

## Queens of Slippery Rock Oral History Project

Interview with Kaci Vandergrift conducted by Anna Swartwout and Brenna Waugaman

Anna: I'm Anna Swartwout.

Brenna: I'm Brenna Waugaman.

A: We are here for the Queens of Slippery Rock oral history project and we are here interviewing Kaci Vandergrift.

Kaci: Hi, I'm Kaci Vandergrift. I'm a senior physical activity and fitness management major from Pittsburgh, PA.

A: Can you please give us a little of your biography while you were in college? What activities you were involved in and what you did at Slippery Rock?

K: Yes. Absolutely. Coming here I was a transfer. I started off as a freshman transfer and I got immediately involved. I was actually on the track team for one year and then I decided that was a little bit of a commitment so I kind of switched over and got really involved on campus. I took part in the Green and White society so I was an ambassador for them. We work closely with alumni and guests of the university so I did a lot of networking, back and forth just meeting people, celebrating the traditions on campus and just getting the students involved. That was kind of from the beginning. Then I changed my major. I was health and phys. ed. then physical activity and fitness management. There I got involved as a treasurer for my club. I'm also a Jumpstart mentor so I kind of worked in the **OMD** office a little bit then I got involved in SGA as well as a commuter senator. So, a little bit here and there. I took – At the arc I did intermural. I helped out there with some volunteer programs and adapted as well. So that's just a little bit.

A: Definitely. Before we start off with all those questions, we just want to know: what does being a homecoming queen mean to you?

K: Pretty much, I just love Slippery Rock. Super passionate about everything it stands for, all the traditions, the heritage, the background of where it came from. Obviously, it kind of started off as kind of an education school which is what brought me here. I think I just really well represented the school, just kind of being at all the events, supporting different clubs and organizations on campus, just being a leader in my major, and just being proactive. Everything that I could attend – I worked in the athletic department office so I try to go to all the athletic events and games and be really a part of the school and get everyone along with it as I got older. I think people look up to me a little bit so I hope that that was more of an impact. I am the mentor for a lot of undergrad student, something I enjoy doing and that I'm passionate about. I hope that helped to get me to where I was with homecoming queen. It was a shock, but it was really – I was surprised, but hard work paid off so I think that was good too.

B: What made you decide to run? Were you involved in high school or was it some of the things you mentioned before, just getting involved?

K: In high school, I was on prom court and homecoming court my senior year. I didn't win either but it was great to be a part of. It was a great experience. I think that kind of led towards it. The year of 2015 I

was really involved with different organizations and peers, mostly green and white society. They nominated me, so I accepted and kind of just went through it. So, if it wasn't for them standing behind me, just with their support, I probably wouldn't have done it. But, SGA was a big help too. I was involved in a lot of things even within my major and just speaking out in classes about it so I think that helped too.

B: Would you say there was one person who inspired you to run or was it just your organizations as whole?

K: There were a lot of professors and advisors that were very supportive. I would say that green and white society – them nominating me kind of put me out there for that opportunity so I just ran with it and I was like "okay." Definitely the group really supported me. Some of the advisors and professors were really supportive when I brought it up to them. But if it wasn't for all the ambassadors I probably wouldn't have taken initiative.

A: Definitely. Can you tell us a little about your campaign? Did you run with someone, did you run solo? How did you campaign?

K: Absolutely. So, green and white society nominated a boy and a girl and we did a voting system and I ran with Ian Banks so he was my co-partner and we did a little bit of campaigning. Once campaigning week started, we actually got some photos taken outside around slippery rock and put together some flyers, posted a lot of that. We utilized social media a lot. I think that was just a huge thing with college, I mean everything is on social media. Twitter, Instagram, Facebook. Talked to people and put yourself out there. For the most part it was just kind of like the connections and who you know. Ian and I are pretty personable so it was kind of nice to just be like "hey guys" even if it was a text message or an email, kind of everything you can do to just let people know you want to represent slippery rock and I think they felt confident in us doing that. Once we ran, I guess I can get into a little bit of that, I made it onto court and then I was with Shane Sanders who then it was homecoming day and we did the whole thing on the field or however they want to call it. The whole ceremony on the field, that was really cool.

B: With the social media you said you utilized, would you say that was a main part of your platform or how did that come into play?

K: SO social media, I just – In my opinion it was a huge chunk of putting information out there like letting people know like Hey Ian and I are running for homecoming because you know you follow so many people and have a database of people you can reach out to. There's only so much you can post around campus and whatnot. I think it played a pretty big role in the sense that you can make events on Facebook. It's just – I don't know – the technology these days is very well known so I think that really helped a lot.

B: Definitely.

A: What do you think was the hardest apart about running?

K: The hardest part was probably not really necessarily being humble about it but just trying to have fun. At first, I was a little stressed out and I was just like "You know, this isn't a big deal. Let's just have fun. Whatever happens, happens." We just want to support green and white society, support slippery rock. That was our main goal, to just let people know what this is – we care, whatever happen. We were just

in it together for the experience so I think that was one of the main things. It was hard to not be on top of everything because you want to. We were both competitive people, I mean I would have never even guessed so we were just like – whatever happens, whatever. You know what I mean?

A: Definitely.

B: So then before the election, what did you think your chances were? Did you think it was looking good or?

K: It's kind of intimidating at the beginning because you're like: how many people really run for this and what are my chances? Just because I don't know how many students go here or who was going to run. What was cool was I did know a lot of the people who were running as well. There were some people I didn't. I know that everyone ran for a reason and everyone was super passionate about slippery rock and very involved and I've seen them around doing different things just like they've probably seen me. Not that I knew my chances were really good or anything, there were definitely odds, but I was like "whatever happens, happens." For the experience, like I said before, it would be a good time. If we get on court that's great. Other than that, I didn't really expect overall. I think it was a good process.

A: Did you encounter any stigma around the idea of homecoming queen? Either in high school or leading into it. Did anyone look down on you because of it?

K: I know what you mean. I'm more of an optimistic so I looked at it as a good thing. I had peers vote for me then I knew I was going to try my best. I know what you mean about the stigma. I got almost the opposite effect where people kind of just messed around. "Homecoming queen, Kaci for homecoming queen." They just joked around. I liked it but I was like "whatever happens." I didn't want to get my hopes up because I don't know what to expect. I know what you mean by stigma. I didn't really look at it as a negative thing. After I won I was just kind of like – I wasn't going to do anything extra or different. In high school I think it was different. In college, people are more mature. I don't think I ever had a problem with thinking of it. I just looked at it as a good thing and kind of moved on from it.

B: Definitely. Would you say that after you were actually elected, this kind of conversation or stigma changed?

K: Elected on court, or finalized?

B: Finalized.

K: The initial shock was huge. It was crazy. I had a lot of people there and in the stands. I don't think the stigma really changed. I can't control what people perceive of me or if they know me or if they don't. I felt, not accomplished, but proud. If there's that many people that trust in me representing slippery rock and being passionate and everything I've done up until that point to work towards that, I think that's something someone should be proud of. I don't think the stigma bothered me too much. It's college and it's different. Some people would be like "Wow, she did that," and some people won't even know. It's a different.

A: Since social media did play such a big role, was there any negative attention, anonymously or even from Facebook pages, that came into play through social media? Was anyone – I don't want to say cyberbullying – but did anybody negatively attack you like that?

K: Not that I'm aware of. Not that I know of. Mostly supportive comments, positive comments, congratulations, different things like photos, likes, things that like. I didn't experience anything negatively like to my face or on social media. I can't say I don't know anyone that doesn't hate me but you know what I mean? [Laughs.] Other than that, it was really a positive experience and sometimes in the back of your head you can be like "wow." I never wanted to be conceited about it but sometimes people will be like "She won homecoming queen!" And I'm just like "okay, yeah..." I don't flaunt it or anything like that. Initially it was just like a shock. I was just super thankful. A lot of people could have different views on that but I never experienced anything negative.

A: We typically have a pretty supportive campus.

B: Yeah, we do.

K: For the most part. If people did say something maybe word of mouth or this-this-or-that. I ran against a lot of people that I was working with in other organizations so everyone was super happy for everyone, if that makes sense.

B: That's great, yeah.

K: It was a really good experience. I had a great group of people who I ran with. I think the pep rally was the most intimidating experience because you didn't know who was going to come and who was cheering for who. When they announced Shane and I, you didn't know what the initial response was going to be, if it was going to be like "Oh yeah!" You know what I mean? I didn't really experience anything negative. I felt pretty supported. If that answers your question.

B: It does! Why do you think you won?

K: That's a good question. I still ask myself that. [Laughs.] I had to have done something right. I did work. I worked my butt off to meet all the criteria for campaigning. I think what really paid off was having fun with it and just some initial things I did. I spoke out. My majors super supportive and I spoke out in a lot of my classes, just like "hey guys" and I was treasurer for different things. Probably the main reason why was my involvement just within different groups of organizations. A lot of people were aware that I was running just because I made it aware. I think that helped a lot. Just having people, connecting with people, really campaigning and utilizing that as much as I did. That was probably why.

B: Yeah, they probably could tell that you really cared.

A: What about your family? What did they think about it? How did they react after you won? I'm assuming they were supportive too.

K: Most definitely. My family actually couldn't make the actual final – they couldn't make anything. I was like you know what, this isn't high school it's college. Everyone just kind of voted me to do this, I'm going to do this. I went through the pep rally then it was the football game and everything. They were really happy for me. They were really supportive. They were like "Oh my gosh, I wish we could have been there!" Just like, I didn't even know if I was going to make court. You don't know until the night before and then the game's the next morning. I live a good bit away and then my mom lives in a different state so it was just kind of hard. They were super excited. They were just like "What, are you serious?!" They kind of felt bad they weren't there but I couldn't have told them that, I didn't even know I was going to make court so it was just kind of like I was confident but anything can happen. There were nineteen

other people standing here. Like, I don't know. They were definitely supportive and I wish they could have made it. They got pictures and different stuff.

B: That's good. Would you say your life has changed at all in being homecoming queen?

K: Not necessarily. I think people may respect me a little bit more or maybe think highly of me as more of a leader. That's kind of what I was going for so that's good. I wouldn't say so, no. I have people who supported me in green and white society who are like "homecoming queen!" They'll joke around still to this day and I don't mind it. I just laugh but I don't really think it's changed much. It really changed my experience for Slippery Rock just because it was like wow I just really have a good connection now. Working in the athletic department -- I don't know -- the staff and faculty that work there think highly of me now just because you know like I feel more comfortable here now. The experience was definitely initially shocking. I don't even know how to explain it. Sorry I'm repeating myself.

A: No, that's great. I actually have -- Okay so you were a junior when you won. So, this year as a senior you got to help the newest queen which is Tori. What was that experience like? Did she come to you? Were you at the ceremony?

K: Yeah, actually. Myself and Shane Sanders, we MC-ed the pep rally at the arc so we introduced the band, football team, we announced the girls and the guys and we read their bios. That was cool because everyone could see they were the past homecoming king and queen and moving on to the future. It was really cool because being a part of that initially. I was like supporting everyone who was there. People did ask me for advice, people asked me for like "how did you campaign? What different things did you do?" I was full and open with everyone to give everyone a chance. People have different outlooks on what they wanted to do. It was really cool to be a part of that. The day of, we sashed the winners and got pictures with that. It was kind of just like it replayed in my head -- I was like "Oh my gosh!" I was so nervous for whoever was going to win because this was me last year. I would've never thought they would've called my name over the loudspeaker and it's just your initial response. I was just excited. I was happy. The former queen, Katie Hill, was in green and white society and I was actually good friends with her so she was able to crown me. I thought that was really special because we had a really good relationship and she was a really involved student leader. She probably was a pretty big influence in why I ran and she always really supported me. She actually has a teaching job now and is coming back to be on Slippery Rock's panel. It was a great experience that day and I was super supportive. I was almost as nervous as when I was standing out there so I knew how that felt.

A: So, you will be graduating and since you won't be on campus for other homecomings, do you think you'll come back?

K: I plan to come back every year for as long as I can. I will. Yeah. Definitely. It's just a great connection within the alumni. I joined the alumni association, just having that connection with green and white society with as much as they do on campus is just a special thing so as much as I can come back I will be here just to -- for good old times sake.

B: Definitely. Would you come back if there were a ceremony honoring past homecoming queens during the homecoming weekend?

K: Oh yeah, most definitely. Again, if I can make it I will be there 100 percent. I think that would be great. I would support and pursue everyone to just try it out and go for it. I know a lot of people aren't

out there. It was a great thing and it did change my perspective on college. Just like the people you meet and it was a great experience.

A: Yeah you have answered this question – well, you've said so many positive things about it – but the next question was did it positively. . . Did it have positive or negative influences on your college experience? You've told us a lot of positive ones and you said there wasn't really much negative, so were there any positive experience that led to things that went off-campus or was it more on-campus?

K: After the fact, I was interviewed a few times. I was in the Rocket and there were some things in there and I have that all saved and everything, which is really cool. I just think it is so cool because you just look back on it and those are the things you cherish. I like things like that. As far as more positive, like I said, it was just a great experience. It happened so fast and I couldn't be more thankful for the people that supported me. I couldn't have done it without the people on this campus. I'm sure there were people that voted for me that maybe didn't even know but a friend told them to or different thing like that. So, the outlook, it was a really positive thing. I know sometimes – people have different experiences but for me, I just went through all the motions and it was just like – it just happened. I don't really have anything negative to say about it. If there's something I don't know, then I don't know it and I'd rather not know it.

A: That's great.

B: It seems like it was really positive for your college experience. So, we have the last question. Do you think it will affect you after college and if so, how?

K: I've kind of gone back and forth on how will this benefit me in the future. How can I use this for a job or something professionally and I think about that. As far as putting it on a resume, or word of mouth, but I'm not going to be like "hey I was homecoming queen." I take pride in that. It is what it is. If you were to ask me I would tell you but I wouldn't just put it out there. It's still, to me, I just can't believe it happened. That was 2015 and it's crazy because people are like "Oh you were a junior?" But that was the peak of my involvement and it was the perfect timing. I think about that, using it in the future, I would hope it benefits me. I've thought about putting it on my resume because it would look good but at the same time, how do I explain this? It's just something I personally take pride in, whether who knows it or not, it's something I experienced and have a positive experience in.

B: It sounds like even if you don't put it on your resume, it gave you more confidence.

K: Absolutely. Yeah. It really did.

A: Promotion with the campaigning, public awareness and stuff.

K: It was fun. In high school, the campaigning was different. It was word-of-mouth, like oh, so-and-so is running for homecoming court or we don't like her or we don't like him. But here, it was so crazy how everyone was so supportive of everyone and I know people vote will for their friends or organizations will vote for their own organizations, different things like that. I'm super thankful that I met – I actually met a lot of people out of it – that was my favorite thing. I'm a personal person and I really like interacting with everyone. Being at the alumni tent as well, I had my sash on initially like before and alumni were coming up to me and I was meeting people. Networking was huge, even when I was doing

that. They wanted to know. I was just like "yeah!" To me it wasn't a big deal. I was still in shock. It was nice to tell my story and explain it. I'll be able to tell that the rest of my life.

A: It's a major achievement.

K: It's pretty cool. I agree.

A: Thank you so much for talking with us.

K: Absolutely. Yeah.