

Interview with Cathy Kloss

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Interview #1: September 26, 2013

Interviewer: Philip Pogue

Pogue: This is Phil Pogue. We're on the campus of Prairie State College, where we're going to be talking to Cathy Kloss. It's September 26, 2013. We're in the community of Chicago Heights, Illinois, and this is the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library project on the history and the development of the Illinois Community College System. We are happy that Cathy is going to be talking to us about the history and development of Prairie State, and we welcome her to the project. To begin with, Cathy, what is your family and educational background?

Kloss: Thank you, Phil. We're really glad that you're here at Prairie State College today. We are located in Chicago Heights, as you mentioned. That's twenty-six miles south of the Willis Tower [formerly the Sears Tower] in Chicago. You can actually see the building from our northern boundary, where Halsted Street crosses Illinois Route 1 at I-80. It's going to take you about forty minutes in good traffic if you were to drive here right from the Willis Tower.

A lot of things have changed since Bloom Junior College was established in 1957, but we are proudly located at the intersection of learning, employment and lifelong achievement. A couple things have never changed about the college, and I hope they never will. We're very responsive to the community and employer needs, and our community college reflects its citizens and their concerns. We're accessible to students, and we're affordable.



Cathy Kloss

To go to your first question, about my family and educational background, I graduated from Notre Dame High School in Chicago, and that is a girls' high school. There's also a boys' high school by the same name that's located in suburban Niles, Illinois. Then I graduated from Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, with a Bachelor of Arts with honors and a major in English. I married, and I have one son. I've been a resident of Homewood, Illinois and Community College District 515 since 1978.

I'm proud to say that my family has a three-generation relationship with Prairie State College. My late father-in-law, Lester Kloss, Sr., was a Prairie State College trustee and board chair here at the college. My husband, Lester Kloss, Jr., was a Prairie State College student in 1969 and seventy. And our son, Andy, took his first college classes here, starting in 1998. He got active in the student government, was layout editor for *The Student Review* newspaper, and then he

transferred to earn his bachelor's degree. So I'm very excited and honored that the college has asked me to provide the interview today.

Pogue: What kind of work experience have you had in addition to Prairie State?

Kloss: Currently, I'm the director of development and special projects at Prairie State since July the first. I came to the college in 1996. I'm the past executive director of the foundation, having served in that role for over twelve years. But I first came to Prairie State in 1996 in a part time position, as assistant to the coordinator of student life, and I worked in the Student Leadership Center with Student Government Association, *The Student Review* newspaper, clubs and other student activities.

Before coming to the college, I was the information writer and editor for the Homewood Schools; that's District 153. I did that for about eleven years. It was a part-time position. My husband and I were volunteer newsletter editors for a lot of the community groups, including the Homewood Historical Society and the Homewood-Flossmoor High School Band Parents. And I served on the Village of Homewood's citizens committees, including a 1993 centennial committee, where we planned and held eighteen months of activities for the village's celebration of its first 100 years. I also served for many years on the Homewood Heritage Committee, which has gained recognition for the Dixie Highway, which is the first north-south transcontinental highway in the United States. I also worked for cable television as an on-air programming host—I interviewed dozens of people doing that—and I did work for a major railroad in administrative support positions during my college summers and for years after I got my college degree.

Pogue: Had you been involved with any other community colleges, other than Prairie State?

Kloss: Does voting count? I can say that before the elections were consolidated, we made it a point to always vote in community college elections. So, no, except for taking a summer class one year at the City Colleges of Chicago, when I was a resident there, I have not had any previous community college experience.

Pogue: You mentioned several positions here at Prairie State. What are some of the duties and functions of those positions?

Kloss: It's sort of interesting. I was initially hired by the students of Prairie State College as the first assistant to the coordinator of student life. In 1996 I was working on public information for the local elementary school district. That was strictly limited to forty hours a month, and I wanted to work more hours. So, I saw an ad in the newspaper, and that shows how things have changed, no one looks at newspaper ads anymore. I applied, and I learned that the Student Government Association had allocated \$10,000 of their budget to hire someone to assist the coordinator of student life, at a whopping \$10 an hour, working nineteen hours a

week. I liked what I heard, and the students and their search committee selected me.

So then I was working two part-time jobs, as the information writer at the Homewood Schools and at Prairie State, working with community college students. It was a great introduction to the Prairie State College. I was working in the Student Leadership Center, where the student leaders are all very active with government, with the newspaper, the clubs, and all their faculty and staff advisers. It was a really good introduction to the whole campus community. Student Leadership Center is an activity hub on this campus, and I also handled I.D.'s [identification] and student parking permits, back then before it got computerized.

I was really impressed by the Prairie State College students because so many of them were facing a lot of challenges when they came to school. They weren't just four years away at university. They had families; they had jobs; they had other responsibilities in the community, and yet they had an energy and enthusiasm that was so commendable. I was happy to be a part of it and to help support them in their goals.

Student activities are an important part of this college experience, and I think it should be for all colleges and all college experiences. Students are going to learn valuable soft skills. They're going to learn teamwork, interpersonal relationships, goal setting, follow-up; and they see how their efforts make a difference just beyond the classroom, for the campus and beyond.

The best part of that job, working in student leadership, was probably the most hectic part of the year, commencement. We measured for caps and gowns; we distributed them; we got them lined up on the big day, and then the big lineup or march, as we call it here.

When I realized I liked working **with** college students more than I liked writing **about** elementary school students, I applied for a permanent position at the college. The college foundation had started a new position called coordinator of special events. I applied, and I was selected for the position. It was another opportunity to benefit Prairie State College students by raising scholarship funds and networking in the community. I worked on fund raising and friend raising events to benefit scholarships, and it allowed the executive director of the foundation at that time additional opportunities to work with the foundation board to grow the organization.

From 1999, when my supervisor was promoted to another college area, until 2001, I handled the responsibilities of both positions and then eventually was named executive director in July 2001. I also supervised the college's art gallery as part of my responsibilities, and that coordinates student, faculty and regional art work in eight shows a year.

The foundation's assets grew to \$2 million; it received a clean audit with no findings; the college identified that there was a need for a new position, and now I'm just two months into my position as director of development and special projects.

At strategic planning meetings last year, they pointed to a need for grants coordination and the need for a women's center on the college. So those are among my first charges, and I'm very glad to continue supervising the Christopher Art Gallery. The gallery's a teaching and learning experience on our campus, and we engage the community with opportunities to see really wonderful exhibits close to home and highlight student and faculty art talent as well.

Pogue: You mentioned earlier that Prairie State was once known as Bloom Township Junior College. That was, I guess, formed around 1957, with classes beginning in 1958. What were some of the major events for that institution?

Kloss: You know, Phil, like so many of the community colleges in Illinois, we started as an adjunct of the local high school. In this part of the state, the high schools were organized out of the townships; that was the local government unit. Bloom Township Junior College, in 1957, began holding classes in 1958, but they thought about this idea and got it together in 1957. They'd actually talked about it as early as the teens and the 1920's, but money and other problems were in the way. The country, of course, went into the Great Depression in 1929, and then we had a World War, II, which intervened. So by the time they got back to the concept again, it was 1957.

Bloom Township continues to be a very instrumental force in the current college situation, and the voters in this district were among the first in the state to authorize the creation of a junior college district. It was a margin of almost two to one, and at that time the vote was 945 to 479. Bloom Junior College became Illinois's thirteenth public, what we now call community college.

Pogue: How did the college get renamed Prairie State?

Kloss: That's an interesting story. I would like to get to that a little bit later, when we talk about the growth of the college district.

Pogue: What are the geographic boundaries of the college? In 1989, they added an area around Beecher.

Kloss: That's absolutely true. It's hard to imagine how different this area looked in 1957. Now when we talk about the city, we mean the city of Chicago. But back in 1957, Chicago Heights was a rural area. It was the major city in the area, with rural spaces surrounding it. There were big open spaces between the towns that now touch each other. Actually, we're all contiguous with other neighboring suburbs, and those suburbs are going to touch the City of Chicago. We have expressways now that are going to link us to all parts of the Chicago metro area, as well as to other states.

But right now, our boundaries extend to 175th Street on the north, east to the Indiana state line, west to Harlem Avenue in Tinley Park, and south past the Town of Beecher. We have about 250,000 people in our district, and our campus is just about 135 acres. You asked about Beecher joining our district. Again, I'm going to defer that until a little bit later. It didn't happen until 1989.

Pogue: What are some of the high schools that are now within the boundaries of Prairie State, since it has expanded from Bloom Township?

Kloss: We take in Bloom, Bloom Trail, Crete-Monee, Beecher, Rich East, Rich Central, Rich South and Homewood-Flossmoor High School. Those eight are our public high schools that are in the district. There's also a local private high school, Marian Catholic High School, in Chicago Heights.

Pogue: What have been some of the biggest challenges that the college has faced in its history?

Kloss: I would say that funding has always been a concern for the college. [pause]

Phil, before I answer that question, I just wonder if I could append a little bit to my answer about our geographical boundaries. We are a south suburban institution, District 515, and our boundaries, like all community colleges, are set by the state. Now our district is urban, suburban and rural. I would say it is arguably the most socio-economically diverse community college district in the state. The communities that we serve are Beecher, Chicago Heights, Crete, Flossmoor, Ford Heights, Glenwood, Homewood-Madison, Monee, Olympia Fields, Park Forest, Richton Park, Sauk Village, South Chicago Heights, Steger, University Park, and then we have portions of Country Club Hills, Hazel Crest, Lynwood, Tinley Park and adjacent unincorporated areas of Cook and Will County.

Probably the easiest way to visualize our boundaries would be to match up with the high schools and the high school boundaries. If you're served by one of our feeder high schools, then you're a resident of District 515. As I mentioned, those would be Beecher, Bloom, Bloom Trail, Crete-Monee, Homewood-Flossmoor and Rich East, Rich Central and Rich South. Before, you had asked about Beecher. It was very independent for a very long time, and under the laws of the state, students could choose which community college they would attend. As a result, there was no tax levy for the Beecher property owners for a community college.

At fifteen miles south of Chicago Heights, Prairie State College is closer to Beecher than Kankakee or Joliet Junior College would be. And Prairie State College's tax levy was lower than Kankakee Community College's. So it was 1989 before it was determined that Beecher would annex into Prairie State College's district.

I know you have asked me about the biggest challenges over the college history. Certainly finances have always been a concern, particularly right now we've seen a decline in assessed valuation, due to foreclosures and loss of industry in our boundaries, and state support in our most recent budget was estimated to be 7 percent, rather than the expected 33 percent, which constitutionally is stated.

We've passed a referendum once, in May of 1978, and we are aware that most referenda for other taxing bodies have been turned down at the polls. The college is very much aware of that. Affordability is really a priority, and the college foundation has been instrumental in providing scholarship assistance to help hundreds of students annually attend Prairie State College.

Another issue would be governance. Our community college trustees are elected by the community, and they're all volunteers. They do take on the responsibility for setting the policy for the college, and they're unpaid. Most don't work in higher education, but they do care tremendously for our students, and they are fiscal stewards for our community. We're very grateful for those trustees, who worked to establish the college, who made the decisions over the years, and those right now who are keeping our college focused and viable.

Some other concerns over the past few years, of course, have been student rights and civil rights, and a lot of that originated during the Vietnam era. Prairie State experienced many of the same issues as other community colleges did in the late sixties and early seventies, except all of those issues were here in students' home communities, not away at a university. The student newspaper and student government association, over the years, were leaders in thought and discussion. And for students, it seems no matter what the year, parking, some aspect of social life, and their finances are always of concern, no matter what the year or what the campus is.

Someone once said, "All politics is local." I'm sure that's true of students' concerns as well. A couple examples of student concerns over the years: There were protests when the city of Chicago Heights barricaded Coolidge Street and prevented quick access from one road, Joe Orr Road, to the next. And in 1971, there was a change in the commencement ceremony. It was felt that a banquet would better serve the student body, yet thirty middle-aged women requested a traditional ceremony, with caps and gowns and a procession, and this was held for them.

Employment in the region is also a concern. Chicago Heights was originally a steel mill town, an industrial manufacturing center, a lot of factories, but the economy began to shift, and those higher paying jobs were lost. So, employment is now basically retail or service industry oriented. Health care is a growing field, and Prairie State has many programs to train people for jobs in allied health professions. Our technical and occupational programs are also seeing increased interest right now.

We do have changing populations as well. I mentioned earlier that our district is urban, suburban and rural, all in one. The percentage of rural has definitely decreased, and we are seeing an influx of residents who need basic education, remedial education, as well as college level skills. We're fortunately in a building right now, our adult education division, which is helping to bring literacy, English as a second language, and GED programs to our residents, not just here on the campus but also at satellite locations too. Job losses in the community mean that there are more houses in foreclosure, and it affects the assessed valuation for property taxes that support the college.

Another concern is community relations. I mean that in a good way. We are fortunate to have a very good relationship with all of our communities and strong relationships with our feeder high schools. And our legislators are very attuned to Prairie State and the issues that affect us here. We have advisory committees for various curricular and occupational areas. There are volunteers in our Adult Literacy Institute who work one on one as tutors to help adults learn how to read. Most people in the area view the college as a real asset, and this has been true since its founding.

In terms of labor issues, employee labor relations are governed under union agreements on our campus. In the early days of the college there were a few faculty strikes, but this has been avoided in recent years. Because we are small, we're a very collaborative college, and our size and finances influence all of us to work together for students' benefits.

In terms of other challenges that we might face, I would say underprepared students. It requires the college to develop effective programs to address their learning needs. We've been able to do that successfully. We provide coursework that will insure their college success. And I have to say space is getting a little tight, particularly at peak periods during the day.

Pogue: Related to the accomplishments in the college's history, let's talk a little bit about the building construction and how all of that changed, once the campus was moving away from Bloom Township Junior College.

Kloss: Absolutely. When the first course was taught at Bloom Junior College on September 8, 1958, the classrooms were rented in the basement of the First Christian Disciples of Christ Church in Chicago Heights. That was just adjacent to the high school, and it was a convenient way for people to continue education if they did not want to or could not attend university after high school. It was good for those who wanted to go to college but had to work during the day or take care of a family and attend college during evening hours. There were four classrooms, with a church library and faculty room, a social center, a dean's office. Science labs were located at the high school.

There were fifteen faculty members. They were all from the Bloom High School staff. They started with 118 full time students, with thirty in the evening

program. At that time, 66 percent of the students were male, and the average age was twenty. But the students outgrew that space by the second year, and they moved to a building on the high school campus.

An open-door policy by the high school board allowed any district high school graduate to attend, and the junior college was under the high school's governance. Remember, that was only for folks who attended Bloom Township High School at that time. There was only one high school in Bloom Township.

But by 1959, enrollment went up 144 percent in the day time. There were 288 students, 200 in the evening, 70 percent male. They began a student newspaper and planned for their first formal. A lot of the activities seemed to follow a high school model.

By 1960, a new building was dedicated, the College Center Building. According to Dr. Richard Sherman's history, this was the first new junior college building in Illinois, located outside the city of Chicago. There were cooperative classes being offered with Thornton Junior College in mechanical technology. This was a tradition of cooperation that was the first of many in our state.

Bloom Junior College was providing cultural leadership for the community, a great books program, symphony tickets, expert speakers. The colors were red and white; they named the mascot "The Viking." "Knowledge for Life" became the college motto, and tuition was \$50 a semester for a full time, in-district student.

Over the years, as they added more students, we found that 82 percent were enrolled in general education or professional courses. But graduation was still low, and it's a concern that endures even to today for most community colleges.

By 1965 we had a chapter of Phi Theta Kappa, the international honor society for community college students, extremely active to this day, the Nu Sigma Chapter. And we achieved an NCA, North Central Association accreditation, in March of 1965, where they noted we needed more full-time faculty teaching at night, more library books—we only had 4,000, and they thought 6,000 should be appropriate—and a separate accounting system and budget that would separate the college from the high school because, again, Bloom Community College was still under the jurisdiction of the high school.

At that time you began to see a reflection of the United States' concerns, principally the Vietnam War, and the typical campus concerns, lack of parking, minimum charges at a local restaurant, card playing in the student lounge.

But in 1965, the Junior College Act passed in Illinois. It required full-time equivalency enrollment of 2,000 students, within five years of the junior college's establishment, in order to attain the Class I status. So the Bloom College trustees thought about how to achieve this. They settled on annexing local high school

districts and allowing the Bloom identity to be retained. This required that 20 percent of the voters had to sign a petition to favor annexation, and then there was an election in which the majority of votes cast were in favor of the annexation. So in 1966, they established a small tax levy, .09 percent for education, .03 percent for building purposes.

Twelve years of criticism followed, that the rate was too conservative. But it would have been difficult in those times to foresee the growth that we had here or the change in the district demographics or the economic status of the community.

In 1966, Bloom Junior College officially became a Class I junior college; Bloom Township High School relinquished control over the junior college; a faculty organization was organized, and our two-year nursing program began. It's a signature program to this date, and our 2012 pass rate on the NCLEX [National Council Licensure Examination] national RN licensing examination was 100 percent.

Effective July 1, 1966, the Junior College Act incorporated the entire state into junior college districts, as part of higher education, and a seven-district committee, here in our area, considered combining Bloom Junior College with Thornton Junior College to serve seven high school districts that would have included Bremen and Thornton Townships. It was determined this wasn't feasible.

The committee had graduation statistics, from each high school, that were valuable; it provided a forum for a variety of opinions on how to move on. Rich Township's representative was Lester Kloss, Sr., who proposed what came to be referred to as the Kloss Compromise, that Crete-Monee, Rich and Homewood-Flossmoor should annex to Bloom Junior College, and Bremen and Thornton to Thornton Junior College. Then there would still be more time to determine if they needed two junior colleges or if the seven-district plan should just be reinvestigated.

The concern for each high school was that they would have representation, as Bloom Junior College moved ahead. So in 1967, by a seven to one margin, voters were in favor of annexing in April. It increased our district size three times; it increased our assessed valuation by two and a half times, and the first budget was \$908,000.

There was a blizzard in 1967. Everything came to a standstill for three days, including the college, and thirteen of one 167 teachers left Bloom Township High School and joined the college permanently. We were no longer under the auspices of the high school. An early faculty member at what is now Prairie State was William Patton. He said, "Throughout the staff, there was a feeling like we were on a frontier. The junior college was a new idea in the state, and we were part of a new movement."

Bloom Junior College elected its first student trustee [student representative on the board of trustees]—which was an advisory role—six years before the state law was enacted to that effect. Raymond Garcia was the first Bloom Community College student to later earn a PhD.

It became necessary to annex additional high school districts. So Rich, Crete-Monee and Homewood-Flossmoor came in. Plans were afoot in Springfield. There were changes in regulations that were going to be coming to the junior colleges of Chicago. There were numerous suggestions, limited time to act, and the Kloss Plan was enacted.

Now came site selection. There were seven possibilities posed. A location near the center of population was the most desirable, but at that time the campus wasn't central. There were soil tests that showed better soil pressures per square foot on Halsted Street than the second-place site, which was located east of our current location in Glenwood, or the third place site which was at Sauk Trail and Cottage Grove.

So the current site was selected. There was some geographical disappointment, towns wanted the commercial development that they figured would follow the students, and some thought there might be a second campus in the near future. The Illinois Junior College Board said, "You can buy 119 acres at \$6,000 an acre."

Between 1965 and 1967, an average of one junior college per week was established somewhere in the United States, and during this period there were weeks when this average seemed to hold true in Illinois, according to our best biography expert, Dr. Richard Sherman.

The architectural firm of Perkins and Will was selected for our building, and when classes began in 1967, Bloom Community College was hardly the same place it had been a decade before. The community that supported the college was in transition; the components of the institution were growing larger; there was a new and differing image developed. It was time to change the name.

The local economy changed from industrial to retail and service, and we had one of the first shopping centers in the Chicago area developed in our district, the Park Forest Plaza. When that developed, it caused the subsequent decline of the downtown Chicago Heights shopping district, and when Lincoln Mall was established in Matteson, it led to the Park Forest Plaza's demise. But each of these provided increased valuation. The profile of the work force changed; job training and re-training were needed.

By 1967 the enrollment had grown 78 percent; we were up to 3,700 people. It was an older profile. There was an increase of women on our campus, and by 1972 women did exceed the men who were registered. Eighty-nine percent of our students resided within ten miles of the campus.

In 1968 and sixty-nine a child development program was developed here, in conjunction with the Head Start Program in East Chicago Heights. That community is now known as Ford Heights. More than forty children were brought to Prairie State when the college opened a laboratory school. It became the nation's first such laboratory school in association with a community college.

We also enlarged the continuing education and community services programs. In 1969 the first black studies program at an Illinois community college was established at Prairie State. We were also the first Illinois junior college, outside of Chicago, to form a teachers union.

Cook County Teachers Union Local 1600, as it was known then, chose the AFT [American Federation of Teachers] as its bargaining agent. There was a brief strike for two days prior to the start of summer school, and then everything resumed. There was federal mediation in 1970 for a strike, before summer school. It was the first time, I'm told, in Illinois, that there was federal mediation between a college board and a teachers' union. As a result of an all-night trustees' meeting the strike was settled.

At that time, a lot of the concerns focused on a young institution, without long traditions to draw upon, trying to finance a growing institution against financial constraints of inflation, attempting to gain the title to and purchase the permanent campus site, getting the site annexed into the municipality.

Of course, the civil rights movement, the reaction to the Vietnam War, deficit funding; there was a \$1 million debt between 1968 and 1970. They wanted to fund a black studies program; they needed to organize for accreditation; there was low enrollment in spring of seventy-one, and we still had the lowest community college tax levy, twelve cents, since March of 1966.

The main campus is ready to start; on August 14, 1972, there was a groundbreaking. There were 1,000 people here. Governor Ogilvie attended, an oak tree was planted, but classes did not begin until fall of seventy-five in the main building.

In February of sixty-nine, Governor Ogilvie put a freeze on public construction projects. There were court proceedings on the purchase of property; there were a lot of parcels that had to be aggregated, but the project was reactivated in 1970, and by May of seventy-one, \$7 million was released by the General Assembly for building. Chicago Heights, our host community, annexed the property. But the college needed to widen Coolidge Street, and then Chicago Heights would provide fire and police services.

There was a little dispute over the valuation of vacated alleys and streets. The city would annex the south campus; the college would pay \$110,000 for vacated streets and alleys, and then Chicago Heights annexed the north campus

because Prairie State would need police and fire service but not generate any taxes for the municipality.

Enrollment went up; there was a new building. It was the last year, I'm told, for a vets benefit program, but the economy was down. Prairie State College moved in during the worst state funding crisis in Illinois community history to that time, between 1975 and seventy-seven. That second lowest tax rate in the state caused funding problems, because state equalization payments dropped.

We found out more parking and sidewalks were needed, so we added a 600 car lot. Regional Transportation Authority bus service began in 1977, and our child care drop-in center opened in spring of seventy-six.

By the early 1970's there were more women, more part-time students, more evening students. There was an older average age throughout the college. There were more women in their thirties and forties who needed to earn income, and there was an apparent need for developmental education classes, even then.

In August of 1970 trustees from thirteen community colleges met at Lincoln Land Community College in Springfield and founded the ICCTA [Illinois Community College Trustees Association], and Shirley Mellecker from Prairie State was among those. So by 1973 the community college system was essentially completed in terms of the number of colleges and campuses established in Illinois. But Prairie State kept planning.

We've kept our legislators advised of our needs. Ninety percent of the State of Illinois was located within community college boundaries, and we made the change from junior to community college. Community colleges were moved from the Public School Code that governed elementary and high school students.

We talked a little bit about Beecher being fifteen miles away and how it joined Prairie State College. At one time, Beecher students attended Bloom High School, so a lot of members in the community felt it was a logical extension to come back to the area where Bloom High School was, rather than go out to Kankakee. In a referendum in 1974, they voted by a margin of seven to three not to annex to Kankakee Community College but to have an independent status and come to Prairie State. We did have extension classes taught in Beecher as well.

Talking about our buildings here at Prairie State, we opened a tech wing, which is an addition to our main building in August of seventy-nine. That was only sixteen months after the groundbreaking for the main building. It saved utility costs. It was close to general education classes for the vocational students. The programs were welding; heating, ventilation and air conditioning; sheet metal working. There were three classrooms with lab space, and again, we added that 600 parking space parking lot I mentioned, so we had one space for every three enrolled students at that time.

In terms of basic education needs or instructional services, we found that we had about 1,000 students that needed additional help. The U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare recognized our efforts in meeting the problem of remediation with a four-year grant of \$55,000. Back in the late seventies and early eighties, the program name changed to Personalized Learning, and we added English as a Second Language. [There's] a lot of language diversity in our program right now. You might think there could be six or eight languages represented, but I'm told at any given time there could be more than thirty in our ESL program.

We have extension centers serving students who have a varying range of school experience in non-credit programs, non-high school grads up to degree holders. These folks attend intermittently. They usually have a short-term education goal rather than a degree. A lot of our education centers are out at high schools and libraries in the communities.

You had asked why the college was renamed and when that had happened. Well, in 1967, we now have other high schools that are included. They've annexed into our district, so the name needed to be inclusive, beyond just Bloom Township. So on October 5th, 1967, the name Prairie State College was approved by the Board of Trustees. It had been suggested by an instructor here, Paul Gregg. "In its socio-economic, ethnic and minority composition, this college represented a microcosm of Illinois," said Professor Gregg, and this continues to the present day.

We've had some other building additions as well. In 1996 we put on an addition for the library, what was known as the Community Instructional Center, and the Christopher Art Gallery. In 1998 our Matteson Area Center, which we call the MAC, M-A-C, opened. Originally, we had held classes in the Lincoln Mall in Matteson, but this is now our own permanent building.

The academic classes at the Lincoln Mall did not meet our enrollment expectations, but now at the MAC, we focus on short term adult education, business training, and in the summer, we have a very successful Kids at College program there. In the year 2000 our Health Tech Center opened. This expanded our Dental Hygiene Program, both for facilities and allows more enrollment in that program. We added Surgical Technology, and the Health Tech building provides instructional space for EMT [Emergency Medical Technician], fire-fighting and network administrator preparation.

In 2001 we opened a fitness complex. This is cool because it's a unique partnership with the Chicago Heights Park District and St. James Health Care. The Pioneer Field House is used for basketball and volleyball and commencement activities by the college. We have the use of an indoor pool for our physical education classes, and it serves as a site for Personal Training students to have internships. The rest of the building is a membership facility, emphasizing wellness and physical facilities. It is on a membership basis.

In 2004 our Adult Training and Outreach Center, which we call the ATOC, and our Children's Learning Center were opened. ATOC has our adult education, work force development, job training, job search help, and we do have an Illinois WorkNet Center here.¹ There's a child care facility in a secure setting, which is actually part of this building, but there is no congress between the two of them.

All of this is found on 137 acres at South Halsted and Vollmer Road, except for the MAC that's located in Matteson off Cicero Avenue just across from Lincoln Mall.

Pogue: You mentioned the 1978 referendum. Is that the only one that passed, and was there anything unusual about that referendum?

Kloss: You know, Phil, that was the only property tax referendum that has been successful, and that was in 1978. To the best of my knowledge the college has not had another referendum attempt since then. We're very aware that the communities around us are struggling and that many of the voters have turned down elementary, high school, library, and park district referendums in the other communities, so we have not tried for another referendum.

Pogue: What fields of study are offered at Prairie State?

Kloss: We have over 100 fields of study. We have diverse, vibrant faculty, dedicated staff, and that's really one of the exciting aspects about community college, to be able to help students either transfer to a university or prepare for employment. We have Career in a Year certificates, which provide training in twelve months for good paying jobs. Prairie State is very tuned in to what employers want, and the college wants to prepare students to work for those employers.

Pogue: You mentioned many "firsts" that Prairie State was involved in, having a child care center, black studies, teachers union, federal mediation. You were also listed as the first community college to guarantee all credits will transfer. How did that come about?

Kloss: We are very proud of that initiative. In March 1992, students were guaranteed that the courses they took for an associate degree in arts or applied science would transfer to most other colleges in the state. And those who completed their associate degree were guaranteed they were properly prepared for entry into their chosen field of employment. If it turned out that they were less than qualified, they could have nine more credit hours of additional skill training without cost, and that would be provided by the college.

¹ The Illinois WorkNet Center serves as a resource to communities within Illinois to help economically disadvantaged individuals and others who face serious barriers to employment in order for them become productively employed. (https://localwiki.org/cu/Illinois_WorkNet_Center)

Now we take for granted that the Illinois Articulation Agreement, the IAI, spells out what course transfers and what doesn't to which institution, but it was unique at that time, and it was greatly helpful to our students.

Pogue: What programs exist with area high schools?

Kloss: We have quite a number of programs. We have something called the Talented High Schooler Program, which gives you a free tuition class. A high school student can take one class, either the summer before the senior year or during the senior year, if their GPA [Grade Point Average] in high school is 2.5, and their high school counselor has signed off on it.

We have an Early College STEM program, a bio-science grant, with the Rich Township district students.² And the Crete and Beecher high school students have an initiative where those students can take English and math at Prairie State, and they can use that as credit towards their high school graduations also.

We have a four-week summer camp that gives chemistry and math exposure to high school students. There's a four week summer bridge program that gives additional instruction. If a Compass Test, that's our placement test at the college, showed the student needed additional developmental math or English, Prairie State will pay for a Compass re-test if those high school students have completed the four-week summer bridge.

We have a Trio Program, a talent search. It's an educational outreach program funded by the U.S. Department of Education. [It] motivates and supports students, grades six through twelve, who have the potential to succeed in higher education. It provides academic, career and financial counseling to participants, encourages them to graduate from high school and continue on and complete post-secondary education.

We have ACT test preparation; we have high quality tutoring; we have student's study skills workshops, and I should say our tutoring is free as well on our campus. We have college information and assistance to select, apply to and enroll for educational programs after high school, and we offer a lot of financial aid information and assistance workshops, either individual assistance or parent and student workshops, to help them prepare applications for grants, scholarships, college work programs, student loans.

Pogue: Are there any other accomplishments that you wanted to mention at this time?

Kloss: I would like to say that we are pleased to have established a sworn police force on our campus. We currently have a hybrid department, some sworn officers and

² STEM is a curriculum based on the idea of educating students in four specific disciplines — science, technology, engineering and mathematics — in an interdisciplinary and applied approach. This campaign also addresses the inadequate number of teachers skilled to educate in these subjects. (<https://www.livescience.com/43296-what-is-stem-education.html>)

other campus safety officers. But I think the events of September 11 [terrorist bombings in New York and Washington D.C.] and occurrences on other campuses influenced those who previously objected, and everyone now sees the importance of having a police presence on our campus.

Pogue: The college currently has roughly over 12,000 students enrolled in credit and noncredit courses. You mentioned, I think, that when Bloom started, you had about 100 and some students full-time. You also indicated a drop-off at one time. Has the school's enrollment grown fairly steadily?

Kloss: We've had leaps and bounds. I think that's the same situation in most institutions. When we were new and when we didn't have much space, of course our enrollment was lesser. As the college grew and space became available, and I think with society and the communities' recognition that postsecondary education was more important, our numbers grew. So you're right.

We are around 12,000 students right now in credit and noncredit classes, and like most community colleges, our enrollment is typically counter-cyclical to the economy. So, if unemployment declines when more people have jobs, our enrollment actually goes down a little bit. And just like when Bloom Junior College was started and veterans were returning to school in increasing numbers at that time, we're now serving more vets, and we have a well-regarded vets center at Prairie State.

Pretty much we've always been responsive to the community needs. We've offered classes during the day, evenings, Saturdays, on-line, and we even had Sunday classes for a while too.

Pogue: You mentioned at the beginning that at one time the student population was 70 percent male when it was perhaps at the Bloom Junior College. Now it's reversed to about 60 percent female. Is there anything else you'd like to add about that change?

Kloss: Women do now predominate enrollment, but I think that mirrors the national statistics on gender enrollment. We are working with the high schools to encourage male enrollment, and we have a men's mentoring program at the college as well.

Pogue: The average student age is about twenty-eight, and you talked earlier that Bloom and Prairie State served older students. Has that been pretty consistent?

Kloss: Yes it has, because we have students who are actually home-schooled high school students, up through people in their eighties who have attended Prairie State. When Bloom Junior College was established—I think the age skewed a lot younger—it was expected that that institution would be the next step after high school. Veterans at that time were also younger, particularly if they served their country immediately after high school.

We found that recent high school graduates tend to take more classes, upon coming to Prairie State and be among the full-time students, more so than the older students, because the older students have families or jobs, and that is a time commitment with those responsibilities.

Now our most recent ten-day enrollment statistics for 2013, in fall, show that students age twenty to twenty-five are the largest group on our campus. The median age for the last three fall terms was twenty-three. This fall it is twenty-two. Nineteen is the most represented age currently, but we are very close to that upper twenties as the average age of a student at Prairie State.

Pogue: What have been some of the great events in the college's history?

Kloss: Certainly establishing the campus and consolidating the high school and townships together was huge for Prairie State College. I would say that working with community groups to help our neighbors also really stands out. There are new opportunities that come up every year.

For many, many years the campus has participated in the local cancer support center's Walk of Hope. We're typically recognized as the biggest team with the highest fund raising total, and our team is named for a retired math professor, Dr. Dale Haywood, whose death was due to cancer. We have food drives many times during the year, frequently benefit Respond Now, a local social service provider in the community. Our vets club sponsors a holiday drive for the Manteno Veterans Home, and that's supported by everyone on the campus. Our Phi Theta Kappa chapter, Nu Sigma, is linked to the Chicago Heights Kiwanis. And many of our student clubs support South Suburban Humane Society.

I also would like to mention that Prairie State College is known for our annual Jazz Fest every February. Chicago media always highlight this event. Middle school and high school jazz students participate in clinics here. They're coached by some of the top jazz musicians in the whole country, such as Orbert Davis, whose a trumpeter. And then in the evening, the jazz masters all jam on stage, and they include talented students with them. I just a fantastic way to see this budding talent, along with recognized greats, right here in our community.

Finally, I think Prairie State College may be the first community college ever to have grown its own president. My colleagues and I are very excited and proud of our recently installed fourteenth president, Dr. Terri L. Winfree. She came to Prairie State as a working parent. She was seeking to learn computer accounting for a family business, and then she kept taking classes and she got her associate's degree here, then she got both her bachelor's and her master's from Governors State University. She taught at Prairie State and other institutions, she held varying positions of responsibility here as an administrator and rose to vice president of Community and Economic Development, while she earned her PhD from Colorado State University.

After a national search in the spring that drew almost sixty candidates, she was selected as our president. She's our first woman president, and she is the first member of her family to attend college. In so many ways she mirrors not only my experience but the experience of many of my colleagues and a predominant number of our students on our campus.

Pogue: What future challenges does the college face?

Kloss: I would say certainly state funding. It's now at 7 percent of our total funding as a college. Those payments are sometimes delayed, so the state's budget crisis definitely affects us. The new health care law, due to budget concerns we need to be vigilant about the number of hours an employee works. Veterans' waivers, we have a dedicated Veterans' Center. We're proud that so many vets choose PSC, regardless of their home address. But those funds typically do not come at the same time that the students come; they come later.

You had asked whether medical marijuana might be a concern for the college. We will be guided by legislation in this area, but we don't anticipate any problems. Some campuses are worried about concealed carry, but educational institutions are excluded from that part of the law.³ Our police department will continue to monitor this. We don't anticipate any problems.

In terms of employment, we have unions on our campus. The college abides by the labor agreements. And I would say that sustainability is a very important opportunity for the college and for everyone at this time.

Pogue: How has the college met the needs of area employers and the students found in the district? You've talked about the changes that have been taking place in the area, the loss of some of the manufacturing. You also talked about the growth of health needs, and obviously that is a key issue the community colleges are now facing. What has taken place here?

Kloss: When we started, I mentioned that the college has always tried to mirror the concerns of the employers and the residents in the district. What we're seeing now is that manufacturing is suffering a loss of its employees, as they near retirement. They're seeking more qualified employees in manufacturing, and we have a wonderful program now, called Steel Worker for the Future.

The Arcelor Mittal Steel Company approached Prairie State and told us that 50 percent of their work force will be retired in ten years. They need to replace the skilled workers that have made them the number one steel company in the world. So Prairie State has partnered in a program to help provide steel workers for the future, as well as other people in manufacturing technology.

1. ³ Concealed carry or carrying a concealed weapon (CCW), is the practice of carrying a weapon (such as a handgun) in public in a concealed manner, either on one's person or in close proximity. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concealed_carry_in_the_United_States)

Our health programs in dental hygiene, surgical tech and nursing are providing skilled and very compassionate workers for dental practices and hospitals in the area.

We have a program in logistics and supply chain because we have increasing intermodal capacity in our district. And we continue to offer customized onsite training for district employers. I think it's very significant that an in-district employer's full-time workers can come to Prairie State at the in-district tuition rate, whether they're taking something regarding their employment or they're just here to advance their own educations.

We continue to be responsive to employers' needs, and we take real pride in educating employees, current and future, for them, and we do value our program advisory committees. These are members from the community who work as professionals in their field, and their expertise alerts us to upcoming needs.

Pogue: Could you give a little more information about that steel worker program?

Kloss: Yes. Arcelor Mittal has several locations in northeastern Illinois and northwestern Indiana. The project includes the opportunity for internships and the opportunity to go to work for them at the completion of the associate's degree. You go in as an intern, and you earn money for one year. You take the licensing examinations in that profession. Following that, you become a Classification III employee on their payroll. I was told by the president of the company that it's not unrealistic that within a year and a half's time a graduate joining the steel worker program will be making \$90,000 a year, with a potential for \$120,000 a year in the very near future. That's a good wage for a community college graduate.

Pogue: When did that program begin?

Kloss: We've been working with Arcelor Mittal about two years now.

Pogue: Where do you see the college going over the next decade?

Kloss: I see us continuing to serve the residents and the employers of District 515. We will be offering hope to those who are taking the first steps up the ladder of educational achievement, the folks who meet in this particular building, who are here for basic literacy, tutoring, GED classes, English as a second language, as well as the students who come in, brand new to the college experience, no family members to offer any guidance or mentoring. We will always be located at the intersection of learning, employment and lifelong achievement.

Pogue: As kind of a follow-up question as we start concluding our interview, you mentioned that you had a lot of family history tied to this school with your father-in-law, son and husband.

Kloss: Yes.

Pogue: What kind of experiences did they have?

Kloss: My father-in-law's experience, of course, was as a trustee. He was elected by the community; first he was appointed, and then he was elected. It was a very exciting time for the college because they were just beginning to change to a community college. They were going to be building the building. His personal recollections were very positive. He was a dedicated individual who cared very much about the college, as did all of the people who served with him.

I first learned about Prairie State College when my husband and I were dating, and our dads came up to Dad's Day at NIU. My then-boyfriend said, "We could go to a luncheon on the top of the Holmes Student Center." I said, "Sure, great. Get a ticket for me and Dad." It turned out to be some type of community college trustees meeting (laughs). But we had a good lunch, and that was the first time I met the man who would become my father-in-law. And, of course, I learned a little bit about community college history at the time.

My husband was a student here, 1969-1970, earned good educational credits that he transferred so that he could get his baccalaureate degree and then continue his master's studies.

Our son came to Prairie State College as an undecided student, but his experiences in the Student Leadership Center, working with the *Student Review* newspaper, particularly, led him in the direction of graphic design because he had worked so much on the newspaper. He earned his bachelor's degree after graduating from Prairie State.

Pogue: You talk about relationship with the college and the community. How is that to this day?

Kloss: I would say it's very positive. People have a high opinion of the college. I think everyone's very concerned about taxation; everybody's concerned about assessed valuation, and so many of our supporters in the community have good things to say about Prairie State College. They send their friends and their family here; they recommend us to employers. I do think that finances will continue to be a problem, not just for Prairie State but for all of our communities, due to the state budget crisis.

Pogue: We've talked about it just briefly, but how does Prairie State work with local legislators?

Kloss: I would say there are several different levels. Our president, Dr. Winfree, because of her past role in community and economic development, was very active with the Chicago Southland Chamber of Commerce, other of the smaller chambers in the area, as well as business organizations in the community. So she is a very well-known entity to them. She established a lot of contacts, which are very beneficial to the college.

All of our presidents have reached out to our legislators, both locally and on the national level. We do lobby in Springfield, and when I say “lobby,” I want to put quotations marks around that. We do attend with the Trustees Association or with other community college groups. We don’t have a paid lobbyist, but they’re very aware of our needs. Because so many of our local legislators either had their own Prairie State experience or they possibly had family members who came to Prairie State, they’re very aware of our programs.

Pogue: Well, Cathy, I want to thank you very much for explaining the history of Prairie State and its predecessor, Bloom Township Junior College, and your own experiences through your family and living as a resident in the district. Any final thoughts that you want to add?

Kloss: I would just like to thank you for this opportunity to share Prairie State’s story with the state and for everyone who will listen on the Internet. I would like to say, choose Prairie State. Our motto is “Start near. Go far.” This is what we want to do to help people achieve their educational dreams.

(end of transcript)