, I smell marijuana every day, every night and I have all these things going on in my life and you’re upset because I’m using profanity.” I thought about it and I said she had a point, because what was I supposed to say next? “Let me tell you something. When I was your age, I didn’t live in an apartment, I lived in a house. We didn’t have hot and cold water. I was one of the youngest, so by the time that I got to the water not only was it cold but it was dirty. I still had to take a bath.” I

would tell her about the toilet about how we did not flush and how we would have to go out the back. She said, “No!” And I asked her what her problem was. She said, “You had to go outside,” and I said, “Yeah, and there was no soft toilet paper!” I didn’t know if I was going to hit a button or not, but I did. When we got ready to go back in, I asked her if she had any questions. She said, “I can’t believe you had to go outside to use the bathroom.”

JOHN WINSLADE - (Laughter.)

MARGARET HILL - It turned her around, because, when I went back to the school a month later, she was given an academic award. She was doing her homework quietly and things of that nature. I don’t have a problem using my story.

JOHN WINSLADE – I love your stories.

MARGARET HILL – I said to her, “I shared this with you, because you think you have a bad situation. But there’re places in the South that have outdoor toilets.” I told her, “You want to know why I am not there? It’s because I got an education. That’s the only way out.” So when I talk to students I always tell my story.

JOHN WINSLADE – Yes that’s wonderful. What would you say has given you the most satisfaction?

MARGARET HILL – The most satisfaction that I get is having students contact me or let me know how they’re doing, good or bad. I have gotten phone calls and letters from prison. I had one reach out to me that was a millionaire but still going to prison, because he thought he was smarter than everyone else. Just hearing the success stories and walking

into the schools to hear people say I was at San Andreas and now I’m a teacher. I get a joy out of that they are doing good. My biggest joy was when I ran for the school board and I posted on Facebook, because I didn’t know if I made the right decision. I posted about 5 o’clock the day I decided to run and by 11 it had 100 hits all from my students.

JOHN WINSLADE – Really?

MARGARET HILL – They said, “You were there for us, so you need to be there for everyone else. You did the right thing.” I didn’t know if I did the right thing. I ran because I was angry at a couple of board members.

JOHN WINSLADE – So that must’ve been very confirming?

MARGARET HILL – It was, it really was. Even now, if there is a problem in this district and someone puts it on Facebook, I just sit and watch and read the messages, because I know someone eventually is going to say, “Call Margaret Hill.”

JOHN WINSLADE – Yes, if you were to meet someone who is entering the field of education, what would you advise them to cultivate in regards to personal disposition or personal commitments?

MARGARET HILL – Well I would like to start with ... when I was teaching at Cal State, I was teaching students that were teachers, administrators and counselors. My first class I would tell them, “It’s not too late for you to drop this class without being penalized.” I’d tell them, “You have to have compassion, you have to learn people by their names, and you don’t just sit in your office. You need to be with the kids. You’ve got to love kids, otherwise they can read you like

a book. You don't make enough money in that position and not like kids." I had a couple of students that finished the class, but they said they weren't ready for administration right now. So I would say, "Go for the things that you need and want to get, everything else, the books and everything is not the priority. The priority is your own compassion and how you can deal with different people and every kid on your campus, when you lock your car and walk into that building, you have to pretend like they're all living in your house."

JOHN WINSLADE – Well that's a nice thought.

MARGARET HILL – You always have to believe. That is the thing that I would say, never go into administration because of the money.

JOHN WINSLADE – I'm interested in what your thoughts are about this particular district? You've been here a long time. You spent your career here. I'm imagining you must have a heart for this community and this district, is that right?

MARGARET HILL – I have a heart for the entire community. I serve on a lot of boards, I'm the last charter member of the YMCA of Highland. I work with Community Action Partnership and the Food Bank. I work with San Bernardino city police.

JOHN WINSLADE - So you're really widely spread?

MARGARET HILL – Yes, I work with the sheriff and the reason why I do all this is because you can't be a part of the solution if you're not at the table. This is what I would always tell young people, because you need to be a part of

something. If there is anything ever broken, you need to be at the table to figure out how to fix it. I do these types of things, because I care about the district. The thing that I've been doing that I didn't think I would be doing for eight years is, I thought someone else would pick it up, but every month at City Council, I do a student of the month from one of the local high schools. We have nine high schools and I write a column for the Sun newspaper. As a matter of fact I'm doing a column on a ten-year-old and this is my third year of doing that.

JOHN WINSLADE – That sounds like a pretty active retirement?

MARGARET HILL - It is. Anything that I can do to promote kids, I do.

JOHN WINSLADE – What is special about this district that you're so committed to and have this heart about?

MARGARET HILL – It's just because this is where I became a teacher and started my career. I mean I just love it here and I hear people, oh San Bernardino... I was out the other day with a board member and I saw a student that had graduated from San Bernardino High School. He said that he spent a lot of time in San Berna-Ghetto. I didn't say anything in front of the other board member, but I had to ask the boy why he was still here? If this was a place that made it possible for you to eat, and have a car and a house, would you call it the ghetto? I'm not sure if I'd want to be involved if it was a ghetto.

JOHN WINSLADE – One of the commitments our college has is the concept of social justice, it's in our mission statement. I'm interested your thoughts about that? How would you express an interest in social justice?

MARGARET HILL – My feeling is there is something here for all of us. It doesn't matter if you're African-American, Latino, White or Native American, this place is like a puzzle and it doesn't become complete without all parts of it. We need to find our place. Some people deal with it differently, but I'm a big advocate for our Caucasian students, because we talk a lot about African-Americans and Latinos. I always say, we can't forget our White students and our Asian students, because they are a part of this. I like to look at us as ... not by ethnicity ... ethnicity is there and it plays a role, but we want all of them successful.

JOHN WINSLADE – That's like an ideal that you have?

MARGARET HILL – Exactly, so when it comes to social justice, I look at it as fairness. Everyone should be comfortable with their skin and everyone should feel important about making contributions. I got my honorary PhD from the University of Redlands for social justice and I was getting ready to enroll there. The reason I was interested was because I had taught on campus when the department or the doctoral department I was so familiar with asked me to add to what the other speakers had said. When I got ready to enroll, I said that this is going to be neat, because this is something I enjoy and it's not foreign. I got a call that said, "Margaret, don't worry. You don't need to enroll, you can probably teach the program, so we are giving you an honorary PhD." I really appreciated that and I'm very involved in what happens. When I first came to California and before I started working with the school district, I was working with an organization called Operation Second Chance. I was in the courtroom when the

judge made the decision to desegregate San Bernardino.

JOHN WINSLADE – Really, when was that?

MARGARET HILL - 1970, ever since then I've just been kind of involved with social justice and fairness for all.

JOHN WINSLADE – This district is known for having a large number of Latino students or a large proportion. I suspect that a lot of those students would be "dreamers", correct? So I'm wondering your thoughts on how the district should respond or can respond?

MARGARET HILL – I would say that students have very little voice and as a result of that they should not be punished, because they are here. They didn't decide as young children that they were going to come across the border. That decision was made by someone else and whether right or wrong, I understand what happens with immigration. Also, being from a part of the country where blacks were considered secondary citizens. We didn't have anything, but no one had anything. So the assimilation of our Latinos it's a little bit different and I know Latinos who say, "I do wish they would build a wall." I guess I kind of understand, but I don't approve of it. I think everyone should have an opportunity to be the best they can be. The thing is, yes we have people to come over and break the law, but we have citizens who break the law and that's not right either. So I just don't think ... if they're enrolled in our schools, they are our students. I remember when Joe Baca became a Congressman, and because I knew him quite well, I asked assistance in getting graduates who were not citizens in college. I knew students that did not know they were not citizens until after they graduated. I worked

through his office to maneuver and try to do things to help students, at least get them into community college. There are students whose parents are citizens and the parents feel that the kids are citizens.

JOHN WINSLADE – Would you say under your leadership you would like to see the board take a particular stand in that regard?

MARGARET HILL – The stand that we took, I mean, we approved a resolution that we would protect all students. We would not question the status of students and I'm very supportive of that. I think we have enough in place that represents those on the board. These are our students, it doesn't matter how they got here or when they got here. It is someone else's business. It's not our business, we are here to educate.

JOHN WINSLADE – I think it will be particularly interesting for people to read the stories that you've told. Those things are quite powerful and I appreciate the value of stories.

MARGARET HILL – Well tell them. They can read more because I wrote two books.

JOHN WINSLADE – Yes, tell me about the books.

MARGARET HILL – The first one I wrote, I didn't intend to write a book, just like going into education. One of my English teachers was attending a writing class and she asked me to join her and I said I don't have time to write. She said perhaps when you retire, but I wasn't retired for another four or five years and so I thought I was safe. So when I retired she called me.

JOHN WINSLADE – She remembered?

MARGARET HILL – She remembered! I would go over and the professor would just tell us to write, just write. So I started writing about the students and then I said, I guess I need to introduce myself. So I went in one night and introduced myself and my stories are about the students I've been working with. The professor said no Margaret you can't do that, you have to write about you, because your story is interesting and you're just putting in a little piece. Write about yourself and include students, so I would write about myself and then it would remind me of when... a lot of students would recognize themselves but I never use their name. I wrote my first book and it was titled, "*It's All About the Children*". So this lady who read my book, said I like your book, but I would like to learn a lot more about you. I didn't know how she was going to find out, because I wasn't writing another book. She said, well what if I write it? I said fine, so we met for about eight months.

JOHN WINSLADE – So she asked questions and wrote about what you spoke about?

MARGARET HILL – Yeah and she clarified a lot of things for me. Like I didn't know that my dad worked for WPA (*The Works Progress Association, a New Deal stimulus plan employment agency*) until I shared my story. When I was born, my brother told me the story a lot how my uncle would beat that mule, beat that mule to get to town to get to the doctor. I told that story in my first book and so when my ghostwriter was writing she said, "Where was your dad?" And I didn't know, so I called my oldest brother who is 85. I said, "Where was dad?" and he said he was working for WPA and if he didn't work he wouldn't get paid. I never knew that until six years ago. I learned a lot as a

result of that. I say to people get yourself a ghostwriter and write about your life.

JOHN WINSLADE - And what was the second book called?

MARGARET HILL – The second book was called, “*From Sharecropping to Nonstopping*”. Now my first book was featured on C-SPAN.

JOHN WINSLADE – Really?

MARGARET HILL – It was shortly after the December incident that happened here and they didn’t do it for that reason. They wanted to do something on this area. We have a lot of writers in this area, because I go to book signings and there are a lot of people from San Bernardino. I said, “Why did I get so lucky?” She said my mom and dad were educators and I thought if I get a book on someone in education, they would forgive me for not going into education. So they came out from DC and got an interview at San Bernardino High School where I started my teaching career.

JOHN WINSLADE – How have those books gone? I imagine you’ve gotten feedback from other people about them?

MARGARET HILL – Yes, they have gone quite well. My first book, I didn’t keep track of. My second book, last time I kept track, it was in something like thirty-two states. Whenever I travel, I always take my book and I always find someone to give it to. So when I went to Hawaii in May I had it, and this gentleman I met there had traveled with his wife and he was from Virginia. His wife was a teacher so I gave it to him. When I was on tour in Costa Rica there was a lady that wanted to become a teacher and so I gave it to her. I look for the right person to give it to, so I know my book is in Costa

Rica, Greece, Alaska, Mexico and Peru and I got one to the Secretary of Education. I sent it to Michelle Obama and I know she got it, because I got a letter saying thank you.

JOHN WINSLADE – That’s really great.

MARGARET HILL – So it’s out there.

JOHN WINSLADE – So I’m not going to take up any more of your time. Thank you.