

Rock Voices: The Oral History Project of Slippery Rock University
George Mihalik Interview
August 8, 2019
Bailey Library, Slippery Rock University, Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania
Interviewed by Taylor Akers
Transcribed by Taylor Akers
Proofread and edited by Judy Silva
Approved by George Mihalik

TA: So, it is August 8, 2019. I'm Taylor [Akers]. I'm sitting with Dr. George Mihalik at Bailey Library for the Oral History Project. How are you?

GM: Well, Taylor, anytime you're at the Rock [and] you're on campus, you have to be feelin' good.

TA: Yeah, absolutely. So, just as a starting point, tell me a little bit about yourself. Biographical information, your name, date of birth, education, stuff like that . . .

GM: Well, as stated: [I am] George Mihalik and I was born in Colver, Pennsylvania and grew up in Ebensburg, Pennsylvania. [I] attended Bishop Carroll High School, and upon graduation found my way here to the Rock. My dad brought me here, I came preseason or pre-student, for football camp, and I'll never forget my dad saying goodbye at that stop sign right outside of the fieldhouse, the lower level fieldhouse, and I watched that car drive away, drive away, drive away, 'til I couldn't see it anymore. [It] kept moving, kept moving. And I kinda looked around and said, 'what am I doing here?' And little did I know that just on the other side of that wall of the fieldhouse, I would make my career—a part of my career here at the Rock—as the head football coach and a professor. I met my wife Laura here at the Rock and we have two daughters, Jenny-Lee and Beth and they each have two children, so [I am a] proud grandfather. Jenny-Lee's boys are named Tyler and Christian and Beth's children are named Hannah and Deacon.

TA: That's awesome.

GM: My wife Laura is a graduate of the Rock, and so is Jenny-Lee. Her husband, Teddy Wright, is a grad of the Rock. [My] two nephews, are grads of the Rock, and one of their wives is too. [My] sisters-in-laws [are] grads of the Rock. So, you know, the Slippery Rock tradition goes deep within the Mihalik family. My daughter, Beth, graduated from WJ [Washington and Jefferson] and her husband Jamie from West Virginia. So, Slippery Rock is a big part of the Mihalik family and has been for, oh, forty-some years now.

TA: That does run deep, honestly.

GM: [Chuckles].

TA: I didn't know that much. So, what's your affiliation with the university? I know you did coaching for a while and were a teacher and know, obviously, you said you went here, so you can start from the beginning, like whenever you went here as a student . . .

GM: Okay. As a student, I came here to the Rock and like probably a lot of students, didn't really know what I wanted to major in.

TA: What year was that?

GM: That was 1970 [laughs].

TA: Okay, all right [laughs].

GM: Obviously, Taylor, you weren't born. Not even close.

TA: Nope, not even a thought [laughs].

GM: But, anyhow, [it was] 1970 and I came and—you know, primarily I was recruited to play football. That was kinda the main reason for attending the Rock, and upon getting here, eventually I chose a major and it was Business. And [sigh] you know, 'cause everybody was saying [there's] a lot of jobs in the business world; not many jobs in education. Well, it got to the point where sophomore season—my sophomore year, second semester—I just wasn't doing well in the business classes. I just wasn't interested. And one of my coaches said, "Well, what do you really wanna be?" and I said, "I don't know" and he said, "In your heart, yes you do. What do you really wanna be?" I said, "Well, I'd love to be a teacher and a coach." "Well, then do it." And I said, "But there aren't jobs." He said, "There will always be jobs for good people." So, that's how I found my way into the education realm and specifically, I majored in Health Education here. [It's an] interesting story though. That second semester of my sophomore year, I went home on a Friday night; told my mom and dad that I'm going to quit school.

Now, my dad was a coal miner and he was a coal miner for 42 years and I'm very proud of that work ethic and family heritage. [Clears throat]. So, Saturday morning he says, "Why don't you come underground with me?" So I did, and we spent the entire day underground and it was a scary experience. So, after the day, we were cleaning up and I was coughing and—a disease for the miners was known as black lung disease—and I was coughing and said, "Dad, I think I got black lung disease." I was only under there one day. He looked at me and I'll never forget his eyes [and] his look, and he said, "George, the day you quit school, you're underground with me for the rest of your life. Now you decide: do you want to use your mind or your body to make a living?" Guess where I was Sunday morning? On my way back to the Rock. [I] changed my major to Health Education and upon graduation, I stayed here as a graduate assistant and worked on my master's degree. So, I got that degree and then from there, I went to the University of Kentucky for one year as a graduate assistant football coach. And then my coach, Coach

DiSpirito, he called me and there was a part-time position here: part time teacher/professor, and coach for the football team.

TA: Was he the coach that encouraged you to do the teaching and the coaching at that time?

GM: Yes, yup, yeah. Coach D, as he was fondly known. So, I always wanted maybe that Division I experience but I had it and thankfully I did 'cause I saw I didn't want that. I wanted my family to have roots. So, when Coach D called, immediately I came back and [the] part-time position turned into a full-time temporary. And then the third year, [it] turned into a full-time position in the Health Science Department. And [pause] I never left. [I] never left. Forty-seven years counting the undergrad and my working experience. 45 years here at Slippery Rock. As I said, [it's been] great. I met my wife, Laura, [we] raised our girls here and we still live here at the Rock so it's been a great place for my family.

TA: And in those 47 years, have you seen the university change? The programs? The departments? The coaching itself and the kids?

GM: Sure.

TA: Can you go into that a little bit?

GM: I mean the community changed. When I started here, we had a movie theater [chuckles]. We had stores downtown and the town has changed to modern day now, you know? We have a lot of variety of restaurants and some establishments for alcohol, so the town has upgraded itself. The university, I mean, [is] just amazing. The dorms that [pause] I remember—you know, as an undergrad—don't exist anymore. Well, yeah, there's three still standing: North Hall, Rhodes Hall and Patterson was a dorm but now is classrooms and office space. So, it has changed tremendously. The academics, you know, I was very involved with the development of the Safety Management program. Upon being hired, my assignment was to write, develop and get approved the Bachelor Science Programs in Safety. So, that was a big challenge.

TA: Were you on a team with anyone?

GM: Well, the department was supporting [me.] The research showed that the demand for safety professionals was going to be far greater than the supply, even into the early 2000s. So now you're talking about late 70's—1978—and they're projecting this big need for this profession for thirty-some years. Beyond that! So, we developed it and I'm very proud to say the goal then was to have the department [as] its own department, which it is, [the] Safety Management Department. And our own building which was just created and [was] formally known as the BSB building, now known as the Strain Safety Building. The dream's come true. So, seeing that program from nothing to getting it approved by the State System. [The] first graduates were May of 1982, and now there's close to 500 majors in that program in our own facility. It'll be the top program in the nation. There's no doubt in terms of safety management.

TA: So, you not only started it but also taught within it, right? The first teachers?

GM: Yes! Well, I was a professor in the Department of Safety Management and I really enjoyed that dual role, so not only professor but [also] head football coach. That doesn't happen much across the country at the college football landscape. Coaches are coaches and that's it. So, I guess that makes me a bit of a dinosaur? But that's the way it was early in my career. My coaches, Coach DiSpirito and Coach Kendziorski, they were teacher/professor coaches. But as years went on, that separated where now you were simply hired as a coach or simply hired as a professor, but I maintained that dual role and I really enjoyed that for this reason, Taylor: because I could look at any one of my players and say, "I'm not asking you to do what I won't do. I'm asking you to go to class. I had to go to class. I'm asking you to prepare for class. I had to prepare for class. I'm asking you to practice. I had to attend practice." The only thing that they did that I didn't do was they played the game and lifted weights. Those days were over for me, but . . . So, I liked that dual role because most other college football coaches, head coaches, were saying, "You have to go to class. You have to do this, do this, do this." While I was *doing* the same thing.

TA: So, you kind of leveled the ground a little bit.

GM: Yeah, and I think it was a great example to our players that [pause] you have two responsibilities. You're known as a *student-athlete*. I was known as a *professor-coach*. So, we walked the same walk.

TA: Right and so, I have a quote from one of your other interviews and it was actually whenever they were doing the stadium dedication?

GM: Okay.

TA: And you said: "When football ends, I still have that life, that job, that teaching profession." And so I wanted to know if you wanted to talk about that a little bit? Because it felt very pro-education, and how did you continue that quote past retirement?

GM: Well, you know, it's very interesting because that was a common statement to the team and the players. Look, yes, we're focused on football. We want to work hard, we want to win, but remember: football will *end* someday. Something called life doesn't end and that's gonna be your job, your career, your profession so that's why you're here: to graduate! And I was proud of that! I was proud of that role and I told all of them, "All of us, all our football days are gonna end sometime." Mine did. I still had that career as a professor. And the other thing I always shared with them, I said, "You're gonna do two things. If you attend Slippery Rock and you want to be a student-athlete, here's our two goals. On graduation day: in one hand, when you walk across that stage, you're gonna carry your diploma. In the other hand, you're gonna wear a championship ring."

TA: [Chuckles].

GM: And that was the goal for our team and our players. We were a two-lane highway. It wasn't just athletics. It wasn't just academics. We were doing both. I was doing both and I think that's why we had a very successful graduation rate and we [pause] a lot of those guys . . . football ended but they're doing very well in their careers.

TA: That's such a good philosophy. Did you ever have a teaching moment or a coaching moment that really stuck out to you in particular?

GM: [Pause] I mean there's so many memories, so many memories on the field, so many big games, so many great victories. In a classroom, I think the greatest joy was when you had students that just had that hunger, that passion, that desire to advance, to learn, to get as much out of a class as they could. That was very rewarding and satisfying. And also, I took a lot of pride in sometimes those students that came here and—students are on all levels. You have the higher-end academic student, the middle range, and those that you know, on paper, their grades, their test scores, aren't like some of the others'. But I found the greatest joy in *those* students that succeeded because sometimes they were told, "I don't know if you can do it." [Pause] But don't ever doubt someone's heart. Give them an opportunity. Give them a chance.

So, in a classroom that's what I enjoyed and on the football field, I think the same thing. We had some players, some guys, come in and they were just talented. They just had it. And other players came in and they had to work hard their freshmen year, sophomore year, [and] maybe they didn't play 'til junior or senior year. But they stuck with it. They ended up being starters, All-Conference, All-Americans, and champions. So, I guess I always like seeing the underdog win or succeed.

TA: Yeah. Plus, you played yourself so you know first-hand what being on the field is like so you're kind of fostering that.

GM: And you know, in athletics, it's having good people around you. As a student-athlete here myself, [I had] tremendous coaches that mentored me, great teammates and then in my career as a head coach, fantastic assistant coaches. Great players too numerous to mention; I'd forget somebody. But they were all—in my opinion—they were all great. And in the classroom, in the academic setting, I had some great professors who were mentors who helped me develop that Safety program, who helped me strategize and create my own teaching style. So, *I* was fortunate to be surrounded by good individuals here at the Rock.

TA: That's awesome. And the buildings that you worked in, was it just the Strain Building?

GM: Oh, you should've seen my keyring.

TA: Okay [laughs].

GM: [Laughs] It was big. I taught in McKay, that building. I taught in Eisenberg. I taught classes in Swope. I taught classes in BSB, the football offices in the Field House, at the stadium, [in] the weight room . . . I had a lot of keys [laughs].

TA: Did you ever have a favorite place to teach or be around?

GM: Well, I think the most favorite was what was known as BSB. There were times when maybe our office was in Swope but we taught in Eisenberg and that's a challenge, carrying your materials. The office was in Swope and we taught in McKay. So, it was great when the Safety Program found its assignment or its place in the BSB Building and the majority of our classes were in the BSB Building, so . . . There's nothing like being on the football field and in that stadium. It's great.

TA: Yeah. How'd you feel about the dedication and all of that?

GM: Oh!

TA: I can only imagine.

GM: I guess, I guess, what it—I was overwhelmed.

TA: Someone *named* it after you. That's crazy.

GM: I mean [pause] did I ever think it would happen? I was stunned when President Robert Smith . . . We had a football banquet each year at the end of the season. And [as] the president came and made his remarks at the end of the banquet, he said "I want to make a special announcement that now and in the coming September, the stadium will now be known as Mihalik-Thompson Stadium." Well, when he called me to the podium and presented a picture of the stadium and a little proclamation at that point, I was speechless! And I'm not speechless very often but I was, and then to stand there on the track at halftime at our first game when the official dedication or announcement—however you want to put it—and my entire family was there. You know, my mom who was able to be there. Unfortunately, my dad had passed on. So, I wish that coal miner could've seen that. But my entire family was there: my brothers, and extended family, and in-laws. And just to have that experience and hear that announcement, it was as they say, *surreal*. Pinch me. And I think the most gratifying point was: I was alive to see it. You know, many times buildings are named or dedicated and the individuals have passed on. But in this case, that was . . . [clears throat] talk about highlights in my career that could've been . . . it's up there! [Chuckles]. It's right at the top!

TA: And now in the next, however many years, there will be people just like you getting dropped off and they'll be looking at the stadium and they'll be like, "Who's, what's this name?"

GM: That's right!

TA: And going back to that, when your dad dropped you off, other than “What am I doing here?” What were your other impressions of the university? What other programs were you in?

GM: Back then, you didn’t visit a lot of colleges. Your generation, okay, did you visit?

TA: I visited ten. That was a lot [Chuckles].

GM: There it is. Perfect example! [In] today’s society, young people are visiting *numerous* colleges. You didn’t do that back then. You know, I came up one day for a visit with Coach DiSpirito and the football staff and that was basically it. I went to visit one other school and it was just something. Coach DiSpirito really impressed me. He was my mentor. I really owe a lot to him. So, from that perspective, I always felt this way [pause]: Good people make good programs and Coach D was a good man. And that’s why I wanted to be a part of that program so you know, it was like—I remember coming here for freshman orientation. That’s when I really saw most of the campus for the first time and really the campus ended at the . . . I’ll call it the Old Student Union. That was the farthest-most building. The stadium wasn’t where it is today; it was behind the Field House and it was Thompson Stadium. There’s been so many changes but you know, to come here—I came from a small town, an average-sized high school, and just to interact with a lot of different players it’s As you’re finding out, college is some of the best years of your life [laughs]. It’s a great experience.

TA: And so other than coaching, and teaching, and whatnot, were you part of any other campus activities? [Were there any] committees outside of those or were you just so caught up . . . ?

GM: As an undergrad?

TA: Or even [as a] professional.

GM: Well, as an undergrad I did join a fraternity. It was known as Alpha Sigma Phi. So, I joined that and that was a circle of friends, but I had the team also as a circle of friends. So, it wasn’t just one-dimensional. Really, I was fortunate enough to have—I’ll just say the average student body and the athletic student body—in terms of teammates. So, then as a professor [and] as an assistant coach, then that really takes up a lot of time. I was on a lot of committees in our department: Academic Forum, as they called it, [and] many other student-type committees. But for the most part, I was working on my doctorate degree. So, working on that [and] raising two little girls [between] my wife and I. She was a second-grade teacher at Grove City School District; that’s where Laura’s career was. So you know, it didn’t leave a lot of time outside of that and [I was] developing a bachelor program.

TA: Right, you had a lot on your plate.

GM: [Laughs].

TA: I can only imagine [laughs].

Let me see . . . there's a lot of questions here. So, going back to the teaching and the coaching. I know you said there are so many memories that kind of go together and that you appreciate them all, but did you ever have any worst teaching moments, or [what was] the hardest part of coaching for you or a time where it was crunch-time or game time?

GM: Okay, I think . . . both as a coach and as a professor, some of the situations that frustrated me the most—maybe that's the word—or [when] I felt I didn't succeed, was when there was an individual who had talent and you couldn't get them to utilize their talent. So in a classroom, you see a student who has great academics, great intellectual, but they're kind of wasting it. How do I reach them? How do I get that— [snaps] how do I get that [snaps] — lightbulb to turn on? How do I get it on a football field? You know this guy has great skill but he won't work hard. He doesn't use it. How do I [snaps] light that fire? And when I couldn't get that, whether in a classroom or the field, that's when I felt that I didn't succeed. That's where I felt I didn't do my job, maybe put it that way. So, those are the things that I wish everyone . . . Put it this way—I wish I could've motivated, succeeded, and have everyone reach their fullest potential but that never happens. On the flip side, when you have those as I said previously who don't have as much talent or intellectually have to work harder and they do it and they succeed, I mean, that's the positive.

TA: Let me see what else . . . you were here for such a long time; do you remember any major events or activities [that happened] while you were here? So again, you were a part of making that entire Safety program. Were there any other building projects, or weather stuff, or anything that comes to mind? Like milestones for Slippery Rock?

GM: Probably when we became a university. That was a big deal for the entire community and the whole campus.

TA: So you were here for the State College?

GM: Right. When I attended, it was Slippery Rock State College. Fortunately, I saw the transition to Slippery Rock University. Well, Slippery Rock State Teachers College, then Slippery Rock State College and then Slippery Rock University so that was nice to see but just the development of campus was so nice to see, the expansion. You're going from a student body of maybe 2,500 to 3,000 students to where we are today: 8,500+, somewhere in that ballpark. So, that was nice to see, the growth. And the new buildings, the new construction. I mean, our fitness center? Oh my goodness, you talk about impressing a prospective student.

TA: And you went into the Health Science stuff too so you kind of knew what the bottom line of that was.

GM: Yeah, and from just activities of things here on campus and still today. When you bring in some of the bigger names in entertainment, some of the performers, that was always nice to see. As undergrads, we had some big name bands and even today—in the spring mostly, or fall, when

they bring them in. But to me, one of the most special times on campus as an undergrad and as a professor/head football coach is homecoming. I've always said, "There's nothing like a Rock Homecoming." I mean, the excitement, the thrill on campus, the alumni coming back, the students, just the festivities surrounding that weekend. I think there's no better weekend on a college campus than homecoming weekend. I've been around for quite a few of them now, from 1970 to present, so that's a lot. That's a weekend we circle and my entire family, we tailgate, which they did all the time during my career as the head coach and we continue to do that, especially on homecoming weekend.

TA: Did you ever have a favorite homecoming game?

GM: Let's see . . . probably about 25 of 'em 'cause we won [laughs].

TA: [Laughs].

GM: Yeah. Anytime that we won a homecoming game . . .

TA: That's a good day.

GM: That's a good day. And our record was pretty good. I think we were like 25-3 on homecoming games so . . . I made it a big deal with the team that this was maybe the only time most alums will see you play. Now, with the ability to stream games and watch on video, everybody can watch them now.

TA: Right. Which is a good thing because you know, you get more bodies to watch it.

GM: Oh yeah! [During] my last few years as a head coach, I would get emails or notes from alums in Oregon, Arizona: 'Hey! We watched the Rock. Great game!' and so forth. So, the internet is a big positive in terms of athletics and allowing alumni from all over the country and [the] *world* to view and watch their alma mater perform.

TA: That's awesome. And you said that alums were emailing you about the homecoming game and everything.

GM: Mmm-hmm.

TA: Did you ever have a past player that stayed in touch with you or went big or just a success story generally?

GM: Oh, I have a *lot* of relationships with former players and I really appreciate that. So, once they graduated, it didn't end. I really like that—and with Safety majors as well. [We had] a lot of connections.

We had the players go on into the NFL, you know? A couple of the guys I coached: Brandon Fusco [is] currently having a great career in the NFL with the Vikings, the 49ers and the Atlanta

Falcons. There are other guys, again, Ricky Porter: 8 years in NFL. Greg Paterra, Chuck Sanders, and other guys [are] in the Canadian Football League and the Arena Football League. I'd start naming them but I'd forget somebody so, I don't want to offend anyone. But I enjoy watching *them* on TV.

And the Safety students now, you know . . . keeping connected just from that professional standpoint is fantastic so that's the reward of, I guess, having a college life. You can continue those relationships far beyond. Put it this way, Taylor: I never went to work. [Pause] It wasn't a job. I never once said, 'I don't want to go to work.' I enjoyed my job. That's why I stuck around so long [laughs], but I enjoyed the job, and I enjoyed the experience.

TA: And that also comes from—I mean, you talked about DiSpirito and your coaches and your dad and everything kind of influencing you. So, whenever you decided to become a coach and decide to become a professor, when you first came to campus, what were your first impressions of the other people around you? How did your coming in as the new head coach shift that? [How did it] shift the team?

GM: Okay. Let's first talk a moment about it from a professor/faculty standpoint, I mean, I was intimidated. Here's professors that are really intelligent and again, what am I doing here? I don't know. Am I—Do I have the knowledge to be a professor? I had to gain that confidence that my knowledge base was something that I could share with young people and help them develop *their* skills.

TA: And you were finishing your doctorate at the time, right?

GM: Yeah. So, I think I had overcome that. I was a little bit [pause] cautious, maybe. Until you gain that confidence, that 'Okay, I know the subject material' and—this is what I always shared with students who were going out on an internship, because you'll experience this soon upon graduation or that first job. You'll say, "Do I know enough to take this internship? Do I know enough to take this job?" I always try to share this with the students: *you know more than you think you know*. Right now, yeah, you don't think you have a lot of knowledge. You know more than you think you know, and you'll find that out with each passing day of your new career, your new job, or your internship. And I guess I lived that, and that's what I try to share with them.

Then, from a football perspective, oh! We all think we're ready to be head coaches. But until you sit in that seat and kind of look around and [say] again, "What am I doing here?" You have that confidence level, and you portray that, and let's put it this way: everyone learns. Every day of our lives, we learn something. So, you're better today [and] I'm better today, than we were last week because we've had seven days of more experience and more knowledge. I think we all get better as we move from day to day in our careers.

TA: Right.

GM: I got to say this though: One big day in my family, in my life, was the day that I graduated with a doctorate degree from WVU. It was a big family celebration. My father-in-law, Paul Lanich, they owned a bus company. So, we took a Coach bus down there and loaded it up with a lot of tailgate stuff and I'll never forget knowing that my family was there in the coliseum and my dad—again, as a coal miner—his dream was to have one of his sons graduate from college. Not only that, but here I was getting a doctoral degree.

TA: That's awesome.

GM: Yeah. That was a big, special day. I also have to say I had great mentors in my two brothers, Denny and Bob. They were older than I was and they kept me in line a lot of times.

TA: Yeah [Laughs]?

GM: And there were days where I said, "I'm done with this doctorate. I don't want to continue." But they reminded me that, "Hey, your dad's underground working, and so make us all proud." I'm glad I stuck it out.

TA: So in the current time, who's significant to you now? I know you mentioned you have grandkids and all of that but is there anyone you still aspire to be? What are you doing currently?

GM: Well, I do have to mention Dr. Robert Aebersold who was president here at the University. Obviously, Aebersold Recreation Center, ARC. He was a mentor during his time. He was an assistant football coach, professor, and he moved on up the ranks to become president and I thank him for giving me the chance to become a head football coach. Other mentors: Stan Kendziorski, Paul Bruno, Mike Pariseau, Rod Oberlin, all those coaches who helped [me] form myself. Dr. Larry Lowing was chairman. Charlie Bish, they were chairmen in my early years in the Health Science Department and for the last, oh, 25 to 30 years, Dr. Joe Cali. He and I are great friends and we shared a lot. He's currently the chairman of the Safety major and he's done a fantastic job during his time as chair to take this program to another level.

TA: And you can kind of watch your baby grow.

GM: Oh yeah! And as a grandfather, I mean, there's nothing better than those four little ones. Right now, they're six, four and a half, and two three-year-old boys who were born a week apart so they're like twins.

TA: [Laughs].

GM: When all four of them come to the house, things are lively but [I] wouldn't have it any other way. So, I spend a lot of time with the grandkids and with my daughters and extended family. Nephews, brothers—we get together and we enjoy golfing. We have a camp--hunting and fishing--so I'm not bored in retirement. Believe me that.

TA: So, [it's] still not a job [laughs].

GM: [Laughs] And I desperately miss game days. I think [I miss] just that thrill, the excitement of competition, the excitement of seeing the product on the field develop . . . so I miss game days but Sundays through Fridays, it's not bad. Those days are pretty good.

TA: That was my next question: what else do you miss about Slippery Rock?

GM: I miss the student interaction! I mean, I enjoyed being a professor! A lot of folks just see my career [as] mainly football. They view me as Coach Mihalik and like you said, the name on the stadium and so forth, and the championships and all of that, so most folks see that. But I'm just as *proud* of my academic career here at the Rock, being a professor and seeing that Safety Management program develop. So, I guess I miss the interaction with young people. I miss the interaction with the students *in* the classroom, talking to them before and after class, or stopping in the office. I miss the interaction with the players, before and after practice or [in] the office. I miss the interaction with faculty members on campus. You know? And I think that was a big plus because other faculty didn't just look at George as a football coach. I was one of them!

TA: Right.

GM: So, we bridged that gap and I truly enjoyed the relationships with faculty from other departments and serving on academic committees. So, it's the friendship—I'm not even going to say friendships—it's the relationships that I miss.

But filling that void now is more time with my wife, more time with [my] daughters, more time with [my] sons-in-law, more time with [my] grandkids. So, while you miss maybe a bigger circle in terms of a campus, believe me, the immediate family is filling that void, very, very well [chuckles].

TA: Which is so well-rounded, by the way. And so, you mentioned the academic committees that you were on, and I also know from again coaching, you did a lot of interaction with the cheerleaders and the bands and stuff.

GM: Oh, yes.

TA: So, if you can talk about that a little bit, but I'm also curious if you ever cross-collaborated between departments and what you did on the committees.

GM: Okay. No, I *really* liked interacting with the student body. First of all, I did it on a daily basis in the classroom. But I really enjoyed interacting with the marching band. And I would go down and talk with them during their preseason practices. They're practicing out there in the hot weather just like we are, so we really established a good relationship there. The cheerleaders; I always said, "You're my favorite group." We developed a tradition with them there where they would line the pathway from the field to the locker room. And after a game, my family is out on the field, alumni, media, so it took me a while to get off the field and into the locker room but

those cheerleaders would never leave until I walked through that—their tunnel per se—and high fiving ‘em. Because, hey! When we win, everyone wins.

TA: Right.

GM: I also really enjoyed interacting with the students, and I had developed a tradition there my last few years that I would go over in front of the student section, stand on the track, and give them a thumbs-up. And interact with them a little bit, cheering, give them a thumbs-up and give them a salute, and say thank you because we had the *best* student support of anybody in this, what we call, PSAC Conference [Pennsylvania State Athletic Conference]. Our student body is amazing. Rock Rowdies! Rock Rowdies!

A little tidbit: we were in the national playoffs, okay? So, this was late 90s. I think we were going to Carson-Newman [University]. We were in the final four and they had a big-time pep rally in the field house and tremendous student turnout and I said, “Every school has their student groups.” Duke has something called the Cameron Crazies. Okay? And other major colleges have their student bodies. I said, “We need a name!” I think it should be the Rock Rowdies.” And it stuck. So, that’s how that kind of all came about. But I love the student body and the band, cheerleaders, and athletic trainers. Athletic trainers were a big part. *Those* students put in so much time.

TA: Were you around—what was the mascot that you had?

GM: [Laughs] Okay! We had the original Rocky!

TA: That original!? [Points to Rocky the Rock mascot]. That’s what I thought.

GM: The original Rocky! Now, a lot of people said it looked like a sock.

TA: It’s the *best* mascot!

GM: [Laughs].

TA: I’m still mad that it’s not the current mascot. I would love to have him here.

GM: Now, here’s a little history, okay? We’re talking history. So, the current stadium, the old scoreboard on top of—oh, no I’m sorry—[on top of] old Thompson Stadium, okay?

TA: Behind the Field House.

GM: Behind the Field House. On top of the scoreboard, was a rocket because we were the Rockets. That was our mascot: Rockets. And that was on top of our scoreboard and when we scored a touchdown, it—I don’t know how they did it—but, *shwoooo*, it would sound like that. It would make a noise like it was taking off, okay? So, then at one point in our society, it just seemed to be, you know [pause], wasn’t politically correct in terms of military, and whatever.

So, it was dismantled. It was taken down. So now, I mean, the jersey that I wore as a student athlete [during] my senior year, I still have. Across the front are rockets. Okay?

So, now current day, and modern day—if you can call ‘80s, 1980s through now—across the jersey is The Rock. So where did it all change? Well, the rockets were eliminated. That was not the name any longer. So now, who are we? What are we? So, along comes Rocky. And there’s some history there and a story about who made it. It was some student’s mother who made the outfit and I remember one of the Rockys would climb the goal post and sit on the crossbar. So, he was pretty athletic.

TA: I think it was Bob Jones or something like that?

GM: Yup. Bob Jones. So, he would do that and then at some point, people started saying it’s not attractive, it doesn’t look good, it’s a sock, okay? So, it was, “Move on from it.”

So, we have no mascot. We’re just the Rock and a lot of times as the head coach, it made me visiting or doing interviews . . . Slippery Rock brought all types of national attention. I mean, newspapers from Texas, California, always calling, wanting interviews. “So, what’s your mascot?” I said, “We’re just the Rock!” They said, “Well, what do you mean?” “That’s who we are. We are known as ‘The Rock’.” “What’s your mascot?” “We don’t have one. It’s ‘The Rock’.”

So, then there was this Prudential Insurance Company like the Rock of Gibraltar so there was, “Well, maybe we can do something like that.” And for the longest time, we had nothing and then I think it was Dr. Bob Watson, he came up with the idea, “Well let’s maybe call ourselves the Slippery Rock Pride.” So, the pride. A group of lions is known as a pride so thus, the current mascot and a couple renderings of it to where we have the current visual look of Rocky the Lion. Okay. The nickname, ‘The Pride’ never caught on so we’re not ‘the Pride’, we’re ‘the Rock’ and our mascot is Rocky the lion.

Well, I’m hearing now that there’s a lot of interest, concerns, and buzz—I’ll use the word buzz—folks want to go back to the original mascot, Rocky. Okay, you! [You’re] a current day student! You’re sitting there with a big smile on your face. You would like that?

TA: I would love that because it makes it unique, right? And again, with school pride, I look back at those pictures and they were all about that and not about a normal lion. I mean, there’s so many different kinds and it’s already been done. But that’s my opinion of it but don’t know so . . .

GM: Okay, so who knows?

TA: Yeah, and that’s what I mean. You interacted with the band and cheerleading and probably with the mascot at some point as well.

GM: Oh yeah. I always liked getting pictures with Rocky.

TA: And so it was always there. [Pause] what else is there? Oh! Academic committees and you between departments.

GM: A lot of collaboration with departments in developing the Safety major because initially, I was it. I taught every Safety course [as] kind of a one-man band. So, in order to fill in some of the other areas that were needed, I collaborated with the Chemistry Department. They initially taught the Industrial Hygiene course. The Business Department: personnel management, human resource management, statistics. So, I had to collaborate with a lot of faculty in terms of [pause] putting together this curriculum but then it continued because, let's just say if a particular student was having difficulty in class—and it could be just a student in my class, if they come say, “You know, I’m not doing well in this other class,” and so forth. I didn’t have any hesitation in calling another faculty member and say, “Look, one of my advisees is struggling in your course. What is he or she not doing that they could do better?” And then, if a football player was having some difficulty, I didn’t mind calling another faculty member in, and see that’s where the bridge was because it wasn’t the head coach calling them, it was their colleague who was a professor. Just as I would for any advisee of the general student population, I would do it for a football player, so I enjoyed that collaboration with other faculty and everyone wants to help young people! Everyone wants to see someone succeed as long as they are putting forth the effort. So, that was something I enjoyed: interacting with faculty and then just some general [pause] committees campus-wide. One was called Academic Forum, Curriculum Committees. You see a lot of faculty from other departments and you interacted that way.

TA: And how did you see the curriculum itself change?

GM: Oh my goodness.

TA: Because you saw *The Rocket* change with all those politically correct issues and Safety curriculum so . . .

GM: Well, Safety curriculum, let me put it this way: initially, we developed four courses. So, I taught those four courses and we had collaboration from other departments. Well, the major started growing and so we added faculty so now we could add and create our *own* Industrial Hygiene course where it’s taught within the Safety Department now.

So, to the point now [where] I think there’s ten faculty in the Safety major and I lost track of how many major courses are all taught within the Safety program so it was a birthing process. You know, nobody’s born an adult. You have to grow and [it’s] just the same with the Safety major. We started with three graduates and now we’re close to 500. So . . . now there’s an interesting story about the first three graduates of Safety. You want to hear it?

TA: All ears. We’re all good [laughs].

GM: So, working to build this Bachelor of Science program in Safety; coordinating with my doctoral program at WVU [West Virginia University]

TA: And these were your kids, right? These three that graduated?

GM: Yes. Well, okay. So imagine in your sophomore year, I come to you and I say, “Taylor, I want you to start taking some course [pause] towards a degree that doesn’t exist right now.” [Pause]. So, you’re a sophomore and I presented to you, “Hey, there’s gonna be this real great degree. It’s not here yet but by the time you graduate in May of 1982, it’ll be here and approved and you’ll be the first graduates.” And you’re a sophomore . . . you’re gonna take that risk?

TA: Depending on the relationship maybe, but yeah.

GM: Okay, so—

TA: But usually, no [laughs].

GM: Okay [laughs]. Let’s just say it’s fall of 1980. So there are three students that said okay. Talk about recruiting? That was one of the best recruiting jobs I ever did! So these three students--December of 1980, end of the semester. They come in and say, “Hey! Has it been approved yet?” No it’s not approved. Rewrite after rewrite; send it to the state; change this, change that. Spring, May of 1981. “Hey! Is it approved? We gonna graduate with that in another year?” “Not yet. It’s not approved yet.” December of 1981, the end of the semester. “Hey! Is it approved?” “No. No, no, no.” I mean, I’m sweating now. Okay? I told these three students that when they graduate in one more semester; they’re gonna be the first graduates in this new Bachelor of Science program called Safety, Safety Management, and it’s not approved yet and they have one semester to go. Well, it was January of 1982. I’ll never forget that day. Now, there’s no email then, right? [Laughs]. There was no quick text messages.

TA: Morse code [laughs].

GM: In the mail, it came in the postal mail, was an envelope. “Slippery Rock University, blah, blah, blah . . . approved.” So now, in late February, I was able to say, “Two months and you’ll be the first grads in this Safety program.” I credit those three for taking a risk, and I was just with one of the original three, end of June and he was on campus. Showed him the [renovated] building and, I mean, we had nothing like that. It was just books and maybe a video here and there so. . . . I’m proud of that fact that those three have had successful careers and are still working in the profession.

TA: Was it just the job growth expectancy for why you started it [the Safety program]? Or was it for other reasons? What made you so invested in that?

GM: Well, the chairman at that time, Dr. Larry Lowing; I was hired and he said, “Here’s your assignment. You’re going to teach these courses but we want you to develop a Bachelor of

Science program” and it’s like, how do you do *that*? So, that’s where faculty assisted me and helped me. And research showed—I said earlier—research showed that the supply wasn’t going to meet the demand so he said, “We got to get on this. It’s going to be a great program for the future.” I mean, you talk about being prophetic and a visionary!

TA: Yeah.

GM: So, that’s how I was assigned that project and four years! It took four years to get it approved. Talk about disappointment, like “Hey, I got a real good proposal now,” and give it to the faculty and it comes back—maybe you had this experience. You turn in a project, it comes back and there’s a lot of red stuff on it, you know? “This needs changed; this needs changed.” So, that was challenging but I just kept getting closer and closer and closer so. . . .

TA: But the faculty stuck with you all the way.

GM: Oh yeah! Oh yes! They were all supportive but doing the legwork didn’t make it any easier when you thought you had a good product and you had to change a lot of things.

TA: Right. [Sighs]. Um, I think that’s pretty much it. Is there anything else that you would like current or future Slippery Rock people to know about? Anything you want to add or talk about?

GM: Um . . . I guess something that I always tried to share with the students, players, whatever you want to say [pause], the word ‘failure.’ Everyone views that as a negative. [Pause]. No. It’s just the opposite! It—you just learned what *not* to do. You just learned that what you tried didn’t succeed. Failure is not a negative. It’s a chance to build and get better. So, I always said, there’s nothing wrong with stumbling and falling. What’s wrong is if you don’t get up and keep moving . . . forward. And that’s kind of where failure comes in: “Oh, I failed. I’m not” Sure. We get down on ourselves and view it that way but you gotta see the *other* side that teaches you and is going to enhance you and will *allow* you to get better.

And from an athletic standpoint, I’d just go back to the year 2015, season 2015. It was our fourth game of the season. We’ve won now three championships in a row—three in the last four years—and we’re ranked in the top seven in the country. You know, we’re feeling pretty good about ourselves!

TA: Right.

GM: Maybe it’s called ‘overconfidence?’ So, we go play a team that no way should have even been on the field with us [pause] and they *beat* us. Okay? And I’ll never forget on the field after that game talking to the team. And I still say to this day—a lot of people [said], “How can a loss ever be a positive?” Because we lost to a team inferior and they weren’t going to be a contender for the conference. But it got our attention and then we won the remaining—into the playoffs—the remaining nine or ten in a row. If we don’t fail, then we might fail in weeks seven or eight to a team that would win a conference because they beat us.

TA: Right.

GM: But that failure early in the season: we learned from it. We learned that we can't overlook anybody. We learned [that] we better be ready to play every week. So, that's my example of failure. "Oh, you lost. We're done. Season's over." No, it's not over. It's just early. It's over if we don't prepare because we were good enough to beat anyone and everybody.

TA: And you had the highest career wins I'm pretty sure in Slippery Rock football history. I'm pretty sure. I mean whatever you did worked.

GM: Good coaches. Good players. Good administration supporting you. It's not me. It's not one person. It's a team effort, and that team wasn't just on the field. It was the cheerleaders; it was the band; it was the athletic trainers; it was the athletic director. You know, Paul Lueken and Bill Lennox [were the] athletic directors when I was head coach and they were supportive and very fantastic to work for. So, it's not just one person. As I said: players, coaches, *family*!

If I don't have family support and, you know, the *wives* of coaches; they're the real winners because they're doing everything. Like my wife, Laura. I'm in meetings until 10 [or] 11 at night. The grass still grows. The kids still need to run around. They have appointments. They have activities. She has a full-time job. So, she deserves a lot of credit for my career as well because she took care of the house when I should've been back there doing some other things. And my daughters! I spent a lot of time away from them but they were the biggest fans. They liked being on that sideline. The officials knew they were there at many times so . . . [laughs].

TA: And they were your own personal cheerleaders, right?

GM: Yes! You know, I remember them in their little Slippery Rock cheerleading outfits.

TA: Oh, so they even had an outfit then?

GM: Oh yeah!

TA: That's awesome.

GM: Oh yeah, and they'd go on the track and as they grew older, they were on the track. They were supportive and [at] timeouts, they would take water out to the players. And that's what we try to profess here in our program. At least—I'm gonna talk strictly football here now. It was a family. [Pause]. That's what it was. It was a family and when you have that family—I would often tell coaches, "Look, your son, your daughter is playing? They have a high school event? Go." "Well, no. I got this meeting." "No. They're only going to be a junior or senior once. You gotta go watch them. And then when my daughter, Beth, was playing in high school, coaches told me, "Go! You made us leave. You go. Watch your daughter. Be there."

So, we were a family. It wasn't a corny phrase; it was a reality. It was a way of life in our program and I tried to bring that into the classroom as well. Now, I maybe didn't spend as much

time with the students in the classroom as I did with players, but still. We're all here trying to better ourselves so, let's work together to get this done. The one thing that hung in the football office as soon as you walked in--we had four goals, okay? Do you have any idea what it [the first goal] might have been? The very first goal for you as a student and a Rock football player?

TA: Try your best? Have fun? [Laughs].

GM: Okay [laughs]. Well, we're going to make it a little more concrete than that.

TA: [Laughs] Okay.

GM: "Earn a degree."

TA: Okay. Oh! And the championship ring.

GM: "Earn a degree." Next was, "Win the conference." Next was, "Get to the national playoffs." And the last one was, "Win a national championship."

TA: So, they can have both in their hands, right?

GM: Never got that national championship. Never got it. As I said, [we] finished in the final four. Came close, you know? Lost a game in the last couple minutes and that would have put us in the national championship so that's one goal I never got to experience. The other phrase and—I was just talking to a former player yesterday on the phone and he said, "Coach, do you still remember what you told us after every game?" and I said, "What was that?" and he repeated it. So, before we said our thing, [the] first thing we would say after finishing a game—we gathered as a team—the *last* thing we did before we left the locker room, we had team prayer. I strongly believe in it.

TA: Yeah, yeah.

GM: First thing we did *after* the game, on the field where we gathered: our team prayer and *then* I would make my comments.

The last comments were: "Remember you represent this great university. Remember you represent this outstanding football team. Remember you represent your families. Remember you represent yourself." We would then give our Rock Pride and off they went because what I wanted them to know, as they moved throughout that weekend and throughout their lives . . . that one player said, "I share that with my kids." You know, maybe [it was said] in a little different context but yeah. We represented this university when we wear green and white. We represented the team and you represent your family. Your family name! And [you represent] yourself, so it was more than football. It was academics and football and they can work together and they do work together. I'm most proud of the success that Safety alums are having and the success that some of the players are having and I told them, "I'm more proud of you as a man, as a father, as

a husband.” So, it goes far beyond just drawing up the play. Far beyond taking a test in the classroom. It’s life, a life process.

TA: Right, and you can take it with you.

GM: The Rock has been good. Great place. Thank goodness, I found my way here. It was so good—

TA: And your dad left you [laughs].

GM: [Laughs] Yeah, yeah. He left me! Come back, come back, come back! [Slippery Rock was] so good that I never left, Taylor.

TA: That’s awesome. Is that everything? Anything else?

GM: Nah, I think that that covered quite a bit. I think I hit some of the important family messages that I wanted to share, the coal mine story, watching my dad, and my wife. I just had to give her all that credit and my daughters so Thank you!

TA: You’re welcome.